

# CRS Report for Congress

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## **Fatherhood Initiatives: Connecting Fathers to Their Children**

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# Fatherhood Initiatives: Connecting Fathers to Their Children

## Summary

In 2000, 26% of families with children were maintained by mothers. According to some estimates, 60% of children born during the 1990s will spend a significant portion of their childhood in a home without their father. Research indicates that children raised in single-parent families are more likely than children raised in two-parent families to do poorly in school, have emotional and behavioral problems, become teenage parents, and have poverty-level incomes. In hopes of improving the long-term outlook for children in single-parent families, federal, state, and local governments along with public and private organizations are supporting programs and activities that promote the financial and personal responsibility of noncustodial fathers to their children and increase the participation of fathers in the lives of their children. These programs have come to be known as “fatherhood” programs.

Sources of funding for fatherhood programs include the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, TANF state Maintenance-of-Effort (MOE) funding, welfare-to-work funds, Child Support Enforcement (CSE) funds, and Social Services Block Grant (Title XX) funds.

President Bush’s FY2004 Budget included \$20 million annually (for FY2004-FY2008) for competitive grants to community and faith-based organizations for responsible fatherhood programs. On February 13, 2003, the House passed H.R. 4 (108th Congress), a welfare reauthorization bill (that is essentially identical to H.R. 4737 as passed by the House in 2002) that provides \$20 million per year for each of FY2004-FY2008 for a responsible fatherhood grant program. On September 10, 2003, the Senate Finance Committee approved its version of H.R. 4, which establishes a \$75 million responsible fatherhood program comprised of four components for each of the fiscal years 2004-2008. The Senate is expected to vote on H.R. 4 during the second session of the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress.

Most fatherhood programs include media campaigns that emphasize the importance of emotional, physical, psychological, and financial connections of fathers to their children. Most fatherhood programs include parenting education; responsible decision-making; mediation services for both parents; providing an understanding of the CSE program; conflict resolution, coping with stress, and problem-solving skills; peer support; and job training opportunities (skills development, interviewing skills, job search, job retention skills, job advancement skills, etc.). To help fathers and mothers meet their parental responsibilities, many policy analysts and observers support broad-based collaborative strategies that go beyond welfare and child support agencies and include schools, work programs, prison systems, churches, community organizations, and the health care system.

The federal government’s support of fatherhood initiatives raises a wide array of issues. This report briefly examines the role of the CSE agency in fatherhood programs and discusses whether father-child interaction can be promoted and supported outside the framework of the father-mother relationship, and whether fatherhood programs should include the “promotion of marriage.”

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# Fatherhood Initiatives: Connecting Fathers To Their Children

## Introduction

In 2000, 31% of families with children were maintained by one parent; this figure is up from 11% in 1970. Most of the children in these single-parent families were being raised by their mothers.<sup>1</sup> According to some estimates, 60% of children born during the 1990s will spend a significant portion of their childhood in a home without their biological father. Research indicates that children raised in single-parent families are more likely than children raised in two-parent families to do poorly in school, have emotional and behavioral problems, become teenage parents, and have poverty-level incomes as adults.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it is widely acknowledged that most of these mothers, despite the added stress of being a single parent, do a good job raising their children. That is, although children with absent fathers are at greater risk of having the aforementioned problems, most do not experience them. In hopes of improving the long-term outlook for children in single-parent families, federal, state, and local governments along with public and private organizations are supporting programs and activities that promote the financial and personal responsibility of noncustodial fathers to their children and reduce the incidence of father absence in the lives of children.

The third finding of the 1996 welfare reform law (P.L. 104-193) states: “Promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children.” Moreover, three of the four goals of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program are consistent with the components of most fatherhood programs. The three fatherhood-related goals are: ending welfare dependence by employment and marriage; reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. Thus, states may spend TANF and TANF state Maintenance of Effort (MOE) funds on fatherhood programs. Further, any services that are directed to the goal of reducing nonmarital births or the goal of encouraging two-parent families are free of income eligibility rules.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Current Population Reports*, P20-537. America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2000, by Jason Fields and Lynne M. Casper. June 2001. p. 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> McLanahan, Sara, and Gary Sandefur. *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1994. See also: Bumpass, L. (1984) Children and Marital Disruption: A Replication and Update. *Demography*, v. 21. 71-82. See also: Maynard, Rebecca A. *Kids Having Kids – A Robin Hood Foundation Special Report on the Costs of Adolescent Childbearing*. 1996.

With the exception of the federal Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program, fathers historically have been ignored with regard to their input or participation in welfare programs. Moreover, it was not until 1996 that Congress broadened its view to acknowledge the non-economic contributions that fathers make to their children by authorizing the use of CSE funds to promote access and visitation programs. With the enactment of the 1996 welfare reform law, which helped reduce the welfare rolls, increase the employment of low-income mothers, and strengthen the CSE program, Congress began focusing its attention on the emotional well-being of children. Historically, Congress had treated visitation and child support as legally separate issues, with only child support enforcement activities under the purview of the federal government. The 1996 law authorized an annual \$10 million entitlement of CSE funds to states to establish and operate access and visitation programs.<sup>3</sup>

It appears that a consensus has occurred regarding the need to connect or reconnect noncustodial parents to their children. During the 106th Congress, Representative Nancy Johnson, then chair of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources, stated: “To take the next step in welfare reform we must find a way to help children by providing them with more than a working

*“While fathers must fulfill their financial commitments, they must also fulfill their emotional commitments. Dads play indispensable roles that cannot be measured in dollars and cents: nurturer, mentor, disciplinarian, moral instructor, and skills coach, among other roles.”*

Source: U.S. Executive Office of the President. A Blueprint for New Beginnings—A Responsible Budget for America’s Priorities. Chapter 12. February 2001. p. 75.

mother and sporadic child support.” She noted that many low-income fathers have problems similar to those of mothers on welfare. Namely, they are likely to have dropped out of high school, to have little work experience, and to have significant barriers that lessen their ability to find and/or keep a job. She also asserted that in many cases these men are “dead broke” rather than “dead beats” and that the federal government should help these noncustodial fathers meet both their financial and emotional obligations to their children. During the 106th Congress, legislation was twice passed by the House (but not acted on by the Senate — H.R. 3073 and H.R. 4678) that would have authorized funding (\$140 million over 4 years) to establish a program (usually referred to as fatherhood initiatives) to make grants to public or private entities for projects designed to promote marriage, promote successful

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<sup>3</sup> The child access and visitation program (Section 391 of P.L. 104-193) funded the following activities in FY1999: mediation, counseling, parental education, development of parenting plans, visitation enforcement, monitored visitation, neutral drop off and pickup, supervised visitation, and development of guidelines for visitation and custody. In FY1999, about 47,000 individuals received services. Most common services: supervised visitation, parenting education, counseling, and mediation. Most states used a mix of services. Most of the service providers were Human Service Agencies. Individuals were referred to services by the courts, CSE or welfare agencies, and others, as well as by self-referral. Services were both mandatory and voluntary, as determined by the state. **Source:** U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. Office of Child Support Enforcement. *State Child Access and Visitation Grants: State Profiles (FY1999)*. October 2002.

parenting and the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children, and help fathers improve their economic status by providing job-related services to them.

During the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, several bills (H.R. 1300/S. 653, H.R. 1471, S. 685, S. 940/H.R. 1990, H.R. 2893, H.R. 3625, H.R. 4090, S. 2524, and H.R. 4737) that included fatherhood initiatives were introduced. The purposes of the fatherhood programs in the bills introduced generally were the same: fatherhood programs must be designed to promote marriage through counseling, mentoring, and other activities; promote successful parenting through counseling, providing information about good parenting practices including payment of child support, and other activities; and help noncustodial parents and their families avoid or leave cash welfare by providing work-first services, job training, subsidized employment, career-advancing education, and other activities.

However, the structure of the fatherhood programs differed. For example, H.R. 4737 as amended and passed by the House would have added a new part C to Title IV of the Social Security Act to provide competitive grants to public and private entities to operate an array of fatherhood programs. The competitive grants would have been administered by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The appropriation amount for the fatherhood grants was set at \$20 million a year for each of the five fiscal years FY2003 through FY2007; up to 15% of the annual appropriation was to be available for the cost of various demonstration projects and evaluations of the competitive grants.

In contrast, H.R. 4737 as amended in the nature of a substitute by the Senate Finance Committee appeared to have more of an emphasis on helping low-income noncustodial parents find and retain work. It would have amended part D of title IV of the Social Security Act (i.e., the Child Support section) to provide grants to states to (1) establish a noncustodial parent employment grant program and (2) conduct policy reviews and develop recommendations, and conduct demonstration projects with the goals of obtaining and retaining employment for low-income noncustodial parents, increasing child support payments, increasing the involvement of low-income noncustodial parents with their children, and coordinating services for low-income noncustodial parents. The HHS Secretary and the Secretary of Labor would have jointly awarded grants to eligible states for the purpose of establishing, in coordination with counties and other local governments, supervised employment programs for noncustodial parents who have a history of irregular payment or nonpayment of child support obligations and who are determined to be in need of employment services in order to pay their child support obligations. The appropriation amount for the noncustodial parent employment program was set at \$25 million a year for each of the four fiscal years FY2004 through FY2007. The appropriation amount for the grants, administered by the HHS Secretary, to states for policy reviews, recommendations, and demonstration projects also was set at \$25 million a year for each of the four fiscal years FY2004 through FY2007.

Although H.R. 4737, amended, was passed by the House on May 16, 2002 (H.Rept. 107-460, Part 1), and reported favorably in the nature of a substitute by the Senate Finance Committee (S.Rept. 107-221) on July 25, 2002, it was not passed by the full Senate.

President Bush also has indicated his support for fatherhood initiatives. President Bush's FY2002<sup>4</sup> and FY2003 budgets both included responsible fatherhood initiatives. President Bush's FY2003 Budget included \$20 million (for FY2003) for competitive grants to community and faith-based organizations for programs that help noncustodial fathers support their families to avoid or leave cash welfare, become more involved in their children's lives, and promote successful parenting and encourage and support healthy marriages and married fatherhood.

The 108<sup>th</sup> Congress has introduced several bills that include responsible fatherhood provisions (i.e., S. 5, S. 448, S. 604, and S. 657, S. 1443; H.R. 4 and H.R. 936). President Bush's FY2004 budget includes \$20 million annually (for FY2004-FY2008) for promotion and support of responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage. This funding is expected to promote and support involved, committed, and responsible fatherhood and encourage the formation and stability of healthy marriages. The proposed budget would also increase the annual funding of the CSE access and visitation grant program gradually from \$10 million annually to \$20 million annually by FY2007.

On February 13, 2003, the House passed H.R. 4 (108th Congress), a welfare reauthorization bill (that is essentially identical to H.R. 4737 as passed by the House in 2002) that provides \$20 million per year for each of FY2004-FY2008 for a responsible fatherhood grant program.

On September 10, 2003, the Senate Finance Committee approved its version of H.R. 4 (S.Rept. 108-162), which establishes a \$75 million responsible fatherhood program comprised of four components for each of the fiscal years 2004-2008: (1) a \$20 million grant program for up to 10 eligible states to conduct demonstration programs; (2) a \$30 million grant for eligible entities to conduct demonstration programs; (3) \$5 million for a nationally recognized nonprofit fatherhood promotion organization to develop and promote a responsible fatherhood media campaign; and (4) a \$20 million block grant for states to conduct responsible fatherhood media campaigns.

## What Are Fatherhood Initiatives?

The realization that one parent, especially a low-income parent, often can't meet the financial needs of her or his children is not new. In 1975, Congress viewed the CSE program as a way to make noncustodial parents responsible for the financial support of their children. In more recent years, Congress has viewed the CSE program as the link that could enable single parents who are low-wage earners to

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<sup>4</sup> President Bush's FY2002 Budget included \$64 million in 2002 (\$315 million over five years) to strengthen the role of fathers in the lives of families. This initiative would have provided competitive grants to faith-based and community organizations that help unemployed or low-income fathers and their families avoid or leave cash welfare, as well as to programs that promote successful parenting and strengthen marriage. The initiative also would have funded projects of national significance that support expansion of state and local responsible fatherhood efforts.

become self-supporting. With the advent of welfare reform in 1996, Congress agreed that many noncustodial parents were in the same financial straits as the mothers of their children who were receiving cash welfare. Thus, the 1996 welfare reform law (P.L. 104-193) requires states to have laws under which the state has the authority to issue an order or request that a court or administrative process issue an order that requires noncustodial parents who were unable to pay their child support obligation for a child receiving TANF benefits to participate in TANF work activities. As noted earlier, the 1996 law also provided funding for states to develop programs that supported the noncustodial parent's right and responsibility to visit and interact with his or her children.

To help fathers and mothers meet their parental responsibilities, many policy analysts and observers support broad-based collaborative strategies that go beyond welfare and child support agencies and include schools, work programs, prison systems, churches, community organizations, and the health care system.

Although Congress has not authorized federal funding specifically earmarked for responsible fatherhood programs, many states and localities, private organizations and nonprofit agencies operate fatherhood programs.<sup>5</sup> Most fatherhood programs include media campaigns that emphasize the importance of emotional, physical, psychological, and financial connections of fathers to their children. To counterbalance some of the procedural, psychological, emotional, and physical barriers to paternal involvement, most fatherhood programs include many of the following components:

- Parenting education – a course that describes the responsibilities of parents to their children; it discusses the need for affection, gentle guidance, financial support; the need to be a proud example and respectful of the child's mother; and the need to recognize developmentally appropriate behavior for children of different ages and respond appropriately to children's developmental needs;
- responsible decision-making (with regard to sexuality, establishment of paternity, and financial support);
- mentoring relationships with successful fathers and successful couples;
- mediation services (communicating with the other parent, supervised visitation, discipline of children, etc.);
- providing an understanding of the CSE program;
- conflict resolution, coping with stress, problem-solving skills;
- developing values in children, appropriate discipline, participation in child-rearing;
- understanding male-female relationships;
- peer support;
- practical tasks to stimulate involvement – discussing ways to increase parent-child interactions such as fixing dinner for children, taking children to the park, playing a game, helping children with

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<sup>5</sup> National Governor's Association. *Promoting Responsible Fatherhood: An Update*. August 3, 1998.



school work, listening to children's concerns, setting firm limits on behavior; and

- job training opportunities (skills development, interviewing skills, job search, job retention skills, job advancement skills, etc.).

Although most people refer to programs that seek to help fathers initiate or maintain contact with their children and become emotionally involved in their lives as "fatherhood" programs, the programs generally are gender-neutral. Their underlying goal is participation of the noncustodial parent in the lives of his or her children.

## Funding

For FY2001, Congress appropriated \$3 million for a non-governmental national fatherhood organization named the National Fatherhood Initiative (P.L. 106-553), and an additional \$500,000 for the National Fatherhood Initiative and \$500,000 for another non-governmental organization called the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization (P.L. 106-554). However, the House and Senate failed to reach agreement on H.R. 4678 in the 106th Congress, a bill that included funding for a nationwide fatherhood grants program (\$140 million over 4 years).

Several sources of funding for fatherhood programs already exist. They include the TANF program, TANF state Maintenance-of-Effort (MOE) funding, welfare-to-work funds, CSE funds, and Social Services Block Grant (Title XX) funds.<sup>6</sup> In addition, many private foundations are providing financial support for fatherhood programs.

As mentioned earlier, states can use TANF block grant funds and state MOE funds on programs or services that accomplish the broad purposes of the TANF program. These sources of funding are potentially the largest sources of funding for fatherhood initiatives.<sup>7</sup> To review, P.L.104-193 created the TANF block grant program which provides grants (approximately \$16.5 billion annually) to states through FY2002 to meet the broad purposes of the program. The TANF program also has a MOE requirement that states continue to spend at least 75% (80% if they fail to meet TANF work requirements) of what they spent under prior law cash welfare-related programs in FY1994 on families that meet TANF eligibility requirements. The 75% MOE is about \$10.4 billion.

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<sup>6</sup> Funding Sources for Fatherhood Programs. *Welfare Information Network*, v. 5, no. 2, January 2001.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to long-term welfare recipients, the \$2.7 billion in welfare-to-work funds may also provide services for certain noncustodial parents who are unemployed, underemployed, or having difficulty making their child support payments. At the end of FY2001, only about half of welfare-to-work funds had been expended by the states and localities. States and localities can continue to spend their welfare-to-work funds through FY2004. For more information see CRS Report RS20207, *Welfare Reform: Competitive Grants in the Welfare-to-Work Grant Program*, Shannon Harper and Christine Devere.

The cash welfare caseload declined from a peak of 5.1 million Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) families in 1994 to 2.0 million TANF families in March 2002. The 60% reduction in the cash welfare caseload together with the fixed block grant funding means that funds which otherwise would have been spent for cash assistance are now available for other purposes.<sup>8</sup> These other purposes could include fatherhood initiatives, which are allowable uses of TANF and state MOE funds. Moreover, fatherhood initiatives would not be subject to many of the requirements that apply to spending for ongoing cash assistance such as work requirements and time limits.<sup>9</sup>

## Research and Evaluation

Research findings indicate that father absence affects outcomes for children, in terms of schooling, emotional and behavioral maturity, labor force participation, and nonmarital childbearing. These findings hold when income is taken into account, so the negative effects of father absence are not limited to those created by reduced family income.<sup>10</sup>

Both advocates and critics of the CSE program agree that parents should be responsible for the economic and emotional well-being of their children. They agree that many low-income noncustodial parents are unable to meet their financial responsibility to their children and are barely able, or unable, to support themselves. They also agree that some noncustodial parents do not know how to be responsible parents because they were not taught that knowledge or were not exposed to enough positive role models that they could emulate. Below are several examples of demonstration programs that seek to, or sought to, help low-income men become responsible fathers by helping them to gain employment or job mobility and by teaching them life skills so that they might reconnect with their children in a positive sustained manner.

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<sup>8</sup> The reader should note that according to the Center for Law and Social Policy, in the last quarter of FY2002 (July-September 2002), the TANF caseload increased in 39 states. However, even with the estimated 0.9% reduction in caseload during the quarter, the national caseload declined 3.3% over the past fiscal year. (Center for Law and Social Policy. *Welfare Caseloads Increased in Most States in Third Quarter*, by Elise Richer, Hedieh Rahmanou, and Mark Greenberg. December 30, 2002.)

<sup>9</sup> Congressional Research Service. CRS Report RL30723, *Welfare Reform: Federal Grants and Financing Rules Under TANF*, by Gene Falk. April 5, 2002. See also: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. National Conference of State Legislatures – The Forum for America’s Ideas: *Broke But Not Deadbeat—Reconnecting Low-Income Fathers and Children*, by Dana Reichert, July 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Meeting the Challenge: *What the Federal Government Can Do to Support Responsible Fatherhood Efforts*. A Report to the President from Various Executive Agencies. January 2001. [<http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/guidance01>]

## MDRC Parents' Fair Share Demonstration Project

The Parents' Fair Share (PFS) Demonstration was a national demonstration project that combined job training and placement, peer support groups, and other services with the goal of increasing the earnings and child support payments of unemployed noncustodial parents (generally fathers) of children on welfare, improving their parenting and communication skills, and providing an opportunity for them to participate more fully and effectively in the lives of their children.<sup>11</sup>

Between 1994 and 1996, over 5,000 noncustodial parents who were eligible to participate in the seven-site PFS demonstration were randomly assigned to either a program (experiment) group that would receive PFS services or a control group that would not receive PFS services. The interim report on the PFS demonstration, which was designed by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) and conducted and funded by public and private organizations, found that parents who received PFS services were more likely to pay child support through the CSE system than those who remained in the control group. In all seven sites, the proportion of parents who paid child support during the 18-month follow-up period increased significantly; but the amount of child support paid over the 18 months increased by a statistically significant amount in only two of the seven sites.

The final report on the PFS demonstration concluded that the program did not significantly increase employment or earnings among the full sample of PFS participants during the 2 years after they entered the program. However, the program did increase earnings among a subgroup of men who were characterized as "less employable" (i.e., those without a high school diploma and with little recent work experience).<sup>12</sup> In addition, another of the final reports found that although PFS did not affect the frequency of fathers' visits with their children, it did increase the level of disagreement between parents about child-rearing. According to the researchers, this finding might suggest that some noncustodial parents were becoming more involved in new areas of decision-making about the child, which the researchers viewed as a positive development. The report noted that the increased level of disagreements between the parents was not accompanied by an increased level of aggressive forms of conflict or domestic violence which researchers surmise might indicate that the parents were able to distinguish between legitimate parental differences of opinion versus latent animosity in their male-female relationship.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The Parents' Fair Share (PFS) demonstration was funded by a consortium of private foundations (the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Ford Foundation, the AT&T Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, and the Northwest Area Foundation) and federal agencies (the U.S. Department of Human Services and the U.S. Department of Labor). The PFS demonstration was conducted in seven cities: Dayton, Ohio; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Jacksonville, Florida; Los Angeles, California; Memphis, Tennessee; Springfield, Massachusetts; and Trenton, New Jersey.

<sup>12</sup> Martinez, John M. and Cynthia Miller. *Working and Earning: The Impact of Parents' Fair Share on Low-Income Fathers' Employment*, MDRC, October 2000.

<sup>13</sup> MDRC. *Parenting and Providing: The Impact of Parents' Fair Share on Paternal Involvement*, by Virginia Knox and Cindy Redcross. October 2000.

One of the reports noted the following as lessons learned from the PFS demonstration.

Low-income noncustodial fathers are a disadvantaged group. Many live on the edge of poverty and face severe barriers to finding jobs, while those who can find work typically hold low-wage or temporary jobs. Despite their low, irregular income, many of these fathers are quite involved in their children's lives and, when they can, provide financial and other kinds of support. ...Some services, such as peer support proved to be very important and valuable to the men and became the focal point of the program. Other services, such as skill-building, were hard to implement because the providers had little experience working with such a disadvantaged group; it was difficult to find employers willing to hire the men, and the providers were not equipped to deal with the circumstances of men who often were simply trying to make it from one day to the next. Finally, we learned about the challenges of implementing a program like PFS, which involves the partnership of various agencies with different goals, and about the difficulty of recruiting low-income fathers into such a program.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the recommendations for future programs included: structure the program to encourage longer-term participation and to include job retention services; provide fathers who cannot find private sector employment with community service jobs; earmark adequate funding for employment services, involve custodial mothers in the program and provide fathers with legal services to help them gain visitation rights; and encourage partnerships between CSE agencies and fatherhood programs.<sup>15</sup>

Some researchers of the PFS approach contend that a broader array of intensive employment services, such as skills training combined with part-time work and community service employment for persons who were unable to get job, might have improved the outcomes of the program. Other analysts maintain that most of the fathers who participated in the PFS demonstration were estranged from their children when they entered the program and that some of them participated in lieu of serving time in jail. They assert that new unwed fathers are generally very attached to their children around the time of the child's birth and probably are more motivated than fathers of older children to take advantage of the opportunities and/or services offered by fatherhood programs.<sup>16</sup>

## **Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study**

A "fragile" family consists of low-income children born outside of marriage whose two natural parents are working together to raise them—either by living together or frequent visitation. According to the 1997 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), 25% of poor children under the age of two who were born outside

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<sup>14</sup> MDRC. *The Challenge of Helping Low-Income Fathers Support Their Children—Final Lessons from Parents' Fair Share*, by Cynthia Miller and Virginia Knox. November 2001. p. v-vi.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. v.

<sup>16</sup> Princeton University. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing. *Congressional Testimony before the Mayor's Task Force on Fatherhood Promotion*, by Sara McLanahan. June 14, 1999.

of marriage lived with both of their biological parents; another 35% lived with their mother and saw their father at least every week.<sup>17</sup>

The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study is designed to sample new births in 20 U.S. cities.<sup>18</sup> The study began in January 1997 and is scheduled to end in June 2004. The total sample size is 4,700 families, including 3,600 unmarried couples and 1,100 married couples. The data will be representative of nonmarital births in each of the 20 cities, and they also will be representative of all nonmarital births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. Follow-up interviews with both parents are scheduled for when the child is 12, 30, and 48 months-old. Data on child health and development will be collected from the parents during each of the follow-up interviews, and in-home assessments of child well-being will be performed at 30 and 48 months. The study is expected to provide previously unavailable information on questions such as:

- What are the conditions and capabilities of new unwed parents, especially fathers? How many of these men hold steady jobs? How many want to be involved in raising their children?
- What is the nature of the relationship between unwed parents? How many couples are involved in stable, long-term relationships? How many expect to marry? How many experience high levels of conflict or domestic violence?
- What factors push new unwed parents together? What factors pull them apart? How do public policies affect parents' behaviors and living arrangements?
- What are the long term consequences for parents, children, and society of new welfare regulations, stronger paternity establishment, and stricter child support enforcement? What roles do child care and health care policies play? How do these policies play out in different labor market environments?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Urban Institute. *Redirecting Welfare Policy Toward Building Strong Families*, by Elaine Sorensen, Ronald Mincy, and Ariel Halpern, March 2000.

<sup>18</sup> The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study is supported by grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and the Office of Population Research at Princeton University and by funding provided by: California Health Care Foundation, the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society at the University of Pennsylvania, Commonwealth Fund, Ford Foundation, Foundation for Child Development, Fund for New Jersey, William T. Grant Foundation, Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Hogg Foundation, Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, Kronkosky Charitable Foundation, Leon Lowenstein Foundation, John D., and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, A.L. Mailman Family Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, National Science Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Public Policy Institute of California, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, St. David's Hospital Foundation, St. Vincent Hospital and Health Services, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>19</sup> University of Wisconsin – Madison. Institute for Research on Poverty. *Focus*, v. 21, no. 1, spring 2000. Garfinkel, Irwin and Sara McLanahan. *Fragile Families and Child Well-Being: A Survey of New Parents*. p. 9-11.

Initial findings of the study, based on the data from Oakland, California and Austin, Texas at the 12-month point, indicate that 50% of unmarried parents live together (i.e., are cohabiting), and another 30% are romantically involved with each other. Further, more than 66% of the participant parents in the two cities said that they expect to marry. The data also indicate that generally fathers had income of less than \$12,500 per year, and mothers had income of less than \$5,000 per year; about 50% of both parents lacked a high school degree; and that 25% of the fathers and 40% of the mothers did not work in the previous year. The initial findings also showed that about 20% of the mothers drank alcohol, used drugs, or smoked during their pregnancies.<sup>20</sup>

## **Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) Responsible Fatherhood Programs**

The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) provides \$1.5 million annually to fund Responsible Fatherhood demonstrations under Section 1115 of the Social Security Act. Projects are currently being funded in the following eight states: California, Colorado, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, Washington, and Wisconsin. These projects attempt to improve the employment and earnings of under- and unemployed noncustodial parents, and to motivate them to become more financially and emotionally involved in the lives of their children. Although the projects share common goals, they vary with respect to service components and service delivery. An early report on the implementation of the programs (from initial start-up in late 1997 through December 1999) noted the following:

The success of the Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration Projects appears to be tied to the commitment of the staff. Reaching alienated and disenfranchised populations and convincing them to change their attitudes and behaviors is hard work. It takes time, persistence, repeated contacts, fast action, patience, firmness, and endless resourcefulness. Programs need to recruit key program staff who are inspired and inspiring. They also need to be knowledgeable about community services in order to maximize opportunities for participants. First-hand knowledge is key. The best referrals are not made out of directories, but result from long-standing familiarity with community services, eligibility requirements, available resources, and relevant personnel. Dedicated, knowledgeable, and energetic staff can better counsel and steer parents into a course of action that makes them more financially and emotionally responsible for their children.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See [<http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/>]. See also *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study Baseline Report*, by Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel, Nancy E. Reichman, Julien Teitler, Marcia Carlson, Christina Norland Audigier. August 2001. The one-year follow-up study is expected to be released in the Spring of 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Policy Studies, Inc. Center for Policy Research. *OCSE Responsible Fatherhood Programs: Early Implementation Lessons*, by Jessica Pearson and Nancy Thoennes. June 2000. p. 9.

## Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration

HHS has an ongoing partnership with the private-sector initiative called Partners for Fragile Families (PFF). The Partners for Fragile Families Project is an initiative of the National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership (NPCL), a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C. The PFF was designed to help poor single fathers pull themselves out of poverty and build stronger links to their children and their children's mothers. The PFF was established in 1996 to provide support for these "fragile families," which are defined as low-income, never-married parents and their children. Research indicated that although many of the fathers in these families are involved with their children during the early childhood years, this involvement tends to diminish over time, often with negative consequences for the children. The PFF initiative is aimed at helping fathers work with the mothers of their children in sharing the legal, financial, and emotional responsibilities of parenthood.

In March 2000, HHS approved ten state waivers for the Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration projects. The demonstration projects seek to develop new ways for CSE agencies and community-based non-profit and faith-based organizations to work together to help young noncustodial fathers obtain employment, health, and social services; make child support payments to their children; learn parenting skills; and enable them to work with the mothers of their children to build stronger parenting partnerships. The demonstration project sites are located in California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.<sup>22</sup>

## Issues

An underlying tension in the debate on fatherhood initiatives is the concern of some women's and mothers' rights groups, such as the National Women's Law Center and the National Organization for Women (NOW), that an emphasis on the importance of fathers may lead to undervaluing single-parent families maintained by mothers, that services for fathers may be at the expense of services for mothers, and that the "pro-fatherhood" discourse might give fathers' rights groups some leverage in challenging child custody, child support, and visitation arrangements. Some analysts contend that the policy debate on fatherhood initiatives must be based on the view that the welfare of fathers, mothers, and children are intertwined and interdependent; otherwise, the debate will be very divisive and unproductive.<sup>23</sup>

Many issues are associated with the federal government's support of fatherhood initiatives. A few examples are Is the goal of federal policy to promote and support

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<sup>22</sup> See [<http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/fi-prog.htm>].

<sup>23</sup> Doherty, William J., Edward F. Kouneski, and Martha Farrell Erickson. *Responsible Fathering: An Overview and Conceptual Framework*. Final Report. September 1996. Prepared for the Administration for Children and Families and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation; contract HHS-100-93-0012 to the Lewin Group.

the involvement of fathers in their children's lives regardless of the father's relationship with the children's mother? What if the father has children by more than one woman? What is the federal policy with regard to incarcerated parents and parents recently released from prison? Does the federal government support counseling, education, and supervised visitation for abusive fathers so that they can reconnect with their children?

The discussion below examines two issues that will likely impact the success of congressional fatherhood initiatives. The first deals with the role of the CSE agency in fatherhood programs. Presently, the CSE program is the starting place for many fatherhood programs. Some analysts contend that since many noncustodial parents have a negative view of the CSE program, the use of the CSE program to recruit fathers does not bode well for the success of such programs. Several of the fatherhood bills would make competitive grants available to community organizations and other groups that have experience in working with low-income men. All of the fatherhood bills introduced in the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress included evaluation components. The second issue examines father involvement in the context of the father's relationship to the child's mother. The second issue is based on the premise that formal marital relationships last longer and are more conducive to long-term interaction between fathers and children than other types of relationships.

## **CSE System and Noncustodial Parents Often At Odds**

During the period FY1978-FY2002, child support payments collected by the CSE agencies increased from \$1 billion to \$20 billion. Moreover, the program has made significant improvements in other program measures as well, such as the number of parents located, paternitys established, and child support orders established. Advocates of the CSE program say that this dramatic program performance is aside from the indirect and intangible benefits of the program, such as increased personal responsibility and welfare cost-avoidance. Critics of the CSE program contend that even with an unprecedented array of "big brother" enforcement tools such as license (professional, driver's, recreational) and passport revocation, seizure of banking accounts, retirement funds, and lottery winnings, and automatic income withholding from pay checks, the program still collects only 18% of child support obligations for which it has responsibility and collects payments for only 49% of its caseload.

Although the CSE program has historically been the policy answer to the problem of father absence, because its focus until recently was exclusively on financial support, it has had the practical effect of alienating many low-income fathers who are unable to meet their child support obligations. Some policy analysts maintain that fathers are in effect devalued when their role in their children's lives is based solely on their cash contributions. They argue that public policies are needed to support the father's role as nurturer, disciplinarian, mentor, and moral instructor.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The Brookings Institution. Horn, Wade F., and Isabel V. Sawhill. *Making Room For Daddy: Fathers, Marriage, and Welfare Reform*. Working Paper, April 26, 2001. p. 4.



Information obtained from noncustodial fathers for various surveys and studies consistently tells the same story. Not surprisingly, noncustodial parents, especially low-income fathers, prefer informal child support agreements between themselves and the child's mother wherein they contribute cash support when they can and provide noncash aid such as taking care of the children from time to time and buying food, clothing, presents, etc. as often as they can. Many noncustodial fathers maintain that the CSE system is dismissive of their financial condition and continues to pursue child support payments (current as well as arrearages) even when it knows that many of them can barely support themselves. They argue that for welfare families, the CSE program generally does not improve their child's well-being because their child support payments are used to benefit the state and federal government (i.e., welfare reimbursement) rather than their child. They contend that the CSE program causes conflicts between them and their child's mother because the women often use it as leverage by threatening to report them to CSE authorities, take them back to court, have more of their wages garnished, or have them arrested.<sup>25</sup>

Many observers maintain that noncustodial parents and the CSE program have irreconcilable differences and that the most that should be expected is for the noncustodial parent to clearly understand the purposes of the CSE program, the requirements imposed on the custodial parent, the noncustodial parents' rights to have their child support payments modified if they incur a financial change in circumstances, and that they as noncustodial parents have a moral and societal responsibility to have (to build) a loving relationship with their children.<sup>26</sup> If the CSE program continues to be the entrance to fatherhood programs, most observers contend that the fact that the CSE program has not been effective in gaining the cooperation and trust of many noncustodial parents must be acknowledged and addressed. Several analysts suggest that to be successful, fatherhood programs may need to operate independently of the formal CSE system.

Others assert that more than any other agency of state government, the CSE program has the responsibility and is in the position to reach out to fathers who need supportive services. They state that CSE agencies are already involved in forging relationships with fathers through partnerships with community-based organizations. They also note that CSE agencies provide a natural link to coordinate with TANF agencies to help families achieve self-sufficiency.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> University of Wisconsin–Madison. Institute for Research on Poverty. *Focus*, v. 21, no. 1, spring 2000. A failed relationship? Low-income families and the child support enforcement system, by Maureen Waller and Robert Plotnick. p. 12-17. See also: *Family Ties: Improving Paternity Establishment Practices and Procedures for Low-Income Mothers, Fathers and Children*. National Women's Law Center and Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy. p. 9-11.

<sup>26</sup> University of Wisconsin–Madison. Institute for Research on Poverty. *Focus*, v. 21, no. 1, spring 2000. A failed relationship? Low-income families and the child support enforcement system, by Maureen Waller and Robert Plotnick. p. 12-17.

<sup>27</sup> National Child Support Enforcement Association. *Resolution on Fatherhood Initiatives*, Adopted by the NCSEA Board of Directors on July 29, 2000.

Although we do not have any evaluations on the effectiveness of fatherhood programs that are delivered through a CSE framework versus fatherhood programs that place little emphasis on the formal CSE system, all of the fatherhood bills introduced in the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress included funding for evaluation.

## **Non-Custodial Father Involvement Versus Promotion of Marriage Versus Maintenance of Fragile Families**

The first finding of the 1996 welfare reform law is that marriage is the foundation of a successful society. The second finding is that marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children.<sup>28</sup> However, some child welfare advocates argue that marriage is not necessarily the best alternative for all women and their children. It is generally agreed that single-parent families are a better alternative for children than living with an abusive father. Many observers caution that government must be careful about supporting programs that provide cash incentives to induce people to marry or that coerce people into marrying. They note the problems associated with child-bride marriages and the short-term and often unhappy nature of the so-called “shot gun” marriage. Others respond that many long-lasting marriages were based on financial alliances (e.g., to increase economic status, family wealth, status in the community, etc.). They also point out that most government programs are sensitive to the issues of domestic violence and include supports to prevent or end such actions.

Many young children live with both of their parents who are not married but who are cohabiting. Noting this, some analysts argue that coercive policies designed to promote certain types of family structures (e.g., nuclear families) at the expense of others may undermine non-traditional family relationships. They contend that more emphasis should be placed on trying to meet the needs of these fragile families to enable them to stay together for longer periods of time. They maintain that if these parents wanted to be married they would be married.<sup>29</sup> They also point out that because of the complexity of many family relationships, there are no easy answers. A single-focus policy, no matter whether it aims to support traditional family relationships or fragile families, can place children in less desirable situations. For instance, promoting marriage of biological parents may result in supporting situations where some children in the household have a stepparent if all the children are not from the same union. Similarly, promoting fragile families also could result in supporting situations where a biological parent is absent if all of the children in the household are not all from the same union.

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<sup>28</sup> The majority of pre-TANF evaluations of welfare initiatives that examine family formation decisions have found little, if any, impact of state policies on decisions to marry. One recent exception is an evaluation of the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). In this program, compared to those who were subject to the AFDC requirements, more single-parent participants subject to new policies under MFIP got married and fewer of the two-parent participants had divorced 3 years after the program began.

<sup>29</sup> See: *Fragile Families Research Brief*, July 2002, Number 9. Is Marriage A Viable Objective for Fragile Families?

Some pro-marriage analysts point out that about 75% of children born to cohabiting parents will see their parents separate before they reach age 16, compared to about 33% of those born to married parents. Some observers note that even with supports it is unlikely that fragile families (unmarried couple) will remain together as long as married families. Thus, they argue that the promotion of marriage should be incorporated into fatherhood programs if the goal is lifetime involvement of fathers in the lives of their children.

In contrast, fatherhood initiatives are sometimes viewed as incompatible with initiatives that encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families, and with initiatives that promote marriage. In fact, many observers argue that the focus should be the participation of fathers in their children's lives, regardless of the marital status of the parents. As mentioned earlier, the TANF law states that the second purpose of the block grant is to "end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage." The fourth purpose of the TANF block grant is to "encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families." There has been some discussion about whether the fourth purpose means married-couple families or just two parents who are involved in their children's lives, regardless of whether they are married or even living together. In late 1999, the Clinton Administration issued A Guide on Funding for Children and Families through the TANF program which broadly interpreted two-parent families to mean not only married-couple families, but also never-married, separated, and divorced parents, whether living together or not. Thus, many states classify their fatherhood programs and programs that encourage visitation by noncustodial parents under the rubric of fulfilling the purposes of the TANF program.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, it should be noted that recent research indicates that there may be a racial component in the marriage promotion versus fatherhood involvement debate. In 2001, 68.6% of black births were to unmarried women whereas only 22.5% of white births were to unmarried women. Given this demographic reality of black and white families in the U.S., the authors of the study<sup>31</sup> contend that proposals that earmark five times as much money for marriage promotion as for responsible fatherhood promotion<sup>32</sup> seem "racially insensitive."

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<sup>30</sup> Horn, Wade. Wedding Bell Blues: Marriage and Welfare Reform. *Brookings Review*, summer 2001. p. 40-41.

<sup>31</sup> Mincy, Ronald B. and Chien-Chung Huang. *The M Word: The Rise and Fall of Interracial Coalitions on Fathers and Welfare Reform*. February 25, 2002. p. 1-5, 32.

<sup>32</sup> H.R. 4737 as passed by the House in the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress authorized \$100 million annually for five years for competitive matching grants for marriage promotion activities and authorized \$20 million annually for five years for responsible fatherhood grants.