



FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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A Balancing Act: Sources of Economic Support Among Unwed Mothers

Background

A major goal of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) was to reduce reliance on public assistance. This was to be accomplished through two major strategies -- encouraging mothers to work and requiring fathers to contribute to the financial support of their children. Since the 1996 legislation, welfare rolls have declined substantially. It is unclear, however, whether mothers leaving the welfare rolls have achieved self-sufficiency and whether caseload reductions achieved thus far can be sustained in the future. Low-income mothers face a number of barriers to gainful employment, frequently must accept low-paying jobs with few benefits and irregular hours, and often do not earn enough to pay for childcare. Moreover, the deteriorating economy and spending on homeland security will likely exacerbate such obstacles.

A new study, based on data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (See box - page 2), examines unwed mothers' reliance on various sources of economic support one year after their child's birth. The study addresses the following questions that are relevant to the impending reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program: *How are those most vulnerable to welfare policy making ends meet? How many unmarried mothers with young children are employed? How many are dependent on public assistance? How many rely on support from family and friends? How many receive financial support from their children's fathers? How many families combine different types of financial support?* The findings, based on interviews with families approximately 12 months after the birth of their child, paint a picture of the circumstances, challenges, and needs of unwed mothers at a critical juncture in welfare legislation history.

Sources of Support¹

The proportion of unwed mothers relying on earnings and private support in the past year is presented in **Table 1**. As shown, most mothers worked in the year following the child's birth; two-thirds of unwed mothers report earnings for the previous year and most of these mothers worked full-time (58 percent). There is little variation, by relationship status, in the percentages of unwed mothers with earnings.

The percentage of unwed mothers receiving private support is also very high. Most received financial assistance from the child's

Table 1: Proportion of Unwed Mothers Relying on Own Earnings and Private Support by Relationship Status

	Cohabiting	Other Relationship	No Relationship	All Unmarried
Total Percentage with Own Earnings	67	66	68	67
Regular Work	64	63	64	64
Underground Work	8	7	7	7
Part-Time Work	9	8	9	9
Full-Time Work	58	58	59	58
Total Percentage Receiving Private Support	100	96	82	95
From Father	100	89	50	85
From Others	52	66	63	59
Sample size	965	697	471	2133

father and more than half received assistance from other family and friends. Specifically, eighty-five percent of all unmarried mothers and one hundred percent of cohabiting mothers received support from the father. Clearly, the most disadvantaged group, in terms of receiving private support from the father, are mothers who are not in any relationship with the father: only 50 percent received support from the baby's father. Private support receipt from others is far lower than father support, but still fairly high.

¹ For the purposes of this study, a mother is considered to have been employed during the past year if she had total earnings of at least \$1000 from all regular and underground jobs or worked for at least four weeks during the year. Under our private support category we categorize cash or in-kind support (formal or informal) from the baby's father as support from the father and cash or in-kind support from family/friends and cash or in-kind support from fathers of the mother's other children as support from "other." In-kind assistance is defined here as no-cost housing and supplies for the child (food, diapers, toys, medicine, etc.). To be categorized as receiving these forms of private support, the mother must have received the support in the past 12 months. In terms of our relationship categories, "Cohabiting" describes homes where the father resides at least some of the time; "Other Relationship" describes non-cohabiting parents who maintain another type of relationship (including being romantically involved, divorced, separated or just friends); and "No Relationship" describes parents who hardly ever or never talk to one another.

Overall, 59 percent of unmarried mothers received support from family, friends and the fathers of their other children in the past year.

Table 2 clearly illustrates that TANF is only one component of public assistance received by unwed mothers, and it is not the most commonly relied upon program. The majority of unwed mothers relied on support from Women, Infants, and Children (WIC, 84 percent), Medicaid (71 percent), and Food Stamps (50 percent). Only one-third of all unmarried mothers received any TANF. With respect to TANF and Food Stamps, there is variation by relationship status in the percentage of unmarried mothers relying upon these forms of support. For example, only 26 percent of cohabiting mothers relied on TANF while 42 percent of mothers not in a relationship received this type of support.

Table 2: Proportion of Unwed Mothers Relying on Different Types of Public Support by Relationship Status

	Cohabiting	Other Relationship	No Relationship	All Unmarried
Total Percentage Receiving Public Support	94	94	96	94
Child Care	10	13	12	12
Medicaid	69	73	73	71
Housing	22	28	30	26
WIC	85	84	84	84
TANF	26	41	42	35
Food Stamps	45	55	53	50
SSI	4	5	5	4
Sample size	965	697	471	2133

Forty-five percent of cohabiting mothers received Food Stamps while 53 percent of mothers not in a relationship relied on Food Stamps. There is little variation across relationship categories with respect to reliance on WIC or Medicaid.

Summary

In looking at the types of support upon which unmarried mothers rely, we find that the overwhelming majority of mothers received both public and private forms of support. As illustrated in **Table 1**, two-thirds of the mothers had earnings from work during the year following the birth, regardless of their relationship with the father of their child. Still, most mothers not living with the father relied on him for financial support. Eighty-nine percent of mothers who are in a relationship but do not live with

the father received support from him and 50 percent of the mothers who have little or no contact with the father depended on him for support.

Despite high levels of employment and private support receipt, reliance on some form of public support is extremely high; 94 percent of all unmarried mothers relied on at least some form of public assistance during the year following the birth of their child, with surprisingly little variation by relationship status (**Table 2**). Though mothers residing with the father are less likely to be dependent on TANF, they are just as likely to be dependent on some form of public support as mothers not living with the father.

Implications for Policy

Unwed mothers combine many sources of support to make ends meet. Although PRWORA was designed to shift much of the burden of support from government to parents themselves, and despite the prominent roles played by both maternal employment and father contributions, reliance on some type of public support continues to be pervasive. Overall, only one percent of unwed mothers relied exclusively on some combination of their own earnings and father support (not shown in the tables).

Our findings show that welfare reform has not eliminated dependency on public support. Despite the decline in welfare caseloads and increase in employment, 94 percent of unmarried mothers rely on some type of public support in the year following a child's birth. These high levels of dependency, despite high employment rates, would seem to support a re-examination of education and job-training as key welfare program components. But paving the way for new mothers and fathers to obtain higher paid jobs will require a considerable investment, beginning well before young men and women have children. As a result, new educational bills may end up being more consequential than changes in the TANF program, at least in the long run. Our results also point to the importance of tax credits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to supplement parents' earnings and reduce dependence on other forms of public support. New research on how parents are managing, such as that provided by the Fragile Families study, can inform policy-makers about how to capitalize on the early successes of PRWORA while decreasing the obstacles parents face as they balance work and child-rearing.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a birth cohort of nearly 5,000 children, including 3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents. The data are nationally representative of births in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information about the study, visit the Web site of The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm> or email the CRCW at crcw@opr.princeton.edu

Analysis in this brief is based on "A Balancing Act: Sources of Support, Child Care and Hardship Among Unwed Mothers," by Julien O. Teitler, Nancy E. Reichman, and Lenna Nepomnyaschy. To download a copy of the paper on which this brief is based, visit <http://crcw.princeton.edu>, go to the *Fragile Families* link, click on *Publications*, then click on *Working Paper Series*.

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