

Executive Summary

In 2006, HHS published a study regarding child welfare agencies' efforts to identify, locate, and involve nonresident fathers of children in foster care. That study was based on telephone interviews with caseworkers in four states (Arizona, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Tennessee) about specific children in their caseloads. Its findings, described in the report, *What about the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify Locate and Involve Nonresident Fathers*, are primarily descriptive in nature. Because all children in the sample were in foster care at the time of the caseworker interviews, the original study could not examine the relationship between father involvement and case outcomes. By design, none of the cases had outcomes when the original data collection occurred.

This report, using administrative data supplied by each of the states that participated in the original study, examines case outcomes for the children whose caseworkers were previously interviewed. At the time data were extracted for this follow-up analysis, approximately two years had passed since the original interviews, and most of the children (75 percent) had exited foster care. These analyses use information from the original survey about whether the father had been identified and contacted by the child welfare agency and about the contacted fathers' level of involvement with their children, combined with administrative data about case outcomes two years later, to explore three research questions: (1) Is nonresident father involvement associated with case length? (2) Is nonresident father involvement associated with foster care discharge outcomes? and (3) Is nonresident father involvement associated with subsequent child maltreatment allegations? It should be noted that while findings indicate associations between father involvement and case outcomes, causality cannot be determined.

Definitions

Caseworker responses from the original interviews were used to classify agencies' levels of interaction with the nonresident fathers of children in the sample and to stratify the level of involvement these fathers had with their children in foster care.

- **Unknown fathers** (N = 237) were those whose names did not appear in the child's foster care case file.
- **Identified-only fathers** (N = 590) were those whose names appeared in the case file, but who had never been contacted successfully by the child welfare agency.
- **Contacted fathers** (N = 1,071) had been in contact with the caseworker or someone else at the child welfare agency at least once since the child entered foster care. Contact may have been in person, by phone, or by mail.

Fathers were further grouped according to their level of involvement with their children. Involvement was defined by whether the father had visited his child in foster care, whether he provided financial support for his child, and whether he provided nonfinancial support, as reported by the caseworker. This information was available only for fathers who had been contacted by the child welfare agency.

- Fathers described as **not involved** (N = 253) had not done any of these activities.
- Fathers referred to as **involved** (N = 448) did one or two of these activities.

- **Highly involved** fathers (N = 161) had done all three of these activities. That is, they had visited their child at least once and provided financial and nonfinancial support, according to the child's caseworker.

Findings

- **Nonresident fathers' involvement with their children is associated with a higher likelihood of a reunification outcome and a lower likelihood of an adoption outcome. Children with highly involved nonresident fathers are also discharged from foster care more quickly than those with less or no involvement.**

Nearly 45 percent of children whose nonresident fathers were classified as not involved with their children exited to adoption, compared with 34 percent of children whose nonresident fathers were involved and 12 percent whose nonresident fathers were highly involved. Reunification was the discharge outcome for 16 percent of children whose nonresident fathers were not involved, 22 percent of children whose nonresident fathers were involved, and 48 percent of children whose nonresident fathers were highly involved.

Contact by the child welfare agency was not as clearly linked to case outcome. Children whose nonresident fathers were unknown were much more likely to be adopted (43 percent) than reunified (14 percent). But reunification rates were statistically indistinguishable between children whose nonresident fathers were identified but not contacted (23 percent) and children whose nonresident fathers had been contacted by the agency (24 percent). The likelihood of an adoption outcome was actually higher among those whose nonresident fathers had been contacted by the agency than among those who had been identified but not contacted (33 versus 22 percent), perhaps indicating that many contacts are initiated to terminate the father's parental rights.

Children whose nonresident fathers were highly involved spent less time in foster care, on average, than children whose nonresident fathers were less involved. Average case length for children with highly involved nonresident fathers was 21.4 months, compared with 25.3 months for those whose nonresident fathers were not involved and 26.3 months whose nonresident fathers were classified as involved but not highly involved.

- **Contrary to the expressed fears of some caseworkers and child welfare administrators, nonresident fathers' contact with the child welfare agency and involvement with their children is *not*, in the aggregate, associated with subsequent maltreatment allegations. In fact, among children whose case outcome is reunification, usually with their mothers, higher levels of nonresident father involvement are associated with a substantially lower likelihood of subsequent maltreatment allegations.**

Consistent with other child welfare research, in this sample of children, those whose cases ended in reunification had a higher likelihood of a subsequent maltreatment allegation than those who were adopted (15.2 versus 2.1 percent). But among children with reunification discharges, the likelihood of a subsequent maltreatment allegation was 12.2 percent among those with involved nonresident fathers, compared with 32 percent among those with nonresident fathers who were not involved. This research did not examine who the perpetrator was in these allegations, just that there was an allegation in the two years subsequent to the original caseworker interview.

Implications

While causality cannot be determined from these data, an association between nonresident father involvement and discharge outcomes for children in foster care is evident. The results presented here are initial and exploratory, but they suggest that engaging the nonresident fathers of children in foster care could potentially improve outcomes for the children.

Since the original *What about the Dads* study was published in 2006, the Children's Bureau within the Administration for Children and Families has funded a Quality Improvement Center on Nonresident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QIC-NRF). Operated by the American Humane Association and its partners the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law and the National Fatherhood Initiative, that project has two phases. In phase I, the team has identified themes, knowledge gaps, service gaps, and research priorities. As this follow-up report is being published, the QIC-NRF is just embarking on phase II of its activities, in which subgrants will be awarded to several sites for experimentation and demonstration focusing specifically on the child welfare system's contact and engagement of nonresident fathers, with attention to the collaboration between courts, community systems, fatherhood program providers, nonresident fathers, and paternal kin. Using a collaborative approach, the QIC-NRF will serve as a laboratory for innovation, application, and learning. More information on the QIC's activities and products is available on its web site, <http://www.fatherhoodqic.org>.