

Fathers' Risk Factors in Fragile Families: Implications for "Healthy" Relationships and Father Involvement

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We use longitudinal survey and qualitative information from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine how risk factors such as physical abuse, problematic substance use, and incarceration among unmarried fathers in the study are related to fathers' early involvement with their children. The survey results indicate that nearly half of fathers have at least one risk factor and that each risk is negatively associated with paternal involvement. The results also show that fathers with risk factors are less likely to have romantic relationships with mothers and that relationships between parents mediate associations between risk factors and fathers' involvement. Qualitative interviews with a sub-sample of mothers and fathers in the study illustrate the meaning of risks for parents and the processes through which early family outcomes occur. Parents' accounts suggest that mothers often select out of relationships they deem "unhealthy" and monitor fathers' access to children, particularly in cases of physical abuse. While some fathers with risks withdraw from children, others attempt to maintain their involvement independently or as part of a strategy with the mother to address these risks with varying success. We suggest that policies to promote marriage and responsible fatherhood be mindful that some fathers they are targeting have characteristics that may not be conducive to increased involvement while other fathers face personal and institutional barriers to involvement. Keywords: father involvement, fragile families, incarceration, domestic violence, marriage promotion.

The President is determined to make committed, responsible fatherhood a national priority . . . [T]he presence of two committed, involved parents contributes directly to better school performance, reduced substance abuse, less crime and delinquency, fewer emotional and other behavioral problems, less risk of abuse or neglect, and lower risk of teen suicide. The research is clear: Fathers factor significantly in the lives of their children. There is simply no substitute for the love, involvement, and commitment of a responsible father (Executive Office of the President 2001).

Drawing on social science research that suggests children from single parent families face disadvantages as adults, policymakers have presented paternal absence as a public problem, or an issue with public status and for which action is required (Gusfield 1984). In light of this concern, recent policies and programs have been aimed at encouraging the involvement of fathers with their biological children. "Responsible fatherhood" initiatives targeted primarily at low-income, unmarried fathers have received bi-partisan support in Congress and from

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two consecutive administrations (Harden 2002).¹ Although more controversial, policymakers have proposed an even larger sum of money be provided for activities to encourage or preserve fathers' co-residence with their children through marriage. Critics have argued that initiatives to promote marriage would push women into unhealthy or abusive marriages and that increased contact with nonresidential fathers required to pay child support could also trigger violence (Allard et al. 1997; Raphael and Tolman 1997). In response, supporters of these plans have said that they hope to improve children's well-being by encouraging only *healthy* marriages and family relationships—language that is now reflected in legislation to reauthorize welfare.

Despite some agreement in the policy community that women should not be coerced to marry or remain in “unhealthy” relationships with the fathers of their children, ideas about what constitutes unhealthy relationships have not been fully articulated. Nor do we understand how certain risk factors among unmarried fathers that negatively affect relationships between parents may also be related to paternal absence and disengagement. This paper uses survey and qualitative information from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine how risk factors such as physical abuse, problematic substance use, and incarceration among unmarried fathers in the study are associated with fathers' early involvement with their children. We also examine how risks are related to parents' relationship status and how relationships between parents mediate father involvement. Following a mixed method approach, quantitative data are used to investigate the incidence of these risks and their relationship to early outcomes for families within three years of having a nonmarital birth, while qualitative data help us understand the meaning of these risks for unmarried parents and the processes through which these early outcomes unfold. In this analysis physical abuse, substance use, and incarceration are examined as potential risk factors not because they are expected to have the same meaning and consequences for families—in fact these risks are likely to differ from each other—but because they are salient in academic and policy discussions of marriage and father involvement.²

Unmarried Parents, Father Involvement, and Parental Relationships

Although one out of three children is born outside of marriage, unmarried fathers have often been missing from national surveys and representative data on their relationships with children has been limited (Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998). Recent research suggests that unmarried fathers are more involved with their children than commonly assumed; however, a notable minority fit the “absent father” image. For example, drawing on parents' aggregate reports in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Lerman and Sorensen (2000) find that about 67 percent of fathers and 54 percent of mothers said the father saw at least one of their nonmarital children weekly or lived with them. At the same time, about 25 percent of fathers and 39 percent of mothers reported that the father rarely or never visited a nonmarital child. Synthesizing information from several surveys, Argys and colleagues (forthcoming) find that most fathers who had a child outside of marriage were reported to

1. The Department of Health and Human Services' list of fatherhood initiatives includes efforts to involve fathers in children's learning, to help children maintain relationships with their incarcerated fathers, to involve fathers in Early Head Start, to keep children with their biological parents, to promote access and visitation for noncustodial parents, to promote abstinence education, to promote marriage, and to reduce family violence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2006).

2. As the opening quote indicates, policymakers also express concern about the effect of these risk factors on children when fathers are absent from their lives.

be in contact with their children between birth and age five despite significant variation in reports across surveys. Qualitative evidence also suggests that a large share of unmarried fathers see their children often and provide direct and in-kind support to them, while others have disengaged from their children's lives (e.g., Johnson, Levine, and Doolittle 1999; Pate 2005; Roy 1999; Waller 2002).

Baseline data from the Fragile Families survey, an important new source of information about nonmarital urban births in the United States, also indicate a high level of engagement among fathers around the time of their child's birth. For example, parents report that most fathers provided some economic support or in-kind assistance to the mother during the pregnancy, came to the hospital at the time of the birth, and planned to sign the birth certificate and give the child their surname. The overwhelming majority of mothers and fathers also reported a desire for paternal involvement in the future (McLanahan et al. 2003).

Despite high levels of engagement at the time of the birth, fathers' involvement may wane over time (Sorensen, Mincy, and Halpern 2000). Studies of divorced fathers indicate that men often disengage from their children when their romantic relationship with the mother ends (e.g., Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). Similarly, the status and quality of unmarried parents' relationships seem to be important predictors of early paternal involvement (Carlson and McLanahan 2004; Johnson 2001). When examining how risk factors shape fathers' involvement with children, this research suggests it may also be important to consider how these risks affect parents' relationships.

The Influence of Risk Factors

Of particular relevance to our study is recent research suggesting that unmarried and nonresident fathers are more likely to engage in a range of problem behaviors than are their married and/or resident counterparts. Using data from a subset of cities in the baseline wave of the Fragile Families study, Wilson and Brooks-Gunn (2001) found that unmarried fathers, relative to married fathers, were more likely to have used illicit drugs, drunk, smoked, and physically abused mothers. Among unmarried fathers, those in cohabiting relationships tended to exhibit fewer of these behaviors. Other research, based on a longitudinal sample in New Zealand, similarly found nonresident fathers exhibited higher rates of drug and alcohol problems, anger and violence, and abuse against women than fathers living with their children, likely due to selection of fathers with problems out of cohabitation and marriage (Jaffee et al. 2001). Research further suggests that the benefits to children of living in two-biological parent families may only accrue in the absence of father's problem behavior. For example, greater involvement of resident biological fathers, who themselves exhibit high anti-social behavior, has been found to be associated with greater problem behavior among children (Jaffee et al. 2003).

There are various pathways through which risks could shape fathers' involvement with their children. In particular, risk factors may lead to lower father involvement directly or indirectly, by weakening relationships with the mother. Mothers may further mediate fathers' involvement with children after their romantic relationship with the father ends (Fagan and Barnett 2003). The remainder of this section reviews research examining associations between fathers' individual risk factors, relationships with mothers, and involvement with children.

Physical Abuse. Low income women, and particularly those receiving welfare, are more likely to experience abuse within their relationships with men than are other women. Studies have found levels of recent or current physical abuse among welfare recipients ranging from 8 to 33 percent, and of lifetime adult abuse ranging from 34 to 65 percent (Raphael and Tolman 1997; Tolman and Raphael 2000). Qualitative evidence suggests that abuse is a common

reason that low-income women are reluctant to marry their children's father (Edin 2000; Waller 2002). Recent mixed-methods research also shows that low-income women who have been physically or sexually abused during adulthood are considerably less likely to be in married or stable cohabiting relationships (Cherlin et al. 2004). Women's decisions to break-off relationships with abusive fathers may stem from fear for personal safety as well as a desire to protect their children from emotional and physical danger (Short et al. 2000). Therefore, we expect that reports of physical abuse by fathers will be strongly associated with the status of parents' relationships within three years of their child's birth.

Whereas many studies have noted the co-occurrence of spousal and child abuse (e.g., Appel and Holden 1998; Edelson 1999), researchers have only recently begun to examine associations between spousal abuse and fathers' parenting and relationships with children (Sullivan et al. 2000). Drawing primarily on clinical experiences, Bancroft and Silverman (2002) report that men who are abusive toward women also tend toward controlling, authoritarian, and inconsistent parenting. Moreover, these men are manipulative of their children in ways that undermine the mother's parenting. In addition to having weakened relationships with mothers, we expect that fathers who have been physically abusive to mothers will have more tenuous relationships with children three years after their birth.

Substance Use. Problems associated with alcohol or drug use might similarly present obstacles to the stability of couples' relationships and father involvement. Although there is evidence that shared substance use is one form of homophily (Yamaguchi and Kandel 1997), problematic drug and alcohol use has been found to be predictive of divorce (Amato and Rogers 1997) and is a common reason cited, especially by women, for ending relationships (Amato and Prevetti 2003). Problematic substance use is thus treated here as an additional risk factor associated with couples' relationship status.

In addition to its association with child maltreatment, substance abuse has been linked to a range of indicators of poor parenting, including lower responsiveness to infants, impulsivity, social isolation, and spending less time with children (Hamer 2001; Magura and Laudet 1996; McMahan and Rounsaville 2002). Moreover, research suggests that parental substance use is associated with diminished outcomes for children (Johnson and Leff 1999). We expect that problematic substance use will also be negatively associated with father involvement.

Incarceration. Imprisonment within the lives of poor and minority males is so prevalent that it is almost an expected and modal stage in their early lives. Pettit and Western (2004), for example, report that black, male, high school dropouts born in the late 1960s have a 59 percent chance of going to prison by their late twenties compared to just 11 percent of their white counterparts. In addition to diminished earnings and employment after release (Western, Kling, and Weiman 2001), ex-prisoners have been found to be less likely to marry or cohabit with their children's mothers (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Western, Lopoo, and McLanahan 2004; Western and McLanahan 2000). Past or recent incarceration is therefore expected to be negatively related to couples' relationship status.

Incarceration might motivate fathers to feel a stronger commitment to their families (Edin, Nelson, and Paranal 2004), but the prison experience itself may make it difficult for men to act on this commitment (Nurse 2002). While in prison, restrictions on interactions between inmates and their children are severe and the experience of visitation is often a psychologically debilitating experience for both parties. Many inmates forego visits altogether out of concern for their children's well-being (Hairston 1998). Although research on this issue is limited, the physical and emotional separation of inmates from the mother and child during imprisonment may result in diminished paternal involvement both prior to and following release. Imprisonment is also treated here as a risk factor for infrequent contact and daily activities with children.

Data and Sample

Survey Data

This analysis draws on survey and qualitative interviews with parents who participated in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. The Fragile Families study began in 1998 and follows a new birth cohort of children in 20 U.S. cities to learn more about the circumstances and experiences of unmarried parents and their children in the early years of their child's life. The total sample includes 4,898 births, 3,712 of which occurred to unmarried parents and 1,186 occurred to a comparison sample of married parents. The weighted sample data are representative of nonmarital births to parents residing in cities with populations over 200,000.³

New mothers were initially interviewed in person at the hospital, and the fathers of their children were interviewed either at the hospital or someplace else as soon as possible after the birth. Mothers and fathers were also surveyed when their child was one and three years old, and an additional survey is being conducted at age five. In families that had a nonmarital birth, the response rate at baseline was about 87 percent for mothers and 75 percent for eligible fathers. Fathers were not eligible to participate in the study if the mother of their child was not interviewed at baseline. By year three, 88 percent of mothers in the baseline survey and 68 percent of fathers whose partners were in the baseline interview continued to participate in the study.

The unit of analysis in this study is the focal child, and measures are based on reports from both mothers and fathers. However, some cases in this analysis include reports only from mothers, because they were more likely to participate and less likely to drop out of the study than fathers.⁴ Inclusion of these cases is justified on the following grounds. Unmarried fathers who participated in the survey were more likely to be in relationships with their child's mother, producing a somewhat select sample of fathers. Similarly, fathers participating at baseline but dropping out by year three were less likely to be in relationships with the mother and were more likely to have been recently incarcerated. Retaining information about these families through the use of mothers' reports likely yields a more accurate representation of the diversity of fathers' relationships with mothers, risk factors, and involvement. Thus, despite its limitations, we can use the Fragile Families data to get a more comprehensive portrait of unmarried fathers than was available from previous national surveys.

Qualitative Data and Mixed Methods Approach

The analysis also includes information from qualitative interviews we conducted with a sub-sample of Fragile Family participants from the Oakland, California site.⁵ The qualitative study was designed to be nested within the broader survey to facilitate mixed method analyses (Caracelli and Greene 1997; Creswell 2003). Qualitative interviews were conducted between the baseline and 12–18 month survey, and between the 3 year and 5 year surveys. To select parents for qualitative study, the Oakland survey sample was stratified by the three largest race or ethnic groups (i.e., non-Hispanic, black, Hispanic of Mexican descent, and non-Hispanic white). A random sample of births to 62 unmarried and married parents was drawn within race or ethnic groups.⁶ We examine the responses of 41 parents (24 families) who had a nonmarital birth. The sample of unmarried parents had a response rate of about 86 percent for mothers and 88 percent for fathers at the first interview.

3. See Reichman et al. (2001) for more information about the study's methodology.

4. The study also has a small share of "father only" cases that resulted from the attrition of the mother, but they are not included in this analysis.

5. Compared to the full sample, the Oakland sample has a larger representation of Hispanic parents and is of slightly lower socioeconomic status. Oakland fathers do not differ appreciably with respect to risk factors, relationship status with mothers, or fathering outcomes.

6. White parents were over-sampled in the qualitative study to allow for group comparisons.

Waller conducted the qualitative interviews in order to maintain data quality, to ensure a full exploration of themes in interviews as they emerged in the process of data collection, and to facilitate the interpretation of data.⁷ Interviews were done with mothers and fathers separately.⁸ The majority of the interviews took place in parents' homes and lasted about 90 minutes at each wave. The interview was conducted as a guided conversation following a "tree and branch" design that focused on a similar set of topics across interviews while encouraging parents to elaborate on their responses and introduce new issues for discussion (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Weiss 1994). Parents reported a higher incidence of each of the three risk factors in the qualitative interviews than they did in the survey, suggesting this format may also have allowed parents to feel more comfortable discussing sensitive issues. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. A qualitative data analysis program (ALIAS.ti) was used to code themes within and across interviews, to analyze coded interview excerpts through memos, and to use visual displays for examining patterns in the data (Miles and Huberman 1994; Weiss 1994). Codes for this analysis were developed inductively, on the basis of observations that emerged from the interviews (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

A mixed method analysis is used to help us gain a more complete understanding of risk factors in fragile families and to increase the breadth and depth of our investigation (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham 1989). Following a pragmatic approach, we draw on the method that "works" best for different purposes (Patton 2002). In particular, the quantitative data are used to examine the incidence of risks and associations between variables in a representative sample of nonmarital births, while the qualitative data are primarily used to investigate the meaning of risk factors in families headed by unmarried parents and the processes, or mechanisms, linking risk factors to early family outcomes (Lin 1998). In addition to illustrating how and why parents respond to these risk factors, information from the qualitative interviews further allowed us to refine general hypotheses derived from the literature for this sample, to think about how to measure risk factors, and to interpret the quantitative results. The qualitative and quantitative data were integrated in the analysis and interpretation using an iterative process (Creswell 2003; Seidel 1998).

Survey Measures

All dependent variables are measured at the second follow-up survey, approximately three years after the birth. Measures of risk factors are derived from the baseline survey (at birth) and the first follow-up (at 12–18 months). We use mothers' reports of outcomes because they provide a more comprehensive picture of father involvement at three years, including situations in which the parents were no longer in a relationship or the father had dropped out of the sample. We use measures of risks from both waves to more fully capture experiences and behavior occurring prior to the outcomes.⁹ The decision to include information from more than one measure of each risk (see below) was informed by our qualitative interviews, which suggested parents were likely to have underreported or not responded to these sensitive questions. We also include reports from both mothers and fathers when available. A father was considered to have a risk if either parent reported this problem. When information about a risk factor was asked of only the mother or father (i.e., only mothers were asked about abuse and only fathers were asked about recent substance use) or missing, we rely on the report of one parent. Mean substitution was employed in cases of missing data on the risk factor variables, with dummy variables used to represent missing cases. We briefly review these measures and refer the reader to the Appendix for a more detailed description.

7. A bilingual male research assistant conducted two interviews with unmarried fathers in Spanish.

8. Comparable to the survey, we completed interviews with both parents in about 7 out of 10 families while interviewing only the mother in about 3 out of 10 cases.

9. In parents' combined reports of risk factors from the baseline and the first follow-up survey, we see a higher incidence of risk factors among fathers than is reported at each wave (results available upon request).

Table 1 • Bivariate Relationships between Father's Risk Factors, Relationship Status, Contact, and Daily Activities with Child

Variable	Dependent Variable by Presence of Each Risk Factor						
	Full Sample	Physical Abuse ^b	Drug Use ^c	Alcohol Use ^c	Substances Interfere ^d	Recent Incarceration ^d	Past Incarceration ^d
Prevalence of risk factors ^a		.111	.076	.082	.176	.117	.302
Relationship status at three years ^e							
Married	.174	.113	.103	.152	.082	.074	.134
Cohabiting	.296	.124	.329	.407	.199	.108	.325
Other romantic relationship	.028	.015	.015	.007	.041	.059	.028
No romantic relationship	.502	.748	.553	.433	.678	.759	.512
Contact with child in past month ^f	.449	.347	.342	.444	.324	.153	.426
Daily activities scale ^g	3.584	3.079	3.779	3.472	3.182	3.097	3.603
Mother distrusts father to caretake ^h	1.471	1.876	1.500	1.445	1.916	1.774	1.570

^aDescriptive statistics are weighted to reflect probabilities of sampling and retention at the 12–18 month follow-up survey.

^bBased on mothers' reports.

^cBased on fathers' reports.

^dBased on mothers' and fathers' reports.

^eUnweighted $N = 2,123$ families in the nationally-representative sample.

^fAmong nonresidential fathers.

^gAmong residential and nonresidential fathers with some contact in past month. Scale ranges from 0 to 7.

^hResponses range from 1 for "very much" to 3 for "not at all" trusting the father to take care of the child.

Relationship Status. The first outcome examined is parents' relationship status three years after their child's birth, because the literature and parents' qualitative accounts (discussed in the next section) suggest their romantic relationships mediate paternal involvement with children. At the time of the birth, 50.8 percent of parents were living together, 31.8 percent were in relationships but living apart, and 17.3 percent were no longer romantically involved. Three years after the child's birth, 17.4 percent of couples were married and another 29.6 percent were cohabiting. More than half of couples (50.2 percent) were broken up and only 2.8 percent were in a non-residential romantic relationship three years after the child's birth (see Table 1). Data in Table 1 strongly suggests that relationship status is associated with risk factors. For example, 74.8 percent of parents for whom the mother reports having ever been physically abused by the father fall into the "no romantic relationship" category compared to 50.2 percent overall.

Father Involvement. The analysis considers two indicators of father involvement. The first measures mothers' reports of whether or not the father has had contact with the child more than once in the last 30 days. Of nonresidential fathers, 44.9 percent were reported to have had such contact.¹⁰ Among fathers with recent contact (including residential fathers), the survey

10. Qualitative interviews suggest that this measure likely understates contact between fathers and their children. Depending on when the interview was conducted, some fathers with regular contact might be temporarily out of contact for one reason or another. This measure may also not capture contacts of longer but infrequent durations (Argys et al. forthcoming).

also asks mothers how many days out of a typical week the father participates in a variety of activities with the child (0 to 7 for each item). These 13 activities represent a range of ways fathers could be directly engaged with and accessible to their children, such as playing with them, showing affection, and providing direct care (see Appendix).¹¹ A daily activities scale is created by averaging the unstandardized values of these items, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91. The scale of daily activities averages 3.58. For ease of interpretation, this would correspond to a father having engaged in each of the activities on the scale an average of 3.6 days a week. More frequent engagement in fewer activities would also yield such an average.

Physical Abuse. Mothers are coded as having experienced physical abuse if they reported ever being cut, bruised, or seriously hurt in a fight with the father at the 12–18 month follow-up survey or being hit or slapped by the father in an argument at baseline. Just over 1 in 10 women (11.1 percent) reported experiencing such violence.¹² Although this measure captures one type of domestic violence, it is possible that indicators of emotional and sexual abuse (in addition to physical abuse) would show a greater incidence of domestic violence among unmarried mothers in this study.

Drug and Alcohol Use. Potentially problematic drug and alcohol use is measured in two ways. The first strategy measures alcohol use and drug use separately, based on fathers' reports of recent usage. Alcohol and drug use are considered problematic if fathers reported drinking or using drugs frequently or if they used a "hard" drug at least once. Based on these criteria, 7.6 percent of fathers are characterized as at risk due to drug use and another 8.2 percent for alcohol use. A second approach utilizes reports of both mothers and fathers of whether fathers' drug or alcohol use had interfered with various domains of daily life, including work, family, or personal relationships (17.6 percent of fathers). This measure reflects medical and psychological definitions of substance abuse, which emphasize the negative social, occupational, and health consequences of problematic substance use.

Incarceration. We include two measures of incarceration based on mothers' and fathers' reports. Use of both parents' reports follows the measurement strategy of Western, Lopoo, and McLanahan (2004) and may help to offset the underreporting and under-sampling of behavior considered to be socially undesirable. *Recent* incarceration identifies fathers who have been incarcerated since the birth (11.7 percent of fathers). *Past* incarceration captures fathers who had spent time in an adult correctional facility prior to the birth of the child (30.2 percent of fathers).

When we examine an overall count of fathers' risk factors, we find that nearly half of fathers (48.9 percent) in this study were reported to have at least one form of risk. Approximately 31.5 percent of fathers in the study have a single risk factor, 13.3 percent have two risks, and 4.2 percent have all three risks.¹³ Risk factors observed to co-occur most frequently among fathers with multiple risks are incarceration with substance use interference and physical abuse with substance use interference and past incarceration.

11. Lamb and colleagues (1987) use the terms engagement, accessibility, and responsibility to identify three primary types of paternal involvement. According to this framework, engagement involves direct interactions with children. Argys et al. (forthcoming) suggest that measuring daily activities is one approach to tapping into the quality or nature of the contact between fathers and their children.

12. To most accurately depict the prevalence of risk factors, descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 are based on the 16 cities in the national sample and weighted using the 12-month weights. Following Carlson, McLanahan, and England (2004), the regression models are based on all 20 cities and are unweighted. Results from weighted regressions (not shown) are consistent with those reported with respect to both the magnitude and statistical significance of associations.

13. In exploratory analyses (available upon request) we examined associations between the number of risk factors present and each outcome, controlling for each of the individual factors. This variable was not found to be statistically significant for any outcome and thus is not included in the analyses.

Control Variables. We control for demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the sample at baseline, including mothers' age, fathers' race or ethnicity, fathers' education, and both parents' employment. Although this sample was not selected to be low-income, unmarried parents tend to be a relatively disadvantaged group. About 36 percent of fathers have not received a high school degree, 36 percent have a high school degree or GED, and another 27 percent have education or training beyond high school. Mothers reported that about 28 percent of fathers were unemployed the week before the birth and 30 percent of mothers did not work the year prior to the birth. Parents are young adults—the mean age for mothers is about 24. About 28 percent of fathers are Hispanic, 57 percent are non-Hispanic black, 11 percent are non-Hispanic white, and 4 percent are from other race or ethnic groups.¹⁴

Survey Results

Analytic Strategy

The full quantitative analysis sample includes 3,098 cases in which mothers participated in the surveys at baseline and three years and provided information about their relationship status, and in which the father was still living. This represents about 83 percent of the baseline sample of non-marital cases.¹⁵ As described below, sub-samples of cases are used for particular outcomes.

Three sets of multivariate models are estimated. The first model examines associations between fathers' risk factors and relationship status with mothers at three years and includes all 3,098 cases. Modeling these outcomes corresponds to the expectation that relationship status with mothers might mediate associations between fathers' risk factors and involvement with children. The second set of models considers associations between fathers' risk factors and their having had any recent contact with their children, both with and without controls for relationship status. Because mothers were not asked whether residential fathers had recent contact with the child, these models are limited to a sub-sample of 1,700 non-residential fathers. The final set of multivariate models then examines the intensity of involvement in daily activities with children. Since these questions were asked about both residential and nonresidential fathers with recent contact, the models include 2,189 cases.

Relationship Status at Three Years

Odds ratios from multinomial logistic regression models predicting relationship status at three years, controlling for parents' age, race, education, and employment status, are presented in Table 2.¹⁶ Models 1 through 4 assess associations of each risk factor, entered individually, with relationship status at three years. Models 5 and 6 assess the joint influence of the

14. New research points to the salience of multi-partner fertility for families headed by unmarried parents. Although we do not conceptualize multi-partner fertility to be a risk factor in the same sense as is physical abuse, or the other risk factors, we ran all of the analyses with a control for the number of children that the father has with other women. These results show that this control is significantly associated with each of the outcomes, but it does not appreciably attenuate the magnitude or statistical significance of the associations reported here between risk factors, relationship status, and father involvement.

15. Of the total number of 4,898 cases, we drop 1,187 cases in which parents were married at the time of the birth. We also drop 8 cases in which the mother did not report baseline data and 577 cases without year three data. Of the remaining cases, we exclude 5 cases in which mothers did not report their relationship status and 31 cases in which the father was deceased by year three. These filters yield a final analysis sample of 3,098 cases.

16. Some researchers using the Fragile Families data control for baseline relationship status to partly control for unobserved heterogeneity that, in this case, might be associated with both relationship status at year three and our risk behaviors (e.g., Western, Lopoo, and McLanahan 2004). Controlling for relationship status at baseline (results available upon request) is found to have little effect on the substantive pattern or statistical significance of our findings presented. Due to this fact and the possible bias introduced by including baseline status indicators, we have chosen not to include them in the models presented.

Table 2 • Multinomial Models of Relationship Status Regressed on Father's Risk Factors and Other Covariates

Variable	Odds Ratio					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Marriage versus no relationship comparison						
Physical abuse	.486** (.102)				.574* (.123)	.652* (.142)
Drug use		.616* (.137)			.692 (.156)	
Alcohol use		.828 (.193)			.827 (.195)	
Drug or alcohol use interferes			.339*** (.066)			.423*** (.089)
Recent incarceration				.217*** (.063)	.239*** (.070)	.279*** (.083)
Past incarceration				.732* (.100)	.784+ (.109)	.855 (.120)
Cohabitation versus no relationship comparison						
Physical abuse	.394*** (.062)				.432*** (.069)	.478***
Drug use		.840 (.120)			.935 (.138)	(.077)
Alcohol use		1.050 (.175)			1.052 (.180)	
Drug or alcohol use interferes			.434*** (.056)			.547*** (.074)

(Continued)

Table 2 • (Continued)

Variable	Odds Ratio					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Recent incarceration				.265*** (.045)	.287*** (.050)	.327*** (.058)
Past incarceration				.828+ (.084)	.891 (.092)	.960 (.100)
Romantic relationship versus no relationship comparison						
Physical abuse	.399* (.142)				.409* (.147)	.428* (.155)
Drug use		.742 (.230)			.757 (.237)	
Alcohol use		.853 (.329)			.943 (.367)	
Drug or alcohol use interferences			.640 (.167)			.683 (.185)
Recent incarceration				1.270 (.310)	1.388 (.343)	1.483 (.372)
Past incarceration				.699 (.166)	.759 (.182)	.789 (.190)
Log likelihood	-3150.8	-3137.7	-3142.5	-3116.7	-3067.5	-3082.3

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. All models control for mother's age, father's race, father's education, mother's and father's employment, and missing data. N = 3,098 families.
 +p < .10 *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001 (two-sided tests)

risk factors, with all risk factors entered simultaneously, using different measures of substance use (i.e., usage versus interference with daily life). Results are shown for three comparisons: marriage versus no relationship, cohabitation versus no relationship, and romantic relationship versus no relationship.

In Model 1, mother's report of having been physically abused by the father is associated with significantly lower odds of being married, cohabiting, or in a romantic relationship versus having no relationship with the mother. Stated in terms of odds, physical abuse is associated with 51.4 percent lower odds ($1 - .486$) of being married versus having no relationship, controlling for other variables in the model. Similarly, physical abuse is associated with 60.6 percent lower odds ($1 - .394$) of cohabiting versus having no relationship.

In Model 2, associations of alcohol use and drug use with relationship status are examined. Only drug use is found to be a significant factor and only in the case of the marriage versus no relationship contrast. Substance use that is defined as interfering with daily life (see Model 3) is found to be associated with lower odds of both marriage and cohabitation. Fathers for whom substance use interferes with daily life have 66.1 percent lower odds of being married and 56.6 percent lower odds of cohabitation versus having no relationship with the mother.

Model 4 assesses associations of relationship status with recent and past incarceration. Fathers who were recently incarcerated have 78.3 percent lower odds of being married and 73.5 percent lower odds of cohabitation compared to having no relationship with the mother, controlling for other variables (Model 4). Neither recent nor past incarceration is significantly associated with whether the father is in a romantic relationship with the mother. Though the coefficient for recent incarceration tends positively toward being in a romantic relationship, it is not statistically significant.

In Model 6, all three types of risk factors are significantly—and negatively—associated with marriage and cohabitation, relative to no relationship. As before, recent incarceration is more strongly and significantly associated with relationship status at three years than is past incarceration.¹⁷ Also note that the associations of physical abuse with marriage and cohabitation are slightly more pronounced when the alcohol and drug use variables are used (in Model 5), as opposed to the substance use interference measure. This pattern suggests that physical abuse and reports of substance use interference are somewhat interconnected—a relationship also observed in the qualitative data.

Contact with Child in the Past Month

The modeling strategy for nonresidential fathers' contact with the child in the past month follows a similar pattern, with models including individual risk factors estimated first followed by models with multiple risk factors. Odds ratios from these logistic models are shown in Table 3.

When entered individually all four types of risk factors are significantly associated with lower odds of fathers having had contact with their child in the past month. Physical abuse is associated with 36.3 percent lower odds of contact with the child. Of the substance use measures, fathers reported to have used illicit drugs have 30.6 percent lower odds of having seen the child recently. The qualitative interviews suggested that recent incarceration presents significant barriers to maintenance of contact between fathers and children. This appears to be the case (see Model 4), as fathers who have been incarcerated since the birth of the child have 76.3 percent lower odds of having seen their child recently than do non-incarcerated

17. In many cases, past incarceration occurred prior to the birth of the child and in some cases women may either not be aware of the incarceration, or have already factored that into their decision to form a relationship with the man in the first place.

Table 3 • Logistic Models of Contact with Child in Past Month by Nonresidential Fathers Regressed on Father's Risk Factors and Other Covariates

Variable	Odds Ratio						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Father's risk factors							
Physical abuse	.637** (.094)				.719* (.094)	.772+ (.107)	.831 (.132)
Drug use		.694* (.117)			.772 (.136)		
Alcohol use		1.250 (.272)			1.185 (.266)		
Drug or alcohol use interferes			.473*** (.063)			.591 *** (.083)	.602*** (.087)
Recent incarceration				.237*** (.037)	.242*** (.038)	.269 *** (.042)	.235*** (.039)
Past incarceration				.649*** (.111)	.664** (.083)	.722 * (.091)	.724* (.092)
No relationship at three years							.149*** (.039)
Log likelihood	-1135.7	-1128.9	-1124.2	-1086.2	-1075.0	-1076.6	-1041.2

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. All models control for mother's age, father's race, father's education, mother's and father's employment, and missing information. *N* = 1,700 families in all models.

+*p* < .10 **p* < .05 ***p* < .01 ****p* < .001 (two-sided tests)

fathers. Though not as dramatically, a history of past incarceration is also found to be negatively associated with contact.

Models 5 and 6 again suggest a relationship between physical abuse and substance use that is defined as interfering with daily life. When drug and alcohol use measures are used, physical violence retains a statistically significant association with contact in the past month, lowering the odds of contact by 28.1 percent. When the substance use interference measure is used, in contrast, the coefficient for physical abuse decreases slightly in size and statistical significance.

We also examine whether associations between risk factors and contact with children are mediated by the relationship between mothers and fathers. Model 7 introduces an indicator for whether or not mothers and fathers were in a romantic relationship at three years. Having no romantic relationship is associated with significantly lower odds of contact (85.1 percent lower). Moreover, its inclusion appears to partly mediate the association of physical abuse with contact, with the coefficient decreasing in magnitude and completely dropping out of statistical significance. We explore mothers' decisions to end relationships with the father in cases of physical abuse further in the qualitative section.

Daily Activities with Child

The final outcome examined from the survey is the degree to which fathers engage in various activities (i.e., showing affection, feeding, reading, playing, etc.) with their child on a daily basis. This outcome is assessed using a similar sequence of models, with ordinary least squares regression results presented in Table 4.

Physically abusive fathers are found to engage in .582 fewer activities with children than do other fathers (Model 1). Neither drug nor alcohol use in themselves are significant factors (Model 2), whereas fathers for whom substance use is reported to interfere with daily life (Model 3) are found to engage in significantly fewer activities with their child ($b = -.280, p < .01$). Both incarceration measures are found to significantly predict activities with the child (Model 4). Recent incarceration is associated with .659 fewer activities whereas past incarceration predicts .162 fewer activities. When considered jointly in Models 5 and 6, both physical abuse and recent incarceration remain significantly associated with lower daily involvement.

Model 7 assesses whether relationship status at three years mediates relationships between risk factors and daily activities. This mediational hypothesis is lent support in the case of physical abuse, as its coefficient decreases in size from $-.514 (p < .001)$ in Model 5 to $-.310 (p < .01)$. To a lesser degree, the coefficient representing the association between recent incarceration and daily activities drops from $-.569 (p < .001)$ to $-.495 (p < .001)$ with inclusion of romantic relationship status in the model. A tentative interpretation, which the qualitative analysis will examine in greater detail, is that one of the reasons fathers with risk factors spend less time with their children is because of weaker relationships with mothers.

Parents' qualitative accounts also suggest mothers sometimes engage in "protective gatekeeping" in response to fathers' risk behaviors, especially in cases of physical abuse. Although no direct measures of gatekeeping are available in the survey, the degree to which mothers say they trust the father to take care of their child is used here as a proxy. Because this question was asked only of fathers with recent contact, we can only examine its influence on daily activities. This measure is introduced in Model 8 and, as expected, clearly attenuates the relationship between physical abuse and daily activities with children, with the regression coefficient dropping from $-.310$ to a non-statistically significant $-.142$. This suggests that physical abuse by the father is associated with lower levels of mother's trust and translates into fewer daily activities with the child. In contrast, distrust of the father does not appear to play a mediating role with respect to father's recent incarceration as its negative association with daily activities is slightly strengthened in Model 8.

Table 4 • OLS Models of Father's Daily Activities with Children Regressed on Father's Risk Factors and Other Covariates

Variable	Regression Coefficients							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Father's risk factors								
Physical abuse	-.582*** (.122)				-.514*** (.123)	-.497*** (.124)	-.310** (.111)	-.142 (.106)
Drug use		-.029 (.119)			.008 (.119)			
Alcohol use		-.128 (.132)			-.086 (.132)			
Drug or alcohol use interferes			-.280** (.107)			-.153 (.109)	-.001 (.097)	.147 (.093)
Recent incarceration				-.659*** (.141)	-.595*** (.142)	-.569*** (.142)	-.495*** (.127)	-.544*** (.122)
Past incarceration				-.162* (.079)	-.114 (.080)	-.101 (.081)	-.123+ (.072)	-.107 (.068)
No relationship at three years							-.1560*** (.066)	-1.193*** (.067)
Mother distrusts father to caretake								-.925*** (.059)
R-squared	.043	.037	.036	.043	.055	.052	.247	.322

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. All models control for mother's age, father's race, father's education, mother's and father's employment, and missing information. *N* = 2,189 families in all models.
 + *p* < .10 **p* < .05 ****p* < .001 (two-sided tests)

Qualitative Results

Information from qualitative interviews illustrates how a sub-sample of parents at the Oakland site of the study interpreted men's physical abuse, substance use, and incarceration in the context of their relationships with each other and fathers' relationships with their children. Parents' qualitative accounts also reveal the processes through which they responded to these risk factors in the years after their child's birth. As these stories suggest, parents' decisions about whether to end their romantic relationships were in many cases influenced by these risk factors, with important implications for fathers' involvement with the child. Parents also engaged in strategies for managing their relationships as parents with these risks in mind. After presenting an overview of these processes, we describe how they emerged in the context of each risk factor.

Ending the Relationship

Although relationships between new, unmarried parents are often fragile, parents' stories of how their relationships unfolded after the birth suggest why fathers' risk factors made these relationships particularly unstable. These accounts show that mothers tended to select out of "unhealthy" relationships by ending their relationships unilaterally or in agreement with the father. While multiple considerations were often involved in this decision, mothers cited the fathers' abuse and, in some cases, substance use as their primary motivation. This decision could result after a "threshold" of negative interactions with their partner was passed, leading women to redefine their partner or relationship in a fundamental way, or when one act was sufficiently serious to transform these perceptions (Gottman 1993). Since paternal involvement is often contingent upon whether the couple's relationship stays intact (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991), the decision about whether the couple would maintain their romantic relationship affected fathers' ability to interact with their children.

Family Strategies. Those couples who decided to stay together adopted a joint strategy for responding to risk behaviors. Interviews with these parents suggest that they engaged in what we will refer to as family strategies or an agreement to keep the romantic and parenting relationship intact and deal with the risk as a family. In some situations fathers initiated these strategies by changing their behavior, while in other cases mothers attempted to negotiate with, or exert leverage over, the father to end risky behaviors. Parents reported engaging in family strategies when the father had a problem with drugs or alcohol or when he had been incarcerated, but not when the father had been violent toward the mother.

Protective Gatekeeping. When couples decided to end their romantic relationships, mothers usually assumed physical custody of children. Parents indicated that these arrangements were usually established informally rather than through the legal system and that mothers often defined the conditions under which fathers could spend time with the child. Previous research suggests that mothers in intact families often facilitate the relationship between the father and child and may choose to stop doing so when the couple ends their romantic relationship (Arendell 1999). In addition to withdrawing this support, mothers may restrict the father's access to the child. Although there has been limited research on maternal gatekeeping practices among unmarried parents who live apart, we use the term protective gatekeeping to refer to behaviors mothers use to limit fathers' involvement in response to a perceived risk (Allen and Hawkins 1999; De Luccie 1995; Fagan and Barnett 2003).

Both mothers and fathers described protective gatekeeping practices such as placing a restraining order on the father, supervising paternal visits or requiring that they be supervised

by a family member, and moving to a different area. In situations where the mother required visits to be supervised, the couple's own mothers and other family members often played important roles in allowing fathers to maintain a relationship with the child. This supervision imposed some constraint on the father's interaction with the child, but scheduling visits at a family member's home also facilitated contact by making mothers feel more at ease. When discussing these and other parenting strategies, mothers did not suggest that the father would intentionally harm the child. However, they did express concern about the father's ability to have "healthy" family relationships (in cases of violence), his competence as a parent (in cases of substance use), and his influence on children, particularly sons, as a role model (in all cases). Fathers also sometimes acknowledged the legitimacy of these concerns. A minority of mothers said they limited fathers' access to the child because they feared that he would try to forcibly take custody if left alone with the child.

Paternal Withdrawal. Unmarried, nonresident fathers tended to face more constraints on involvement with their children when they exhibited a risk. For some fathers incarceration and deportation restricted their options for maintaining contact with their children. Because mothers were more likely to end relationships with these men, their daily contact and interaction with their child was limited by the fact that they did not live in the same household. In addition, mothers more often set the initial terms of the parenting arrangement. Despite these constraints, and often their own personal problems, most fathers did have the option to maintain a relationship with their child at some level.

Terry Arendell (1995) describes how nonresidential fathers may use absence as a strategy to avoid conflicts with the mother and to manage their emotions after a divorce. In the same way that gatekeeping may reinforce mothers' authority over children, absence allows men to maintain a sense of control. Some fathers who did not maintain contact with their child participated in a process of passive rather than active withdrawal. This could happen, for example, when fathers did not take steps to initiate contact and after the mother stopped facilitating their involvement. Other fathers seemed to actively disengage from their children after a breakup, sometimes in response to mother's behavior.

Parallel Parenting. In contrast to fathers who withdrew from their children, other fathers were able to remain actively involved with their child after their relationship with the mother ended. Parents tended to establish "parallel parenting" arrangements in which they maintained separate relationships with their children but did not coordinate their childrearing efforts (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). Those fathers who spent time with their child on a regular basis or for an extended period (e.g., during the summer) had either established their own households or could use their own mother's homes for these visits.

Women typically had more agency in initiating changes in couples' relationships as partners and parents when fathers had a problem. This is likely because the analysis focuses on a select group of couples in which the male partners had these negative characteristics. However, it makes sense that women would be more likely to set the terms of these relationships because they typically had more responsibility for the child and often felt the need to make decisions about relationships with "risky" partners with their child in mind. It is important to note that these relationship and parenting strategies were dynamic during the period parents participated in the study, responsive to the actions of the other partner, and sometimes developed around more than one risk. Parents also "problematized" some risks more than others and used moral boundaries to assess risks. These boundaries may be thought of as conceptual categories parents used to differentiate fathers with risks, and their relationships with mothers and children, on the basis of moral criteria (Lamont 2000). The remainder of this section discusses these processes in the three risk situations considered in this analysis.

Physical Abuse

Of all risk factors considered, mothers were most likely to end their relationships and use protective gatekeeping practices in situations of physical abuse. Mothers who experienced physical abuse described both one-time incidents of violence and more prolonged abuse that resulted in injury, including being choked, hit with objects, bruised, cut, and losing consciousness. Both types of abuse had consequences for couples' relationships and fathers' involvement with their children, leading to outcomes observed in the quantitative analysis. However, mothers more often monitored fathers' access to children when abuse was serious and prolonged.

Relationships between Parents. All of the couples in which the mother reported abuse had separated by the second qualitative interview and interviews with both parents suggest that mothers initiated these break ups or came to a mutual agreement with the father to end the relationship. These mothers pointed to physical abuse as a primary reason for ending their relationships although fathers tended to downplay or deny their abuse. Their accounts also suggest that a single act of physical violence could lead them to fundamentally change their perception of the father's character or psychological state (Gottman 1993) and to designate this risk as a serious problem. Mercedes, a first-time mother we interviewed, explains:

We were together for like 3 years . . . we hardly ever argued or nothing . . . And he had got drunk when I was 8 months and just flipped out. And I was like: "Ain't no man gonna put their hands on me."

Other mothers remained in abusive relationships for several years before ending the relationship. Teresa's poignant account helps illustrate how this decision could occur after a period of sustained abuse. Although Teresa said the father was abusive for several years, she was afraid to let her friends and family members know what was happening until after the couple broke up and did not report abuse in the interview until the relationship ended. It is possible that the qualitative results show a closer connection between relationship dissolution and violence than the survey because of the sensitivity of this topic and the tendency to discuss abuse retrospectively.¹⁸

One time I guess where he choked me too much and I passed out, and he thought I had passed away, and he really had killed me. And I just remember waking up and he was crying over me, and I was going, "What's going on?" And he was like, "I'm sorry" and just kept on saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry". . . Just so many times I was really hurt . . . [and] he threatened me. I always felt scared, so I stayed there . . . It was just so hard for me to talk to anybody about it . . . And one day I just realized that he was doing wrong, and I wasn't doing anything wrong. That I was doing right. So I just let him go.

Father Involvement. Mothers who experienced physical abuse tended to place some restrictions on the father's access to the child, typically by requiring visits to be supervised. Some fathers withdrew in these circumstances but others maintained contact under the mother's or a family member's supervision. For example, Linda and Mark had two children together and decided to marry after the birth of their youngest child. A former welfare recipient, Linda might be considered a success of welfare reform. However, Mark became abusive a few years into their relationship and she eventually broke things off when his abuse was coupled with infidelity. Linda had a restraining order placed on Mark after they separated but later allowed supervised visits in her presence. Although Mark initially agreed to these arrangements, he later withdrew from his children.

Linda's feelings about Mark's involvement were mixed: she wanted him to be part of their lives and believed her daughter was suffering as a result of his absence. At the same time

18. About half of the mothers who acknowledged violent behavior on the part of the father in the qualitative interview did not do so in the survey.

she did not trust him to be alone with their children and wanted him to change his behavior before reconnecting with them. In response to our question about whether Linda would like him to be involved, she explained:

I want him to be involved with them because I really do think it's important to have your dad there. I really do. But not a bad dad and somebody that don't care. I don't want you around my kids. So if he can change his ways and be there for them—yes. But if you're going to have this type of attitude, then they don't need to be around him at all. Because I don't want a bad influence like that on them. I don't want it at all.

Mark downplayed his abuse, claiming he responded violently to Linda in arguments only after she would become violent with him. However, he agreed that he may not be a good influence on his children because of his character flaws, referring to himself as an "evil" person who is "black inside." To deal with his emotions and reassert control, he said he decided to "blank out" his children and withdraw from them:

I don't think I'm a good role model no more, a good parent no more . . . they need another daddy. Somebody with the right kind of head. The right mentality.

It is important to note that mothers themselves were often uncomfortable acknowledging that they restricted fathers' access and appeared to struggle with two competing ideas about what was best for their children. On the one hand, most said they thought it was important for the father to have a relationship with his child and did not want to prevent this from happening, a position perhaps made easier by the fact that none of the unmarried mothers in this study said the father had abused their child. Equally strong, however, was the feeling that the father-child relationship should be "healthy" for their children and "unhealthy" relationships characterized by abuse should be avoided. In making these moral distinctions, mothers used the same language for classifying family relationships that appears in recent marriage initiatives, but is yet to be clearly defined.

In contrast to other risks, mothers suspected fathers' abuse could be attributed to deep moral or psychological traits that are not easily altered. In the same way that Linda expressed her concerns about the involvement of a "bad dad," Diane drew symbolic boundaries between "healthy" and "unhealthy" involvement in the following exchange, suggesting the former might only be possible if the father changed in fundamental ways.

Q: Do you think it's important to have the biological father involved?

A: At one point in time I did. Now, no I don't. I think if it's healthy then it's okay, but I feel like it's going to be unhealthy, then no. And I feel that in my situation it's very unhealthy. So no.

Q: Do you think it's possible that you would want him to be involved in the future?

A: If he can make a turn around and he can change his life.

Q: So why would you still want him to have a relationship with them?

A: Because that's their father and I don't want it to be like I'm the middle man, I'm preventing that, I'm trying to stop that. Because I want what's best for them.

Drug and Alcohol Use

The qualitative accounts suggest parents did not always respond to fathers' substance use in their decisions about romantic and parenting relationships, in part because fathers' substance use was not always considered problematic. These perceptions could help explain why fathers' self-reported substance use was less closely related to family outcomes in the qualitative analysis than were parents' reports that fathers' substance use had interfered in their lives. Parents' accounts tended to emphasize the consequences of drug use more than alcohol use for family relationships and to illustrate the connection between drug problems and other risks.

Relationships between Parents. In contrast to situations characterized by physical abuse, some couples adopted a family strategy to address fathers' substance use. However, a subset of mothers cited this use as the primary motivation for ending their romantic relationships. Mothers tended to problematize and draw moral boundaries around this behavior in their romantic relationships when they were trying to stay away from drugs themselves or when it was coupled with abuse. For example, Cindy discovered she was pregnant after she and the father were arrested for violating drug probation. While in prison, the couple exchanged letters and made plans to marry after they were released. She also gave birth in a drug rehabilitation program for incarcerated mothers during this time. A few weeks after the fathers' release, however, Cindy decided to end the relationship, explaining that the father did not leave the "drug scene" as he had promised and that she "couldn't risk myself or my children by going back to prison." As Cindy predicted, the father was arrested shortly after for methamphetamine-related charges and had been in prison since this time. In the qualitative sample, several fathers who used drugs heavily were coupled with mothers who had past or current drug problems. In those situations in which mothers did not use drugs or had gotten clean before fathers, the father's drug use became a significant issue in their relationships.

Father Involvement. Parents' accounts indicate that mothers who partnered with men who had substance use problems often monitored fathers' access to the child, particularly when the father's substance use was coupled with violence. Some fathers withdrew in these circumstances. Again, in contrast to situations of abuse, other fathers attempted to end this behavior independently or as part of a family strategy. When describing these efforts, fathers attempted to separate themselves from their previous identities as substance users. Michelle and Mali had an unplanned pregnancy while he was temporarily separated from his partner but they were able to establish "parallel parenting" arrangements. At the first interview, Michelle was concerned that drugs were preventing Mali from being more involved, explaining he was into "drugs and being on the streets and stuff [more] than he is his kids." However, Mali maintained that he had stopped using cocaine and was determined to stay out of jail and become "100% [a] family man."

I'm trying to get my life together now . . . 'Cause I used to indulge myself in using drugs and everything . . . And this last time [having a child] really made me think like you can't continue doing things, 'cause my kids hate coming to see me in jail. You know, they hate it. So I had to really think well, is this how I want to live my life? Not only me, I got to think about my kids . . . I'm at the point of changing my whole life.

The first time we spoke to Mali he had distanced himself from his friends who used drugs and moved to a neighborhood where drugs were less accessible. At the follow-up interview, Mali and Michelle were alternating their physical custody of the child with the help of Mali's mother and partner.

Other fathers attempted to change their behavior as part of a family strategy with their child's mother aimed at getting the father or both parents off drugs. Most parents acknowledged that their drug use negatively affected daily interactions with their children only after they had quit. In Andrew's case this realization came after an intervention by Child Protective Services.

Since she's been pregnant with him, I mean, we've stopped doing everything we used to do before. We're gonna try to be responsible parents now . . . we look at [their older child], we have kind of a discipline problem with [her] . . . she was being raised when we were more involved in drugs. And what it was, was generally whatever makes her happy, send her to her room, here's your toys, just to leave us alone.

Although some fathers like Mali were able to turn their lives around, other fathers, like Andrew, who expressed similar goals shortly after their child's birth were not as successful.

At follow-up, Andrew and his partner said they were trying to rebuild their family following a recent relapse by both partners that led to a period of heightened conflict in their relationship and separation.

Incarceration

Incarceration was the most common risk factor in the study and the majority of parents we interviewed reported that the father had been arrested for drug related offenses. As Pettit and Western (2004) report, about 30 percent of non-college African-American's were incarcerated by their mid-thirties and their risk of imprisonment increased three fold in the last 20 years. Perhaps because incarceration has become so common for men like those we interviewed, parents did not characterize this experience as presenting the same kind of personal barrier for fathers' relationships as other risks or use this as a moral basis for evaluating fathers. Although parents often expressed a desire to engage in family strategies or to maintain visiting arrangements in these situations, their accounts suggest how physical and emotional separation imposed by incarceration and, in some cases, deportation in the years after their child's birth could undermine their aspirations. Although parents were much less likely to discuss the effect of fathers' incarceration before the birth on their families, it is possible this experience contributed to instability of family relationships more indirectly, for example, by depressing fathers' earnings (Western, Kling, and Weiman 2001).

Relationships between Parents. None of the parents we interviewed said incarceration was the primary motivation for their breakup. At the same time, the quantitative results show that couples are more likely to end their relationships than to marry or live together when fathers had been incarcerated since the child's birth. Both mothers and fathers suggested incarceration could erode the mother's trust in the father and seriously strain their relationships in these circumstances, particularly in situations where fathers were in jail more than once or for an extended period of time.

Kelly and Michael shared an apartment the first time we interviewed them but knew that Michael would be returning to jail in the next few months. Michael had a long history of arrests, which both partners attributed to his troubled and destitute childhood. Despite these problems, Kelly hoped he could walk away from illegal activities after their son was born and developed a family strategy to encourage this change. At the first interview she planned to get her own apartment so that she could "wear the pants" in the family after he returned from prison. Three years later, Kelly had followed through on her plan and had asked Michael to leave when he used crack in her apartment—behavior that violated her moral standards and threatened her tenancy in public housing.¹⁹ Without a job, Michael returned to familiar strategies for survival and was soon re-arrested. Although Michael had been in and out of prison since their child's birth, he was able to keep in contact with Kelly and their son through occasional letters and collect phone calls. However, his behavior was a frequent source of conflict and Kelly had also begun to revise her opinion of him as a father as she struggled to raise and support their child alone:

He always kept [our son] safe. He came real close to putting [him] in harm's way a couple times but he always kept him safe. He always kept him fed. He always kept him warm. Whether we had a place to stay or not . . . So, in the necessities kind of way, he's a good father. 'Cause if I was on the street right now, he'd be here. And he'd help me through it. And he'd be there for [our son]. I mean, there's just no question. But it's so beyond the necessary when it comes to being a parent. It's a full-time job. And since he's never here, there's not much to it.

19. See the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's HUDCLIPS Web site for information about the "one strike" policy for public housing authorities (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2006).

Kelly said that her family had often encouraged her to leave Michael but she would reply: "This is the man I fell in love with. He's the father of my child. I don't want to leave him. You know, he's basically my husband to me." At the same time, she was conflicted about whether this was the best decision for their child and was not hopeful that their relationship would survive.

Father Involvement. Parenting strategies were most diverse when fathers had been incarcerated, largely because this risk affected a larger share of families than abuse or substance use. As previous examples suggest, some fathers attempted to end drug-related behaviors that could lead to re-arrest and to seek legitimate work in the formal and informal economy with varying levels of success. When fathers continued to participate in illegal activities, such as selling drugs, that could put their children in harm's way, mothers sometimes monitored their access to children. More often, parents described situations in which fathers lost contact and passively withdrew from their child despite their desire to maintain involvement. Incarceration required fathers to make a greater effort to maintain a relationship with their child, such as calling collect, writing letters, and reinitiating contact with their child after release, and these interactions depended on the cooperation of the mother. None of the mothers in the qualitative sample said they were willing to take their child to see the father in jail or prison after their romantic relationship ended. In some cases, distance was a barrier for visits. However, even those mothers who adopted a family strategy and wanted to maintain involvement believed this experience could be more harmful than beneficial to the child. According to Kimberly:

I used to take [our son] to see him in jail, but it got to the point where [he] couldn't have contact and so he would just scream and hit the glass because he couldn't touch his daddy. So I stopped doing that because it was just tormenting [him].

Like some other fathers we interviewed, Gary, her partner, did not want their son to see him while incarcerated and was afraid that his son might emulate his behavior: "Kids are very pliable when they're at an earlier age. My son is not going to be a thug." Parents also worried about their children's exposure to the jail or prison environment.

Unlike families who had negative feelings about child visitation in jail or prison, Joaquin and Hope, one couple who engaged in a family strategy, described how a program for incarcerated fathers facilitated father-child contact and actually allowed the father to improve his parenting skills. This example suggests that incarceration need not result in family instability. According to Joaquin:

[Our son] would come to visit me and we would spend time together. They show[ed] us how to get attached again. Plus, not just with him, with the mom, too. How to understand each other, from being away. It was a good program they got there . . . [it lets] you keep a close connection with him so when you came back it wasn't just like you were re-entering his life for the first time . . . They have a whole preschool in there . . . We bring out the toys, the books. We get to see them like that, and play with them . . . The thing is to bond with him, so they leave you separate, alone with him . . . We go to class [with other fathers] . . . they show[ed] us movies on domestic violence and child abuse.

Hope said the couple continued to struggle with issues related to trust and his inability to find steady work, but she saw a clear change in his commitment to parenting and to their relationship after he participated in this program. In contrast to many parents, she was more optimistic about the future of their relationship at the follow-up interview than she was a year after their child's birth.

Discussion

Results from this mixed methods analysis help us understand how fathers' physical abuse, substance use, and incarceration shape early relationship and parenting outcomes for unmarried couples who have a child together. The survey results indicate a considerable

presence of risk factors among fathers in the Fragile Family study, with nearly half having at least one of the risk factors, and show that each risk is negatively associated with fathers' involvement with their children. We find that fathers with risk factors are less likely to have romantic relationships with mothers and that relationships between parents mediate associations between risk factors and fathers' involvement with children. Information from qualitative interviews illustrates the meaning of risks for parents and the processes through which early family outcomes unfold. Parents' accounts suggest that mothers often select out of relationships they deem "unhealthy" and monitor fathers' access to children particularly in cases of physical abuse. While some fathers with risks withdraw from children, others attempt to maintain their involvement independently or as part of a strategy with the mother to address these risks. However, their efforts were not always successful.

The quantitative analysis indicates that physical abuse was consistently and significantly associated with parents' relationship status as well as fathers' contact with children and involvement in their daily lives. In qualitative interviews, mothers cited violence as a primary reason for ending relationships with abusive partners and typically required visits to be supervised in these circumstances. The regression results confirm that the relationship between violence and daily activities with children is mediated by the relationship status of parents. In other words, one reason that physically abusive fathers are not more involved with their children is that they are no longer in relationships with the mother. We also find evidence that mothers' distrust of physically abusive fathers mediates fathers' daily activities with children.

Frequent or problematic drug and alcohol use was more common among fathers in the Fragile Families study than was physical abuse and also led to negative outcomes. Parents' qualitative accounts suggest that substance use had implications for romantic and parental relationships after it was identified as a problem, including situations in which use was coupled with violence and when both partners had used drugs. Qualitative interviews also suggest that some fathers with substance use problems made efforts to change their behaviors with varying success. Similarly, the regression results show that substance use is significantly associated with relationship status and lower levels of contact with children only when it is perceived to interfere with relationships or daily life. At the same time, we caution that a better measure of substance use might have yielded a more significant relationship with our outcomes in the quantitative analysis.

Incarceration was the most common risk factor for fathers in this study and was also found to play an important role in the lives of families, but parents did not characterize this as presenting the same kind of personal barrier for fathers' relationships as physical abuse or substance use or as a basis for making moral distinctions between fathers. Rather, the father's absence from the home, and the logistical and emotional constraints imposed by imprisonment, presented serious challenges to maintaining relationships with mothers and children. Of particular concern to family relationships were recent stints of incarceration, a significant predictor of relationship status at three years, recent contact, and daily activities with children. In comparison with other risks, parents more often describe fathers as losing contact and passively withdrawing from their children despite their desire to maintain these relationships.

Our results suggest that policies to promote marriage and responsible fatherhood should be mindful that some fathers they are targeting have characteristics that may not be conducive to increased involvement while others face personal and institutional barriers to involvement. The prevalence of risk factors among fathers in the Fragile Families study is perhaps not surprising given dramatic increases in incarceration among minority men at lower educational levels, particularly for drug-related offenses. Risks such as physical abuse and incarceration may also create additional economic barriers for mothers and fathers and lead to poverty (Raphael and Tolman 1997; Western, Kling, and Weiman 2001). These findings do not point to obvious policy solutions but suggest that strategies for incorporating fathers into families must recognize how parents interpret and respond to risks.

Mothers appear particularly likely to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships in cases of domestic violence and choose to end their romantic relationships and

limit fathers' access to the children. These difficult decisions should be supported in programs designed to encourage marriage and responsible fatherhood. In other situations not characterized by violence, some couples pursued family strategies to deal with substance use or incarceration. Because a subset of fathers with drug problems seem to be partnered with mothers who share these problems, treatment for both partners might be necessary for families who hope to stay together. Recent studies suggest that low-income mothers also have a high risk of drug use (Pollack et al. 2002), and that the proportion of mothers incarcerated for drug-related offenses has been on the rise (Johnson and Waldfoegel 2002). An important topic for future research will be to further examine the meaning of unmarried mothers' risk factors for their relationships with fathers and children.

Given its consequences for marriage and father involvement, policymakers with an interest in increasing the stability and well-being of families headed by unmarried parents should also seriously consider alternatives to incarceration, which disproportionately affects unmarried African American and Latino fathers. Programs for incarcerated fathers may also have significant potential to help them maintain relationships with their children, as one of the qualitative cases illustrates. Increasing family stability and promoting fatherhood within or following prison may yield the added benefit of reducing recidivism, as previous life course research has found stable bonds in adulthood to serve as positive turning points within the careers of offenders (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Sampson and Laub 1993).

Rather than addressing these issues in isolation, our results also suggest that risks are often interrelated, occur within conditions of economic disadvantage, and may require a comprehensive approach for supporting families. An example of this kind of approach can be found in prisoner reentry strategies that attempt to coordinate criminal justice and social policy around challenges facing previously incarcerated men, including their barriers to employment, drug and alcohol addiction, and issues related to their parenting and romantic relationships such as domestic violence (Travis 2004). Because drug related crime and incarceration appear in context of deteriorating economic opportunities for men at lower educational levels, educational, employment, and income support programs may also be needed to provide economic alternatives for fathers struggling to end drug-related behaviors and to help them overcome the effects of incarceration.

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Appendix: Description of Survey Measures

<i>Dependent Variables</i>	<i>3 Year Survey</i>
Father contact (mothers' report)	Father saw child more than once in past 30 days.
Fathers' daily activities with child(mothers' report)	<p>If fathers had contact with child more than once in the past 30 days, mothers were asked to report the number of days per week (0 to 7) they did the following activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sing songs or nursery rhymes with child • Hug or show physical affection to him/her • Tell child that he loves him/her • Let child help him with simple household chores • Play imaginary games with him/her • Read stories to child • Tell stories to him/her • Play inside with toys such as blocks or Legos with child • Tell child that he appreciated something he/she did • Take him/her to visit relatives • Go to a restaurant or out to eat with him/her • Assist child with eating • Put child to bed
<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Baseline and 12–18 Month Survey</i>
Physical abuse (mothers' report)	<p>Based only on mothers' reports, when either of these scenarios is indicated:</p> <p>Baseline variables:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "How often would you say that he hits or slaps you when he is angry?"—Mother replied "often" or "sometimes." <p>12–18 month variables:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Were you ever cut, bruised, or seriously hurt in a fight with father?"—Mother replied "yes."
Substance use	<p>Drug or Alcohol Problem (reported by either mother or father)</p> <p>Baseline variable (mothers):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mother replied "yes" to question: "Does baby's father have problems such as keeping a job or getting along with family and friends because of alcohol or drug use?" <p>Baseline variables (fathers):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Father replied "yes" to question: "In the past year, has drinking or using drugs ever interfered with your work on a job or with your personal relationships?" <p>12–18 month variables (mothers):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mother replied "yes" to question: "Does (the father) have problems such as keeping a job or getting along with family and friends because of alcohol or drug use?" <p>12–18 month variables (fathers):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Father replied "yes" to question: "Since child was born, has drinking or using drugs interfered with how you manage on a day-to-day basis?" • Father replied "yes" to question: "Since child was born, has drinking or using drugs interfered with your personal relationships?"

Appendix (Continued)

Dependent Variables

3 Year Survey

Drug and Alcohol Use (based on fathers' reports only when at least one of the following scenarios was reported)

Baseline variables (fathers):

- In response to question: "In the past three months, about how often did you use drugs such as marijuana, crack cocaine, or heroin?"—Father replied "nearly every day" or "several times a week" or "several times a month."
- In response to two questions, father reported that he drank alcohol nearly every day and had more than three drinks in one day.

12–18 month variables (fathers):

- Father replied that he smoked marijuana or pot every day or almost every day in past month.
- Father replied "yes" to question: "In the past month, did you use cocaine, crack, speed, LSD, or heroin or any other kind of hard drug?"
- Father indicated that he had five or more drinks in one day on five or more days during the past month.

Incarceration

Recent Incarceration (at least one of the following scenarios was reported by mother or father)

Baseline variables (mothers):

- Based on a constructed variable in which mother reported that father was in jail at time of interview.

12–18 month variables (mothers):

- Based on a constructed variable in which mother reported that father was in jail at time of interview.

12–18 month variables (fathers):

- Based on a constructed variable in which fathers reported being in jail at time of interview.

Past Incarceration (reported either by mother or father)

12–18 month variables (mothers)

- "Has father ever spent time in jail or prison?"

12–18 month variables (fathers)

- "Have you ever spent time in a correctional institution, like a county jail or a state or federal prison?"
-