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**UNMARRIED BUT NOT ABSENT: FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT
WITH CHILDREN AFTER A NONMARITAL BIRTH***

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ABSTRACT

We use new data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a birth cohort study in twenty large U.S. cities, to investigate the level and predictors of fathers' involvement with children approximately three years after a nonmarital birth ($N=3,009$). We examine the frequency of fathers' spending time with their child, their engagement in various father-child activities, and their help toward the mother with household and child-related tasks. We explore differences in fathers' involvement by parents' relationship status at birth, defined as cohabiting ($n=1,449$), visiting (romantically involved but living apart, $n=1,056$), and not romantically involved ($n=504$). We find that three-fourths of unwed fathers have seen their three-year-old child at least once in the previous month, while one quarter of fathers no longer have regular contact with their child. Parents' relationship status at the time of the child's birth is a key predictor of subsequent involvement: fathers in cohabiting unions are much more likely to be involved in their child's life three years later than other unmarried fathers. Parents' relationship quality is also linked to greater father involvement for some outcomes, and domestic violence is strongly associated with lower involvement. A history of incarceration and having children by other partners also deter fathers' involvement. We conclude that both fathers' individual attributes and his relationship with the mother at the time the child is born have important consequences for fathers' subsequent involvement with young children.

UNMARRIED BUT NOT ABSENT: FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILDREN AFTER A NONMARITAL BIRTH

INTRODUCTION

Major changes in family demography in recent decades (Casper and Bianchi 2002), a growing recognition of the negative consequences for children of father absence (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994, Amato forthcoming), and a greater awareness of the increasing diversity in fathers' roles (Cabrera et al. 2000) have converged to heighten interest in the antecedents and consequences of fathers' involvement in children's lives. Despite the rapid rise in nonmarital childbearing since the 1960s, information about unwed fathers' involvement with children is still limited. Some studies have focused on special samples of unwed fathers such as teen fathers, but much of the extant research has focused on divorced fathers or fathers (regardless of marital history) who live apart from their child(ren); in other words, most studies have examined father involvement in families in which the parents' relationship has ended. We now know that many unwed couples with children are cohabiting and/or romantically involved at the time of their baby's birth (McLanahan et al. 2001). Father involvement may be quite different among unmarried fathers who remain in a romantic relationship with the mother of their child, making the comparison to divorced parents not particularly salient. Further, marriage formalizes parents' childrearing responsibilities, and the norms, rights and expectations for divorced fathers may be clearer than those for never-married fathers, implying that there may be greater variability in both the content and the consequences of involvement among unmarried fathers. Given the growing number of unmarried parents and the growing importance of fathers for children, understanding the nature of unmarried fathers' involvement is an important area for inquiry with significant implications for family and child wellbeing.

This topic also has important consequences for social stratification and inequality, given the striking sub-group differences in rates of nonmarital childbearing. Overall, 35 percent of births today occur to unmarried parents, but the figures are 24 percent among non-Hispanic whites, 45 percent among Hispanics and fully 69 percent among non-Hispanic blacks (Hamilton, Martin and Sutton 2004). Given that nonmarital childbearing is highly correlated with socioeconomic disadvantage, lower parental investments in children, and family instability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1995), these racial disparities suggest that inequality in child outcomes will only increase over time, further compounding the already-growing inequality in children's resources more generally (McLanahan 2004).

In this paper, we extend the literature by examining the level and predictors of unmarried fathers' involvement with children subsequent to a nonmarital birth. We examine whether fathers see their children when they are about one and three years old. Then, for fathers who have some contact, we examine four different aspects of involvement, including the number of days fathers see their child in the past month, the number of days they spend one or more hours doing things with their child, how often they help the mother with household and child-related tasks, and how often they engage in a series of father-child activities. We use data from a new longitudinal study of unmarried parents – the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study – which has been following a sample of approximately 3,700 unmarried parents who gave birth between 1998 and 2000.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Levels of Father Involvement

The preponderance of academic research on fathers has focused on married and/or middle-class men (Coley 2001). What we do know about unmarried fathers comes primarily from studies of

divorced or separated fathers who live apart from their children.¹ The literature shows that whereas a sub-set of divorced fathers maintain frequent contact with their children, many fathers disappear rather quickly from their child's life (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1991; Furstenberg 1995; Furstenberg, Morgan, and Allison, 1987; Furstenberg and Nord 1985; Marsiglio 1993; Mott 1990; Seltzer 1994; Shiono & Quinn, 1994; Zill and Nord 1996). The situation for never-married fathers is somewhat different. While many people think of unwed fathers as being less involved with their children than divorced or separated fathers, evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) mother-child data suggests otherwise. About one third of children born to unwed mothers (over age 20) between 1984 and 1990 were living with their biological fathers at birth, and another third were seeing their fathers at least once a week (Lerman and Sorenson 2000; McLanahan et al. 1997). Many of these parents appeared to be in stable relationships: McLanahan et al. (1997) found that among children born to unmarried parents who were living with their biological father at birth, 77 percent were still doing so two years later; similarly, 69 percent of children who were seeing their fathers once a week or more in the first year of life were maintaining this level of contact two years later. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) also found high levels of contact between nonresident, never-married fathers and children of all ages, using data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH).

The relatively high levels of involvement among new unmarried fathers are probably due to the fact that many parents are still romantically involved at the time they are observed; in short, their unions or “marriages” are still intact. Thus, comparison with divorced, nonresident fathers is probably not appropriate. Once the parents’ relationship ends, however, father involvement may drop off just as rapidly among never-married couples just as it does among divorced couples; and both quantitative and qualitative research suggests that children’s ties to unmarried fathers are

¹ Much of the research on nonresident fathers has focused on the payment of child support. Since our paper is focused on non-financial involvement, we do not discuss the child support literature here.

tenuous over time, particularly if the father never or only briefly lived with the child (Lerman 1993; Furstenberg and Harris 1993). Alternatively, the informality of the tie between unwed parents may cushion these couples from the shock of divorce, which, in turn, may make it easier for fathers to stay involved with their child after the relationship with the mother ends. Our understanding of the causal processes by which many fathers disengage from their children is limited (Lerman and Sorenson 2000).

We should note that most nationally representative data sets under-represent fathers, particularly those who live apart from their children (Garfinkel et al. 1998; Lerman 1993; Seltzer and Brandreth 1995). For example, Garfinkel et al. (1998) estimate that approximately 40 percent of nonresident fathers are missing from the NSFH, either because they were not interviewed or because they did not identify themselves as fathers. The problem is even more serious for low-income fathers and men who were never married to the mothers of their children (see Rendall, Clarke, Peters, Ranjit, & Verroponlou, 1997; Sorensen, 1995). Beyond missing a large fraction of fathers, most large surveys present an incomplete portrait of the types of involvement fathers may have with their children, focusing typically on the frequency of contact and the amount of financial support (Coley 2001). In this study, we use data from a new survey of unmarried parents which interviews mothers and fathers at the hospital soon after their child is born. This strategy yields a high response rate and provides a wider range of information about fathers' involvement with children than has been available in previous research.

Predictors of Father Involvement

We know that fathers who are unmarried at the birth of their child are more likely to subsequently live away from their children than fathers who are married (Clarke, Cooksey and Verropoulou 1998; Seltzer 1991), but there is limited research about the factors *among* unwed

fathers (using large, national samples) that predict subsequent involvement. We draw on the literature on father involvement about divorced or nonresident fathers in order to summarize key factors that are expected to affect fathers' involvement with their children, and we note any differences anticipated for unmarried fathers. We identify five groups of variables that are potentially important: parents' relationship status and quality, fathers' human capital, fathers' cultural and attitudinal characteristics, fathers' health and socio-demographic characteristics, and child characteristics.

Parents' relationship status and quality at birth. Relationship status at the time of the baby's birth signals parents' commitment to one another and also proxies for a range of unobserved characteristics (such as intentionality about childbearing, relationship skills, etc.). Cohabitation at the time of birth is related to the fathers' later involvement (Landale and Oropesa 2001), although no research of which we are aware has differentiated among other types of unmarried relationships (i.e. romantically involved versus not). Beyond relationship status, the quality of parents' interaction may also be important for fathers' involvement. An extensive literature shows that within marriage, the quality of the mother-father relationship is positively associated with fathers' parenting (Erel and Burman 1995). Likewise, for unmarried parents, a few studies suggest that conflicted relationships discourage positive father involvement (Coley and Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Danziger and Radin, 1990; Furstenberg 1995; Seltzer, 1991), while amicable and supportive relationships foster father-child interaction (Carlson and McLanahan 2005).

Human capital. Despite the broader fatherhood role today, being an effective breadwinner remains central to the meaning of fatherhood for most men and women (Gerson 1993). Fathers who are unable to provide financially for their children are more likely to withdraw, and/or mothers are more likely to discourage the involvement of men who are not good breadwinners. Studies show that fathers of higher socioeconomic status (as reflected by education and employment status) are

more likely to live with their children and to exhibit positive parenting behaviors than fathers of lower status (Woodworth et al. 1996; Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999; Cooksey and Craig 1998; Landale and Oropesa 2001; Rangarajan and Gleason 1998), although the evidence is not entirely consistent (Pleck 1997). Since most unmarried fathers are of lower socioeconomic status (Sigler-Rushton and McLanahan 2002), we might expect these fathers to be less involved with their children than divorced fathers.

Culture/attitudes. We know that men with more egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles do more household work including child care (Hochschild 1989), and that divorced men with more traditional gender role attitudes see their children less frequently than men with less traditional attitudes (Arendell 1995). There also is evidence that men who identify strongly with the father role are likely to exhibit greater involvement with their children than men for whom the father role is less salient (Ihinger-Tallman et al. 1993). Finally, there is some evidence that more religious fathers demonstrate greater involvement with their children than their less religious fathers (King 2003; Wilcox 2002).

Health and socio-demographic factors. . Fathers' good health is expected to foster greater involvement. Fathers who suffer from depression are less likely to demonstrate positive paternal engagement (Eiden and Leonard 2000) than non-depressed fathers, and incarceration may diminish fathers' connection to children (Western, Lopoo and McLanahan 2004). Older fathers are typically more involved than younger fathers (Landale and Oropesa 2001). There is some evidence that men who grow up apart from their fathers are less likely to form successful relationships in adulthood and thus, less likely to live with their children than men who lived with their fathers during childhood (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994).

Child characteristics. Finally some empirical evidence suggests that fathers are more involved with boys than with girls (Harris and Morgan 1991; Marsiglio 1991; Pleck 1997), although

other research shows no gender differences in father involvement post divorce (Seltzer and Bianchi 1988). It may be that fathers parent girls and boys somewhat differently (Gottman 1998), so gender differences may depend on the type of involvement in question. For example, Cooksey and Craig (1998) find that absent fathers are more likely to talk on the phone with girls than with boys, but there is no gender difference in fathers' visitation.

In the analysis that follows, we extend the existing literature in several ways. First, we present a descriptive portrait of the level of unmarried fathers' involvement with young children using a large sample of fathers in large U.S. cities who recently had a child. Second, we examine a wide array of father involvement indicators, including any contact, amount of contact, father-child activities, and helping mothers with child and household tasks. Third, we examine a set of antecedent characteristics—such as fathers' incarceration history, fathers' mental health, and parents' relationship quality—that have not been previously explored in prior research but that are likely to be related to fathers' involvement.

DATA AND METHODS

We use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a national, longitudinal study designed to examine the characteristics of unmarried parents, the relationships between them, and the consequences for children (see Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001 for information on study design). The study follows a birth cohort of 3,712 children born to unmarried parents (and a comparison group of married parents) in twenty large U.S. cities.

Baseline interviews with mothers and fathers were conducted shortly after their child's birth between 1998 and 2000. Mothers were interviewed in person in the hospital within 48 hours of the birth, and fathers were interviewed in person (or by phone) as soon as possible thereafter, either in the hospital or wherever they could be located. Follow-up interviews with both mothers and fathers

occur when the child is about one, three and five years old (the latter is not yet complete). Response rates for the baseline survey are 87 percent for unmarried mothers and 75 percent for unmarried fathers.² At the one-year (three-year) follow-up, 90 percent (87 percent) of unmarried mothers and 70 percent (67 percent) of unmarried fathers who had been interviewed at baseline were interviewed again.

Variables

We use five measures of fathers' involvement with children at the three-year follow-up survey, all reported by mothers (we conduct supplementary analyses using fathers' reports to check the robustness of our findings). We use mothers' reports because many of the covariates are reported by fathers. Also, using mothers' reports allows us to include the full sample (since, as noted earlier, a smaller fraction of fathers were interviewed); we discuss later how we deal with missing data. Our first measure is whether the father saw the child at all in the previous month (yes/no). Second, we examine the number of days the father saw the child in the past month, ranging from 0 to 30 (living together is counted as 30). Our third measure indicates how often the father spent one or more hours with the child in the past month, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (every day). The fourth measure indicates how often the father helps the mother with tasks related to the child or the home. For this measure we take the mean across four items: how often the father looks after the child when the mother needs to do things, how often he runs errands for the mother, how often he fixes things around the mother's home, and how often he takes the child places s/he needs to go (Cronbach's alpha = .902). Finally, we measure the mean number of days in the past week that

² The Fragile Families data are most representative of cohabiting fathers (90 percent response rate) and least representative of fathers who are not romantically involved with the child's mother at the time of birth (38 percent response rate).

the father engaged in five activities with the child—singing, playing imaginary games (peek-a-boo at year 1), reading stories, telling stories, and playing with toys ($\alpha = .889$).

Our independent variables measure parents' relationship status and quality at birth, fathers' human capital, attitudes/culture, health and socio-demographic characteristics, and child characteristics, all reported at the time of the baby's birth unless otherwise noted. Parents' relationship status at the time of their baby's birth is represented by several dummy variables: cohabiting (reference), in a visiting relationship (romantically involved but living apart), "just friends," or no relationship (hardly ever or never talk). Supportiveness in the parents' relationship is measured by fathers' reports about the frequency that the mother exhibits four types of behavior at the baseline survey: 1) "is fair and willing to compromise when [they] have a disagreement," 2) "expresses affection or love toward [him]," 3) "insults or criticizes [him] or [his] ideas" (coding reversed), and 4) "encourages or helps [him] to do things that are important to [him]." Response options are "never" (1), "sometimes" (2), and "often" (3). The four items were averaged to obtain an overall supportiveness score ($\alpha=.607$), with higher scores indicating a greater level of supportiveness. Frequency of conflict is represented by the mean of fathers' reports about whether they had conflict over six items in the last month—money, spending time together, sex, the pregnancy, drinking or drug use, and being faithful. Again, responses options are "never," "sometimes" and "often," and a mean is taken across items ($\alpha=.607$).³ Physical partner violence toward the mother is represented by a dummy variable coded as 1 if the mother reported at the one-year survey that she was ever "seriously hurt" by the father at some point before the baby's birth.

Fathers' education is specified as less than high school (reference), high school degree, and some college or above. Earnings in the previous year are measured in four categories: none, \$1-

³ For couples who are no longer romantically involved, they are asked about the frequency of conflict during the last month they were together; since this was likely a contentious time in their relationship, differences between couples still together versus those no longer romantically involved may be exaggerated.

9,999, \$10,000-\$24,999, and \$25,000 or higher (reference). Fathers' traditional attitudes toward gender roles are measured by the average of two questions with response choices ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree): 1) "The important decisions in the family should be made by the man of the house," and 2) "It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family." We include a measure of fathers' attitudes toward fathering, based on three items, with responses again ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree): 1) "Being a father and raising children is one of the most fulfilling experiences a man can have," 2) "I want people to know that I have a new child," and 3) "Not being a part of my child's life would be one of the worst things that could happen to me" ($\alpha=.732$). We include the frequency of each fathers' religious attendance, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (once a week or more).

Health and behavioral characteristics include fathers' self-reported health status (fair/poor versus good/very good/excellent). To measure fathers' risk of depression, we use an abbreviated (12 item) version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CESD) scale; fathers report the number of days in the past week they experienced a range of feelings (e.g. fearful, sad, lonely, etc.). We use the mean across the items ($\alpha=.853$), since there is insufficient information by which to identify a clinical cut-point. Fathers report whether they have a substance problem by responding (yes/no) to the question "In the past year, has drinking or using drugs ever interfered with your work on a job or with your personal relationships?" We include fathers' incarceration history in three categories based on mothers' reports at the one-year follow-up interview: father was never incarcerated (reference), father was previously—but is not currently—incarcerated, and father is currently incarcerated.

We include a number of demographic and background characteristics. Fathers' age at the time of birth is represented by four dummy variables for under age 20, age 20-24, age 25-29 and

age 30 or older (reference). Fathers' race is specified as: non-Hispanic black (reference category), non-Hispanic white, Hispanic, and other race; we also include a separate dummy variable indicating when the parents differ on race/ethnicity. Immigrant status is measured by a dummy variable for whether the father was born outside the U.S. Family background is represented by a dichotomy for whether the father lived with both of his parents at age 15. We include a continuous measure of the number of children in the father's household at baseline, as well as a dummy variable indicating that the father has children by another partner (reported by fathers at the 1-year survey).

We include two pieces of information about the child: the child's gender and the child's temperament based on three items from the Emotionality, Activity, Sociability, and Impulsivity (EASI) scale reported by mothers at the one-year survey. For the EASI items, the mother indicates whether certain statements reflect her child's behavior, ranging from 1 "not at all like my child" to 5 "very much like my child." We include the mean of three items that indicate 'difficult temperament' "he/she often fusses or cries," "he/she gets easily upset," and "he/she reacts strongly when upset" ($\alpha = .594$).

Table 1 describes the characteristics of our sample, showing means/frequencies for all unmarried parents and then by relationship status at the time of the baby's birth. Among all unmarried couples, relationships are generally supportive, with low conflict, and only 6 percent of mothers report previous partner violence. Three-fourths of unmarried fathers have a high-school degree or less. Most fathers had some earnings in the year prior to their baby's birth, but only one-fifth earned \$25,000 or more. Most fathers hold positive attitudes toward being a father, fall in the middle with respect to egalitarian to traditional gender role attitudes, and attend church infrequently. Most fathers are in good health, have few depressive symptoms, and do not report a substance problem; 27 percent have been previously in jail/prison, and 6 percent were incarcerated at the time of the one-year survey. Most unmarried fathers were in their 20s when their baby was born and are

non-Hispanic black or Hispanic; only 13 percent are immigrants. Two-fifths lived with both of their own parents at age 15. One-third of fathers have had another child with the focal child's mother, and another third have had a child by another partner. About half of the babies are boys, and the average child's temperament falls in the middle of the 'difficult' scale.

Comparing fathers by their relationship status with the mother at the time of the baby's birth (we combine the two groups of non-romantic relationships), we find that cohabiting fathers tend to be slightly more advantaged than other unmarried fathers with respect to socioeconomic status and health/behavioral characteristics, although this is not uniformly true. There is not a clear pattern differentiating visiting from non-romantic fathers.

Methods

We begin by describing the prevalence of father involvement for all fathers one and three years after a nonmarital birth. Then, we describe involvement at three years for groups of unmarried fathers broken down by their relationship with the baby's mother at the time of the birth: cohabiting, visiting (not cohabiting but romantically involved with the child's mother), and not romantically involved. Next, we estimate a logistic regression model to assess the association between the independent variables and whether the father saw the child in the previous month at the three-year survey. Finally, we use OLS regression to estimate the association between the independent variables and the four continuous measures of father involvement. We estimate a single model for each outcome which includes all the covariates described above, most of which are measured at the time of the baby's birth. (In results not shown, we tried adding the relationship status variables after the other independent variables. The findings were not altered, so for the sake of parsimony, we present a single model.)

We use several procedures for dealing with missing data.⁴ Among items reported by mothers, for any variables with more than 10 missing observations, we assign the missing cases to the overall mean for all unmarried mothers and include a flag variable to indicate the case has missing data on a particular variable. For father-reported variables, we follow a similar procedure and include a dummy to indicate that the father was missing on a particular variable (when he was interviewed). In addition, in cases where the father was not interviewed (and where we did not have the requisite information from the mother), we substitute means and include a dummy variable to indicate that the father did not participate in the baseline survey.

BIVARIATE RESULTS

Overall, our results indicate that the majority of unmarried fathers—three-quarters—have some contact with their child around the time of the child’s third birthday, while about one quarter no longer see their child. Thus, for most children, being born to unmarried parents does not mean that their fathers will be absent from their young lives. Although there is some decline in involvement between Year 1 and Year 3, the change is not dramatic.

As shown in Table 2, around the child’s first birthday, about 82 percent of fathers have seen their child some time in the previous month, with an average of 24 days/month. About half of all fathers are living with their child (either legally married or cohabiting) which accounts for the high level of contact. With respect to spending time together, 53 percent of fathers have spent an hour or more with their child every day or nearly every day in the past month, 15 percent have done so a few times a week, 7 percent a few times a month, 4 percent once or twice a month, and 21 percent have not spent any time at all. Fathers engage in activities with their children about 3.5 days per

⁴ Missing data do not pose a serious problem in our sample. There are three variables with more than five percent of interviewed cases missing: partner violence before baby’s birth (8 percent), fathers’ incarceration history (12 percent), fathers’ earnings (10 percent), whether father has children by the baby’s mother (15 percent) or by another partner (15 percent).

week, ranging from 2.5 days for reading stories to 4.7 days for playing with toys. On average, fathers are providing some help to the mothers with child/household chores, with a mean across the four items of 2.82, which is close to “sometimes” (on a scale ranging from 1 “never” to 4 “often”). Between 26 and 38 percent of fathers “never” provide this kind of help for a given task, and 34 to 51 percent provide such help “often.”

By the child’s third birthday, fathers’ involvement with children has diminished slightly, but a sizeable fraction of fathers continue to have regular contact. Seventy-four percent of fathers have seen their child in the past month at the 3-year survey, with an average number of days of 16. Forty-one percent of fathers are living with their three-year-old child. About 45 percent of fathers report spending an hour or more a day with their child every day or nearly every day, 14 percent report spending time a few days a week, 9 percent report spending time a few times a month, 4 percent report spending time only once or twice, and 28 percent report spending no time. Fathers engage in activities with their three-year-old children about 3.1 days per week, ranging from 2.7 days for reading stories to 3.9 days for playing with toys. Fathers’ help has declined slightly by the child’s third birthday, with a mean of 2.65 across the four items. For each of the household/child-related tasks, 32 to 47 percent of fathers never help, while 29 to 44 percent help often, according to mothers. Fathers’ days of engaging in activities also drop from an average of 3.5 to 3.1 days in the past week.

Table 3 shows fathers’ involvement with their three-year-old children by relationship status with the child’s mother at birth. Not surprisingly, the mother-father relationship is highly correlated with the level of fathers’ involvement three years later, and there seems to be a somewhat linear association between the strength of parents’ relationship at the time of birth and the level of subsequent father involvement. Fathers who start off cohabiting are most involved later on,

followed by fathers who are romantically involved but living apart from the mother, and finally by fathers with no romantic attachment.

Of fathers who were cohabiting at birth, fully 87 percent have seen their child in the past month at three years, with a mean number of contact days of 22. Sixty one percent are still living with their child (either married or cohabiting). Three-fourths of the fathers who were cohabiting at birth spend an hour or more with their child at least a few times a week. Also, most of these fathers provide instrumental help to the mothers “sometimes” or “often,” and most are engaged in father-child activities, 3.4 days/week on average.

For fathers who were in a visiting relationship at the time of the birth, 72 percent have seen their child in the month before the three-year survey (a mean number of contact days is 14) and 28 percent are living with their child. Just over half of these men are spending an hour or more with their child at least a few times per week. Fathers’ help to mothers averages somewhere between “rarely” and “sometimes.”

Fathers’ involvement is notably lower among those fathers who were not romantically involved with the mother at the time of their baby’s birth. Less than half—43 percent—of such fathers have seen their child in the month prior to the three-year survey. The mean number of days of contact is only 6 overall, 13 days among fathers with any contact. Eight percent of this group of fathers is living with the mother, a small but notable fraction, given their non-romantic status at the birth. Only 14 percent of fathers who were not romantically involved with the mother at birth spend an hour or more with their three-year-old child every day or nearly every day. The majority of these fathers “never” help the mother with household or child-related tasks, although 10-14 percent help “often” on each given item.

REGRESSION RESULTS

Table 4 shows the regression results for our five outcomes. The findings are quite similar across models, so we discuss the effects of each of the independent variables overall and note any key differences across outcomes. As expected, parents' relationship status at the time of the baby's birth has a very strong and consistent association with subsequent father involvement. Relationship status at birth reflects the parents' commitment to each other and their capacity to form a household together, and this variable is correlated with (and likely endogenous to) other variables in the model such as economic capacities and relationship quality. Thus, by including relationship status in our model, we are implicitly looking at the direct effect of the other independent variables on father involvement, net of any indirect effect these variables may have via relationship status at birth. We find that compared to couples who were living together at the time of their baby's birth, fathers in all other relationship types are much less likely to see their child at 3 years. They also have lower levels of involvement, conditional on having any contact.

The quality of the parents' relationship at the time of the baby's birth—even net of relationship status—is also related to fathers' involvement at age three. Supportiveness in the mother-father relationship is positively related to the likelihood that a father will see his child (marginally significant) at three years; and among those fathers who do see their child, supportiveness is positively associated with frequency of contact and with provision of help to the mother. There is essentially no link between the frequency of conflict at the time of birth and subsequent fathers' involvement. The most consistent relationship quality predictor of father involvement is partner violence. When the mother reports that she was seriously hurt by the father before or during the pregnancy, the father is 53 percent less likely to be seeing the child at three years. Among those fathers who did see their child in the month prior to the three-year survey, fathers with a history of domestic violence saw their child three fewer days, on average, and they

were less likely to invest time, to help the mother, and to engage in activities with the child. We suspect that among couples with a history of physical abuse, the mother may try to prevent the father from seeing the child (and herself).

With respect to fathers' human capital, we find little association between fathers' education and involvement. This finding holds even when we drop the relationship status variables from the models (results not shown). Also, being unemployed at the time of birth (reflected by the coefficient for zero earnings) is not associated with subsequent involvement. However, fathers' earnings at the higher end of the spectrum are an important predictor of involvement. As compared to men with earnings of at least \$25,000 in the year prior to the child's birth, fathers who earn less than \$25,000 (but more than zero) are almost 40 percent less likely to see their three-year-old children. Interestingly, there is no difference between fathers earning \$1-9,999 and fathers earning \$10,000-24,999. Also, among fathers who have any contact at three years, those men earning \$10,000-24,999 see their child, on average, one day less than those earning more than \$25,000. These earnings effects underscore the importance of the breadwinner role for fathers' ongoing involvement in their child's life. The fact that earnings capacity affects whether and how much father-child contact occurs—but does not appear to affect the frequency of spending time, engagement in activities, or help of mother—suggests that earnings is most operative at the point of giving the father access to his child (either from his own vantage point or via the mother's gatekeeping).

Men who believe the father role is important (reported at birth) are more likely than other men to have some contact with their child; and, conditional on contact, they are more likely to invest time in their child. Fathering attitudes are most strongly associated with measures of engagement in activities with the child. Except for attitudes about fathering, we find little evidence

that cultural factors are associated with father involvement. Traditional attitudes about gender roles and church attendance are not related to fathers' involvement with their three-year-old children.

We found essentially no evidence that father's physical health, depressive symptoms, or substance problems at the time of the child's birth are related to involvement three years later. Self-reported poor/fair health has a marginally-significant negative association with spending time and engaging in activities. In contrast, we find a strong negative association between incarceration and fathers' involvement. Fathers who were in jail at the one-year survey are 73 percent less likely to have seen their child at the three-year survey (53 percent of these dads were also incarcerated at the three-year survey). Current incarceration is negatively associated with all of the four involvement measures, which is not surprising, since if the father is jail, he can only see the child if the mother and child visit him there. Yet, even fathers who are not in jail at the one-year survey but who have been previously incarcerated are 33 percent less likely to have seen their three-year-old child. And conditional on any contact, these men see their child fewer days, they help the mother less, and engage in fewer activities with the child (marginally significant). Clearly, being incarcerated is strongly associated with subsequent involvement with children and likely reflects both causal and selective factors.

Turning to the demographic characteristics, very young fathers (under age 20 at the time of birth) are less likely to be involved three years later. Also, fathers in the 20-24 age group who have any contact appear to see their child fewer days per month. We find no significant race/ethnic differences in the likelihood of seeing the child, once relationship status and other variables are taken into account. However, conditional on having some contact, Hispanic fathers see their child a greater number of days and are more likely to spend one or more hours per day with the child than black non-Hispanic fathers. White non-Hispanic fathers are (marginally significantly) less likely to help the mother with household/child tasks. Racial heterogamy is (marginally significantly) linked

to lower odds that the father sees the child in the past month; but among those who have some contact, racial heterogamy is positively linked to spending an hour or more per day. There are no significant differences by immigration status in any contact, but among fathers who see their child, immigrant fathers see them nearly two days more per month than non-immigrant fathers. At the same time, immigrant fathers engage less frequently in activities with the child. The most striking demographic factor related to fathers' involvement is fertility history. Conditional on having some contact, fathers who have other children with the focal child's mother see their child more often and are more likely to help the mother with household and child-related tasks than other fathers. By contrast, fathers who have children with another partner are 35 percent less likely to see their child. And conditional on any contact, they see their child one day less, on average, and they engage in fewer activities (both coefficients are marginally significant).

The child's gender does not appear to differentiate the level of fathers' involvement; there is only one marginally-significant association, with fathers of boys being more likely to help the mother with household and child-related tasks. In contrast, the child's temperament is important for two measures of fathering: when the mother reports the child is more 'difficult,' fathers provide less household help and are less likely to engage in activities with the child.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have examined the level of father involvement at one and three years after a nonmarital birth and the individual and dyadic factors that predict greater involvement. Overall, we find that the majority of unmarried fathers are not absent from the lives of their children three years later. Many fathers remain significantly involved, seeing and spending time with him or her, helping the mother with household and child-related tasks, and engaging in father-child activities on a regular basis. At the same time, a sizeable minority of unmarried fathers—one quarter—have little

or no contact with their child. These findings are consistent with two previous studies that have explored early fathering among unwed parents (Lerman and Sorenson 2000; McLanahan et al. 1997).

We find that the mother-father relationship at the time of the child's birth is a key predictor of fathers' involvement with their children. Co-residence at the time of birth is strongly linked to the fathers' staying connected with his child, consistent with other research highlighting the importance of union status for father involvement (e.g. Landale and Oropesa 2001). The *quality* of the parents' relationship also affects fathering (see Carlson and McLanahan 2005 for a more thorough treatment of this question). Although a vast literature points to the importance of relationship quality for paternal engagement among married parents (see Erel and Burman 1995 for a review), ours is one of the first studies to document this association among unmarried parents. Supportiveness in the couple relationship appears to foster fathers' involvement across several domains, and partner violence is strongly linked to diminished father involvement across all domains. Since parental violence is known to be harmful to children (McCloskey, Figueredo and Koss 1995) and since fathers who are violent toward mothers may also be violent toward their children, lower father involvement in these cases is likely to be better for children's wellbeing.

Taken together, our analyses may appear to suggest that fathers' earning capacity is less important for father involvement than prior work suggests. We believe our findings are in fact consistent with the literature for two reasons. First, in our paper, we are measuring many characteristics of fathers (attitudes, health and mental health, incarceration history, previous partner violence, children by other partners and relationship quality) that are likely to be correlated with human capital but that have not been measured directly in previous studies. Thus, in other studies, the human capital measures are probably partially proxies for these characteristics. When we drop these variables from our models and include only parents' relationship status and fathers'

demographic characteristics (in results not shown), the association between fathers' earnings (but much less so education) and involvement becomes notably stronger. Second, while fathers' breadwinner capabilities likely matters for their *contact* with their child, there is less reason to expect that financial resources should be important for the level of involvement s among those who already have contact. Our results show that earnings capacity is strongly associated with the frequency of father-child contact (ever seeing the child and the number of days), which is similar to prior work, but they also show that earnings capacity is not associated with levels and types of involvement, conditional on contact.

The incarceration effects shown here are striking and consistent with other research showing the deleterious consequences of incarceration for family bonds (Western, Lopoo and McLanahan 2004). It is worth noting that we observe strong and significant effects of incarceration even while controlling for other characteristics that are likely associated with spending time in prison (i.e. partner violence, substance problem, mental health and earnings). Thus, we believe our results suggest that men who go to prison are selective on certain additional characteristics that we do not observe that predict their lower paternal investment and/or that the actual experience of spending time in jail or prison diminishes fathers' attachment to their child(ren). We suspect that both are operative—and could be mutually reinforcing; the topic of incarceration and fathering merits further investigation.

With respect to fathers' demographic characteristics, our finding that teenage fathers are less likely to stay involved with their children over time is not surprising, as young men may be ill-equipped emotionally and financially to take on the responsibilities of fathering (Marsiglio 1987). Our finding of minimal race/ethnic differences in fathers' involvement also is consistent with some prior studies of nonresident fathers (Cooksey and Craig 1998; King, Harris and Heard 2004). The fact that fathers who have a child by another partner are less likely to have contact with the focal

child three years after a nonmarital birth goes along with research showing that fathers visit their nonresident children less frequently when they live with children by another partner (Manning and Smock 1999). Multi-partnered fertility (by one or both partners) is common among unmarried couples and likely has important consequences for parents' subsequent investments in children (Carlson and Furstenberg 2004).

Several limitations of our research should be noted. First, we measure father involvement early in the child's life and in the family life course. According to past research, the biggest drop-off in involvement for nonresident fathers (who are mostly divorced) occurs five years after the divorce (Seltzer 1991). Since many of the fathers in our sample are not yet 'divorced' from the mother, and since none of the mother-father relationships have been dissolved for five years, we would expect to find much higher rates of engagement among the fathers in our study. At the same time, past research has shown that fathers are typically more involved with older children than younger children (Cooksey and Craig 1998). Considering these factors conjointly, we expect there may be greater variation in fathers' involvement over time, and the antecedent factors may differentially predict which fathers become more involved versus which become less involved. Fathers with greater social, psychological and economic resources may become more involved as less advantaged fathers disengage, further reifying the inequality of resources that children receive over time. This notion is consonant with previous research distinguishing two major groups of fathers (Furstenberg 1988).

A second limitation is that fathers may be involved in other ways that we are not measuring here. For example, we do not measure other types of involvement that fathers may demonstrate from afar such as telephone calls or cards/letters. Further, our analyses do not examine fathers' economic contributions, which may complement or substitute for direct involvement.

Nepomnyaschy (2005) finds that 57 percent of nonresident fathers provide some type of economic

support to their children both one and three years after a nonmarital birth. This is an important topic that merits additional investigation.

A third limitation is that we use mothers' reports of fathers' involvement with children. We made this decision to avoid the problem of shared variance using the same reporter for the independent and dependent variables (Marsiglio et al. 2000), as we use many self-reported variables about fathers' characteristics and attitudes. Further, using mothers' reports allows us to describe the involvement of all fathers, even those not interviewed. The use of maternal reports is common in this literature (e.g. King and Heard 1999; Landale and Oropesa 2001; Seltzer 1991), although scholars increasingly point to the value of using fathers' own reports (Coley 2001; Marsiglio et al. 2000). In results not shown, we have re-estimated our models using fathers' reports of involvement for the sample of interviewed fathers, and the results are generally similar to our main results for the full sample. These findings support Seltzer and Brandreth's (1995) conclusion that there are mean differences in the levels of father involvement—but not in the predictors of such—when reported by mothers versus fathers.

A final limitation concerns inference of causality. We recognize that with survey data, we can only look at correlations among variables over time. Thus, we must be careful in interpreting our findings, as unobserved variables could be causing both the independent variables and the fathering outcomes. The fact that we have detailed measures of many variables typically unobserved in previous studies—including fathers' mental health and behavior (depression, substance use and incarceration), fathers' attitudes (toward fatherhood and gender roles), and couple relationship quality question—makes this problem less serious, but we cannot rule out the possibility that our independent variables are serving as proxies for something else as well.

We conclude that most unmarried fathers are not absent from their child's life about three years following a nonmarital birth. This is encouraging, given the important role for fathers in the

lives of their children. At the same time, the children in our study are only toddlers, and even by this early stage of children's development, fully one quarter of fathers are no longer in regular contact. Fathers who have lost touch are unlikely to re-engage later on, and involvement by those who remain connected will only diminish over time as more fathers break up from the baby's mother and go on to have additional children with new partners. Our findings about the mother-father relationship at the time of the baby's birth suggest that the context in which the birth occurs is both an indicator of and a predictor for future family dynamics: couples' living together at the time of the birth signals their commitment to raising their child together, and likewise, the experience of living with the child presumably increases fathers' understanding of and attachment to the child. Therefore, our results—which concern paternal involvement *after* a birth—also point to the importance of strengthening couples' relationships and fertility intentions *before* a baby's birth, such that children are born to parents who are both prepared for and committed to raising their child together.

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Table 1. Sample Description: Unmarried Fathers at Baby's Birth

	Relationship Status at Time of Birth			
	All Unmarried	Cohabiting	Visiting	Non-romantic
<u>Parents' Relationship Quality at Time of Birth</u>				
Supportiveness (mean, range=1-3)	2.63	2.68	2.60	2.40
Conflict (mean, range=1-3)	1.45	1.41	1.50	1.55
Violence	5.7	5.2	5.7	7.3
<u>Father's Economic Characteristics</u>				
Education				
Less than high school	37.5	38.5	36.9	35.8
High school	38.4	35.1	43.0	38.7
Some college or more	24.1	26.4	20.2	25.5
Earnings				
None	5.5	3.9	8.2	5.2
\$1-\$9,999	32.9	28.0	40.9	34.5
\$10,000-\$24,999	40.2	43.1	36.2	35.1
\$25,000 or higher	21.5	24.9	14.7	25.3
<u>Father's Cultural/Attitudinal Characteristics</u>				
Pro-fathering attitudes (mean, range=1-4)	3.70	3.75	3.66	3.51
Traditional gender attitudes (mean, range=1-4)	2.35	2.35	2.35	2.30
Church attendance (mean, range=1-5)	2.65	2.61	2.70	2.79
<u>Father's Health and Behavior Problems</u>				
Health fair or poor	7.9	7.9	6.7	11.9
Depression scale (mean, range=0-7)	1.22	1.15	1.25	1.55
Substance problem	7.2	6.6	7.1	11.0
Incarceration history				
Never (as of 1-year survey)	66.6	72.3	61.3	59.7
In jail at 1-year survey	6.3	3.4	8.9	10.0
In jail previously	27.2	24.3	29.8	30.4
<u>Father's Demographic Characteristics</u>				
Age at baby's birth				
Under age 20	11.2	8.3	14.0	13.9
Age 20-24	37.0	37.8	37.0	34.3
Age 25-29	25.7	24.6	25.8	28.9
Age 30 and older	26.1	29.3	23.2	22.9
Race/ethnicity				
White non-Hispanic	11.7	12.9	5.8	12.0
Black non-Hispanic	58.5	47.6	73.4	58.8
Hispanic	27.2	33.8	18.8	26.0
Other non-Hispanic	2.5	2.7	2.0	3.3
Differs from baby's mother	13.7	13.3	12.9	16.6

(table continued next page)

Table 1 (continued). Sample Description: Unmarried Fathers at Baby's Birth

	Relationship Status at Time of Birth			
	All Unmarried	Cohabiting	Visiting	Non-romantic
<u>Father's Demographic Characteristics (cont.)</u>				
Immigrant (born outside U.S.)	13.3	17.5	7.2	10.0
Live with both parents age 15	39.1	42.2	35.2	33.7
Previous child(ren) w/ mother	33.3	37.7	28.0	25.5
Previous child(ren) other partner	34.9	32.8	38.8	34.0
<u>Child Characteristics</u>				
Baby is a boy	52.9	52.0	53.8	53.4
EASI 'difficult' temperament (mean, range=1-5)	2.89	2.86	2.89	2.95
Number of cases (<i>n</i>)	3,009	1,449	1,056	504

Note: All figures are percentages unless otherwise indicated.

**Table 2. Fathers' Involvement about One Year and Three Years
after a Nonmarital Birth (Mothers' Reports)**

	Year 1	Year 3
Saw child in past month	81.8	74.3
Number of days saw child past month		
0	18.2	26.5
1-9	13.7	16.2
10-19	5.2	6.0
20-29	6.4	4.8
30	5.9	6.0
Live together	50.6	40.6
Mean # of days (live with=30)	19.62	16.42
Mean of those with any	23.97	22.33
Father spends 1+ hours/day in past month		
Not at all	20.8	27.8
Once or twice	4.1	4.4
Few times/month	6.6	8.5
Few times/week	15.2	13.8
Every day or nearly every day	53.3	45.4
Father's engagement in activities with child (range=0-7 days)		
Mean across 5 items (shown below)	3.54	3.11
Play games like peek-a-boo (imaginary games at 3 yrs)	4.41	3.32
Sing songs or nursery rhymes	3.19	2.88
Read stories	2.47	2.72
Tell stories	2.56	2.80
Play inside with toys	4.68	3.85
Father's help of mothers		
Mean across 4 items (shown below)	2.82	2.65
Looks after child		
Never	26.3	31.9
Rarely	7.3	9.3
Sometimes	15.4	15.3
Often	51.0	43.5
Runs errands for mother		
Never	30.5	40.4
Rarely	6.6	7.8
Sometimes	18.7	16.5
Often	44.2	35.4
Fixes things around mother's home		
Never	38.1	46.6
Rarely	6.6	6.7
Sometimes	19.6	15.8
Often	35.7	30.9
Takes child places s/he needs to go		
Never	35.5	42.5
Rarely	9.7	10.2
Sometimes	20.6	18.2
Often	34.2	29.1
Number of cases (<i>n</i>)	3,009	3,009

Table 3. Fathers' Involvement with Their Three-Year-Old Children (Mothers' reports)

	Relationship Status at Time of Birth		
	Cohabiting	Visiting	Non-romantic
Saw child in past month	86.9	71.9	43.0
Number of days saw child past month			
0	13.4	29.5	57.8
1-9	11.3	19.8	22.8
10-19	4.9	7.6	6.1
20-29	3.7	7.8	1.6
30	6.0	7.0	3.8
Live together	60.7	28.4	7.9
Mean # of days (live=30)	21.92	14.04	5.51
Mean of those with any	25.31	19.91	13.05
Father spends 1+ hours/day in past month			
Not at all	13.8	32.2	61.3
Once or twice	3.6	5.5	4.9
Few times/month	6.5	9.3	12.9
Few times/week	14.6	16.0	6.7
Every day or nearly every day	61.6	37.1	14.2
Father's engagement in activities with child (range=0-7 days)			
Mean across 5 items (shown below)	3.38	2.87	2.12
Play games like peek-a-boo (imaginary games at 3 yrs)	4.94	4.06	2.67
Sing songs or nursery rhymes	3.51	3.01	1.90
Read stories	2.68	2.38	1.59
Tell stories	2.75	2.51	1.65
Play inside with toys	5.22	4.30	2.90
Father's help of mothers			
Mean across 4 items (shown below)	2.95	2.50	1.84
Looks after child			
Never	17.3	35.2	67.8
Rarely	8.5	11.0	8.0
Sometimes	17.0	15.4	10.1
Often	57.2	38.5	14.2
Runs errands for mother			
Never	24.7	45.5	75.4
Rarely	8.3	7.8	6.0
Sometimes	19.4	16.3	8.4
Often	47.6	30.4	10.3
Fixes things around mother's home			
Never	29.8	53.1	82.1
Rarely	7.3	7.5	2.9
Sometimes	21.5	13.4	4.3
Often	41.3	25.9	10.7
Takes child places needs to go			
Never	29.2	45.6	75.2
Rarely	12.0	9.4	6.8
Sometimes	22.5	17.3	7.6
Often	36.3	27.8	10.5
Number of cases (<i>n</i>)	1,449	1,056	504

Table 4. Regression Results: Father Involvement about Three Years after Nonmarital Birth

	Logit Model: Saw Child Past Month	OLS Models among Fathers Who Saw Their Child			
		# Days in Past Month	# Days Spend 1+ Hours	Help with HH/Child Tasks	Engagement in Activities
<u>Parents' Relationship Status at Birth (ref=cohabiting)</u>					
Visiting	.59 **	-3.18 **	-.26 **	-.22 **	-.30 **
Friends	.39 **	-9.38 **	-.85 **	-.66 **	-.95 **
No relationship	.22 **	-6.96 **	-.34 *	-.59 **	-.79 **
<u>Parents' Relationship Quality at Time of Birth</u>					
Supportiveness	1.31 +	1.53 *	.09	.15 *	.08
Conflict	.87	.19	.07	-.03	-.02
Violence	.47 **	-3.18 **	-.25 *	-.35 **	-.74 **
<u>Father's Economic Characteristics</u>					
Education (ref=some college or more)					
Less than high school	1.00	-.11	.02	.05	-.09
High school	.89	-.41	-.05	-.01	-.11
Earnings (ref=\$25,000+)					
None	.70	.51	.19	-.05	.18
\$1-\$9,999	.61 *	-.86	.06	-.05	-.10
\$10,000-\$24,999	.63 *	-1.24 +	.03	-.09	-.17
<u>Father's Cultural/Attitudinal Characteristics</u>					
Pro-fathering attitudes	1.28 *	.42	.10 +	-.01	.34 **
Traditional gender attitudes	1.07	.20	.00	-.01	-.04
Church attendance	.94	.12	.02	.02	.03
<u>Father's Health and Behavior Problems</u>					
Health fair or poor	1.08	-.60	-.15 +	-.06	-.37 +
Depression scale	.99	.00	-.02	-.02	-.03
Substance problem	.73	-.14	-.12	-.04	-.19
Incarceration history (ref=never as of 1-year survey)					
In jail at 1-year survey	.27 **	-2.86 *	-.43 **	-.41 **	-1.07 **
In jail previously	.67 **	-1.20 *	-.09 +	-.14 **	-.22 +
<u>Father's Demographic Characteristics</u>					
Age at baby's birth (ref=30+)					
Under age 20	.67 *	-2.76 **	-.18 +	-.25 **	-.08
Age 20-24	.99	-1.26 *	-.07	-.10 +	.14
Age 25-29	.92	-.59	.01	-.05	.03

(table continued next page)

Table 4 (continued). Regression Results: Father Involvement about Three Years after Nonmarital Birth

	Logit Model: Saw Child Past Month	OLS Models among Fathers Who Saw Their Child			
		# Days in Past Month	# Days Spend 1+ Hours	Help with HH/Child Tasks	Engagement in Activities
<u>Father's Demographic Characteristics (cont.)</u>					
Race/ethnicity (ref=Black non-Hispanic)					
White non-Hispanic	.93	.63	.02	-.12 +	.14
Hispanic	.97	2.25 **	.14 *	.03	.16
Other non-Hispanic	1.73	1.62	.00	.08	.42
Differs from baby's mother	.76 +	.65	.15 *	.08	.10
Born outside U.S.	.74	1.71 *	.11	.01	-.40 *
Both parents age 15	1.19	-.08	.02	-.02	.05
Previous child(ren) w/ mother	1.07	1.60 **	.06	.10 *	-.08
Previous child(ren) other partner	.65 **	-1.01 +	-.08	-.06	-.22 +
<u>Child Characteristics</u>					
Baby is a boy	1.10	.29	.03	.08 +	-.04
EASI 'difficult' temperament	.95	-.02	-.01	-.05 **	-.15 **
(Pseudo) R-squared	.224	.199	.134	.138	.101
Number of cases (<i>n</i>)	2,938	2,113	2,072	2,183	1,995