

ASPE RESEARCH SUMMARY

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

WHAT ABOUT THE DADS?

Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate, and Involve Nonresident Fathers

This study documents that nonresident fathers of children in foster care are not often involved in case planning efforts and nearly half are never contacted by the child welfare agency during their child's stay in foster care. By not reaching out to fathers, caseworkers may overlook potential social connections and resources that could help to achieve permanency for the child.

Introduction

Most foster children are not living with their fathers at the time they are removed from their homes. Once in foster care, these children may experience even less contact with their nonresident fathers. However, few studies have examined nonresident fathers as placement resources for their children and there is no previous research about child-father visitation or research on the effects of involving nonresident fathers in the lives of children being served by child welfare agencies.

Engaging the fathers of children in foster care is important not only for the potential benefit of a child-father relationship (when such a relationship does not pose a risk to the child's safety or well-being), but also for making placement and permanency decisions and gaining access to resources for the child. Permanency may be expedited by placing children with their nonresident fathers or paternal kin, or through early relinquishment or termination of the father's paternal rights. Fathers and paternal relatives may also offer social or financial resources that could support a plan of reunification with the mother. And through engaging fathers, agencies may learn important medical information, or that the child is the recipient of certain benefits, such as health insurance, survivor benefits, or child support.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH SUMMARY

This ASPE Research Summary describes the findings of a study that sought to assess typical child welfare practice with respect to nonresident fathers of children in foster care.

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The study was conducted by The Urban Institute and the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) under contract to ASPE and in partnership with the Administration for Children and Families.

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This research summary highlights the results of a study that sought to determine the extent to which child welfare agencies are seeking nonresident fathers and involving them in their children’s case management and permanency planning. The study also examined the potential utility of expanding the use of child support enforcement data sources in these efforts. The study consisted of three methods of data collection – interviews with child welfare administrators, case-level data collection through interviews with caseworkers, and data linkage between child welfare and child support systems – in four study states: Arizona, Massachusetts, Minnesota and Tennessee.

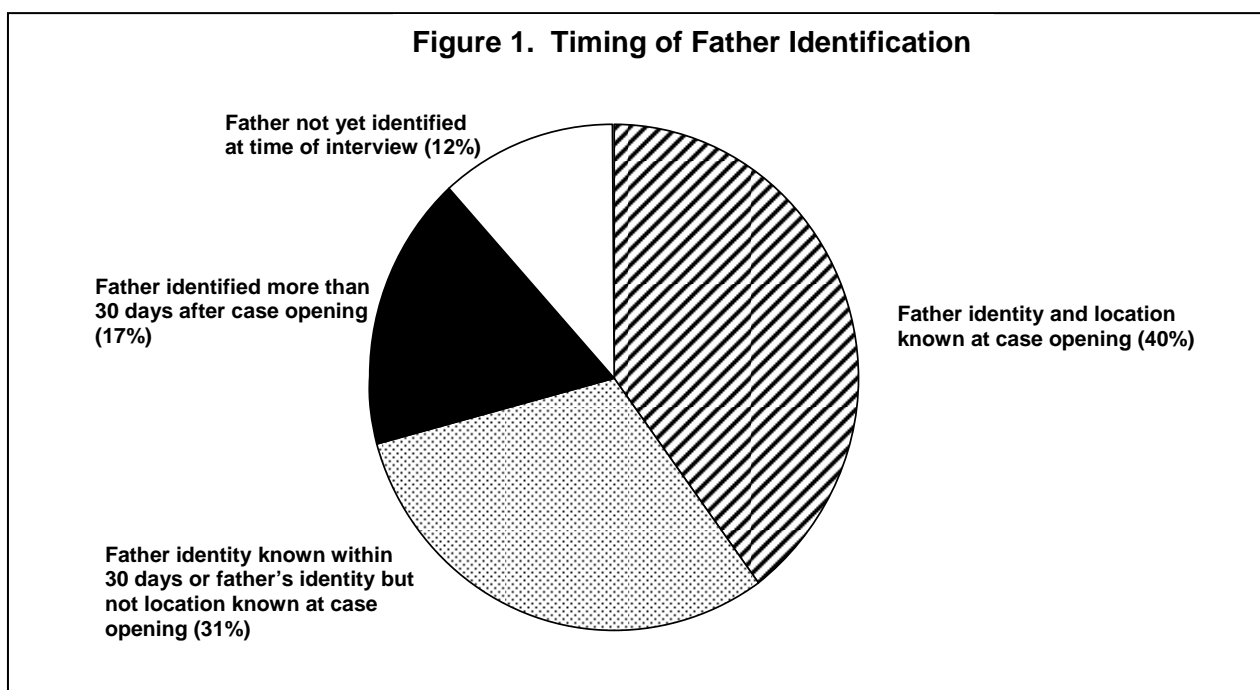
A total of 1,222 local agency caseworkers were interviewed by phone about 1,958 specific cases between October 2004 and February 2005 to examine front-line practices related to nonresident fathers. Interviewers achieved an 83% response rate to the survey. Cases were selected from among children who had been in foster care at least 3 months but no more than 36 months. Children in the sample were all in foster care for the first time, and the child welfare agency’s records indicated that each of the children’s biological fathers was alive but not living in the home from which the child was removed. Additionally, only one child per mother was eligible for the study. The results of this study provide empirical evidence on the steps that child welfare agencies currently take to identify, locate and involve nonresident fathers in case planning; the barriers encountered; and the policies and practices that affect involvement.

Highlights of the Report

Identification of Nonresident Fathers

- **Most fathers are identified in the child’s case file.** Over two-thirds of nonresident fathers (68%) of children in the study were identified at the time of case opening and another 20% had been identified by the time the caseworker was interviewed (that is, at minimum, the father’s full name appeared in the case file). In the one-third of cases in which the father was not identified at case opening, the child’s mother often was unwilling or unable to provide identifying information.

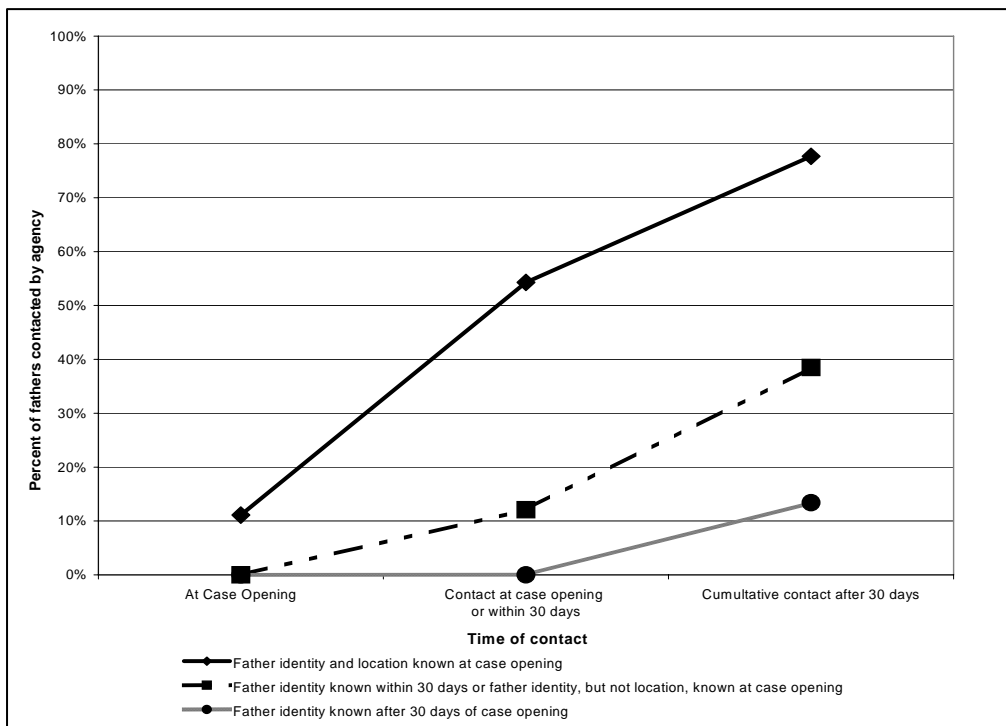
Figure 1 summarizes the timing of caseworkers’ identification of fathers in the study sample.



- Paternity establishment lags behind identification.** Paternity had not yet been established for over one-third of the children (37%), including many whose fathers had been identified. For the two-thirds of cases in which paternity was established, caseworkers reported that a variety of methods were used to do so. In 42% of these cases the caseworker had determined that the father’s name appeared on the child’s birth certificate; for 24% genetic testing had confirmed paternity; 16% of fathers had signed voluntary paternity acknowledgements; and in 18% of cases the caseworker reported that paternity was established through other means or that they did not know how paternity had been established. Unless paternity has been established, a named father is not legally related to the child and cannot participate in court proceedings about the child.
- Fathers identified early are more likely to be involved in the case.** Administrators reported that caseworkers begin trying to identify a child’s father during the child protection investigation. However, most administrators thought efforts were stronger and more successful early in a case but after the investigation. Case level findings suggest that nonresident fathers not identified early are much less likely to have contact with the agency. In cases where the father’s identity and location was known at case opening, 80% had been contacted by the child welfare agency. In contrast, if the father’s identity was determined after the child had been in foster care for 30 days, only 13% had been contacted successfully.

Figure 2 shows contact rates for fathers identified at different points during the case.

Figure 2. Likelihood of Contact with Fathers Identified at Different Points



Locating and Contacting Nonresident Fathers

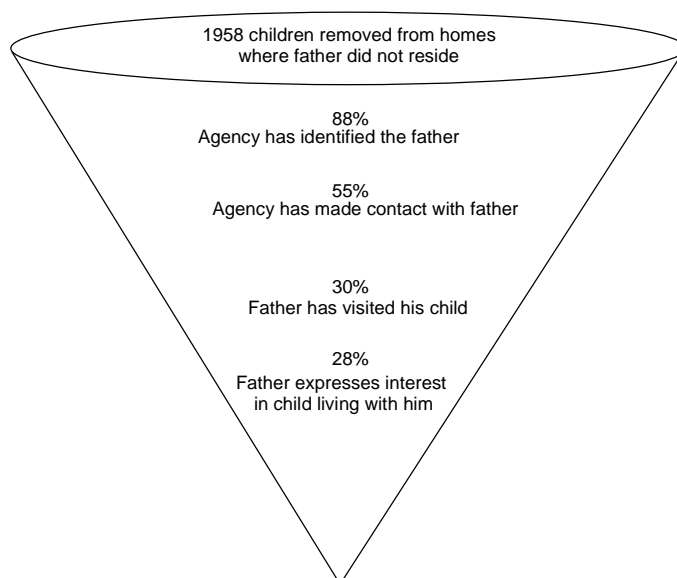
- **Caseworkers reported having at least one contact with 55% of nonresident fathers.** Contacts may have been by phone, in person, or by mail. Of the remaining fathers, 12% had not been identified, and for 33% either the father had not been located, or contact was not successful despite location information. One in five fathers whose identity and location were known at case opening were nonetheless never contacted by the child welfare agency.
- **Efforts to seek nonresident fathers are varied and inconsistent.** Caseworkers report using a number of sources when seeking nonresident fathers whose locations were initially unknown. These include asking the mother and her relatives, the child and his or her siblings, other workers, and the father's relatives. Workers also consulted a number of other sources including law enforcement, public assistance, and motor vehicle records, as well as telephone books. Which sources were contacted in a given case was variable, however, and there did not seem to be a pattern of what steps were taken if the child's mother was unable or unwilling to provide contact information for the child's father. Other than asking the mother, no method of locating a father was consulted in more than 44% of cases in which the father's location was unknown.
- **Varied circumstances made contact difficult.** Caseworkers reported that many factors may make it hard to contact fathers. In 60% of cases with identified fathers, the caseworker reported that the father was unreachable by phone and 31% of the fathers were reported to be incarcerated. Other circumstances, ranging from unreliable transportation and unstable housing to being out of the country, affected fewer cases but were reported to cause great difficulty for caseworkers trying to establish or maintain contact with fathers when they occurred.

Father Involvement

- **Caseworker and administrator attitudes regarding fathers were mixed.** Caseworkers and administrators generally agreed that fathers' involvement can enhance child well-being, although most recognized that this is true only when such involvement poses no safety risk to the child or mother. However, only a little over half of the caseworkers in the study sample (53%) believed that nonresident fathers want to be a part of the decision-making process about their children.
- **Sharing information with contacted fathers was common.** In over 90 percent of cases in which the father was contacted, the caseworkers reported sharing the case plan with the father and telling him about his child's out of home placement.
- **More substantive involvement, including visitation, was less common.** Caseworkers reported that half of the nonresident fathers with whom they had been in contact had expressed an interest in having their children live with them (50% of the fathers who had ever been in contact with the child welfare agency or 27% of the entire sample). Over half the contacted fathers (56%) had visited their child at least once while he or she was in foster care; however this represents only 30 percent of all fathers in the sample. Far fewer were visiting with their child regularly. In 4% of cases the child's case goal was placement with the father.

Figure 3 illustrates the level of contact and involvement of fathers, as reported by the child's caseworker.

Figure 3. Summary of Identification, Contact and Visitation



Issues Preventing Placement with Nonresident Fathers

- **Fathers of children in foster care have multiple problems that may affect their involvement.** For cases involving fathers with whom the agency had made contact, workers were asked to identify problems or issues that prevented the child from being placed with the father. The most common problems identified were substance abuse and criminal justice involvement. In over half of cases in which the agency had been in contact with the father, the father was identified as having an alcohol or drug problem (58%), and over half (53%) were also involved with the criminal justice system, either incarcerated, on parole, or awaiting trial. One-third (33%) were reported to have domestic violence problems. In addition, many fathers had multiple problems. Workers reported that over 40% of the contacted fathers had four or more of the potential problems listed in the survey.
- **Caseworkers know less about fathers than they do about mothers.** Caseworkers much more often answered “don’t know” to questions about a child’s father when they had readily available similar information on the mother. Typically, caseworkers reported not knowing information about mothers 1% to 5% of the time, depending on the item, while for fathers with whom they had been in contact, “don’t know” responses were more often around 15%.
- **Mothers had similar problem profiles.** It should be noted that the serious problems identified in fathers are the same kinds of problems and issues facing the mothers of children in foster care. Caseworkers reported that 65% of the children’s mothers had alcohol or drug problems, 38% were involved with the criminal justice system, and 60% had four or more problems identified. Only levels of criminal justice involvement were lower in the mothers.

Caseworker Training on Father Involvement

- **In the jurisdictions studied, training on father involvement was common.** Over two-thirds of caseworkers interviewed in the four study states (70%), reported having received training on

identifying, locating, or engaging fathers. These figures may not reflect the situation in other places.

- ***Training was associated with higher likelihood of having identified and engaged fathers of children in the sample.*** Those child welfare caseworkers who received training were more likely than others to report having identified a child's father, to have shared the case plan with the father, to have considered placing the child with his or her father, and to report that the agency sought financial assistance from the father as part of the case plan.

Results of Data Linkage with Child Support

- ***The level of coordination and interaction between child welfare and child support agencies varies widely by state.*** Fully 100% of the study's sample of foster children in Minnesota and Tennessee had existing case files in the child support agency, in comparison to 35% in Arizona and 25% in Massachusetts. The child support agency was not necessarily actively working these cases to establish and collect upon a child support order, but had a case file for each of the children through which information on paternity and the father's location could be shared.
- ***Child support files contain information on many children in foster care.*** The data linkage component of the study sought to determine whether more extensive use of the child support agency's information sources about fathers would be helpful to child welfare workers. The results indicate that in many cases child welfare agencies already have information on paternity, location, and support that coincides with child support agency records. There was a substantial subset of cases, however, in which child support records had information that was missing or conflicted with that recorded by child welfare caseworkers. For instance, in one-quarter of cases across study states, child welfare caseworkers' responses about paternity establishment conflicted with information contained in the child support administrative data.
- ***State and Federal parent locator services are a productive but under-utilized source of location information.*** On child welfare cases in which locate information had been sought through the child support systems' state or federal parent locator services (about two-thirds of all cases in the matching sample, with some variation across states), these methods were successful in providing location information in 96 percent of cases. It should be cautioned, however, that these were the results for cases in the sample on which locate results existed in the child support agency's files. This study did not conduct new locate requests. Child welfare caseworkers reported that state parent locator services had been used to try and locate the father in only 35 percent of cases in which the father had not been located by the child welfare agency at the time of the interview. In some additional cases the child support agency may have sought location information as part of a welfare case. There was considerable variation among the states in how often locator services were used, ranging from 3% of cases in Massachusetts, to 79% in Arizona. However, in approximately one-quarter of cases in each state but Arizona, caseworkers reported not knowing whether locator services were used.

Implications

This study is an exploratory look at nonresident fathers of children in the child welfare system. While the study findings do not define best practices, they can inform practice. In particular:

- ***Search for fathers early in the case.*** Most successful information gathering about a nonresident father's identity and location occurs very early in a case, usually as part of the case investigation activities. In this study, if a father's identity and location were not determined at case opening, there was less than a

40% chance that he would have been contacted successfully even once by the time the caseworker was interviewed (at which point children had been in care an average of two years). Agencies should consider whether information about fathers is being sought consistently at, or before, the time a child is first placed in foster care.

- ***Provide training to caseworkers on locating and involving fathers.*** Casework practice in seeking information on unidentified fathers and those whose location is unknown appears case specific and variable. Agencies may wish to make clear what steps caseworkers should consider when mothers do not know or share information about the child's father. Caseworker training appears to help caseworkers understand the importance of father involvement and facilitates the consideration of a father as a potential caregiver. In addition to methods of locating and involving fathers, training should address worker safety issues since safety concerns may discourage workers from making contact.
- ***Use child support data more routinely.*** Child support information, including father location, paternity, and financial support, can be a helpful tool in considering placements with fathers or other ways in which fathers can play constructive roles in their children's lives. The frequency with which caseworkers sought available information from child support varied by state and was related to administrators' perceptions of the relationships between the child welfare and child support agencies and the ease with which caseworkers could request information, including locator services.
- ***Develop models for involving fathers constructively.*** Unless the child's case goal is for placement with the father or his kin, caseworkers often are not sure what, if anything, they should be doing beyond sharing the child's case plan and offering visitation. There is considerable room for programming that engages these fathers on behalf of their children in ways that could extend beyond the child's stay in foster care and support whatever permanency goal is in the child's best interests.
- ***Address domestic violence and worker safety concerns.*** Caseworkers and administrators expressed a reluctance to involve some fathers because doing so might reintroduce potential abusers into volatile family situations. Administrators also raised concerns regarding worker safety when contacting the fathers of children on the caseload. Unless safety concerns are effectively addressed, both those related to worker safety as well as those related to the safety of the child and mother, efforts to involve fathers are likely to stall. Safety concerns need to be acknowledged and assessed at a case level and, as previously noted, through training. However, that nearly half of the fathers were never contacted by the agency suggests that little assessment of the actual risk presented is occurring.

This study also serves as a starting point for further research. Additional analysis of this data set is possible on topics including how state and local characteristics and particular state policies affect case practice regarding fathers. A public use data set for the study will be available through the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. Further, a second phase of this study will examine whether caseworkers' actions with respect to identifying, contacting, and engaging fathers are related to later permanency outcomes. Such an examination was not possible in the initial study since all of the children were in foster care at the time of the interviews, and thus no permanency outcome had yet been achieved. Future productive qualitative research could also examine specific methods of identifying, locating and involving fathers.

The full final report of this study is available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/>.

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