

Fragile Families Research Brief

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New Parents' Attitudes Towards Fathers' Rights and Obligations

Introduction

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 includes a number of provisions designed to increase the amount of child support paid by nonresident fathers. Mothers who apply for public assistance are required to identify the father of their child, to establish paternity (if the child is born outside of marriage), and to cooperate with the state agency in obtaining a child support order. Underlying these requirements is the assumption that children would be better off if their fathers were more involved in their lives, both financially and emotionally.

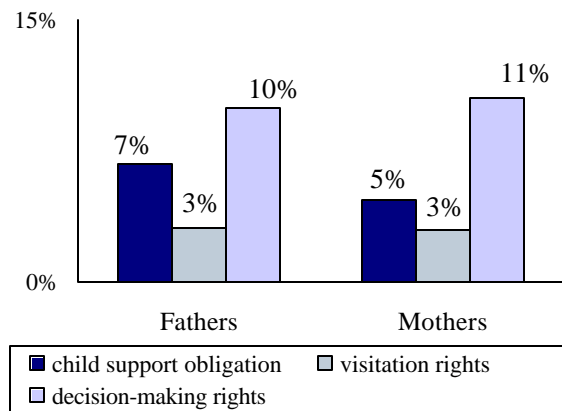
While stronger child support enforcement is likely to make children better off financially, some researchers believe that forcing fathers to pay involuntarily also may have unintended negative consequences. They argue that stricter child support enforcement may create resentment among fathers who do not wish to pay, which, in turn, may increase parental conflict. Another source of conflict is that strong enforcement may encourage nonresident fathers to demand more time with their children as well as more decision-making authority over their upbringing.

This analysis, based on data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, examines new parents attitudes towards child support enforcement and fathers' rights and obligations. Additionally, we look at whether couples agree or disagree on these issues, and whether their disagreements are likely to lead to conflict with possible negative repercussions for their children.

Mothers' and Fathers' Attitudes Towards Fathers' Rights Obligations

We find that very few parents are opposed, in principle, to the idea that fathers should have child support obligations, rights to see their children, and make decisions about how their children are raised. As expected, fathers are significantly more likely than mothers to oppose child support (7 percent versus 5 percent) but there is no significant gender difference in attitudes toward visitation and decision-making rights. In general, the strength of policy regimes, parents' race and ethnicity, and education have no significant effect on parents' judgments about fathers' visitation and decision making rights.

Percent of Parents Opposing Fathers' Rights and Obligations



Attitudes on rights and obligations, however, vary according to relationship status. Unwed mothers are less likely than married mothers to say that fathers do not have a right to visit their child, even when the fathers pay child support. However, unwed mothers that do not have a romantic relationship with the baby's father report substantially higher opposition to fathers' rights than do either other unwed mothers or

married mothers. In addition, fathers who do not have a romantic relationship with the baby's mother report somewhat higher opposition to paying child support than other unwed fathers. In these cases, policy aimed at strengthening father involvement through stronger child support enforcement is more likely to be met with resistance.

Couples' Disagreements About Father's Obligations and Rights

To assess the potential for conflict between parents we examined the extent to which couples disagreed about nonresident fathers' obligations and rights. Ten percent of parents disagreed about whether nonresident fathers should pay child support. Between 3 to 6 percent of couples are potentially at risk of greater conflict over visitation rights and 8 percent are potentially at risk of greater conflict over decision-making rights.

Once again, these results vary by relationship status. Disagreements are low among parents as long as they remain in a romantic relationship, and results even suggest that unwed parents are more accepting of fathers' rights than are married parents. Among parents whose romantic relationship has ended, however, disagreements over visitation or decision-making rights are substantially higher. Nearly 20 percent of mothers in this category object to fathers' having decision making rights. Because fathers' rights to the child are linked to their relationship with the mother, and because young, unwed parents' relationships are often fragile, their children are at risk of being exposed to parental conflict in the future.

Implications for Policy

These findings provide both good news and bad news for policy makers. The good news is that very few unmarried fathers object to child support obligations, at least at the time of their child's birth. Even if we assume that non-resident fathers who did not participate in our study are opposed to paying support, the overall

opposition rates still would be low. However, we should interpret these findings with caution for two reasons: First, this study looks at fathers' attitudes rather than actual behavior. Although a vast majority of unwed, non-resident fathers are not opposed to paying child support, we do not know whether these men would provide support. Our study shows that unwed fathers usually hold "high hopes" about their continued involvement with their child. Unfortunately, many of these fathers are ill prepared to take the childrearing responsibility afterwards. Second, the obligation questions used in this study refer to financial support in general. Although most parents are not opposed to providing support, this result does not imply that these parents will not reject formal or court-ordered child support obligations.

The potential bad news for policy makers is that agreement about fathers' roles is affected by the parents' relationship status. Parents that are not romantically involved are more likely to have objections to fathers' obligations and rights and more likely to disagree with each other over such rights and obligations. The challenge facing policy makers is developing child support enforcement policy in a manner that balances both the financial and emotional benefits of child support, as well as the potential risks some children face due to greater parental conflict.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study was developed to provide information about unmarried parents and their children. The study is following a cohort of parents and their newborn children for at least four years, examining the relationships within these families and seeing what factors (including governmental policy) may push them closer together or pull them apart. Data are being collected in twenty U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. The data are representative of nonmarital births in each city, and the full sample will be representative of all nonmarital births in large cities in the U.S. The current analysis is based on baseline data collected in the first seven cities (Austin, TX, Detroit, MI, Baltimore, MD, Newark, NJ, Oakland, CA, Philadelphia, PA, and Richmond, VA).