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Young Fathers and Child Support

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INTRODUCTION

Although a great deal of progress has been made in recent years in improving the provision of child support services, the child support system has for the most part failed to deal adequately with younger fathers. These young men are especially likely not to establish legal paternity, not to marry the mothers of their children, and not to come within the jurisdiction of the official child support system. This trend is a source of a great concern because young single mothers and their children are at increasing risk of living in poverty. The reasons for the avoidance by young fathers of marriage, official paternity, and officially mandated child support obligations, however, are complex and not well understood.

Careful appraisal of this problem is urgently needed at a time when public attention is focused on welfare reform and child support enforcement is widely perceived as a major part of most reform agendas. The problem is often perceived as the result of the behavior of irresponsible individuals and the performance of lax public agencies. Yet, much more is at stake. Historically high rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing among teenagers are concentrated in certain communities. In these communities, early parenthood is both the result as well as the cause of poverty. Within these communities, strategies for economic survival and reproduction are sometimes different from those among the middle class.

Further, the policies and practices of public and private agencies towards members of these communities are based not simply on attitudes of benign or malign neglect but rather on the recognition by on-line practitioners of the realities of life in these communities. Realistic efforts to deal with the inter-linked problems of early childbearing, the decline of marriage, and welfare dependency must begin with an appreciation of the actual life situations of young parents and the practical and moral complexities that they face when they attempt to provide support and care for their children.

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

The difficulties attending efforts to secure officially mandated child support payments are immediately apparent when one examines vital statistics on the fathers of children born to young mothers. In 1985 there were 476,485 births to mothers between the ages of fifteen and nineteen in the United States. 18% of the fathers were aged 15-19; 35% were aged 20-24; 9% were aged 25 or older; and fully 37% were unidentified (NCHS, 1987). Thus, the failure to establish legal paternity immediately excludes over one third of these fathers from the jurisdiction of the child support system.

Among those who are identified as fathers, many are officially listed as absent fathers. Younger fathers are much more likely

to be absent fathers. Even though more males in a birth cohort become fathers as they age, absent fathers as a proportion of all fathers in a cohort decrease as the cohort ages (Lerman, 1986).

Even among those absent fathers who have established legal paternity, only a small portion will ever pay officially mandated child support. Among single mothers of all ages, more than 40% do not receive court-ordered payments and more than half of those do not receive the full amount ordered (Everett, 1985). *Arrears payments*

Younger single mothers are also at much higher risk of not receiving child support orders or payments. Although there is wide variation among states, most child support systems assign a low priority to young fathers and devote few resources to pursuing payments from them (Rivera-Casale, 1984).

KEY ISSUES

From the facts presented thus far, it is clear that the goal of obtaining more comprehensive child support for young single mothers faces two major obstacles: the lack of legally identified fathers and the reluctance of child support agencies to pursue those who are identified. Beginning from only this information, one might assume, and large proportions both of the public and of current policy reformers do seem to assume, that increasing poverty and long-term welfare dependency among young single mothers are simply the result of the irresponsibility of young fathers and the laxness of public efforts to enforce their responsibilities. The solution to the problem, as conceived in these terms, appears quite straightforward. Public agencies need only step up their enforcement efforts and the problem will be solved.

Yet, this analysis and program ignore much of the practical reality of individual decisions and institutional strategies. From a strictly analytical perspective, one must ask why it is that out-of-wedlock childbearing by young mothers increased so dramatically during the 1970's when during this same period public policy was increasing efforts to discourage such behavior. During the 1970's, the real benefits of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) were declining while legislation and resources for enforcing child support payments were increasing. Given these trends, neither public policy nor individual cost-benefit calculations can explain the increase of out-of-wedlock childbearing among young mothers or the increasing proportion of AFDC caseloads occupied by young, never-married mothers and their children.

The explanations for the greater number of out-of-wedlock births to young women and for the failures of young men to

establish legal paternity must be sought not simply in the policies of welfare and child support agencies but rather in broader cultural, social, and economic trends which have made marriage and legal paternity less attractive and practical for young parents. These broader trends cannot be reversed by simple changes in welfare and child support policies, although realistic reform of these policies must begin from a recognition of these fundamental changes.

Cultural and social changes which have contributed to the current situation include changes in sexual behavior, changes in marriage patterns, and changes in the roles of women. Sexual activity among adolescents has increased dramatically in recent years (Zelnik and Kanter, 1980). Despite these increased rates of teenage sexual activity, fertility among teenage women has actually declined, primarily as a result of greater access to abortion. Teenage childbearing in the United States, however, is far higher than in many other developed countries with similar patterns of sexual activity, primarily because American culture emphasizes sex but shies away from encouraging contraceptive use (Jones, et al., 1985). Thus, teenage pregnancy and childbearing have remained at high rates despite the greater access to and use of abortion.

Marriage has also declined dramatically among all Americans. This decline has occurred for many reasons, but among them is the greater access of women to jobs. Although women still tend to earn far less than men, they are no longer as absolutely dependent on a male wage-earner as in the past. Teenagers as well as adults have been affected by the trend towards less marriage (NCHS, 1985).

While changes in sexual behavior, marriage patterns, and sex roles have occurred throughout society, changes in the economy and the labor force have had a particularly adverse impact on young people. The changing distribution of jobs that pay wages that make it possible to support a family have curtailed the possibilities for the formation of new, independent families and households for young people, particularly those in poor communities such as the inner-city neighborhoods in which rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing skyrocketed during the 1970's. The ability of young labor force participants to earn wages which could support families has diminished sharply (Johnson and Sum, 1987). In the inner cities, access to any sort of job at all has become problematic. The concentration of poverty and joblessness in these areas has risen steadily (Wilson, 1987).

These economic changes have drastically altered the relationships among childbearing, marriage, and work that prevailed, in these areas as elsewhere, a generation ago. Teenage pregnancy is not a new phenomenon, and teenage childbearing has actually

decreased. In previous generations, however, early pregnancy frequently led to marriage. These young families were then supported by the wages earned by the male head of household. Although this hasty labor market entry by males was likely to diminish their long-term occupational attainments, it was at least possible for them to support families. Young people reached childbearing age and the age for earning a family wage at about the same time.

Today, this is no longer true. The period of education and labor market entry required for earning a family wage has extended far beyond the teen years. For those whose families cannot afford to support them during such an extended period, the prospects for ever earning wages that could support families above the poverty level have become remote. Yet, the normative link between a male's marriageability and his ability to earn a family wage remains. These are the social, cultural, and economic trends which underlie the increase in out-of-wedlock childbearing among teenagers, particularly the very high rates that occur in poor areas such as the inner cities.

If the traditional relationships among marriage, work, and family formation no longer obtain, what are the actual living situations of young families with no father officially recorded or contributing support? Where are the young fathers and what is the actual nature of their relationship to their children and the mothers of their children? These are difficult questions to answer, given the stigma attached to these young men's situations and the difficulties that could result from their disclosing their identities as fathers and their whereabouts. Yet, a growing body of research is beginning to provide some very strong indications that many of those who are officially classified as absent fathers maintain some relationships with their children and are not entirely negligent in providing some care and support.

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A number of studies, some ethnographic (Stack, 1974; Sullivan, 1985, 1986), others based on surveys of AFDC caseloads (Haskins, et al., 1985; Danziger, 1987), representative national samples (Lerman, op. cit.), or service populations (Rivara, et al., 1986), have all found that young fathers are maintaining informal relationships with their children even when they are not married to the mothers, living with the mothers and children, or even officially recognized as fathers. Many of these young men contribute child care and support, if only on a part-time basis.

The existence of these informal support networks and the participation of young fathers in them pose very difficult problems for the child support enforcement system. Some have claimed that vigorous enforcement activities would merely

disrupt the existing informal support systems and drive the young fathers further underground (Stack and Sennel, 1973). Others have disputed this claim (Haskins, ^{et al.} op. cit.), but no one really knows the answer. Existing data are either ethnographic, and thus not readily generalizable, or based on surveys of fathers who are identified, and thus unable to tell us anything about those who are not identified. 1985

It is clear, however, that the existing configuration of family policy, welfare policy, and labor market conditions produce a host of contradictory incentives for many young fathers, particularly those from poor communities, even when they face their situations with the best intentions for trying to support their children. Their prospects for providing steady, full-time support are very poor, thus making them poor candidates for marriage. At the same time, many of them do work sometimes, even though their periods of work are frequently only temporary and part-time. Their attachment to the labor force is also diminished by societal expectations that they continue their education, particularly if they hope to lift themselves out of poverty. They may work, but not steadily.

^{Sullivan} The educational disincentive of entering the official child support must not be underestimated. Most child support jurisdictions currently recognize only cash contributions as legitimate. Yet, in our ethnographic research, we have found several cases in which young fathers have continued in school rather than seeking full-time employment and have been supported in this decision by the mothers of their children and the mother's own parents (Sullivan, 1986). In these cases, the community recognizes the long-term benefit to the child of the father's continued education far better than the official child support enforcement system does.

Under these circumstances, the young mother and her child have access to much steadier support either from AFDC and/or from remaining attached to the mother's own parental household. A further complication in all this is that any contributions made by the young father are deducted from AFDC payments, beyond an important fifty dollar disregard. This situation creates a strong incentive for concealing paternity.

Beyond this, it must be recognized that a high proportion of the wages earned by young men are earned "off-the-books" (Williams and Kornblum, 1985; Sviridoff and McElroy, 1984; Sullivan, 1984). Such earnings can be contributed without being withheld from AFDC payments. Thus, even when paternity is acknowledged, there remains an incentive to refrain from marriage and co-residence. All of these elements must be considered carefully by young parents who face trying to support a child when jobs providing a family wage are scarce and AFDC benefits do not even provide a standard of living

equal to the poverty level.

These unfortunate disincentives to marriage and legal paternity must be weighed against the benefits to the child of legal paternity. Legal paternity gives the child access to a wide range of official entitlements, including Social Security and military benefits, as well as the ability to secure support from the father in future years when his initial attachment to his child may have waned but his labor market circumstances have improved.

In such cases, the immediate and long-term interests of the child are at odds, even when both parents have good intentions. In many of these youthful relationships, of course, attachments and intentions are quite volatile, but official standards for conduct have been completely undercut by these contradictory incentives.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

Currently, two very different institutional sectors are grappling with these problems. These sectors are the child support enforcement system and the social welfare system, both public and private, which deals with young parents. Ostensibly, both sectors are working towards the common goals of reducing poverty and promoting self-sufficient families supported by productive wage-earners. Yet, the approaches to these common goals are quite different and relationships between the two sectors are characterized most often by mutual ignorance, suspicion, and even hostility.

The approach of the child enforcement system is primarily that of law enforcement while that of social welfare system is service-oriented. The social welfare programs in question include not only the many programs providing services for young mothers, and, in some cases, those young men identified as fathers, but also the extensive array of education, training, counselling, and employment programs which serve many young clients, particularly males, without even inquiring whether they are parents and need services related to parental responsibilities. Practitioners in these programs are frequently ignorant of child support policies in their own states and thus unable to provide child support services (Wattenberg, 1984). On the other side, child support agencies tend to concentrate single-mindedly on securing immediate cash payments by young fathers, thus justifying the low regard in which they are held by social service workers who identify with the problems of their young clients.

The most important step that must be taken in order to overcome the current contradictions in public policy towards young absent fathers is that of beginning to bridge these two

institutional sectors. This task will not be easy, for each sector has its own traditions and performance criteria. Further, there will have to be changes in administrative policy and perhaps also legislation. Nonetheless, the policy goal must be to link together services which seek to encourage child support with those that seek to enhance the ability of young parents to support themselves. This means offering education, training, jobs, and related services such as child care and transportation in return for official acknowledgment of paternity and child support obligations.

Child support agencies and the courts can begin this process by recognizing other things than immediate cash payments as good faith demonstrations of a young father's commitment to his children. Provision of child care and enrollment in education and training programs should certainly be given as much credit by official institutions as they are already given in community-based support networks.

A major, though probably controversial, policy change aimed at encouraging paternity acknowledgment would be to expand the current AFDC policy of allowing a fifty dollar disregard of contributions which fathers can make without having their contributions deducted from AFDC benefits. It appears that many more contributions are going on than are now being officially acknowledged. These unofficial contributions relieve poverty for AFDC mothers and their children while binding the father more closely to them. Yet, current policy drives a wedge between these activities and the official acknowledgment of paternity which is so important to the long-term interests of the child. As long as AFDC benefits fall below the poverty level, allowing paternal contributions at least up to the poverty level should be seriously considered.

For the social service sector, a very practical first step is to begin to develop materials and training to educate all social service workers who serve young clients in the child support policies and procedures in their states. Both young women and young men need and want such knowledge, so important to their immediate interests, when it is made available to them.

In order to set these and other related reforms in motion, it would be desirable to bring together child support and social service workers in different locales to discuss these problems and plan together for solutions. Such conferences would probably generate some heat before they began to produce light, but the effort would certainly be more valuable than continuing the current system and its contradictory incentives for young parents.

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