Unmarried Fathers: Perplexing Questions

by Esther Wattenberg

Where are all the unmarried fathers? And who are they? If we can identify them, will they establish paternity? Get jobs? Pay child support? Do well by their children? If not, why not? These questions are beginning to receive national attention, reflecting our increasing concerns with three distinct but interrelated trends.

First we are ending a decade in which the number of births to unmarried parents is the highest in the history of the nation. In 1987, the latest year for available figures, nearly two-thirds
of births to young women under the age of 20 were non-marital. This compares to 30 percent of births to this population in 1970. This steady rise was accompanied by another observation gleaned from census data. The number of children living in single parent households with an unmarried mother and, in frequent instances with an unmarried father, totaled almost 3 million. This is a ten-fold increase since 1970. Presently, it is estimated that one in five children is classified, at birth, as "out-of-wedlock."

Second, minor mothers are at high risk for long-term welfare dependency. Forty percent of young, never-married mothers who enter the welfare program when their child is less than three years old spend at least ten years on AFDC. In 1987, out-of-wedlock children were the largest group on AFDC, leaping ahead, statistically speaking, of children of divorced and separated parents who used to be the chief recipients of AFDC.

Third, an alarming number of out-of-wedlock children do not have a legal father. Nationally, it is estimated that only one out of three non-marital children could legally claim the benefits of an established paternity action.

A storehouse of studies accumulated over the past decade raises an alarm not only about the public cost of this rapidly growing family formation of never-married parents and their children, but also about the private tragedy of an almost certain destiny of poverty for the children. The studies emphasized a grim prophecy: A child born out-of-wedlock to a poor, young mother, especially if she were of minority background, was inescapably destined for a long spell of poverty.

Not surprisingly, the 1980s produced an abundance of programs for adolescent mothers and a surge of studies on the various factors that predisposed them to premature motherhood. "Prevention Strategies" became the touchstone phrase.

Strikingly absent were the parallel programs and reports on unmarried fathers. Indeed, the lagging attention to the "phantom" partner in adolescent childbearing has been noted as a peculiar aberration in the nation's concerns with premature parenting. However, scattered studies on fathers did appear from time to time yielding bits and pieces of knowledge about their status and their relationship to the family units they had produced. These studies, chiefly based on small, unrepresentative samples, and a few reports based on national survey data, provided a disconcerting variety of profiles. However, a few pertinent observations can be made.

**Demographic and Profile Data**

Comprehensive demographic data on unmarried fathers is not available. Where the age of unmarried fathers is known (age is not routinely required by states for birth certificate information), only 25 percent are identified as minor fathers. Very young adolescent mothers frequently identify much older men as the fathers of their children. Allegations that the children of these unions are a result of rape and incest are anecdotal. No reliable studies exist to corroborate the observation. Generally, the fathers of children born to teen mothers are 20 years or older.

In the studies comparing young men who were unmarried fathers and their peers who had not fathered a child, the former were found to be poorer, with lower academic performance and more school behavior problems. In 1984, approximately 80 percent of never-married young fathers (19 to 26 years old) were not living with their children. Sixty percent of black and Hispanic fathers were living with their parents or relatives.

A comparison of young, unmarried fathers and delinquent youths found that they shared many similarities and circumstances. In both groups, traits such as low self-esteem, negative responses to their predominant family structure, single parent families, and pervasive poverty confirmed in both groups a social identity that creates a greater likelihood for deviant behaviors. Clinical studies confirm this observation. Unmarried fathers, both black and white, are overrepresented in arrest record data.

Patterns of employment and income are erratic. Generally, black, young adult males show higher unemployment rates and markedly less income from wages than their white peers. But for both groups, the employment status of unwed fathers is bleak. Many work part-time. Many do not report this income. The number of young, unmarried fathers who are discouraged workers, not seeking work, or in correctional facilities is not known.

One study of 50 young, black unmarried fathers discloses the complex financial and social relationships that are frequently associated with young, unmarried families.

More than half had not completed high school. More than a third were unemployed, and only 20 percent worked full time. Only 15 percent were working at jobs that secured more than $3,000 per year. Many respondents reported that they were expected to and did, in fact, try to contribute to their family of origin to help their siblings. Their contributions to their own children were necessarily sporadic and sparse.

In this self-report study, fathers portrayed their relationships with the mother and their children as compassionate and caring. The majority stated they provided baby-sitting and some physical care of their infants. Eighty percent provided money for food, and a small number contributed toward medical care and clothes. The money amounts ranged from $5 to $25 per month, although this was not a consistent pattern. Twenty-six percent would give money to the mother only when she asked, and about one-third would give money on special occasions only.

Contradictory findings abound on the fathers' involvement with their children. A few studies suggest that at the time of birth, young fathers are often enthusiastic about their role, but this dwindles sharply after the first year. They either drift away on their own accord, or are pushed. In one study, 40 percent of teen mothers had no contact with fathers.

The role of grandparents emerged as an important influence. More than half of the grandparents helped their sons
financially; 89 percent wanted their sons to maintain a relationship with their babies. However, a substantial number of paternal grandparents considered the mothers of their out-of-wedlock grandchildren as unacceptable marriage partners for their sons. Seventy percent stated that they did not want their sons to marry the mothers of their grandchildren.12

Other studies portrayed the father as committed to the families they have formed, but facing unbridled hostility from the young mother’s family.13

Yet another study (information derived from 30 white teenage mothers in a large urban setting) disclosed a profile of fathers as unacceptable either as companions or for their parenting role. Poor work records, compounded by serious alcohol and drug problems, were identified as common characteristics.14

A portion of unmarried fathers do marry, but not the mother of their child. Little is known about the effect of their marriage on the relationship to their out-of-wedlock child.

Much of the information on fathers is derived from their partners. Young, unmarried fathers (YUFs) between the ages of 18 and 24 have been especially difficult to involve in interviews. They are difficult to find (about 40 percent of teen mothers in one study had no contact at all with the fathers of their children). Fathers are often deterred from access to their children by the mothers and their parents; consequently only the broadest outline of the paternal role with their out-of-wedlock children is available.

In summary, unmarried fathers carry the burden of mixed and inconsistent findings from fragmented studies.

Social Service Programs for Unmarried Fathers

It is estimated that over a thousand programs emerged in the 1980s to deal with adolescent parents.

While social service agencies generally limited their services to unmarried mothers, the decade saw stepped-up efforts to reach unmarried fathers.15

The effectiveness of these services could not be assessed with any conviction. It is generally conceded, however, that outreach and techniques for responding to the social service needs of young, unmarried fathers were diametrically inadequate. Participation in employment and training programs and attempts to lure them into parenting classes have been disappointing. Staff members observe that unmarried fathers are ‘hard to work with;’ difficult to find and unreliable in commitments to assist the mother.

The reputation of the agency appears to be pivotal. Most programs are staffed by women, and fathers perceive them as advocates for the mother. This attitude is often cited to explain the failure to engage the father in a constructive way. The necessity for male staff with the same racial background is recommended as essential for programs engaged in serving this underserved population.

Little is known about the way programs introduce and discuss paternity issues with YUFs. There is some data that indicate that the staffs of these programs do not fully understand the benefits of establishing paternity and child support orders, and may not share the value that paternity adjudication is in the long-term interest of the child. They take the position that paternity adjudication is a ‘dad hunt for a walking wallet,’ a punitive and harassing action of a governmental body searching through the fiscal pockets of an impoverished group of men.

In summary, diverse attitudes create a chilling social service environment. Encouraging young fathers to use the resources of the social service system continues to be a challenge.

Paternity and Child Support Issues

In the latter part of the decade, a persistent question about unmarried fathers emerged, reflecting the intensified policy concern with enforcing child support responsibilities. Was there any value in pursuing a paternity action—the first step in child support for a non-marital child—if the unmarried father was a poor risk for a financial contribution to his child?

The response to this question was muddled, depending not only on a mixed perception of his ability to pay, but on varying attitudes of the mother and her kin toward the unmarried father’s personal behaviors, and their disinclination to attach him to the family formation he had created. Moreover, local judges, district attorneys, and an overburdened child support enforcement system also made decisions as to whether he was worth their time and effort in establishing a legal link to his child.

Against these realities, the public policy interest never wavered: Legally linking an out-of-wedlock child to the father is an essential step in improving the life chances of that child.16 But there was a large gap between policy intent and accomplishments. Despite recurrent national legislation, the existence of the Uniform Parentage Act, and a series of Supreme Court decisions designed to protect the legal rights of children regardless of the marital status of their parents, the numbers of non-marital children legally linked to their fathers is still inadequate to serve the interests of a growing generation of children. Generally, only one out of three out-of-wedlock children are ‘legitimized’ and therefore have the same protection as marital children for a considerable range of rights: child support; social security; worker’s compensation; armed service benefits; insured health care; and the psychological benefits of identity, health, and genetic history.

After more than a decade of legislation and legal decisions, significant barriers remain, frustrating equal protection efforts to safeguard the interests of out-of-wedlock children.

Several factors appear to impede paternity actions. The strikingly low number of court-ordered child support payments made to women on AFDC is a reflection, in large part, of the low rates of paternity adjudication. In 1985, only 18 percent of unmarried mothers were awarded child support, compared to 82 percent of divorced and separated women.

From many young mothers’ perspectives, the father is perceived as not
having a financial future that is worth protecting for their child’s future. This dismal economic outlook is shared by grandparents and kin. This network actively disconnects him from the child, discouraging a paternity action. To consider that the father’s fortunes may change over the 18 years of his child’s dependent status seems too abstract and unpromising.

With paternity adjudication comes the father’s rights to visitation and custody. His involvement may be an unwelcome complication in a stage of life where short-term relationships are characteristic for the young mother. Marriage to the father of the child is rarely mentioned as an option.

Young, unmarried mothers frequently express a fear that if they pursue a paternity action, this will be considered a hostile act and will jeopardize an essential, but admittedly unreliable, source of income from the father’s occasional contributions. Further, the stubborn truth is that child support will not necessarily improve the family’s economic status if the mother is on AFDC, since the child support payment goes to the government to reduce AFDC costs. (Only $50 per month is given as a supplement to the AFDC grant when child support is collected.)

In addition, a fundamental question can be raised: Can the young, unmarried father make a financial contribution to his child’s support? Mixed observations cloud the answer. There is an assumption that the declining earnings of young men are characteristic of the service economy. Reliable income data does not exist for a representative sample of unmarried fathers. Further, there are no long-term predictors of how the father’s earnings may change over the 18-year lifetime of his minor child.

Skepticism dominates the general debate about the role of child support enforcement as a strategy to improve the economic status of children in low-income families. The debate is even sharper when it centers on young, unmarried fathers. Are they unable or unwilling to acknowledge responsibility toward their child? Widely held assumptions that they are unemployed, with incomplete educations, add to the reluctance to encourage them to pursue paternity actions.

Yet recent findings challenge this assertion and suggest that a significant portion of young fathers are, and want to be, involved in the lives of their children, financially and otherwise; the findings indicate that they may be more open to the value of pursuing paternity determination than is commonly supported. Patterns may differ according to race. 17

Procedural Barriers

Exploratory studies in the 1980s on the barriers faced by young, unmarried parents disclosed serious problems that are rooted in the procedures for establishing paternity. From the young fathers’ perspective, the procedures, beginning with AFDC eligibility and moving through the child support enforcement office, are rude and crude. The interactions with personnel in these agencies are characterized as punitive, coercive, and intimidating. Factual information on paternity actions is meager, and most information is derived from “the street.” The maze of laws, regulations, internal operating procedures, and uncertain consequences affecting the AFDC grant combine to put paternity “off limits.” Generally, then, the response is avoidance.

The factors that encourage or discourage paternity actions are relatively unknown territory. 19

The problems of Child Support Enforcement offices and their interaction with young, unmarried fathers have not received systematic attention, but some observations can be made from exploratory studies:

• The rights of young fathers are not routinely protected. The provision of a counseling environment is rare. Guardians ad litem for minor fathers are not routinely available. Blood test information and the right to an attorney are not uniformly available.

• Procedural delays are pervasive, ranging from 18 months to five years.

• There is insufficient outreach for purposes of advising unmarried parents of their rights and obligations.

• Paternity actions are susceptible to receiving a lower priority within the child support enforcement agency, as they are less likely to result in immediate collections. The budgets of these offices are determined, in part, by their support collections. Unmarried fathers are a mobile group, and postponement is often equivalent to disregard.

• Overburdened and understaffed agency offices with heavy caseloads find it time-consuming to deal with the hesitancies and confusions of young, unmarried parents. State interests in conserving judicial and fiscal resources may postpone actions or ignore young parents.

In some courtrooms, the assignment of child support obligations is cast in a punitive tone. In others, the child support award is avoided altogether to spare the father’s future, because it might interfere with his schooling, his job opportunities, his life chances. Indeed, approaches to the unmarried father reflect confusion and bewilderment on how to treat his responsibilities. Responses vacillate between lenience and punishment.

Conclusion

One cannot go overboard in interpreting the slim data base that exists on unmarried fathers. Almost nothing is known of the fathers of non-AFDC out-of-wedlock children. The existing data must be examined with social class and racial factors in mind.

What shapes and influences an attitude of family obligation as manifested in a paternity adjudication and a long-lasting attachment to one’s child is uncharted territory. Not well understood is why fathers play a dwindling role in the lives of their non-marital children, and why fathers are overwhelmingly rejected as plausible candidates for the fathering role. Little is known on the cohabitation patterns of young, unmarried couples, and how these situations discourage paternity adjudication.

Coming into sharp focus is the necessity to understand more about the phenomenon of out-of-wedlock childbearing, and the relationship of this phenomenon to poverty and welfare re-
Can we pay more attention to the elusive father and his role in preparing for self-sufficiency? How do unmarried fathers relate to welfare reform issues?  

The welfare dependency of unwed mothers cannot be understood without bringing the somewhat invisible father into clearer focus. Recent developments for involving young males in programs to enable them to carry out their responsibilities toward their children are emerging. 

The concept of equality, in which young males are expected to share the consequences of an out-of-wedlock birth with the young mother, has alerted social services providers to their responsibilities in creating effective outreach strategies. The widely held belief that the father's exclusive role is one of financial responsibility is broadening. The equity argument that he should be a participant in the work and training mandates of welfare reform is gaining ground. 

The general tendency to think only of short-range goals in which the father is defined as a non-contributing person is changing. Several programs around the country are linking unmarried fathers to work opportunities to enhance their future capacity for child support. As the role of unmarried fathers gains visibility and his rights are protected, his responsibilities are stressed, and the perception that he has a future worth protecting for his child gains ground. 

Perhaps this will convince child support enforcement programs that have been reluctant to invest scarce resources in cases with little short-term collection potential to establish a base of commitment to safeguard the long-term interests of the child. Optimism would prevail, based on the notion that an unmarried father's fortunes can change. 

One direction for public policy that is receiving some attention is to disengage the paternity actions from the child support enforcement concerns. An efficient and effective method for insuring paternity actions, primarily through administrative procedures,

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Many of the training opportunities require that the provider take time away from her work—or her family. Moreover, regulation can entail costs for providers, as they are more likely to have to apply for insurance, pay taxes on their earnings, and make modifications to their homes. The awareness that regulation does not serve their needs directly may, in some cases, undermine provider resistance to regulation.

But there are ways to improve the working conditions of family day care providers. Regulatory procedures might consider more fully the needs and concerns of providers by protecting them in their negotiations with parents through such mechanisms as requiring parents to sign contracts, offering training in the provider's home, and helping providers locate clients.

Additional ideas for easing the problems facing family day care providers come from the providers themselves. The largest single response given to the question of what might have improved the work among those child care workers who had left the occupation was the possibility of having someone to provide a break for them and of having someone to provide substitute care. Others spoke about needing more frequent visits from outreach workers to relieve the isolation of family day care. Still others spoke about wishing to have access to toy and book lending libraries, about career opportunities within family day care that would enable them to take time off from direct service, and about education for parents focusing on the choice and use of child care. As we design public policy for child care in this country, we would do well to heed these voices.

2 M. Whitebook, C. Howes, R. Darragh and J. Friedman, "Who's Minding the Child Care Work-
3 Ibid, pp. 2-6, backcover.
7 National Staffing Study, p. 12.
9 Detailed information on statistical analyses may be obtained from Margaret K. Nelson, Department of Sociology, Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT. 05753.
11 The women also reported that the intense work with children was highly stressful. They said, for example, that the noise and constancy of children's demands were sources of stress. Stress itself, however, is not related to turnover: Women who reported high levels of stress in the questionnaire were no more likely to have left the occupation one year later than were those who reported lower levels of stress.
12 Whitebook et al., p. 2; See also J. Freudenberg and M. J. Reed, "Stress in Live-in Child Care," and B. Sutton, "Consideration of Time in Child Care Work: Observations on Child Care Work Experiences," in Child Care Quarterly, Summer 1977.
14 This difference is not statistically significant at the .05 level.
15 It should be noted, however, that because of the regulations surrounding registered day care in Vermont the ratios reported among family day care providers were lower than those recommended for center-based care by the Abt study and lower than those in the proprietary centers cited by Whitebook et al.

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would relieve the court system of this burdensome caseload, and at the same time eliminate the intimidation of court hearings. A shift to the judicial system would occur in the event of a contested paternity case. At this point, access to legal representation and blood testing information would be assured for every unmarried father. The child support enforcement concerns and their use of the courts could then concentrate on the father's ability to pay, changing circumstances, visitation, and other child support-related issues.

It should be possible to create a counseling environment for young, unmarried fathers that acknowledges their responsibilities, acquires accurate information on their rights, both legal and social, and enables unmarried fathers to receive services unencumbered by threats and intimidation.

Responses to fathers, the "phantom" half of the rapidly growing family formation of out-of-wedlock children and their unmarried parents, are at an early stage of development. Unmarried fathers should be at the top of the social agenda for the 1990's.

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In addition to exploring how the families interviewed resolved the questions of how to prepare older children for the new baby and how to divide responsibility for all of the children (his, hers, and theirs), Dr. Bernstein addresses issues as the shrinking stepfamily (as children grow up and leave home), stepsiblings who do not live with the mutual child, and the possibility of another divorce. She also examines how important “outsiders”—grandparents, former spouses, other relatives and professionals—can build “bridges” or “barriers” to family integration.

The interviews with children of all ages, in their roles as mutual children, half brothers and sisters, and stepchildren, are particularly revealing. Poignant anecdotes illustrate the pressures and demands on the mutual child—who is often viewed as the “rallying point” for the new family—and the confusion and resentment that stepchildren sometimes feel as a result of well-meaning gestures by stepparents. The children interviewed, ever vigilant to signs of different treatment, are astute observers of parental behavior and family dynamics.

This description of life with “yours, mine, and ours” families will, of course, be most useful to the members of these families, who will surely recognize themselves, take comfort from the universality of their experiences, and derive insights that can help them in their own situations. Professionals and others who come into contact with blended families will gain a better understanding of, and develop a greater sensitivity to, the complexities of life for many families today.