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FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study changed its name to The Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). Due to the issue date of this document, FFCWS will be referenced by its former name. Any further reference to FFCWS should kindly observe this name change.

Fathers' Risk Factors and their Implications for Healthy Relationships and Father Involvement

Background

Social science research suggests that children growing up without fathers are especially likely to be disadvantaged as adults. In response, policymakers have recently created policies and programs aimed at increasing biological father involvement by encouraging unwed parents to marry. Concerns have been raised about the potential of such initiatives to encourage women to enter or remain in unhealthy or abusive marriages. Despite these concerns, ideas about what constitutes unhealthy relationships have not been fully examined. Nor do we understand how risk factors associated with unhealthy relationship are also related to paternal disengagement.

This brief uses both quantitative and qualitative data to examine how risk factors such as physical abuse, substance abuse, and incarceration are related to father involvement and relationship status among unmarried couples. The authors also examine how parents' relationship status and quality mediate the association between fathers' risk behaviors and involvement with children.

Data and Methods

The authors utilize data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study [see box on back]. Quantitative data are drawn from survey interviews with unmarried parents around the time of their children's births as well as one and three years later, and qualitative data are taken from in-depth interviews conducted with a sub-sample of the Fragile Families participants from Oakland, California. The two measures of father involvement used in the brief are drawn from mothers' reports about how often fathers see and engage in activities with their three-year old children. Reports of fathers' risk behaviors (physical abuse, substance use, and incarceration) are taken from one or both parents' reports in the first two waves of the survey. All of the regression models presented in this brief control for baseline measures of mothers' age, fathers' race/ethnicity, fathers' education, and both parents' employment.

Findings

Quantitative results

As shown in Table 1, roughly half of fathers in the survey sample have no risk factors. Among fathers with any risk factors, the majority has one risk factor (32 percent of all fathers) and few fathers have all three risk factors (4 percent of all fathers). The most common risk factor (30 percent) is a previous incarceration, which occurred before the child was born. However nearly 2 in 5 fathers have drug or alcohol problems that interfere with relationships and about 1 in 10 engage in physical abuse.

Table 1. Prevalence of Father Risk Factors

Risk Factors	Prevalence
No risk factors	51%
One risk factor	32%
Two risk factors	13%
All three risk factors	4%
Physical abuse	11%
Drug or alcohol use interferes with relationships	18%
Recent incarceration (since child's birth)	12%
Past incarceration (before child's birth)	30%

Table 2. Relationship between nonresidential fathers' risk factors and contact with their three-year old child in month before the interview

Father's Risk Factors	Association with father-child contact
Physical abuse	-
Drug or alcohol use interferes with relationships	-
Recent incarceration (since child's birth)	-
Past incarceration (before child's birth)	-

N = 1,700

Regression model includes controls for mother's age and employment, father's race, education and employment, and missing information

Table 2 provides information on how these risk factors are associated with father involvement among nonresident fathers. As shown in the table, nonresidential fathers with substance use problems, those who have been incarcerated, and those who have been physically abusive are all less likely than those without such problems to have seen their three-year old children in the past month. The fact that physically abusive fathers are less likely to have contact with their children can largely be explained by mothers exiting physically abusive romantic relationships.

In additional analyses, researchers examined how risk factors among fathers who are in contact with their children are associated with levels of participation in children's activities. They found that fathers who have been physically abusive and fathers who have been incarcerated since the child's birth engaged in significantly fewer activities with their children than fathers without such risk factors. Part of the reason why these fathers are less engaged is that these men are less likely to still be in romantic relationships with the child's mothers

Similarly, they also found that fathers who are deemed untrustworthy to care for their children by the mother engage in fewer activities with their children than do fathers who are trusted. Indeed, after controlling for mothers' trust, the association between physical abuse and fathers' level of engagement was no longer statistically significant. This means that lower levels of engagement by physically abusive fathers can be explained by mothers' lack of trust for these men. Mothers' distrust, however, does not explain lower levels of engagement by recently incarcerated fathers.

Qualitative results

Information from the qualitative interviews illustrates how a sub-sample of unmarried parents interpreted men's physical abuse, substance use, and incarceration in the context of their relationships with each other and fathers' relationships with their children. Parents' accounts suggest that mothers tended to select out of "unhealthy" relationships by ending their relationships unilaterally or in agreement with the father. Among the couples who broke up, while some of the fathers with risk factors withdrew from their children (either actively or passively), others tried to maintain their involvement independently or as a part of a strategy with the mother to address these risks.

Violence was often cited by mothers as a primary reason for ending a romantic relationship, and in such cases mothers frequently allowed only supervised visits between fathers and children. Mothers, however, often found it difficult to reconcile wanting to protect their children from unhealthy relationships with their understanding that paternal involvement is important for children's well-being. This tension in illustrated by the following Q&A with one mother:

Q: Do you think it's important to have the biological father involved?

A: At one point in time I did. Now, no I don't. I think if it's healthy then it's okay, but I feel like if it's going to be unhealthy, then no. And I feel that in my situation it's very unhealthy. So no.

Q: Do you think it's possible that you would want him to be involved in the future?

A: If he can make a turn around and he can change his life.

Q: So why would you still want him to have a relationship with them?

A: Because that's their father and I don't want it to be like I'm the middle man, I'm preventing that, I'm trying to stop that. Because I want what's best for them.

Substance abuse has negative implications for parental and romantic relationships only after it has been identified as a problem. In cases where the father has problems with substance abuse but is not physically abusive, couples sometimes stay together and adopt "family

strategies" for responding to risk behaviors. Such efforts are not always successful, however.

While parents often spoke of the negative effects of physical abuse and problematic substance use on fathers' personal relationships with their families, parents did not talk about incarceration as a basis for discouraging father involvement. Mothers did not, for example, intentionally limit interactions between their children and fathers who had been recently incarcerated. The negative effect of incarceration was felt more through the logistical and emotional constraints imposed by imprisonment and fathers' absence from the home. Passive withdrawal and loss of contact with children despite a desire for continued relationships was more common among recently incarcerated fathers than among those with other types of risk.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The results presented in this brief suggest that policies to promote marriage and responsible fatherhood should be mindful that some of the fathers they are targeting have characteristics that may not be conducive to increased involvement, while others face personal and institutional barriers to involvement. Mothers distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships, particularly in cases of domestic violence, choosing to end their romantic relationships and limit fathers' access to the children. These difficult decisions should be acknowledged and supported in programs designed to encourage marriage and responsible fatherhood. In situations not characterized by violence, some couples pursued family strategies to deal with substance use or incarceration-based problems while also encouraging father involvement. Because a subset of fathers with drug problems seem to be partnered with mothers who share similar problems, treatment for both partners may be necessary in order to sustain relationships and father involvement. Policymakers with an interest in increasing the stability and well-being of families headed by unmarried parents should also consider alternatives to incarceration, which disproportionately affect unmarried African-American and Latino fathers. Rather than addressing these issues in isolation, the results from this study indicate that risks are often interrelated, occur within conditions of economic disadvantage, and may require a comprehensive approach for supporting families.

Recent Working Papers

The following comprises a list of the most recent Working Papers authored by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) faculty and research associates. A complete list of Working Papers is also available for viewing and downloading on the CRCW web site: crcw.princeton.edu/papers.html

2007-04-FF Kenney, Catherine. "When Father Doesn't Know Best: Parents' Management and Control of Money and Children's Food Insecurity."

2007-03-FF Kenney, Catherine. "His Dollar? Her Dollar? Their Dollar: The Effects of Couples' Money Management Systems on Union Dissolution and Women's Labor Force Participation."

2007-02-FF Liu, Shirley, Frank Heiland. "Should We Get Married? The Effect of Parents' Marriage on Out-of-Wedlock Children."

2007-01-FF Teitler, Julien, Nancy Reichman. "Mental Illness as a Barrier to Marriage Among Mothers With Out-of-Wedlock Births."

2006-35-FF Corman, Hope, Kelly Noonan, Nancy Reichman, Ofira Schwartz. "Crime and Circumstance: The Effects of Infant Health Shocks on Fathers' Criminal Activity."

2006-34-FF Carlson, Marcia, Sara McLanahan, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. "Do Good Partners Make Good Parents? Relationship Quality and Parenting in Two-Parent Families."

2006-33-FF Meadows, Sarah, Sara McLanahan, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. "Family Structure and Mental Health Trajectories."

2006-32-FF Kimbro, Rachel. "Together Forever? Relationship Dynamics and Maternal Investments in Children's Health."

2006-31-FF Moiduddin, Emily, Douglas Massey. "Segregation, the Concentration of Poverty, and Birth Weight."

2006-30-FF Gibson-Davis, Christina. "Family Structure Effects on Maternal and Paternal Parenting in Low Income Families."

2006-28-FF Carlson, Marcia, Frank Furstenberg. "The Consequences of Multi-Partnered Fertility for Parental Involvement and Relationship."

2006-27-FF Bzostek, Sharon, Marcia Carlson, Sara McLanahan. "Does Mother Know Best?: A Comparison of Biological and Social Fathers After a Nonmarital Birth."

2006-26-FF Wildeman, Christopher. "Authoritative, Authoritarian, or Something Less? Conservative Christianity and Paternal Involvement in Fragile Families."

Fragile Families Research Brief

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Inside...

This research brief examines how fathers' risk factors are related to father involvement and relationship status among unmarried couples.

For more information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, go to http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu and go to "About Fragile Families" and "Collaborative Studies." To review public and working papers from the Fragile Families Study, go to http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/ffpubs.asp.

This research brief was adapted from Waller, Maureen R. and Swisher, Raymond. 2006. "Fathers' Risk Factors in Fragile Families: Implications for 'Healthy' Relationships and Father Involvement." Social Problems 53(3):392-420. The Fragile Families Research Brief series is funded by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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