

Multiple-Father Families, Child Support Enforcement, and Welfare

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Extended abstract

In the United States, multiple-partner fertility is common, rising, and appears to have negative implications for children's wellbeing. It also poses major challenges for policies aimed at child wellbeing, such as child-support laws and marriage initiatives. Despite this, relatively little attention has been paid to its root causes. This paper examines whether child support enforcement policies, together with the welfare system, have contributed to its prevalence.

While the multiple-partner fertility of both women and men matters to child welfare and to policy, this paper examines only women's multiple-partner fertility (referred to henceforth as multiple-father fertility). This is for several reasons. First, we are interested in the contributory roles of child support enforcement and welfare rules, and even though both kinds of rules are sex-neutral, adult recipients of child support and welfare are predominantly women. Second, the data favor this approach. Few surveys contain the data needed to measure multiple-partner fertility, and the ones that do usually gather data on household members only. Given that most children reside with their mothers, surveys of mothers are more likely also to contain data on their children, such as whether a mother's children share the same father. Because men are more likely to live apart from their children from prior relationships, it is much harder to determine whether a man's children all share the same mother. Furthermore, it is generally believed that

women's reports of how many children they have borne are more accurate than men's reports of the number of children they have fathered.

Although multiple-father fertility is observed at all socio-economic levels, it is especially common among welfare recipients. This may be the simple outcropping of an overlap between groups prone to welfare receipt and groups prone to multiple-partner fertility (e.g., African-Americans, or women who become mothers as teens). It may also be that, because of their family structure, multiple-father families are more likely to be eligible for benefits, and therefore more visible on the rolls. We explain, in the first part of the paper, how welfare's eligibility rules, in the presence of lax child support enforcement, create a financial incentive for the formation of multiple-father families. It is worth investigating whether those incentives are large enough to have significant effects on behavior, and whether the stricter child support enforcement policies of the past two decades have offset those effects. In this study, we focus exclusively on the pre-TANF era, so that our analysis is not confounded by abrupt behavioral changes that may have been provoked by the welfare reforms authorized by Congress in 1996.

The strictness of child support enforcement varies over time and by state, as do welfare benefits. Our proxy for the level of enforcement is the annual ratio of the number of paternities established by a state's child support enforcement agency to the number of non-marital births in that state. Among our controls for other state characteristics are the state divorce rate and a 1998 measure of women's reproductive rights. We also control for a number of MSA-level characteristics, such as the sex ratio, the male unemployment rate, and the male-female wage ratio.

As in many analyses of public policies and family structure, we present separate analyses for white, black, Hispanic, and Asian mothers. The incidence of multiple-father fertility is highest among black mothers (14.4 percent) and lowest among Asian mothers (3.8 percent)

We estimate binomial versions of our model (“One father” versus “Two or more fathers”) and as well as multinomial versions (“One father” versus “Two fathers” versus “Three or more fathers”). The level of child support enforcement is not statistically significant in any of the specifications of the binomial model. We do find a significant, positive, and small correlation between welfare benefits and multiple-father fertility.

The multinomial model yields similar results. The child enforcement variable is statistically insignificant in every specification. Welfare benefits are positively correlated with having children by two men, but among black women only. The probability of having children by three men is correlated with welfare benefits among black and white women alike. In proportional terms, the effects of a \$100 benefit increase are comparable: for black mothers, the estimated effect is a 0.22 percentage point change (against a baseline of 2.34 percent), and for white mothers, a 0.04 percentage point change (against a baseline of 0.56 percent).

As a check on the plausibility of these estimates, we exclude mothers with more than a high-school education -- the ones for whom the level of welfare benefits should be the least relevant to fertility decisions -- and repeat the analysis. The child support enforcement variable remains insignificant, but the correlation between benefits and having children by two fathers becomes larger, for white and black mothers alike. The correlation with having three or more fathers also becomes larger (although for black mothers, it is no longer significant at the 5-percent level, probably reflecting the decreased sample size).

All in all, our SIPP data offer no evidence at all that child support enforcement efforts reduce the prevalence of multiple-father families. Higher welfare benefits do seem to be associated with more multiple-father families among blacks and whites, but the effects are small.