

Ethnographic Research on Young Fathers and Parenting:
Implications for Public Policy

Mercer L. Sullivan, Ph.D.
Senior Research Associate
Vera Institute of Justice

This paper was prepared for the conference on Young Unwed Fathers held October 1-3, 1986, at Catholic University, Washington, D.C. This paper is the property of Maximus, Inc., and the Family Impact Seminar, the organizers of the conference, and is not to be quoted or reproduced without their permission. All facts and opinions expressed herein, however, are solely the responsibility of the author.

2041
2041

VERA INSTITUTE
LIBRARY

The fathers of the children of unwed teenage mothers are rightly the source of serious public concern. Their children, the mothers of their children, and society at large all have a stake in these young males' development of stable careers and responsible behavior. Although young fathers have recently begun to attract the attention of policymakers and operators of programs attempting to address the problems of out-of-wedlock childbearing among teenagers, little systematic knowledge has been gathered about their participation or non-participation in providing financial support or care for their children. Unlike young unwed mothers, who are more easily studied because they often must turn to social programs and public support, young unwed fathers tend to remain out of public view. They have often felt unwelcome at social programs and like criminals from the point of view of the legal system. As a result, little has been understood about the extent to which some of them do accept some paternal responsibilities or about the extent to which their failure to accept full responsibility is based on their unwillingness or their inability to do so.

The relationship between their ability and their willingness to accept paternal responsibility poses a major challenge for public policy. Early, out-of-wedlock childbearing is particularly prevalent in poor communities. Yet, the direction of the relationship between community economic conditions and early, out-of-wedlock childbearing is not clear. If high rates of poverty

and welfare dependency among households headed by unwed teenage mothers are merely the result of the unwillingness of the unwed fathers to provide support, then the public policy imperative is simply to identify the fathers and enforce child support. If, on the other hand, the young fathers do not marry or provide support because they are unable to do so, public policy must also address questions of economic opportunity within poor communities.

This paper reports on ethnographic research with young fathers in poor urban neighborhoods with high rates of welfare dependency. The process by which the young men decided to accept or not to accept responsibility for their children is described, along with the ways in which some of them attempted to act responsibly.

Methods

The ethnographic methods employed in this study have some limitations but also some important advantages for examining the public policy dilemma of how to deal with young unwed fathers. The limitations derive primarily from the small size of the sample and the fact that the sample was not chosen at random. Most of this paper is based on case studies of twenty-four individuals, ranging in age from fifteen to twenty-two at the time they were interviewed. Fourteen of these individuals lived in a low-income, primarily black neighborhood. The other ten lived in a low-income, primarily Hispanic neighborhood. The individuals studied were recruited through community-based networks of friendship and acquaintance. Because of these sampling characteristics, statistical generalizations are not appropriate or attempted here,

although some distributions are noted for purely descriptive purposes.

These same sample characteristics, however, are also very helpful for addressing questions of the relationships between individual responsibility and community-specific structures of opportunity. The in-depth data provided by the case study method allow for an examination of behavior and attitudes in some detail. This approach can reveal more complexity of behavior and attitudes than is possible with the more cut-and-dried nature of results from broader sample surveys or aggregated official records. The fact that the sample was recruited through community-based networks, though it obviates the possibility of analytic techniques associated with random sampling, also confers some benefits. The first difficulty in studying teenage fathers, or, indeed, inner-city males generally, is locating them. The young men to be described here were not chosen from a self-selected population of program users or on the basis of participation in any official institution, such as the schools, the court system, or the welfare system. Some participated in each of these institutions at various times, some did not, and several moved in and out of such participation over time.

One of the most important advantages of a community-based sample of young fathers is directly related to the problem of describing individual moral choices within the context of the structure of opportunities of disadvantaged communities. Ethnographic methods describe individuals within the context of naturally existing communities. Individual choices are described

with reference to the norms of a specific community. Individual behavior is described as it emerges through interaction with other members of the community. This is the approach employed here in the descriptions of how some young men decide to acknowledge paternity or not and how they conceive and enact the rights and duties of paternity when they do so acknowledge. The recognition of paternity is described not merely as an individual but also as a social process. Our data include not merely the self-reports of these young men but also our observations of their interactions with the mothers of their children and with other members of their families and communities. All of the young men have been contacted several times over a period of months, or, in some cases, years.

All the members of these communities recognize the difficulties that most of them face in finding jobs and decent housing and the particularly severe labor market difficulties of young people. Yet they also recognize the difference between responsible and irresponsible behavior in confronting these commonly shared difficulties. Childbearing by teenagers who are poorly equipped to set up and support independent households is common enough in these neighborhoods that informal support systems have been developed. These "folk" systems (Stack, 1974) for providing child care and child support operate, of necessity, within the parameters of the legal, educational, employment, and welfare systems of the wider society, but these societal institutions do not completely determine processes within a particular community. One of the aims of the analysis here is to

describe the interaction of community-based processes with the constraints and resources provided by the institutions of the wider society.

The ethnographic research reported here has been carried out over a period of about two years with a focus specifically on young fathers (Sullivan, 1985). Research in these neighborhoods began five years before that, however, in an extensive study of relationships among crime, employment, and schooling involvements in the careers of young males (Sullivan, 1983; 1984). These career patterns will be shown here to be closely tied to decisions about acknowledging paternity and attempting to carry out paternal responsibilities.

This research on the male role in teenage pregnancy and parenting is ongoing. At present, the most extensive data have been collected in the neighborhood which we refer to as Projectville¹, a low-income, predominantly black neighborhood in Brooklyn in which rates of childbearing by unmarried teenagers are among the highest in New York City. This paper will first examine the data from this neighborhood. The social process by which young males decide to acknowledge paternity will be described first, followed by descriptions of the patterns of support and care for their children. Different cases of support and non-support and of varying patterns of support will be compared, in order to show a range of variation within the neighborhood.

¹Names of neighborhoods and individuals used in this paper are pseudonymous.

Community norms will be identified in the reported reactions of others to various types of behavior by young fathers.

This research project has also begun to develop several in-depth case studies of young fathers in a second neighborhood, which will be called La Barriada. Research focused on young fathers has been in progress there for about six months, although previous research has documented the career patterns of young males there over the past six years. The recent data on young fathers in La Barriada will be compared to the findings from Projectville. Similarities and differences between these communities in the patterning of the recognition of paternity and in the provision of care and support for the children of young males will be explored. These comparisons are intended to highlight differences in community norms and in ways of dealing with the constraints and resources provided by institutions of the wider society.

After the presentation and analysis of the ethnographic data, the implications of these findings for public policy will be discussed. The ways in which young fathers take or do not take responsibility for their offspring will be examined in light of their own choices, the norms in their communities, and the opportunities available to them in those communities.

Projectville

Census statistics show that Projectville is one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City. In 1980, over sixty per cent of the households were classified as female-headed and over half received some form of public assistance. These statistics,

however, conceal as much as they reveal about the the dynamics of family composition and the relation between welfare and work. Many households do contain a working adult male. Many other families break up and reform over time. In addition, although the percentage of households receiving public assistance at any one time is high, there is considerable movement on and off welfare rolls.

Four of fourteen youths for whom we have developed extensive life-histories grew up in two-parent households in which their fathers had stable work histories. Two of these sets of parents were legally married. Two other sets of their parents had been together in "common-law" marriages for over twenty years. Several other youths had lived with their fathers when they were young and had seen their parents' relationships break up when they were small children. Several of those who had lived most of their lives in households headed by their mothers had nevertheless maintained regular relationships with their fathers. They saw their fathers regularly and were accustomed to receiving some money when they did see them.

Most of their own households had been supported by public assistance at some point when they were growing up. By the time they reached their late teens, however, most of their mothers were not on public assistance. As their children had gotten older, these women had found jobs, most often as home care attendants. Some families in Projectville are chronically dependent on public support, but welfare dependency tends to be concentrated at certain points in the domestic cycle, when young children are

present in the household. The high rate of public assistance in the neighborhood reflects the fact that this is a young population, with a median age of about twenty years.

Most adults in Projectville have worked, though not steadily. Many of the marital break-ups mentioned above, for example, were precipitated by a male's loss of employment.

Access to employment is difficult for most Projectville residents but particularly so for teenagers. In an earlier study of relationships between crime and employment among young males in this neighborhood (Sullivan, 1984), we found that government-subsidized employment programs accounted for more than half of their employment experiences before they reached the age of eighteen. During their late teens, they still experienced considerable labor market difficulties, but the situation began to improve as some of them managed to acquire high school diplomas and to move into clerical and service sector jobs.

The struggle for education among these youths is intense. Most attend school sporadically at some point in their mid-teens and few earn regular high school diplomas. Many return to school, however, often in alternative programs, and manage to earn General Equivalency Diplomas by their late teens. Those who do so usually continue to seek additional job training or begin to attend community colleges. During the mid-teens when many are attending school sporadically and have little access to employment, some become fairly intensively involved in street crime. These street crime activities taper off in the late teens, however, as the

costs of crime mount and the labor market begins to open up to some extent.

The family backgrounds and modal career patterns of young men from Projectville have been described in order to establish the context in which many of them confront paternity. Whether or not they grew up in households headed by a married, adult couple and supported by stable employment, none of these youths grew up in an environment in which such arrangements could be considered normal and to be expected. Instead, they had all seen families shift and reform and households supported by shifting and mixed sources of support from public assistance, wages, and, in some cases, the underground economy. Another important aspect of household economies in Projectville is the extensive reliance on sharing, as described by Stack (1974). Networks of extended kin are the locus for most of this sharing. Household items, money, and children move frequently from place to place as one relative runs short this week, and another the next week.

When these young men discovered that they had impregnated someone, their responses to the situation were powerfully influenced by these networks of extended kin and by their current involvements in schooling and the labor market, legal or illegal. We have documented cases in which they both acknowledged and refused to acknowledge paternity as well as a wide variety of patterns of support of their children. Examples are provided here which illustrate these different situations and establish some of the range of variation within this neighborhood. Later, the range

of responses within Projectville is compared to a somewhat different range of responses in La Barriada.

Acknowledgement of Paternity. Most of the youths we have interviewed directly have acknowledged paternity to some extent, both within their own communities and to researchers in the course of consenting to be interviewed. This is a sampling bias that affects even our ethnographic sample and should not be taken to imply that there is no denial or neglect of paternity going on among young men in Projectville. In fact, all of those we interviewed reported that they knew of many such cases. Their accounts of their own experiences or those of others in the neighborhood, however, made clear that the denial or acknowledgement of paternity was part of a social process and not simply an individual decision rooted in the psychology and morals of each individual male.

The case material which follows illustrates several aspects of the social process of the recognition of paternity in Projectville. "Folk" rather than legal norms dominated this process (Stack, 1974). Most of the crucial negotiations determining the recognition of paternity and associated rights and duties occurred within community-based networks. Legal recognition of paternity, through marriage and/or the signing of the birth certificate, occurred only as the culmination of these community-based processes.

The social negotiation of the recognition of paternity began with the assessment by the pregnant female and her male sex partner of the actual probability that he had been the one who had

impregnated her. Those we interviewed described cases in their own and others' experience in which there was legitimate doubt. Two of those we interviewed described cases in which females had first told them that they had made them pregnant and then had retracted those claims. Others admitted that they had had casual sexual encounters in which they might have impregnated their partners and never known because there had been little or no subsequent contact.

In cases where there had been an ongoing relationship, however, the absolute denial of paternity within the neighborhood might not be possible, as expressed in the following statement from an interview:

Tom: ...it's hard to hide. People know things about you, how long you been with her, or who she's been with or not. Plus, if it looks like you and she says it's yours, then nobody's going to believe it isn't yours.

Although most of those we interviewed knew of cases of doubt or disagreement over the basic facts of paternity, only one reported having undergone a blood test. In this case, he was the one who insisted on the procedure. He shared his doubts about paternity with his older sister, who explained blood tests to him and advised him to get one. He did so, even though it caused a fight with the mother of his child. Only after the test did not rule out his paternity did he fully acknowledge the child and sign the birth certificate. At this point, the social process of establishing paternity had begun to involve the young father's own kin, an important aspect of the process in many other cases as well.

In cases where both the young parents are agreed on the facts of paternity and this basic knowledge is also shared in other parts of the community, the next step in the social process of establishing paternity concerns the father's response to the situation. He must decide whether he wants to acknowledge paternity publicly, in which case he will have to negotiate a set of associated rights and duties. Those we interviewed all knew of cases in which the facts of paternity were acknowledged but the father had abdicated his responsibilities, as in the following example:

Stan: He got five kids, but he only claim one. That's the first one. He got to claim that one because he signed the birth certificate. After that, he learned better and he didn't sign no more.

The young men we interviewed were very clear in their judgement of community norms towards this sort of behavior. They referred to neglect of paternal responsibilities as "stepping off." This phrase is also used to refer to backing down from a physical confrontation with another male or, more generally, to backing down from any challenge that a person cannot handle. Such behavior is acknowledged to be fairly common but is also widely condemned within the adolescent male peer group and throughout the community. The following examples illustrate these norms:

Interviewer: Do you know guys who make babies and don't care?

Harold: Yeah, I know quite a few who say, "I got a daughter who lives over here and a son who lives over there" and the way they say it, it seems like they don't care. When you ask them about it, they may say, "Well, I don't know how long I'm going to live, so I'm looking to have as many as I can while I'm able to."

Interviewer: Do they seem proud when they say it?

Harold: Let's put it this way. They don't get no respect from me on that. I can understand if it happens, but it ain't nothing to brag about.

Interviewer: Have you known guys who make babies and don't take care of them?

Tom: Yeah, I seen it, but I don't like it. I've seen what happens on both sides of that situation. There's the girl. She's got nobody to take care of her or the baby. And the guy too. He loses his self-respect. Not only that but everyone else loses respect for him too. Sometimes it makes him go out and start ripping everybody off. I mean, even if he was doing that before, it makes him worse, it makes him get real bad and nasty. If one of my friends did that, I wouldn't talk to him any more.

Despite the disrespect associated with the neglect of paternal responsibilities, we have found little evidence of a willingness to involve the courts either in adjudicating paternity or in attempting to enforce paternal obligations, at least for young fathers in this community. In fact, two of the fathers of the young men we interviewed in this community had received child support orders. Tom's father had paid child support for years. Stan's father had stopped all support after his mother had applied legal pressure. These court orders, however, had been entered against employed, adult males who had been married for several years prior to marital disruption and cessation of support.

Only one of those we interviewed even knew of a case in which a peer had encountered court-ordered child enforcement. Stan reported that a close friend of his had committed suicide when faced with a child support order. Harold told of a case in which the courts had been involved, but for the purpose of keeping a young father away from his child and his child's mother:

Harold: He's twenty and his daughter's about two now. In the beginning, his girl's mother didn't mind for him to see the baby, but when she started realizing he wasn't doing anything for the baby she took him to court and I don't know exactly what happened when they were in court but what it led up to was that either he took care of the baby or he stay away from the baby and right now he has no visitation rights. He can't see the baby, be around the baby, you know. I don't know if he couldn't bother to take care of it or he really wasn't ready for it. See, he didn't have a job and maybe he didn't want to, you know, put his foot in his mouth and say he was gonna do something even though he couldn't do it. Right now I'm quite sure he's regretting it, and I know he wants to see the baby. But the girl and her mother moved to Queens, and right now she's staying with some other guy, so.....

Others also mentioned cases in which young fathers they knew had lost rights to see their children, although as a result of folk rather than legal processes. Zap told of a dispute that had occurred downstairs in his building just before an interview:

Zap: I know this one guy name Rich and he got a baby by this girl. He don't take care of the baby right. This other guy, you know, he is taking care of the baby, and he be looking out. Rich came back, and I saw their hands up in the hallway: "That's my baby." "I ain't going for it" and all of that. Meantime, Rich, you know, he probably just wanted to have sex with her, that's all.

As this latter example indicates, whether or not the courts have been involved, a young father who does not demonstrate some willingness to provide support or care for his child risks losing his rights to see the child or the mother. Another male is as likely as the courts to block his access.

Patterns of Support. Most of those we have interviewed had in fact demonstrated their intentions to provide some child care and support. Many had been with the mothers at the hospital at the time of the birth and most, though not all, had signed the birth certificates. Yet, almost none of them were married to or

living with the mothers of their children at the time of the interviews.

They had negotiated a set of rights and responsibilities before the birth took place. These negotiations usually included not only the young parents but also their own parents. In most cases, agreements were reached before the birth of the child concerning the contributions the father would make to the support and care of the child. As will be seen, these arrangements were fragile and in some cases turned out to be unstable, with the fathers "stepping off" after a failed attempt to take responsibility. The case material that follows illustrates the process by which these arrangements were made and the nature of the support patterns that resulted.

In several of the cases we have studied, arrangements for the support and care of the child began during the pregnancy with an explicit decision not to seek an abortion. The young father and his kin, usually his mother, were involved in the decision to have the child in the first place. If both members of the young couple wanted to have the child, the two families tried to work out arrangements together that would provide for the child's care and support. The young father was expected to seek employment and make financial contributions. He also was expected to provide some child care, usually with the assistance of his own kin. In this neighborhood, marriage and co-residence were not usually considered as possible or advisable by either of the families. Another aspect of planning for the birth in this neighborhood was considerable support for helping either or both of the young

parents continue with their education. If the father should continue with his schooling, he was still expected to seek part-time employment.

These general features of planning for child support and child care -- absence of marriage and co-residence; support for continued education; and expectations of some contribution of money and child care from the young father and his kin -- worked out in practice in a wide variety of ways. Everyone recognized the difficulty of finding employment and the instability of jobs that could be found. If the relationship between the young parents had been of short duration and the young father could not find work, he risked losing access to his child. Those we interviewed were quite clear that inability to find work was a frequent cause of "stepping off":

Ollie: Some of them, they say they just stepped off. In order not to step off, you got to have a job, got to get you a job. Cause, if you don't get a job, and you're not supporting the baby, you ain't see the baby. You going to want to buy the baby Pampers, food, clothes, or whatever. You ain't got the money. You know the baby's mother and the baby's mother mother, I know they're going to have money to kick out for the baby, and if you ain't got no money, you got to step off.

Zap: Sometimes a guy got a nice job, you know, he don't mind trying, but if he ain't got no job, maybe he's afraid to try.

If the relationship between the young couple was more substantial, however, not being able to find a job might more easily be forgiven by the young mother and her family, especially if the young father demonstrated his commitment in other ways, such as providing regular child care, attempting to invest in education and training in order to be better able to provide

support in the future, and staying clear of heavy drug use and incarceration.

Even among our small sample, a wide variety of arrangements for child care and child support are apparent. We have also followed some of these cases now for a long enough period of time to see these arrangements shift according to shifting involvements in school, in employment, and, for some, in crime and incarceration. These developing career patterns of the young parents also included considerable movement in and out of the welfare system. Some of the many permutations of these arrangements, including cases of both more and less conventional patterns, are described here.

Only two of the Projectville respondents both married the mothers of their children and established a common residence. In one case, the mother and child received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments steadily. The father was known to AFDC officials and held a series of short-term jobs. When he worked on-the-books, his contributions were deducted from AFDC payments. When he worked off-the-books, his contributions all provided extra family income. In the other case, the mother and child enrolled very briefly for AFDC, until the father found steady employment, at the factory where his own father had worked for many years, and became able to support them.

In another case, the young parents established a common residence for a period of about six months, though they did not get married. The father supported them through employment at a dry cleaners. Then he lost and found work several times over the

next two years. They lost their apartment twice while he was out of work, and she moved back in with her relatives each time. She did not begin to receive public assistance until the child was a year old and the father had been out of work for several months. Subsequently, he made contributions from short-term stints of off-the-books employment.

Three of the young fathers continued in school for a time after their children were born. Two of these young men had no involvement in criminal activities and found employment sporadically. One found two separate part-time jobs in fast-food restaurants and contributed about twenty-five dollars a week when he was working. His child did not receive public assistance. Another continued in school for a short time and finished his high school diploma. He then found a job in a department store and made contributions, until he was laid off. The mother of his child continued in school, in a special program for young mothers, and received public assistance for herself and the child. The father had signed the birth certificate, but his occasional contributions from short-term, off-the-books jobs were not known to welfare officials. A third continued in school while the mother of his child left school and worked full-time. Their child did not receive public assistance. The young father was a part-time dealer of marijuana and made regular small contributions from his sales.

Some of the young mothers also continued with their education. They enrolled in a special program in an alternative high school with services for young mothers. In one case, the

young father was unemployed and not in school and provided child care while the mother attended school.

In all these cases, the fathers and their families provided regular child care. The young parents still resided primarily with their own parents, but the babies moved frequently back and forth between the two households. The young fathers from Projectville have reported considerable participation in direct child care. When their children are at their homes, their parents expect them to provide care. When they visit the homes of the mothers of the their children, they are also frequently expected to provide direct care.

Involvement in drug use, drug sales and other criminal activities was more prominent in the careers of some of the others we interviewed. In one case, the young father was actually in jail when he learned of the pregnancy. He continued to sell drugs for the first year of his child's life, also working occasionally, and making regular contributions from either wages or drug sales. He finished school and became more responsible. He joined a military reserve unit and decreased his involvement in street life.

In other cases, involvement in crime and/or drug use interrupted initial attempts to provide child care and support. One young father was incarcerated when his child was only a few months old. He had known the mother only a short time and appeared unlikely to resume his initial commitments. One of the married, co-resident fathers mentioned above became involved in using "crack" after two years of marriage and abandoned his

family. Another father who had been providing regular child care and irregular financial support disappeared after becoming involved in a dispute over stolen drugs.

These case studies, from a small sample, reveal a wide variety of strategies for providing child care and support. Support is provided by various and shifting combinations of income from public assistance, employment, and, in some cases, crime. Some situations do not involve any dishonest behavior and other situations involve reliance on criminal income or illegitimate combining of wages and public assistance funds. Survival strategies also shift frequently in response to opportunities or crises. Some individuals are more involved in dishonest activities than others, but even those who try to find stable employment are not easily able to do so. In an earlier study not focused specifically on young fathers (Sullivan, 1984), we also documented shifting patterns of involvement in work, school, and the underground economy. We observed that many became involved in illegal activities at some point in their teens but tended to move out of such involvements as they got older, achieved some kind of education and training, and found employment more easily. The young fathers we are reporting on here are still involved in these career processes and their provision of child care and support at any given time is closely tied to the rest of their career development.

La Barriada

Our data from a second neighborhood, which we call La Barriada, is not as extensive as that from Projectville, but is

already beginning to suggest some interesting similarities and differences to Projectville in the range of responses to childbearing by teenaged parents. We are now in the process of developing case studies and have begun to collect data for ten different individuals so far. We also have considerable data from our earlier study on patterns of involvement in employment, schooling, and crime in the careers of young men. The comparative analysis suggested here is intended to show the ways in which somewhat different sets of community norms combine with similar constraints and resources provided by societal institutions to produce different ways of dealing with early childbearing.

La Barriada is a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood of Brooklyn with income levels and rates of welfare dependency generally similar to those in Projectville. Although the larger neighborhood is more economically and ethnically heterogeneous than Projectville, over half the households in the part of La Barriada that we have studied are officially headed by females and receive AFDC. This is also a young population, with a median age of about twenty.

There are also some important similarities and differences in the career patterns of young men. The relationships between criminal activity and employment are similar: many teenage boys have some involvement in crime but then move on into legitimate jobs starting in their late teens. Their path into the labor market differs, however. Very few finish high school, and, when they do find jobs, they tend to find unskilled manufacturing jobs which are less dependent on educational credentials. As a result,

they stay in school for less time and enter the labor market somewhat earlier, but fewer of them are able to use education to find the more desirable jobs that some Projectville residents do eventually manage to find. These differences in labor market patterns, along with differences in cultural norms relating to family and household formation, both affect local patterns of dealing with early childbearing.

As in our Projectville sample of young fathers, we see a range of situations and behaviors among the young fathers from La Barriada. We have talked primarily to those who have been making some attempts at support, but all of them know peers who have abandoned their children. There is no indication that any respect is given those who father children and do not attempt to support them. Among those we have talked to, there is considerable variation in success in providing support. The strength of the relationship between the young parents, the ability of the father to find employment, and the destructive involvement of some fathers in crime and/or drug use all affect the contributions of the young father to child care and support.

Although there is a range of circumstances among the cases from each of those two neighborhoods, there are also some marked differences. These differences are in patterns of marriage and co-residence and in community support for continued education for young parents.

We are seeing much more marriage and co-residence among the young fathers from La Barriada, despite their similar difficulties in finding stable employment that would allow them to support

their new families. Five of ten young fathers we have spoken to have married the mothers of their children. Three of the unmarried fathers are living with their children and the mothers. A further difference is that four of the young couples are living together in the residence of the father's family, a pattern we have never seen in Projectville.

These differences in patterns of marriage and co-residence appear to be related to cultural norms with respect both to gender roles and to generation roles. A father who acknowledges paternity in La Barriada is more strongly expected to marry the mother of his child. Young mothers are also under tremendous pressure to move out of their parents' households. These patterns appear to be related to a high valuation of a daughter's virginity and consequent family strain if she becomes pregnant. Unlike in Projectville, many of the young mothers in La Barriada become pregnant as a result of running away from home. Once they become pregnant, they are less comfortable remaining at home, particularly if their father is present, since his honor has been severely compromised by his daughter's pregnancy. The young father's family, however, receives confirmation of his virility and is not disgraced in this way. As a result, the young couples who do try to stay together and can not find their own housing are more likely to move into the father's household.

Yet, these newly formed households are extremely fragile, due to many of the same structural influences affecting Projectville. The labor market difficulties faced by the young men are formidable and some are involved in criminal activities

that put them at risk of incarceration. The effects of the welfare system in making jobless men marginal to the household are similar. The fragility of marital ties is apparent among the parents of the young fathers. Seven of ten of them grew up partially or entirely in female-headed households. All of their parents had been married, but the marriages had been disrupted, often by the men's employment problems.

Another difference between the neighborhoods which appears to be rooted in cultural norms is that the young fathers from La Barriada report less participation in direct child care than the young fathers from Projectville. Child care is more likely to be defined as a female responsibility in La Barriada. Thus, even though the La Barriada fathers are more likely to be married and living with their children, they are less likely to provide direct child care.

Despite broad similarities in the labor market difficulties of young men from Projectville and La Barriada, their somewhat different labor market paths do affect community expectations for young fathers. None of the young fathers from La Barriada considered staying in school in order to be better able to support their children later on. If they wished to acknowledge paternity and provide support, they were expected to forget about school and try to find work immediately. In fact, some of them appeared to be more successful in finding work than their counterparts in Projectville, as low-level jobs are somewhat more plentiful in their neighborhood. These jobs are generally off-the-books and do not last very long, however, and thus do not allow them to

provide steady support. As a result, the relationships among work, welfare, and, in some cases, crime, as sources of household income are similar to the patterns in Projectville. There is considerable movement on and off AFDC as males find and lose work. Some households also combine short-term, off-the-books wages with AFDC support for a period of time. Some fathers receive criminal income which they contribute to family support for a period of time, although these fathers are also the most likely to be incarcerated and thus to become unable to provide any support.

Young Fathers and Community-based Support Systems: A Summary

The case material just presented adds to our knowledge of the roles actually played by young fathers of the children of teenaged mothers. Two aspects of these roles deserve particular attention. The first is the developmental nature of these young males' abilities to provide care and support for their children. The second is the range of variation among communities in the expectations of what young fathers should contribute and how they should share responsibilities with others.

Developmental Factors. Most of the young fathers we have studied were assuming some but not all of the full set of paternal responsibilities. They were not yet capable of assuming full responsibilities because of ongoing tasks of their own development. These tasks included not only physical and psychological maturation, but social maturation through the completion of schooling and a difficult period of entry into the

labor market. For many young males from the inner cities, labor market entry is a protracted and painful process. Some may never establish stable employment. Others may try and fail repeatedly for several years between the completion of formal schooling and eventual success. During this period, some become involved in drug abuse and crime.

Yet, it is a mistake to look at a particular youth at a given moment and say that he is a "drop-out," a non-participant in the labor market, or a "criminal," and is likely to remain in these categories indefinitely. Available statistics indicate that many will come through these difficulties. Arrest rates, for example, peak during the teen years and decline sharply in the early twenties. Likewise, unemployment rates, even within inner-city neighborhoods, are much higher for teens than for older people. Many of these youths will earn a General Equivalency Diploma after a period of interrupted education. Despite repeated attempts by social scientists, no one has ever found an accurate method of predicting which youths will and will not survive the stresses of inner-city adolescence. Opportunities and choices along the way make differences that are not predictable. Early parenting itself is a positive opportunity for some and, for others, an additional arena for failure.

Community Factors. The responsibilities of young fathers are defined differently in the different communities we are studying. In La Barriada, there is considerable pressure for young fathers to marry, establish co-residence, and find full-time employment, but little support for their continuing to invest in education and

training. They are not necessarily expected to provide hands-on child care. In Projectville, young fathers are not expected to marry and establish co-residence right away. They are expected to try to find work, but they are also given considerable support if they try to invest in education and training. The combination of ongoing schooling and part-time work is frequently considered ideal. They provide a great deal of direct child care.

We are just beginning to collect data in a third community, a white working-class neighborhood, but some patterns are suggested by our early interviews. One pattern is that early pregnancy precipitates marriage. The young father then finds a desirable blue-collar job through a family connection to a business or a labor union. Such a job allows him to support his family as a primary wage-earner. This seems to be a traditional pattern in this community, but one that is disappearing along with the unionized, blue-collar jobs that give this community and its families a stability unknown to most residents of Projectville and La Barriada. Some of the younger males are becoming involved in drugs and crime to a greater extent and this irresponsibility extends to their children. Some of them are "stepping off" also, and allowing their children to become AFDC recipients.

The implications of these findings for public policy are discussed below.

Policy Implications

Previous studies have pointed to the existence of informal support systems but disagreed about the implications of these systems for policies intended to increase child support. Stack and Semmel (1973) claimed that child support enforcement could disrupt informal support systems and actually be to the detriment of poor children. Haskins, et.al. (1985) disputed this inference and documented continuing participation in informal support systems by men under child support orders instituted under the provisions of Title IV-D of the Social Services Amendments of 1974. No existing studies, however, including this one, offer any conclusive evidence of the actual effects of IV-D enforcement activities on informal support systems. Such studies would be difficult or impossible to conduct, given the difficulty of obtaining quantifiable information on deviant activities such as concealing paternity or withholding child support. (Another recent study documenting the existence of informal support systems is Rivara, Sweeney, and Henderson, 1986.)

Whatever the effect of enforcement actions on young fathers' participation in informal support systems, the current child support enforcement system clearly fails to recognize or take advantage of the positive aspects of the developmental and community-specific factors described here. Young fathers are treated punitively, if they are sought out at all. More frequently, they are simply neglected.

The child support enforcement system, as it now exists, recognizes only cash payments as "child support." The internal workings of the system also frequently relegate young, poor fathers to the lowest priority for attention (Rivara-Casale, 1984). In New York City, for example, young fathers who are themselves AFDC recipients, as were several of those we studied, are automatically excluded from enforcement proceedings (Kohn, 1986). None of the young fathers in our study had ever been involved in an enforcement action. Yet, several of these fathers were making occasional cash contributions and some were continuing to invest in their own education and training, to the possible long-term benefit of the child. These positive activities were not effectively linked to the official establishment of paternity.

The current child support enforcement system is narrow, punitive, and frequently ineffective, particularly in its treatment of young fathers. The current exclusive focus on securing immediate monetary contributions offers little incentive to young fathers to acknowledge paternity, or to young mothers to cooperate with official attempts to identify fathers. Stack and Semmel (1973) have persuasively argued this case with respect to poor fathers generally. Our research points up some of the particular disincentives to marriage and official paternity for young fathers. Young males have especially severe labor market difficulties and are still at an age when schooling may contribute more than work experience to their long-term ability to support themselves and their children. Most of their actual work experience consists of sporadic off-the-books jobs that allow them

to make cash contributions which cannot be traced and deducted from AFDC benefits.

Yet, official paternity is indisputably to the long-term advantage of the child (Wattenberg,1984). Even if the father never achieves stable employment and/or dies at an early age, official paternity can provide his children access to a wide range of benefits from military benefits programs, Social Security, or inheritance (Everett,1985). These long-term benefits are currently in conflict with the short-term advantages of concealing paternity for young fathers like those we have studied. With the passage of time, the difficulties of establishing official paternity increase. The father's chances for obtaining on-the-books employment become more favorable, increasing the likelihood that his contributions will be deducted. Also, the relationship between the young parents may deteriorate, decreasing the father's willingness to contribute.

Thus, the structure of the current child support enforcement system interacts with the developmental trajectory of youthful career patterns in unfavorable ways. The exclusive emphasis on securing immediate monetary contributions is both ineffective in the short-term and even more deleterious in the long run because of the disincentives to establishing official paternity. Research shows that, even within inner-city neighborhoods, employment prospects increase as young men age past their teens (Sullivan, 1984; Sviridoff with McElroy, 1984; Williams and Kornblum, 1985). Yet, the fragile commitments between young parents often do not last. The emotional commitments of young fathers are likely to be

strongest at exactly the time when the structural incentives to acknowledge paternity officially are weakest.

These contradictions in the operation of current policies suggest that the most productive way to encourage the establishment of official paternity for young fathers may be to seek non-punitive measures which build upon the strengths of informal, community-based support systems rather than ignoring or possibly even undercutting such systems. A number of specific suggestions are offered below.

Paternity Benefits Education. Many of the benefits conveyed by official paternity pose no threat to anyone. Many of the young fathers we have interviewed are imperfectly aware of the provisions of the Social Security system and the military which could benefit their children. Their decisions to acknowledge paternity officially or not are often based on sentiment rather than on practical information about the consequences of the choice they are making. Information on these benefits could be disseminated through schools, the mass media, and youth agencies.

Employment, Education, and Training. A growing body of research indicates that the perception of "life options," (Dryfoos, 1985) or the lack of options, strongly influences the decisions that young people make concerning fertility control and parenting responsibility. The data presented here suggest that many young fathers want to take long-term responsibility for their children but are hampered by their lack of educational and employment opportunities. The focus of the current child support enforcement system allows no mechanism for recognizing these

aspirations and may actually discourage continued investment in education and training. The effects of this policy on young fathers are disastrous, both for the young families and in terms of welfare expenses over time. Enrollment in employment programs, training programs, or continued education should be recognized by the child support enforcement systems as a valid commitment to paternal responsibility, as long as such a commitment is accompanied by other demonstrations of paternal responsibility, such as providing child care and other non-cash resources. Access to employment, training, and education should be facilitated for those young fathers who are motivated to take advantage of such opportunities and who are otherwise behaving responsibly towards their children. Making such resources available would reverse the current structure of incentives by encouraging rather than discouraging the official acknowledgement of paternity.

Child Care Credits. Even with expanded employment and training resources, it is unlikely that the labor market problems of inner-city youths will disappear in the near future. In the meantime, many young men, often with the help of their own kin, are providing substantial child care for their children. They should be given credit for child care by the child support enforcement system. This is one resource they can provide whether or not they are able to find employment. Giving them such credit would encourage official acknowledgement of paternity. Child support orders for young fathers could include agreements to provide child care.

Expanded Disregards of Paternal Contributions to AFDC

Households. Since 1984, the first fifty dollars of a father's contributions are not deducted from the AFDC budget, though food stamps and other related benefits are affected (Everett, 1985). This policy change is a small step in the right direction. The contributions we have documented are usually not deducted because they are derived from off-the-books labor. These contributions are not legitimated by the current child support enforcement system, with the result that the desire to provide child support discourages official recognition of paternity. Official recognition of these contributions would encourage official recognition of paternity, to the long-term benefit of both the child and the taxpayers. Since AFDC budgets are below the official poverty level, it would make sense ultimately to allow paternal contributions in amounts up to the difference between the AFDC budget and the poverty level. As a more preliminary measure, an experimental program could be tried in which an expanded disregard could be tried in one area. Rates of paternity acknowledgement could then be measured against a closely matched area.

Sensitivity to Local Family and Labor Market Patterns. Our research points to some significant differences in community values and expectations concerning the proper behavior of young fathers and the roles they are expected to play in community-based support systems for young mothers. The current child support enforcement system ignores these differences and is blind to the different types of contributions that young fathers do or could

make. Child support orders should be designed to recognize these differences and to build upon rather than undercut community-based support systems.

Not all young fathers are responsible, and many are too young, psychologically and socially, to be capable of undertaking full paternal responsibilities. Yet they are all capable of making some contribution. At present, these partial contributions are recognized and supported at the community level much more effectively than at the level of official institutions. Public policy needs to develop ways to recognize and reward positive contributions other than immediate financial support.

References

Dryfoos, Joy G., Review of Programs and Services to Foster Responsible Sexual Behavior on the Part of Adolescent Boys, Report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, July, 1985 (mimeo).

Everett, Joyce E., "An Examination of Child Support Enforcement Issues," In Harriette McAdoo and T.M. Jim Parnham, eds., Services to Young Families: Program Review and Policy Recommendations, American Public Welfare Association, Washington, D.C., 1985.

Haskins, Ron, Andrew W. Dobelstein, John S. Akin, and J. Brad Schwartz, Estimates of National Child Support Collections Potential and Income Security of Female-Headed Families, Final Report to the Office of Child Support Administration, Social Security Administration, Bush Institute for Child and Family Policy, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, University of North Carolina, 1985.

Kohn, Margaret, personal communication from Irwin Brooks, Deputy Administrator, Office of Income Administration, New York City Human Resources Administration, August 8, 1986.

Rivara, Frederick P., Patrick J. Sweeney, and Brady F. Henderson, "Black Teenage Fathers: What Happens When the Child Is Born?" Pediatrics, Vol. 78, No. 1, July, 1986, pp. 151-158.

Rivera-Casale, Cecilia, Lorraine V. Klerman, and Roger Manela, "The Relevance of Child-Support Enforcement to School-Age Parents," Child Welfare, Vol 63, No. 6, November-December, 1984, pp. 521-532.

Stack, Carol B. All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Stack, C. and Semmel, H., "The concept of family in the poor black community," Studies in Public Welfare, Paper No. 12, Part II, U.S. Government Printing Office, November, 1973.

Sullivan, Mercer L. "Youth Crime and Employment Patterns in Three Brooklyn Neighborhoods." A Report to the National Institute of Justice, Department of Justice. Vera Institute of Justice, New York City, 1984. (Mimeo.)

-----"Youth Crime: New York's Two Varieties," New York Affairs, Urban Research Center, New York University, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1983.

-----Teen Fathers in the Inner City, A Report to the Ford Foundation, Vera Institute of Justice (mimeo), 1985.

Sviridoff, Michele with McElroy, Jerome E. "Employment and Crime: A Summary Report." A Report to the National Institute of Justice. Vera Institute of Justice, New York City, 1984. (Mimeo.)

Wattenberg, Esther, "Protecting the Rights of the Minor Child of Unmarried Minor Parents: Toward a Rational Policy," A paper presented to the Child Support Enforcement Research Workshop, Office of Child Support Enforcement, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C., August 18, 1984. School of Social Work, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota (mimeo).

Williams, Terry and William Kornblum, Growing Up Poor, Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1985.