

ASPE ISSUE BRIEF

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION
OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

CHILD WELFARE CASEWORK WITH NONRESIDENT FATHERS OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

Introduction

Nonresident fathers of children in foster care are rarely involved in case planning for their children, and, in the four states studied, nearly half had not been contacted by the child welfare agency. By not reaching out to fathers, caseworkers may overlook potential social connections and resources that could help to achieve permanency for the child.

Most children in foster care are not living with their fathers at the time they are removed from their homes, and once in substitute care, these children may experience even less contact with their nonresident fathers. Yet fathers and their relatives represent half of a child's potential family connections and kin resources. If ignored, important social or financial support for the child may be missed as permanency planning is conducted. Fathers or their relatives may be potential substitute caregivers for the child, may support a reunification plan with child support, respite or other assistance, or may voluntarily relinquish parental rights in support of an adoption plan. But without contact from the caseworker, such potential contributions cannot be assessed. Consequently, child welfare and child support agencies have placed new emphasis on identifying, locating, and involving nonresident fathers of children served by the child welfare system.

Researchers conducted telephone interviews with 1,222 caseworkers in four study states—Arizona, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Tennessee. Caseworkers were interviewed about 1,958 specific children in their caseloads, each of whom had a living father who did not reside in the household from which the child was removed. The response rate to the survey was 83%. At the time of the interview, each of the children had been in foster care between three and thirty six months and was in foster care for the first time.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE BRIEF

This ASPE Issue Brief presents findings related to casework practice from a study that sought to determine the extent to which child welfare agencies seek out nonresident fathers of children in foster care and involve them in their children's case management and permanency planning. The study was conducted by the Urban Institute and NORC under contract to ASPE and was funded in large part by the Administration for Children and Families.

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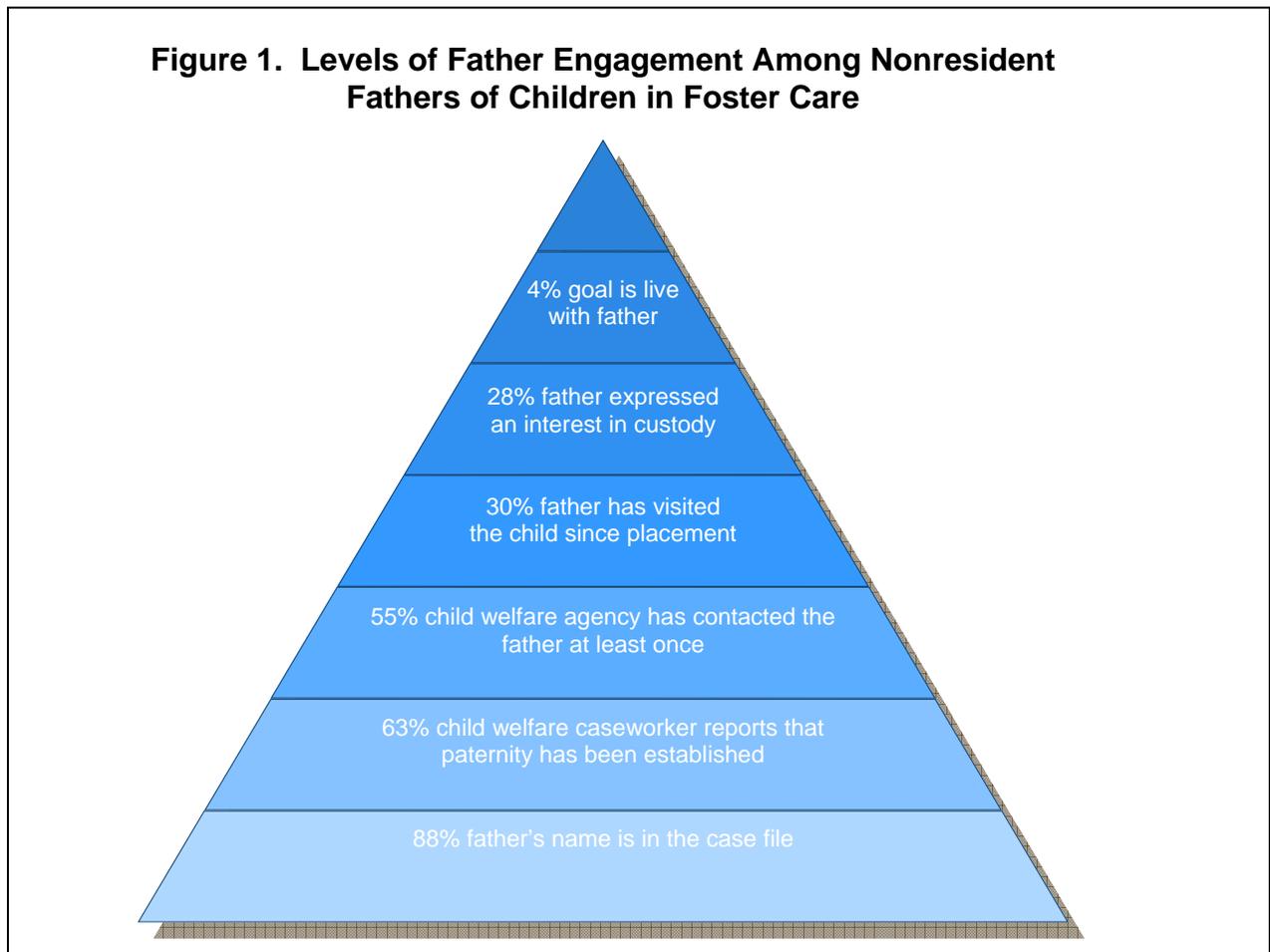
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Fifty-three child welfare administrators in these states were interviewed as well about agency policies and practices regarding nonresident fathers. In addition, unless caseworkers dissented because of perceived danger to the child or mother or other concerns about the case, child welfare administrative data regarding paternity, location of the father, and fathers' history of financial support for the child were compared electronically with similar fields in the child support agency's records. Of child welfare cases included in the electronic match, over 60% percent were previously known to the child support agency, though this overlap varied widely among the states.

Study findings provide insight into how caseworkers identify and locate nonresident fathers, circumstances that may pose barriers to engaging fathers, and ways in which fathers are involved in the lives of children in foster care. Caseworkers' opinions about fathers were explored, as were issues of workload, safety and training.

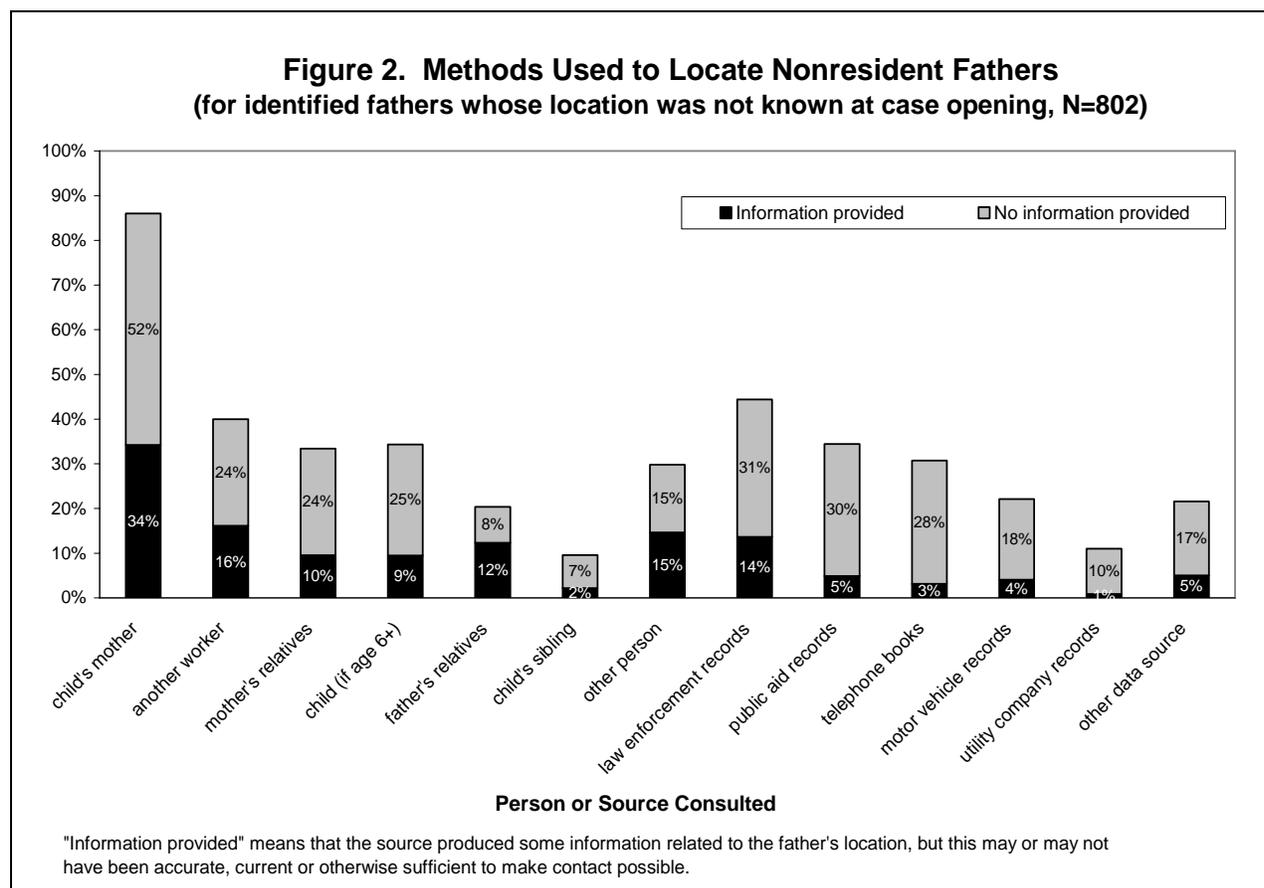
While most caseworkers, at the time of the interview, knew the identity of the fathers of children in the study's sample (88%), paternity had been established for not quite two-thirds of the children (63%) and contact had been made with just over half of the fathers (55%). The lag in paternity establishment is important because unless paternity has been established a named father is not considered legally related to the child and cannot participate in court proceedings about the child. Contact with the nonresident father was likely only if his identity and location were both known immediately at the time of case opening. Figure 1 summarizes the study's findings regarding levels of father engagement among all the nearly 2,000 cases in the sample.



Identifying and Locating Nonresident Fathers

The majority of nonresident fathers are identified early in a case. Approximately two-thirds of nonresident fathers are identified at the time of case opening or very shortly thereafter. Only 17% are identified more than 30 days after the case was opened, and contact with fathers not identified within the first month is very unlikely.

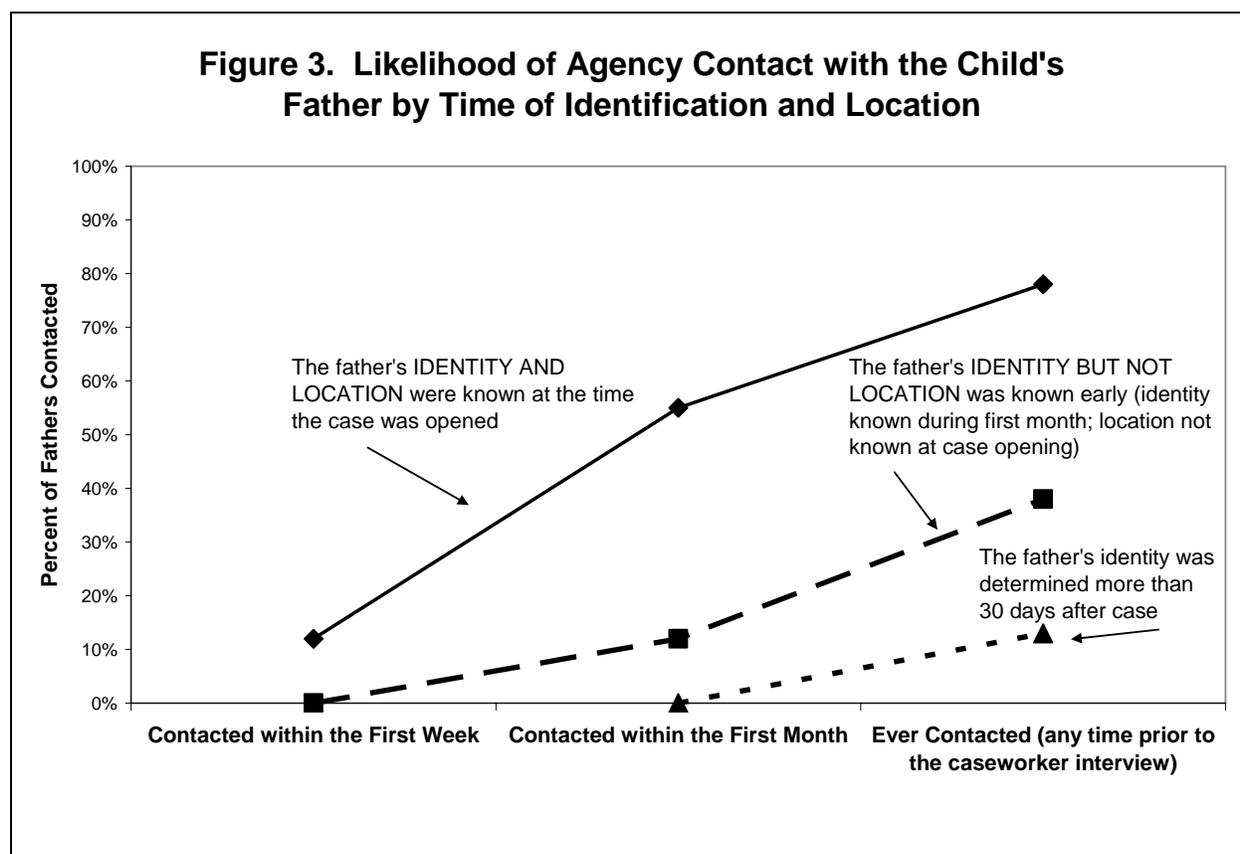
Efforts used by caseworkers to locate fathers vary widely. As shown in figure 2, caseworkers usually consulted the child's mother when information about the father's location was not known at case opening. Although a wide variety of other sources were sometimes consulted, there was no consistency in the use of these other methods. No source other than the mother was used in more than about one-third of cases. Only 34% of school age children were asked whether they knew anything about their fathers' whereabouts.



Caseworkers report little use of child support agency locator resources. Overall, caseworkers reported use of their state's parent locator services in 35% of the study cases and the Federal Parent Locator Service in 7% of cases. While over 60% of caseworkers noted that their agency encouraged referrals to child support for help in locating the father, in only 20% of cases in which the father had not been located did the worker make such a referral. There was a great deal of state variation in these practices, however. Case-level results show overwhelmingly that in comparison to workers in the other study states, Arizona workers reported high levels of use of the state locator services (79% compared to 3-13 percent in the other states). Also, while a significant portion of caseworkers (70%) reported receiving training on identifying, locating, and involving nonresident fathers, less than one third (32%) noted specific training on referring cases to child support for help in locating nonresident fathers.

Engaging Fathers

In slightly over half of all cases (55%), the nonresident father had been contacted by the agency or worker. Contact was broadly defined to include in-person contact, telephone calls, or through written or voicemail communication. Contact was likely only if the father's identity and location were both known at the time of case opening. Caseworkers reported having at least one contact with 80% of nonresident fathers when this information was available immediately. However, the likelihood of contact dropped to 38% for fathers whose identity was known either at case opening or during the first month, but for whom location information was not immediately available. For fathers identified more than 30 days after case opening, the likelihood of contact was only 13%. Figure 3 summarizes information on contact with nonresident fathers depending on when their identities and locations became known to the worker.



Several circumstances make it hard to contact fathers. The most frequently reported circumstance that affected contact with the father was his being unreachable by phone (60%). One third of fathers (31%) were incarcerated at some point in the case, although it was noted as causing difficulty with contact in only about half of these cases. Other circumstances—such as unreliable transportation, homelessness or unstable housing, and being out of the country—were less frequent problems but caused greater difficulty with agency-father contact when they did occur. The relationship between the mother and nonresident father also affects agency contact with the father. Fathers in relationships perceived by the caseworker as hostile, as well as fathers who hardly ever or never talk to the mother, were less likely to have had contact with the agency.

Half of the nonresident fathers contacted expressed interest in having their children live with them (50% of contacted fathers or 28% of the entire sample.) However, the caseworkers considered them as placement resources in somewhat fewer cases. Caseworkers report a wide range of circumstances and problems that are likely to complicate any efforts to place the child in the home of his or her father, and some administrators seemed to favor paternal kin over fathers as a placement resource. However, administrators reported that even if a father cannot provide a home for the child, he might still offer tangible benefits such as financial support or critical knowledge of his medical history.

Many nonresident fathers have multiple problems and do not often follow through when services are offered. Workers reported that many of the contacted fathers (42%) had 4 or more of the 8 problems listed in the survey. (The survey asked about substance abuse, prior findings of abuse/neglect, unemployment, housing problems, physical or mental health issues, domestic violence, criminal justice involvement, and lack of child care.) Caseworkers reported offering services to fathers in most of the cases (59%) but reported that few of the fathers (23%) had complied with the services offered.

Caseworker Training, Gender and Opinions

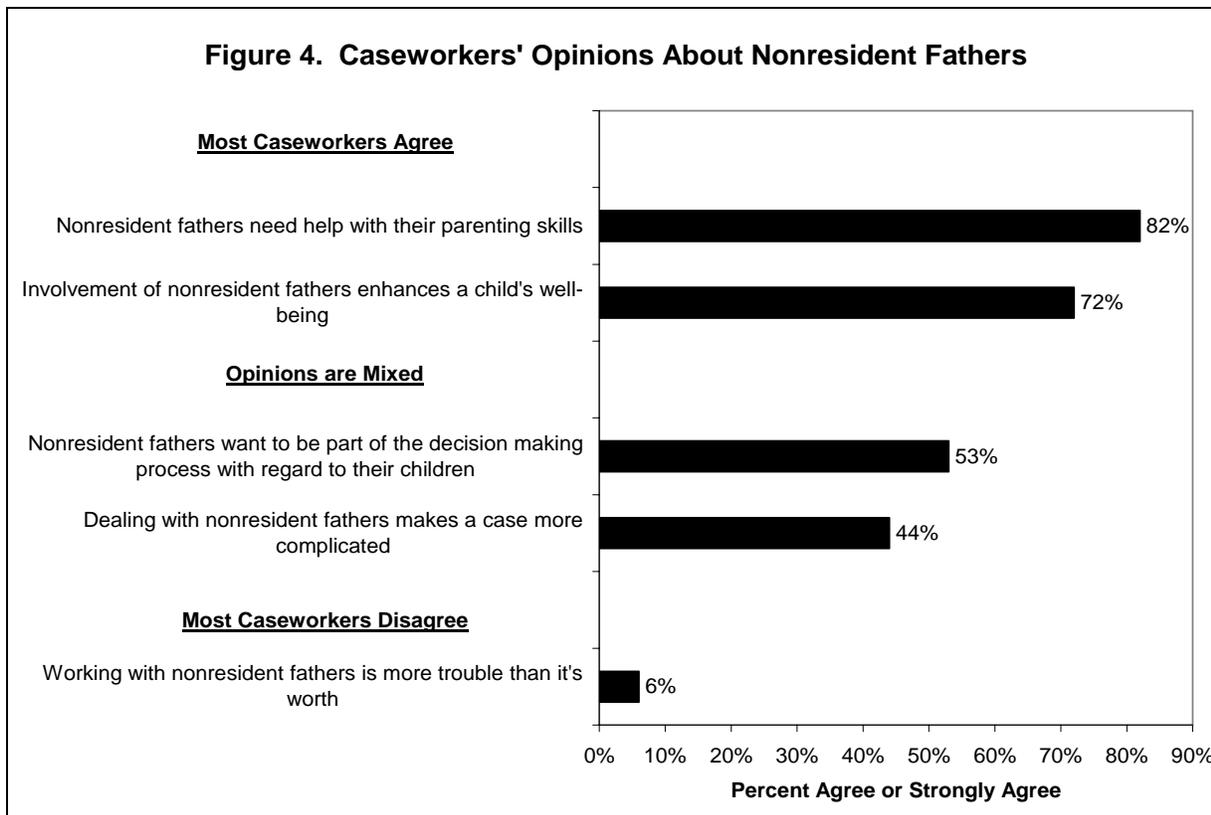
Significant differences were found in methods used to locate fathers between workers who received training and those who did not receive training related to fathers. Most of the caseworker respondents (70%) noted having received training on engaging fathers, though this could have been either a specialized training or material presented as part of a more generic training session. This finding contrasts with previous research that has noted a lack of training on fathers. Workers who reported having received training were more likely than other workers to report seeking help from the father's relatives or from another worker, and were more likely to have searched public aid records and phone books for information on the father's whereabouts.

Workers reporting training on fathers were more likely to involve fathers in the case. Workers who received training were more likely than other workers to report sharing the case plan with the father and seeking financial assistance from him as part of the case plan. These workers were also more likely to report that the agency considered placement with the father and that the father had expressed interest in the child living with him.

Male and female caseworkers report similar casework practices. Previous research examining caseworker gender and father involvement has shown some differences between male and female caseworkers. In this study, however, male and female caseworkers were equally likely to have shared the case plan with the father, told the father his child was in out-of-home placement, and to report that the father had expressed an interest in living with his child. Male and female caseworkers had similar percentages of cases with fathers who had contact with the agency and fathers who visited with their children since case opening. However, male caseworkers were somewhat more likely to report that fathers had been considered as a placement resource.

Caseworkers hold mixed opinions about the involvement of nonresident fathers. While the majority of caseworkers surveyed (72%) agree that involving nonresident fathers enhances a child's well being, even more (82%) agree that fathers need help with parenting skills. Only about half of caseworkers (53%) believe that nonresident fathers want to be part of decision making for their children. A bit less than half (44%) believe that dealing with nonresident fathers makes a case more complicated, and 6% expressed the opinion that "working with nonresident fathers is more trouble than it's worth." Figure 4 presents this information graphically.

Figure 4. Caseworkers' Opinions About Nonresident Fathers



Caseworker opinions do not seem to influence the likelihood of contacting and engaging nonresident fathers. When workers were grouped according to their responses to the opinion questions,¹ those with varying opinions about fathers reported similar percentages of cases in which the fathers were told of the child's out-of-home placement and in which the case plan was shared with the father. However, workers with more positive opinions were more likely than other workers to report cases in which the agency had considered placing the child with the father.

Workload and Safety Concerns

Administrators were concerned that increasing father involvement would create more work for overburdened caseworkers. Involving a father and his kin in a case introduces more people with whom workers must consult. Some administrators stressed that the term "father involvement" evokes an image of a single father per case, whereas the reality is that a sibling group with the same mother may have multiple fathers. Involving each child's father in a case of this sort could overwhelm a caseworker, making his or her attempts to engage fathers less likely. Almost half (44%) of caseworkers echoed these concerns, either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "dealing with a nonresident father makes a case more complicated." In addition, almost a quarter of the unidentified father cases had more than one father named at some point in the case. Such cases may tend to overwhelm and frustrate caseworkers in their attempts to involve fathers.

¹ We categorized workers according to their responses to two opinion questions: caseworkers who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that (1) nonresident fathers want to be part of the decision-making process with regard to their children, and (2) involvement of nonresident fathers enhances a child's well-being. Workers who responded "neither agreed or disagreed," "disagreed," or "strongly disagreed" with both of the statements were grouped together.

Administrators expressed concern that involving fathers could reintroduce potential abusers into volatile family situations. Domestic violence was identified as a problem area for one third (33%) of the nonresident fathers in the study and in a significant percentage of additional cases (18%) workers did not know whether domestic violence was an issue. Workers may also be concerned for their own safety in dealing with nonresident fathers with violent histories.

Implications

- ***Search for fathers early in the case.*** Most successful information gathering about a nonresident father's identity and location occurs very early in the case. If a nonresident father's identity and location are not determined quickly, it becomes unlikely that he will ever be contacted by the agency.
- ***Consult a wide variety of information sources in order to identify and locate fathers.*** Study results showed that no single information source (other than the child's mother) was likely to consistently provide contact information for the father. However, many different sources provided information occasionally, and taken together most fathers could be located. Yet which sources were consulted seemed haphazard and rarely were searches exhaustive. Caseworkers need to know what steps they should consider when mothers do not know or share information about the child's father.
- ***Make better use of state and federal parent locator services.*** In most places, caseworkers would benefit from better access to location information available from the child support agency. These agencies are specialists in locating nonresident parents, and child welfare agencies are explicitly authorized to use their services to locate parents of children in foster care. More systematic use of child support locate services may also make searches more focused and less time consuming to caseworkers. But caseworkers and agency administrators should be aware that in most places, unless a referral is presented as a "locate only" request, the child support agency will follow up with case actions to establish paternity and put a child support order in place. Child welfare agencies should carefully consider when such a full range of child support actions is in the child's interests, and under what circumstances a "locate only" request would better serve the child.
- ***Assess safety issues individually.*** Caseworkers and administrators express sincere and legitimate concerns about the safety of the children and mothers they work with, as well as for their own safety, when dealing with fathers with histories of violence. Such concerns must be acknowledged and assessed at the case level. However, the fact that nearly half of the fathers were never contacted by the agency suggests that fathers are often excluded without an assessment of the actual risk presented.
- ***Consider a range of ways nonresident fathers could be involved in the lives of children in foster care.*** Unless the child has a case plan goal of placement with his or her father or paternal kin, caseworkers may not know what, if anything, their agencies expect of them with regard to involving nonresident fathers. In the cases studied, sharing the case plan was the only consistent activity that followed from contact with a child's father. Caseworkers may offer visitation to the father in some cases but there was no consistent understanding regarding when or whether visitation should be offered or encouraged. Less intensive forms of involvement such as obtaining the father's medical background and obtaining access to benefits do not seem routine. There is considerable room for improvement in activities that engage nonresident fathers on behalf of their children in ways that could extend beyond the child's stay in foster care and support whatever permanency goal is in the child's best interest.

The full report *What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies Efforts to Identify, Locate and Involve Nonresident Fathers*, is available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/06/CW-involve-dads/index.htm>.

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