

GETTING NONCUSTODIAL DADS INVOLVED IN THE LIVES OF FOSTER CHILDREN

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Many, if not most, foster children are living apart from their fathers at the time they are removed from their homes. Once removed, these children experience even less contact with their noncustodial fathers.

The dearth of fathers in the lives of foster children is of mounting concern as efforts to expedite permanent homes for these children intensify and there is greater recognition of fathers' contributions to family stability and children's healthy development. Consequently, in recent years, legislative and policy changes affecting child support and child welfare have placed new emphasis on identifying, locating, and involving noncustodial fathers of foster children.

Fathers and Foster Children

In 1999, more than half of the foster children in nearly two-dozen states came from single, female-headed households.¹ In addition, an unknown number of foster children with noncustodial fathers were removed from households designated (because the mother had remarried or repartnered) as "married couple" or "unmarried couple."

To gauge the share of children in the child welfare system with noncustodial fathers, two other data sets were examined. These data (below) show the proportion to be as high as 80 percent for foster children and 72 percent for all children served by child welfare agencies. The figures are considerably higher than the estimates for children in general (28 percent) and poor children (29 percent; not shown in table).²

Although paternity is known for more than 80 percent of the foster children with noncustodial fathers and for similar children served by child welfare agencies, once in foster care they have diminished relations with their fathers. Just 54 percent of these foster children had contact with their fathers in the past year compared with 66 percent of comparable children served by child welfare agencies and 72 percent of those in the general population.

The likelihood that a child receives support from his or her noncustodial father is less for a child in foster care (16 percent) than for one in the general population (42 percent). During a child's stay in foster care, support from a noncustodial parent is used to repay the state for the maintenance payments it

Children with Noncustodial Fathers

	Foster Children	Children Served by Child Welfare Agencies	Children in General Population
Children with noncustodial fathers	80%	72%	28%
Paternity known ^a	81%	85%	60%
Contact with father in past year	54%	66%	72%
Father contributed to child's support	16%	40%	42%

Sources: Urban Institute tabulations of 1994 National Study of Protective, Preventive, and Reunification Services data, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and tabulations of Urban Institute's 1999 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF).

^aData on children in the general population are from the 1999 NSAF, which asked if paternity had been "legally established." Data on foster children and children served by child welfare agencies are from the 1994 National Study of Protective, Preventive, and Reunification Services, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and are based on a caseworker's response to the question, "Is paternity of child known?"

provides to the foster parent. While such payments do not go directly to the child, having a support mechanism in place during efforts to return the child to the birth family may aid reunification by providing financial resources to the home. The number of children that could benefit is not trivial. Of the more than half a million in foster care in fiscal year 2001, 45 percent had a goal of reunification and 25 percent of those who exited foster care had spent less than a year there.³

Policy Changes Encourage Practice Changes

As the number of children with noncustodial fathers and the rate of nonmarital childbearing have increased over the past three decades, so too has the importance of establishing legal paternity. Congress has steadily strengthened child support enforcement and paternity establishment policies, such as requiring in-hospital programs that allow unmarried fathers to acknowledge paternity, which have led to some success. For example, never-married mothers saw a fourfold jump in their child support receipt rate between 1976 and 1997.⁴ The attention of policymakers is now on how child support enforcement might advance states' efforts to protect children who have experienced abuse or neglect.

Recent shifts in child welfare law make the involvement of noncustodial fathers more likely. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) significantly reduced the time child welfare agencies have to make permanency decisions for children in foster care, which should affect how they identify, locate, and involve fathers. For example, ASFA encourages agencies to use the Federal Parent Locator Service, employed by support enforcement programs, to find fathers and other relatives.

Concurrent planning might prompt earlier efforts to locate fathers because the father, or his relatives, may be identified as a placement resource, even while the caseworker seeks to reunify the child with his or her mother.⁵ Moreover, if adoption becomes the case goal, a diligent search for the father must be undertaken. While judicial guidelines have long sought early identification of fathers, the implementation of ASFA has increased the likelihood that this is occurring more consistently.

Because ASFA reemphasized that kin should be sought whenever possible when designating placement opportunities for foster children, paternity establishment has become vital to identifying a father and any of his relatives as potential caregivers. Family group conferencing or family meetings are being used increasingly by child welfare agencies to involve the extended family in the case decisionmaking process. Using these techniques puts agencies in a better position to make noncustodial fathers part of the case planning.

Policy and Practice Implications

Locating the fathers of foster children should be a priority for child welfare agencies. Not only do many of ASFA's mandates necessitate it, but anecdotal evidence also suggests that quicker, more informed permanency outcomes are likely for children in the foster care system if fathers are more consistently identified and located. For example, once found, fathers can be given the opportunity to care for their children. Those who are not willing or appropriate caregivers will lose paternal rights earlier, allowing the children to be free for adoption sooner. Unwed fathers for whom paternity has not been established can get the chance to do so, leading to a caregiving role or, at the least, identifying the paternal side of the child's family.

To understand the extent to which child welfare agencies are seeking noncustodial fathers and involving them in their children's case management and permanency planning, Urban Institute researchers are conducting a three-year study. The research also will assess the feasibility of using child support enforcement services in these efforts. Data collection will begin in early 2004 and consist of telephone interviews with 1,200 caseworkers in four states.

Further Details

The project's literature review about noncustodial fathers and their relations with children in the child welfare system is available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/CW-dads02/index.htm>. For more Urban Institute research on child welfare, go to www.urban.org/r/children.cfm.

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Endnotes

¹ Data from 23 states on children's pre-foster-care family situation, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999.

² Urban Institute's 1999 National Survey of America's Families.

³ Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2001.

⁴ Sorensen, E., and A. Halpern, 2000. "Child Support Reforms: Who Has Benefited?" *Focus* 21(1), University of Wisconsin-Madison, Institute for Research on Poverty.

⁵ Concurrent planning enables states to seek an adoptive or other permanent placement for a child while trying to preserve or reunite the family.