

**Nurturing Families
Network Father
Involvement Study
Six-Month Interim Report**

December 15, 2008

In July of this year, we launched the Nurturing Families Network (NFN) father involvement study.¹ In the earlier months, the research team was assembled and training completed, after which we developed and piloted the first interview schedule. The research team has since met separately with seven NFN program sites to discuss the study and recruitment strategies. We currently have contact information for eighteen fathers, have completed seven interviews, scheduled three more, lost two of our contacts to prison, and are attempting to contact the remaining six fathers. Preliminary observations are positive – while fathers often appear reserved and mistrustful in the beginning of the interview, they often open up and tell their stories with less constraint by the end of the interview. Interviews are currently being transcribed and we will begin reporting on this information in our next report.

Families in the NFN program meet a criteria of vulnerability that indicate a need for support services.² Most households are low income, with first-time mothers unlikely to have married. Eighty-nine percent have never married, two percent are either divorced, separated or widowed, while only nine percent are married.³ While these figures are indicative of socially and economically vulnerable families, they also reflect larger national trends in unmarried births. Rates of unmarried births in the United States have increased from around six percent in the early 1960s to 37 percent in 2005. Further, in 2005, 82 percent of teen mothers 15-19 years of age were unmarried at the time of birth, as were 55 percent of mothers ages 20-24 and 28 percent of 25-29 year-old mothers.⁴

Unmarried birth rates among racial and ethnic groups also differ significantly, with 70 percent of black mothers, 48 percent of Hispanic mothers, and 25 percent of white mothers giving birth out-of-wedlock in 2005.⁵ Of course, race and ethnicity are conflated with social class, which is also a

¹We would like to thank the other two members of our research team, Sky Keyes-Vogt and Victor Pacheco for their contributions, as well as Marcia Hughes and Kevin Lamkins for their suggestions, Meredith Damboise for her work on the survey, and the Children's Trust Fund for funding the study.

²For more on these criteria, see Marcia Hughes, Meredith C. Damboise, Mary P. Erdmans, Kevin Lamkins, and Timothy Black. 2008. *Nurturing Families Network: 2008 Annual Evaluation Report*. University of Hartford, Center for Social Research.

³Ibid.

⁴The teenage rate is based upon 2004 data. See Child Trends Data Bank, <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/indicators/75UnmarriedBirths.cfm>.

⁵Ibid.

contributing factor to these trends. One study found that poor adults are only one-half as likely to be married as adults whose incomes are at least three times greater than the poverty line.⁶

In 2004, Connecticut had the eleventh lowest unmarried birth rate in the nation at 30.6 percent. Its unmarried white birth rate was the third lowest, while the rate for unmarried Hispanic women was the second highest in the nation. For black women, Connecticut ranks in the middle at 26th.⁷

The increase in unmarried births, however, does not necessarily mean that the father is absent from the home, or uninvolved in the child's life. A recent estimate indicates that nearly one-half of unmarried mothers in urban areas are cohabitating.⁸ Among families in the NFN program, 38 percent of fathers were living with the mother and child around the time of the birth, but around three-quarters were reported to be at least somewhat involved with the child. A grandmother was reported to be living in 21 percent of these households as well. We also found, however, that father involvement decreased in the first year of the child's life, from 72 to 61 percent in families that stay in the program for a year.⁹

In short, the structure of the family has changed considerably over the past 30 years. In this report we attempt to understand these changes and their consequences through an examination of the research literature, a process that is important for contextualizing our father involvement study. In addition, we will report on a survey of program leaders at NFN sites to see what services are currently being offered to fathers through the NFN.

The report is organized into four sections. First, we examine the varying, and often contentious, perspectives on the increase in unmarried births and noncustodial fatherhood. Second, we discuss the consequences of noncustodial fatherhood on children. Third, we examine the literature on absent fathers, father involvement, and child maltreatment. Last, we report on the NFN survey.

Causal Explanations of Nonresidential Fathers

Generally, the explanations for the increase in absent father households can be grouped into four categories: 1) the decline in the nuclear family and family values; 2) the unintended

⁶Kathryn Edin and Joanna M. Reed. 2005. "Why Don't They Just Get Married? Barriers to Marriage among the Disadvantaged." *The Future of Children* 15(2):117-137.

⁷Joyce A. Martin, Brady E. Hamilton, Paul D. Sutton, Stephanie J. Ventura, Fay Menacker, Sharon Kirmeyer. 2006. *National Vital Statistics Report*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control.

⁸Child Trends Data Bank.

⁹Hughes et al. 2008. *Nurturing Families Network: 2008 Annual Evaluation Report*.

consequences of social welfare policies; 3) the loss of living wage jobs; and 4) the empowerment of women to leave or avoid unhappy marriages.

The Decline in the Nuclear Family and Family Values

The nuclear family is an ideal that emerged during the Victorian period in the 19th century when only wealthy households were likely to have the means to achieve this form of family organization. It was only during the prosperous years after World War II that the nuclear family became more widely practiced, especially among white families more likely to benefit from economic growth and from 1950s governmental housing and educational policies. While the nuclear family ideal has remained an integral part of our dominant culture, its practice has nevertheless declined. This can be seen across all social-economic, racial and ethnic groups, in terms of both out-of-wedlock birth rates and divorce rates.

According to a comprehensive study issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2002, divorce rates increased for the baby boomer generation across all social groups, before leveling off in the 1980s and 1990s. One-third of all first marriages were disrupted by either separation or divorce within ten years. Nearly one-half of divorced women remarried within five years and three-quarters within ten years. Fifteen percent of remarriages were disrupted in the first three years and about one-fourth in the first five years.¹⁰

While trends in out-of-wedlock births and divorce have occurred across all social groups, there is significant variation by age, race, and social-economic status. Marrying at older ages, having more income, and being white or Asian increases the chances for enduring marriages. Still, even though whites have much lower rates of unmarried births than blacks and Latinos, their unmarried birth rates have doubled since the 1970s. And while unmarried teen births have received considerable media attention, more than one-half of women in their early 20s now give birth out-of-wedlock. Black women, however, are at the greatest risk of single parenthood – they are much more likely to give birth without cohabitating or being married to the father, their cohabiting relationships are less likely to resolve into marriage, they are more likely to separate (although less likely to transition from separation to divorce), and they are less likely to remarry.¹¹

Another key factor in unmarried parenthood and the decline of father involvement is the establishment of a new family (with new children) by one of the parents, creating what is referred to as “blended families.” Fathers tend to see their children from prior relationships less after they

¹⁰*Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States*. 2002. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

¹¹*Births: Final Data for 2002*. 2003. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

sire children in new relationships.¹² The presence of stepchildren in the new relationship does not have as great of an effect on decreasing father involvement, but generally, co-residing with *any* children in a new relationship can negatively affect visitation with the fathers' earlier children.

Some scholars attribute these changes in family structure to a general decline in traditional family values. Several believe that fathers no longer aspire to the role of breadwinner and head of household. In this way, they may easily decide to walk away from their families, something that presumably would have been unthinkable in previous generations.¹³ David Popenoe argues that since the 1960s, family values have declined and have therefore directly harmed the social and economic functions of the family. He believes that, in general, families have shifted from a focus on the nurturing and development of children to the self-actualization of adults. The repercussions are two-fold: children are not properly socialized and adults increasingly prolong marriage for the purpose of self-fulfillment. Indicative of this, he argues, is the increase of families that *begin* as single-parent families and then may or may not become two-parent families. Popenoe attributes both decreasing marriage rates and increasing fertility rates of unwed mothers to this cultural shift.¹⁴

Social Welfare Policies

Some scholars attribute the decline in marriage to the welfare safety net developed for poor children. Because of the high rate of black single parent households, much of the focus of these studies has been on the black family. The numbers of blacks receiving cash welfare (then called Aid to Families with Dependent Children, AFDC) grew dramatically in the 1960s, largely because eligible black families had been prevented, through discriminatory state practices, from receiving benefits in many states before 1960.¹⁵ Since the AFDC benefit was limited to families in which there was no father in the home, the program was believed to discourage marriage and cohabitation, and even to facilitate father desertion. In Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan's controversial 1965 report, he noted that AFDC receipt drastically increased for black families in the 1960s, while the proportion of cases citing father desertion grew from one-third to

¹²Pamela J. Smock and Wendy D. Manning. 1997. "Nonresident Parents and Child Support." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59(4):798-808.

¹³Stephen Baskerville. 2002. "The Politics of Fatherhood." *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 35(4):695-699.

¹⁴David Popenoe, "American Family Decline, 1960-1990: A Review and Appraisal." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55(3):527-542.

¹⁵ Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave. 2001. *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor*. New York: Routledge.

two-thirds.¹⁶ Further, in an article published in 1976, Barbara Janowitz found that the level of AFDC benefits positively correlated with out-of-wedlock birthrates, especially for younger women. She believed that women were weighing the benefits of marriage against the benefits of AFDC, and concluded that high benefit levels discouraged marriage but did *not* discourage having children.¹⁷

Others scholars shared her assessment, arguing that while poor job prospects made poor men unlikely marriage partners, welfare benefits subsidized the costs of having children, and, as Charles Murray asserted, made "fathers more dispensable."¹⁸ Further, Murray argued that the welfare system imposed a "tax" on marriage, because it eliminated the mothers' welfare benefits if and when she married.¹⁹

Similar arguments have been leveled against the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), currently the nation's largest cash antipoverty program. As a result of welfare reforms instituted in 1996, many former recipients have entered the workforce and now receive governmental assistance through the EITC to subsidize low wages. Welfare critics argue that the potential loss of this benefit through marriage creates a disincentive for low-income working mothers to marry.

In a more recent comprehensive review of the literature on the effects of welfare benefits on marriage, Robert Moffitt found that there was indeed a significant, but small negative effect. Moffitt concluded, however, that "the welfare system does not appear to be capable of explaining most of the long-term trend of increasing numbers of female-headed families in the United States."²⁰

Loss of Living Wage Jobs

Due to economic restructuring that began at the end of the 1970s in response to economic conditions of stagflation and declining profit rates, there was a large loss of good paying,

¹⁶Daniel Patrick Moynihan. 1965. *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*. Washington D.C.: United States Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research.

¹⁷ Barbara S. Janowitz. 1976. "The Impact of AFDC on Illegitimate Birth Rates." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 38(3):485-494.

¹⁸Charles Murray. 1993 "Welfare and the Family: The U.S. Experience." *Journal of Labor Economics* 11(1):S224-S262

¹⁹ Charles Murray. 1984. *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*. New York: Basic Books.

²⁰ Robert Moffitt. 2002. "Incentive Effects in the U.S. Welfare System," *Journal of Economic Literature*, 30(1):56-57.

unionized manufacturing jobs in the U.S. These changes greatly affected working class communities as living wage jobs declined and as newer service sector jobs tended to pay lower wages, hire more women, and require skills that were uncharacteristic of an industrial labor force. These structural changes were particularly hard on racial minority communities, where there were fewer financial resources and social networks to sustain the basic needs of the community and adapt to these changing social and economic conditions. As a consequence, men in these communities became more socially and economically marginalized, as many were pushed into off-the-books jobs, and still others into the criminal underground economy.

Further, drug laws that concentrated law enforcement in black urban communities and instituted mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses dramatically increased the percentage of black men going to prison, to the extent where a recent study reported that one in nine black men between the ages of 20 and 34 are now incarcerated.²¹ Several scholars have attributed declining marriage rates to these structural conditions.

William Julius Wilson, for instance, argues that the economic marginalization of black men has reduced the number of "marriageable men," particularly in black urban communities.²² David Ellwood and Jonathon Crane found that men with more education were more likely to marry, while those without a high school education were much less likely to do so.²³ Similarly, other scholars have argued that there appears to be a financial threshold beneath which marriage is not practical. Couples are more likely to cohabitate under these conditions, until they can create the financial security that they believe is necessary for marriage. For marginalized groups, however, these conditions rarely materialize.

Based on a review of qualitative studies with single parent mothers, Kathryn Edin and Joanna Reed argue that the low rate of marriage among poor women is attributable, ironically, to the high esteem in which they hold marriage – thus rather than finding poor women's attitudes towards marriage to be deviant, they find them to be very traditional. When women don't believe their relationships can live up to the standards of marriage – in terms of wealth, income, and status – they postpone it, but maintain the hopes that it will occur in the future. For these women, marriage cannot just be a trip to the Justice of the Peace; it must include a proper ceremony, followed by moving the family out of the inner city. Thus, many will not marry until a real wedding and marriage can be afforded. Needless to say, these women do not find men who

²¹ *One in 100: Behind Bars in America*. 2008. Washington D.C.: The Pew Charitable Trusts.

²² William Julius Wilson. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²³ David T. Ellwood and Jonathon Crane. 1990. "Family Change among Black Americans." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 4(4):65-84. {

support themselves in the criminal underground economy to be marriageable, even when they are romantically involved. And while they value fathers' efforts to see their children, to find low wage employment, and to make whatever financial contribution to the family they can, this does not, according to Edin and Reed, make these men marriageable in the eyes of many poor women.²⁴

The Empowerment of Women to Leave or Avoid Unwanted Marriages

While conservatives have argued that welfare benefits and supports for low-income women have encouraged absent father households, others see public assistance combined with more job opportunities for women as an important alternative to the patriarchal family. Similarly, as conservatives have argued that the decline of family values has weakened the nuclear family, others claim that giving women more choices allows them to leave unhealthy, and sometimes abusive, marriages. In fact, most studies indicate that in the majority of divorces or separations, it is the mother who leaves the father, taking the children with her.²⁵ Similarly, other studies show that mothers are likely to avoid marrying men whom they do not believe will make trustworthy and supportive partners. In other words, as Marcia Carlson, Sara McLanahan, and Paula England found in their study, mothers' perceptions of the quality of the relationship is an important predictor of marriage.²⁶

There are many issues that may impede quality relationships and leave women reluctant to marry. Studies identify incarceration, criminal involvement, excessive drug and alcohol use, domestic violence, and infidelity to be barriers to marriage, particularly in poorer communities. In their study of relationship break-ups among single mothers in Philadelphia, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas found that almost one-half identified chronic patterns of domestic violence, four in ten cited repeated infidelities, nearly one-third reported criminal involvement and incarceration, and more than one-third alcohol and drug abuse as the reasons for the break-up.²⁷

In Frank Furstenberg's landmark Baltimore study, he found a "culture of distrust" between low-income men and women and a heightened vigilance for relationship problems that not only left

²⁴Edin and Reed, "Why Don't They Just Get Married?"

²⁵Baskerville, "The Politics of Fatherhood."

²⁶Marcia J. Carlson, Sara S. McLanahan, and Paula England. 2004. "Union Formation in Fragile Families." *Demography* 41: 237-61.

²⁷Kathryn Edin and Maria J. Kefalas, 2005. *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

many women reluctant to marry, but quick to exit relationships when they perceive problems.²⁸ As all of these studies suggest, women in poor communities are likely to have different thresholds of tolerance for men whom they have romantic relationships and even children with than they are for men whom they marry.

These four perspectives encompass a wide range of research on changing family structures. They include more conservative perspectives (decline in family values and consequences of welfare policies) as well as more liberal perspectives (loss of living wage jobs and the empowerment of women). For our purposes, they help to better situate our research and policy alternatives within the larger public debate.

Consequences of Nonresidential Fatherhood

The most obvious consequence of absent fathers is the financial hardship this creates for many single-mother families. This is true for all social groups. Women are not only more likely to have primary custodial responsibility for children, they are also likely to have less earning power than men. Single mothers may receive compensation through alimony, child support, or public assistance. For poor mothers, however, their options are often limited. Public assistance is usually inadequate in meeting the needs of the family and, since 1996, cash assistance has become time limited. Further, poor fathers are not likely to have the resources to contribute much to the family, and tend to contribute informally, especially if they are acquiring income from off-the-books jobs or in the criminal underground economy.²⁹ Contributions from low-income fathers employed in formal jobs are meager, and if mothers are receiving state assistance, most of the father's support is paid to the state. Currently, more than \$100 billion is owed in child support debt nationally, and estimates based upon a recent Urban Institute study indicate that 70 percent of this debt is owed by fathers who make less than \$10,000 a year.³⁰

These dynamics are more likely to negatively affect single black mothers. As Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro have shown, the gap in income and wealth between black and white households leaves black mothers with fewer financial resources to rely upon in incidences of divorce or separation, and, as we explained in the prior section, also results in fewer marriages.³¹ Moreover, research indicates that there are important differences in outcomes by these marital statuses. For

²⁸Frank F. Furstenberg Jr. 2001. "Fading Dream: Prospects for Marriage in the Inner City," in *Problems of the Century: Racial Stratification in the United States*, edited by Elijah Anderson and Douglass S. Massey. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

²⁹Edin and Kefalas. *Promises I Can Keep*.

³⁰Elaine Sorensen, Lilliana Sousa and Simon Schaner. 2007. *Assessing Child Support Arrears in Nine Large States and the Nation*. Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute.

³¹Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro. 1995. *Black Wealth, White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*. New York: Routledge.

instance, Suzanne Bianchi finds that mothers who were never married tend to be younger, have lower levels of education, and a weaker attachment to the labor force compared to divorced mothers. As a result, two-thirds of children with never married mothers live in poverty compared to one-third of children in divorced families. Moreover, Bianchi's study shows that children in never married families are also 30 to 40 percent more likely to suffer from learning disabilities and twice as likely to drop out of school.³²

Social and emotional outcomes of father absent homes are difficult to disentangle from economic outcomes. Poverty, whether caused by divorce or separation, or whether a deterrent to marriage in the first place, often means that children are likely to attend poorer performing schools, are likely to live in more chaotic neighborhoods and households, are likely to confront health problems related to nutritional deficiencies and environmental hazards, and are likely to live in families with less stable, cohabiting mothers and fathers or stepfathers. Child outcomes attributed to father absent families include higher levels of teen pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, school drop out and school related problems, juvenile delinquency, incarceration, and suicide.³³

Many scholars have studied whether nonresidential father involvement has a mitigating effect on negative child outcomes. The results are mixed. Generally, the quantity and quality of fathering decrease after divorce, and are even poorer in never-married families. Mothers and grandmothers tend to be gatekeepers in determining the fathers' presence in their children's lives; therefore, the quality of the relationship between the mother and the father is an important element of father involvement and its effects. In a review of 24 studies published in the 1990s, William Marsiglio and his colleagues found that in 10 studies (or 42 percent), nonresidential father contact had some positive outcomes for children's well-being. The nature of the interactions, however, rather than the frequency of contacts was more important in explaining the outcomes. In one study they cited, frequent advice given by nonresidential fathers to adolescent children about educational and employment goals and personal problems decreased the occurrences of depression among children. In another study they cited, the quality of parenting, as evidenced by providing emotional support, reasons for decisions, consistent discipline, and praise for children's accomplishments, decreased problems among sons and daughters.³⁴

³²Suzanne M. Bianchi. 1999. "Feminization and Juvenilization of Poverty: Trends, Relative Risks, Causes, and Consequences." *Annual Review of Sociology* 25:307-333.

³³ See Debora A. Salem, Marc A. Zimmerman, and Paul C. Notaro. 1998. "Effects of Family Structure, Family Process, and Father Involvement on Psychosocial Outcomes among African American Adolescents." *Family Relations*, 47(4):331-341; Baskerville, "The Politics of Fatherhood"; and Elaine H. Rodney and Robert Mupier. 1999. "Behavioral Differences between African American Male Adolescents with Biological Fathers." *Journal of Black Studies*, 30(1):45-61.

³⁴William Marsiglio, Paul Amato, Randal D. Day, Michael I. Lamb. 2000. "Scholarship on Fatherhood in the 1990s and Beyond." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62(4):1173-1191.

The level of conflict between the mother and the father is often an important factor in determining the quality of father involvement. In fact, frequent contact also provides more opportunity for parental conflict. Several studies have shown that the outcomes of father involvement are influenced by the degree of parental conflict. Paul Amato and Sandra Rezac show in their research that male children's behavioral problems decrease after divorce when father involvement occurs in a context of low parental conflict and increase in a context of high parental conflict.³⁵

These same dynamics apply to remarriage and cohabitation. In cohabiting relationships, fathers are present in their children's lives, but the rates of breakup are higher in these relationships than in marriages, and even divorce rates are higher for these couples who go on to marry. In families in which mothers have remarried, the measures of child well-being tend to be lower than in families with two biological parents. Thomas Hanson and his colleagues found that the only exception to this was in remarried families with low conflict, in which case children tend to do as well academically as children in original in-tact families.³⁶ Other mitigating factors have been identified in the research literature as well. Maureen Black and her colleagues, for instance, found that when fathers contributed financially, are satisfied with their parenting, and are nurturant during play with children that neither their biological status nor their marital status mattered in producing better cognitive skills and language competencies among preschool age children. Further, when fathers were employed and satisfied with their parenting, there were fewer behavior problems noted among these young children, irrespective of biological or marital status.³⁷

Similarly, Paul Florsheim and his colleagues argue that the quality of the male role model is just as important in single parent families as it is in married families. They find that negative child behavioral outcomes are associated with the lack of a *positive* male role model, ineffective disciplinary practices, unpredictable family schedules, and overly authoritarian parent-child relationships.³⁸

³⁵Paul R. Amato and Sandra J. Rezac. 1994. "Contact with Nonresidential Parents, Interparental Conflict, and Children's Behavior." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 15: 191-207.

³⁶Thomas L. Hanson, Sara McLanahan, and Elizabeth Thomson. 1996. "Double Jeopardy: Parental Conflict and Stepfamily Outcomes for Children." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58(1):141-154.

³⁷Maureen M. Black, Howard Dubowitz, and Raymond H. Starr Jr. 1999. "African American Fathers in Low Income, Urban Families: Development, Behavior, and Home." *Child Development* 70(4): 967-978.

³⁸Paul Florsheim, Patrick Tolan, and Deborah Gorman-Smith. 1998. "Family Relationships, Parenting Practices, the Availability of Male Family Members, and the Behavior of Inner-City Boys in Single-Mother and Two-Parent Families." *Child Development* 69(5):1437-1447.

The literature on father involvement is immense and we have only scratched the surface here. Nonetheless, there are some clear patterns. The economic consequences of divorce or separation can be severe for mothers and children, and in the case of poor mothers, economic considerations appear to play an important role in whether they are likely to marry the fathers of their babies. High standards for marriage or staying in a marriage may be an important explanation for why children in families with two biological parents tend to do better than children in other types of family structures—mothers either avoid marrying or leave fathers who are not likely to perform well as fathers or husbands. The literature cited above tends to suggest that the important mediating factors of child well-being tend to be the level of conflict between the mother and the father and the quality of the relationship between the father and the child.

Consequences of Nonresidential Fatherhood on Child Maltreatment

There is limited evidence to suggest that father absence increases child maltreatment. In a 1990s study that compared state-level data, the authors concluded that father absence combined with a working mother in the home increased the likelihood that reports of child maltreatment would be made to and substantiated by the state.³⁹ They also found, however, that the presence of an unemployed father in the home would produce the same. These data are limited, however, by inconsistencies in reporting, defining and substantiating child maltreatment across states, and in the study's inability to distinguish fathers as biological or stepfathers. Our review of the research literature would suggest that, instead, the more important factors related to fathers and child maltreatment concern father characteristics, the nature of the relationships between the father, mother, and child, and the mother's freedom in exercising her judgment to mediate relationships between high-risk fathers and children.

In studies of physically abused children, fathers more likely to be the perpetrators of abuse tend to have rigid views of children's behaviors and traditional views of parental gender roles in which they see the father role as less nurturing but dominant and controlling of mothers' and children's behavior. This combination can result in what Gordon Parker refers to as "affectionless control," in which fathers demonstrate low levels of caring, affection or empathy for children, but are overly controlling of children's behavior.⁴⁰ David Pelcovitz and his colleagues also found in their comparative study of physically abused and nonabused adolescents that father physical abuse was highly associated with rigidity, exhibited as excessive control,

³⁹Christina Paxson and Jane Waldfogel. 1999. "Parental Resources and Child Abuse and Neglect." *Child Welfare* 89(20):239-244.

⁴⁰Gordon Parker. 1983. *Parental Overprotection: A Risk Factor in Psychosocial Development*. New York: Grunne and Stratton.

intrusiveness, and the prevention of a child's independence.⁴¹ Affectionless control has been found to increase depression and anxiety in children.⁴²

In a study of physically abusive fathers, Carol Coohey found that lack of instrumental and emotional support and resources from friends, in-law parents, and kin were particularly salient among abusive fathers. This study also indicated that a lack of father support programs in communities also contributes to this void.⁴³

Other studies have identified additional predictors of child maltreatment. In a study of military families, Cindy Schaeffer and her colleagues found that parental depression or distress and family conflict were associated with the potential for child maltreatment. Importantly, when these contextual factors were present in homes in which fathers expressed traditional and rigid parental sex role expectations, and their dominant authority in the home, the likelihood of child maltreatment was particularly increased.⁴⁴ Physical violence towards mothers is also a predictor of child abuse. Jeffrey Edelson's review of this literature indicates that the co-occurrence of women battering and child physical abuse is between 30 and 60 percent.⁴⁵

Another way of viewing these patterns of abuse is to examine the most extreme cases of father physical abuse – cases that result in the deaths of children. Kate Cavanaugh and her colleagues found that these fathers exhibited unreasonable expectations and low tolerance levels of normal childhood behaviors. Further, children were sometimes abused out of jealousy or resentment that was being directed towards the mother. Two-thirds of these men were stepfathers, mostly in cohabiting relationships, which may have also contributed to their emotional indifference toward the children.⁴⁶ Numerous studies have shown that most victims of fatal child abuse are under the age of one, and usually killed by being struck with a blunt object or from being vigorously

⁴¹David Pelcovitz, Sandra J. Kaplan, Ari Ellenberg, Victor Labruna, Suzanne Salzinger, Francine Mandel, and Merrill Weiner. 2000. "Adolescent Physical Abuse: Age at the Time of Abuse and Adolescent Perception of Family Functioning." *Journal of Family Violence* 15(4):375-389.

⁴²Parker. *Parental Overprotection*.

⁴³Carol Coohey. 2000. "The Role of Friends, In-laws, and Other Kin in Father-Perpetrated Child Physical Abuse." *Child Welfare* 79(4):373-402.

⁴⁴Cindy M. Shaeffer, Pamela C. Alexander, Kimberly Bethke, and Lisa S. Kretz. 2005. "Predictors of Child Abuse Potential among Military Parents: Comparing Mothers and Fathers," *Journal of Family Violence* 20(2):123-129.

⁴⁵Jeffrey L. Edelson. 1999. "The Overlap between Child Maltreatment and Woman Battering," *Violence Against Women* 5:134-54.

⁴⁶Kate Cavanaugh, R. Emerson Dobash, and Russell P. Dobash. 2007. "The Murder of Children by Fathers in the Context of Child Abuse." *Child Abuse and Neglect* 31:731-746.

shaken. These deaths are usually not intended, but occur when harsh disciplinary measures are used by fathers who believe their children are being disobedient and exhibiting behaviors they find intolerant, like excessive crying.⁴⁷ In addition, background characteristics identified among male perpetrators of fatal child abuse include poverty, unemployment, minimal education, and a range of problem behaviors such as history of violent criminal behavior, partner abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, and a history of mental health problems.⁴⁸

In cases of infanticide, children in families with a nonbiological parent are at much greater risk than children in families with two biological parents or in single parent families. An extensive record review in Missouri, for instance, found that child abuse fatalities among children younger than five were eight times more likely to occur in households with unrelated adults than in families with two biological parents. They did not find that risk was increased in single parent households.⁴⁹

Similar patterns are found for child sexual abuse. While there is some evidence to suggest that child sexual abuse is more likely to happen in lower income families, the evidence for this is inconclusive and varies by the source of information. Moreover, of all forms of child maltreatment, child sexual abuse is the most likely to occur across all social-economic and racial groups. Father absence does seem to have some bearing on child sexual abuse, as children separated from a parent for extended periods of time are at increased risk of sexual abuse. Nonetheless, most child sexual abuse is committed by either family members or someone familiar to the family, and risk factors are not unlike what we have seen for other types of child maltreatment, including inadequate parenting, emotionally unavailable and unstable parents, high levels of marital or relationship conflict, and parental alcohol and drug abuse. David Finkelhor explains that these characteristics increase risk in two ways: 1) they reduce the quantity and quality of child protection and supervision, and 2) they foster needy and emotionally deprived children, who are then vulnerable to the attention and affection of child abusers.⁵⁰

⁴⁷See, for instance, Andrew M. Baker, Barbara R. Craig, Gael J. Lonergan. 2003. "Homicidal Commotio Cordis: The Final Blow in a Battered Infant." *Child Abuse and Neglect* 27:125-130.

⁴⁸Cavanaugh et al. "The Murder of Children by Fathers in the Context of Child Abuse."

⁴⁹Michael Stiffman, Patricia G. Schnitzer, Patricia Adam, Robin L. Kruse, and Bernard G. Ewigman. 2002. "Household Composition and Risk of Fatal Child Maltreatment." *Pediatrics* 109(4):615-621. Similar findings have been found in studies in Britain and Canada, but not in Sweden, where a review of child homicide occurring between 1975 and 1995 did not find a relationship between stepfathers and infanticide. See Hans Temrin, Susanne Buchmayer, and Magnus Enquist. 2000. "Step-parents and Infanticide: New Data Contradict Evolutionary Predictions." *The Royal Society* 267:943-945.

⁵⁰David Finkelhor. 1994. "Current Information on the Scope and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse." *The Future of Children* 4(2):31-53.

In less serious forms of abuse or neglect, neither father absence nor the presence of stepfathers has been found to be consistently related to child maltreatment. For instance, Howard Dubowitz and his colleagues found that the quality of father involvement was a much better predictor of child neglect than whether the father was present or was the biological father. When parents had a greater sense of parenting efficacy, a longer duration of involvement, more involvement in household tasks, and, interestingly, less involvement in child care, the likelihood of child neglect was reduced. The authors found the child care factor to be an anomaly and suggested that the fathers' increased involvement may also have reflected the relative unavailability of mothers, contributing to higher rates of neglect. What was perhaps more important about this study were the variables that were not related to neglect, including father presence in the home, marital status, biological status, father's education, or even father's financial contribution to the family. Studies like this underscore the importance of relationship quality between father figures and children and the need for programs to help facilitate and nurture these relationships.

The literature on fathers and child maltreatment can provide an important context in which to consider earlier issues discussed in this report concerning marriage, divorce, and cohabitation. As Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalis suggest, the low rates of marriage among poor women may reflect a different threshold for entering into romantic relationships and having children with men and for marrying men.⁵¹ In the former, women may be motivated by the desires to have children and be mothers, but in the latter they may be exercising a more scrutinizing judgment about whether men would make desirable husbands. The criteria for desirability is, in part, economic – whether men can be reasonable household providers – but it is also likely to include whether men can be reliable, trustworthy partners and good fathers. Maureen Waller and Raymond Swisher shed light on this dynamic in their study of how mothers mediate relationships between fathers with risky characteristics for child abuse and their children. Fathers' risk factors in this study included physical abuse of mothers, substance abuse, and incarceration.⁵²

Waller and Swisher found that mothers were particularly reluctant to marry or remain living with fathers who were physically abusive toward them, men who also tended to be controlling, rigid, or inconsistent in their parenting practices. Moreover, mothers were less likely to pursue "family strategies" (such as using a family member as a third party to supervise father visits) to maintain the romantic relationship with the abusive father or his relationships with his children. The substance abuse issue was more complex. Sometimes mothers also struggled with substance abuse problems in which case ending a romantic relationship might be initiated by mothers attempting to remain sober. However, mothers were much more likely to use family strategies to address this issue than they were physical abuse. Substance abusing fathers often withdrew from mothers and children after their substance abuse had been defined as a problem. Unlike physically abusing fathers, however, these fathers were more likely to attempt to end their

⁵¹Edin and Kefalas. *Promises I Can Keep*.

⁵²Maureen R. Waller and Raymond Swisher. 2006. "Fathers' Risk Factors in Fragile Families: Implications for 'Healthy' Relationships and Father Involvement." *Social Problems* 53(3):392-420.

substance abuse problems, while both mothers and fathers were more likely to pursue family strategies to continue the romantic relationship and provide opportunities for father involvement with children.

Incarceration was the most common risk factor in Waller and Swisher's sample. None of the mothers, however, cited incarceration as the primary motivation for discontinuing the relationship, though repeated imprisonment did erode trust and strain relationships, and continued involvement in illegal activities, particularly drug dealing, did lead mothers to monitor relationships more. Mothers did not impose the same moral boundaries in separating from fathers or preventing them from seeing their children compared to the other risk factors; instead, decreased father involvement was more likely to occur as passive withdrawal of the father, which the authors attribute to the physical and emotional distance that incarceration creates.

For all of these perceived risks, however, mothers did not prevent fathers from seeing their children because they thought they would harm the child. Instead, in the case of physical violence, they worried about the father's ability to have a "healthy" relationship with the child; in cases of substance abuse, they were concerned about the father's "competence," and, overall, they worried about fathers being "bad role models." Waller and Swisher's study remind us that, whether the issue is marriage or father involvement, mothers' judgments and the gatekeeping role they impose on fathers and their children can be very important. Of course, gatekeeping practices by mothers, in-law parents, and institutional authorities like the courts and child support enforcement may at times be misplaced and even unfair, but this should not diminish the important decisions that mothers are making to protect their children.

Nurturing Families Network and Father Involvement

Located at 38 sites throughout the state, the Nurturing Families Network consists of three different programs: Nurturing Connections, a support program for low-risk first-time mothers that provides phone support and service referrals; Nurturing Home Visitation, a weekly home visitation program for high-risk first-time mothers that provides parenting education and support, as well as service referrals; and Nurturing Parenting Groups, community parenting education and support groups that are available to all families at any risk level. There are approximately 900 families currently participating in Nurturing Connections, 950 families in Nurturing Home Visitation, and 240 participants in the Nurturing Parenting Groups program.

For the most part, these services have targeted mothers. Program leaders, however, have a strong interest in reaching fathers and developing strategies for engaging them in nurturing parenting practices and for addressing other needs that they may have. This has been the catalyst for the research we are currently undertaking with fathers.

Of course, the scope of services that the NFN can provide cannot address all of the issues discussed in this report that would be necessary to stabilize families and increase father involvement and marriage, especially structural issues like the lack of living wage jobs, the family disruptions and social-economic consequences of incarceration, and the decline in welfare support. But the program can address parenting practices that have been found to be related to

child maltreatment, like rigid expectations and intolerance of children's behavior, occurrences of "affectionless control," the lack of support from family and friends, and perhaps even parental distress. The program has demonstrated success in addressing these issues with mothers. For instance, statistically significant decreases in rigid expectations of children have consistently been found for mothers participating in the statewide home visitation program. In Hartford, where these measures are higher at program entry, similar significant decreases have occurred.⁵³

Some NFN programs are already extending services to fathers. In the remainder of this section we report on data that we collected and analyzed from a survey of program leaders at NFN sites that was administered by the Children's Trust Fund. The purpose of the survey was to document current services provided to fathers as well as the barriers to those services. Ninety-two percent of sites responded to the survey.

Nurturing Connections (NC)

Survey results indicate that the number of families receiving support from NC services varies greatly across sites from 8 to 98 families, with a median of 34. The median number of fathers at these sites who have participated in at least one support phone call is only two.

The survey asked program leaders to identify the barriers to father participation. The responses were similar across many of the sites. Fathers were often not present in the hospital when the initial conversation about the program took place and mothers were enrolled. They were often not home when the calls were made, either because they were working or not living in the home, and when fathers did answer, they were reported to feel uncomfortable with the caller and to believe that services were for the mother. Several program respondents also indicated that their callers were females who were reluctant to engage fathers in conversation about the mother and baby. As one respondent explained:

All of our volunteers are currently female and they often rely on pulling from their own mothering experience and therefore feel less comfortable or less expert in advising on gender neutral parenting.

At some sites, there are few fathers living in the homes. One program leader wrote:

The structure of the families themselves [is a barrier] – for many families, the FOB [father of the baby] is not involved in the care of the child and does not live in the home. In many cases, we don't even know who he is and how to contact him. If we don't see him in the hospital, it is very difficult to engage with him.

One respondent did indicate, however, that even though the fathers are rarely present when the call is made, "several moms relay questions from the fathers and state they refer information we speak about to fathers."

⁵³Hughes et al. *Nurturing Families Network: 2008 Annual Evaluation Report*.

Finally, it is also important to remember, that the NC program reaches out to low-risk families at the time of birth. On average, families only remain in the program for three months, during which time the focus of concern tends to be on the mother's and child's health and the child's feeding patterns, which does not provide much opportunity for father participation.

Nurturing Home Visitation (NHV)

There is an average number of 31 families participating in home visitation at each program site, with a range from 12 to 66. Anywhere from one to eighteen fathers participate regularly at these sites, for an average of seven fathers. Based on average participation of fathers across sites, 24 percent of fathers were reported to participate at least monthly. Interestingly, nine sites reported that at least one father in their program was the primary recipient of home visitation services.

Some of the sites also reported that they were successfully involving nonbiological father figures in their home visiting practices, including boyfriends, grandfathers, and uncles. This was particularly noticeable at some of the urban sites. In Bridgeport, for instance, one site reported that they were working with 20 nonbiological father figures, while one site in Hartford reported working with 10.

The barriers identified to father participation were fairly consistent across sites. Fathers were often working or in school at the time of the home visit, not living in the home, or incarcerated. Many of the respondents indicated that fathers who were living in the home were working long hours, often more than one job or else long hours of overtime. Some of the respondents indicated that their programs do not target fathers, that home visitors are female, and that most "everything (curriculum, materials, welcome bag, etc.) is geared toward mothers."

Some identified fathers' perceptions as a barrier. A few indicated that fathers did not view the program as useful. More often, though, the fathers viewed the program as a "mother's program," "as the mom's responsibility," or that "caring for the baby is women's work." In some cases the mothers reinforce this view, as one respondent wrote, "Some women don't want the FOB involved in the HV [home visit] and seek to become the primary caretaker or 'baby expert' for personal relationships."

Several of the respondents indicated that when fathers are available, it is hard to engage them simply because, without a male home visitor, it is difficult to establish a needed "comfort level" with the father. One wrote, they are "shy fathers" who have "difficulty engaging with women."

Finally, engaged fathers are more likely to become involved as the baby ages. As one respondent explained:

Some men have a hard time handling a baby, or are intimidated by the fragile nature of the baby. They do better as the baby grows (6+ months) and is old enough to do physical activities [like] crawling, then they engage more in the HV because they enjoy playing with the baby.

On average, families stay in the program for around two years, which will provide important challenges to program efforts to engage fathers in the early years of their children's lives.

Nurturing Parenting Groups (NPGs)

The focus of NPGs may vary, depending on whether the group is targeting prenatal mothers, all mothers, or fathers. Twenty-six percent of sites indicated that they had run a fathers-only group in the past year and that an average of 13 fathers had completed the group. When father groups are included in calculating the larger averages of participation, we find that an average of 23 percent of all participants served in prenatal groups are fathers and 21 percent in the more general parenting groups are fathers. These statistics suggest that not only is there an interest in these programs among a vulnerable population of fathers, but that this interest extends to prenatal fathers as well.

The NFN program offers a father parenting curriculum developed by Mark Perlman, the director of the Connecting Fathers and Families Initiative in Sarasota, Florida. The curriculum focuses on some of the key issues identified earlier in the report that are associated with child maltreatment, such as unrealistic expectations of children, use of corporal punishment, and inadequate parental capacity for empathy.⁵⁴

As before, a range of barriers to participation were identified in the survey. Scheduling was the most frequent barrier given. As mentioned above, many of the fathers are working, some more than one job and on different work shifts. Fathers were particularly under-represented in daytime programs. A few respondents indicated that they might get one father at these afternoon groups, which creates an uncomfortable setting for the father. Another respondent indicated that working fathers often say they are too tired to attend evening groups and that they don't want to give up time on the weekend after working all week. One site respondent wrote that their site had tried weekend groups, but with only limited success.

Some of the program leaders did not like mixed groups; one in particular felt strongly about this: "I feel men change the dynamic of the group. Moms are usually isolated [and] need the female support." Others indicated that they try to encourage mothers and fathers to attend, but found that having male and female facilitators was key to the success of these groups. Several of the sites identified the lack of a male staff member as a major barrier, arguing that they could have more father groups and be more successful at recruitment if they had the resources to hire a male staff.

Another barrier to participation is getting fathers comfortable with the group setting. A few respondents believe that fathers find this type of setting "emasculating," "unmanly," "threatening,"—or simply put, "dads do not want to sit in a group." Father-only groups run by men may be the only way to break through some of this resistance.

⁵⁴For more on the Nurturing Fathering Program designed by Perlman, go to <http://www.nurturingfathers.com/program.htm>.

Finally, in a lengthy, spirited statement about the need for father groups, one respondent emphasized the vital importance of comprehensive services for men, arguing that "fathers that participate in parenting groups are looking to break the cycles of generational poor parenting and want guidance but need wrap around services." These services, the respondent stressed, would need to address the daily living needs of this population and would have to adapt curriculum-based parenting to the reality that many of these fathers are not living with the mothers.

Conclusion

The study of NFN fathers is underway. So far, we have recruited fathers from seven sites and are in the process of developing rapport and initiating a series of interviews with each of them. In the next report, we will begin providing information from these interviews.

This report reflects some of the early work we have done to contextualize our study. Unmarried parenting is a current trend in the U.S., especially among lower income groups. Cohabitation has likewise increased and has essentially accounted for the decrease in married families. Perspectives on this trend vary. We provided four general explanations, ranging from conservative to liberal perspectives, to better situate policy alternatives and our research within the public debate.

There is considerable research that identifies the negative outcomes of absent father households. We have looked more closely at this research to better understand the complexity of these issues. Clearly, there are economic consequences, but as we have seen, economic circumstances can also be a cause of unmarried parenting and father absent households. Moreover, we have identified some of the important factors that mediate negative outcomes, including the level of conflict between the mother and father and the nature of the relationship between the father and child.

The association between father absence and child maltreatment appears to be tenuous. Evidence suggests that there is higher risk of physical child abuse among unmarried and nonbiological fathers in the household. But again, there are important mitigating factors, particularly concerning fathers' attitudinal and behavioral characteristics. Environmental stresses associated with unemployment, poverty, and minimal education combined with fathers' rigid expectations of children and their dominant and controlling behaviors towards mothers and children increase the likelihood of child abuse. It may be the case that positive outcomes often associated with the marriage of two-biological parents reflect the benefits that accrue from relationships in which there are relatively fewer problems. As we have seen, mothers may avoid marrying or may leave fathers who exhibit some of the risk factors that may place them or their children in harms way.

Foremost, what we have learned from our review of the literature is that there is much more to be learned about father involvement. Our research is designed to learn about the personal lives and struggles of fathers, with the hopes that our interpretations and understandings of this population will contribute to the public dialogue about these issues and will inform NFN program strategies. As we have seen, NFN has already begun to increase efforts to reach fathers. Hopefully, what we learn from fathers themselves will further this process.