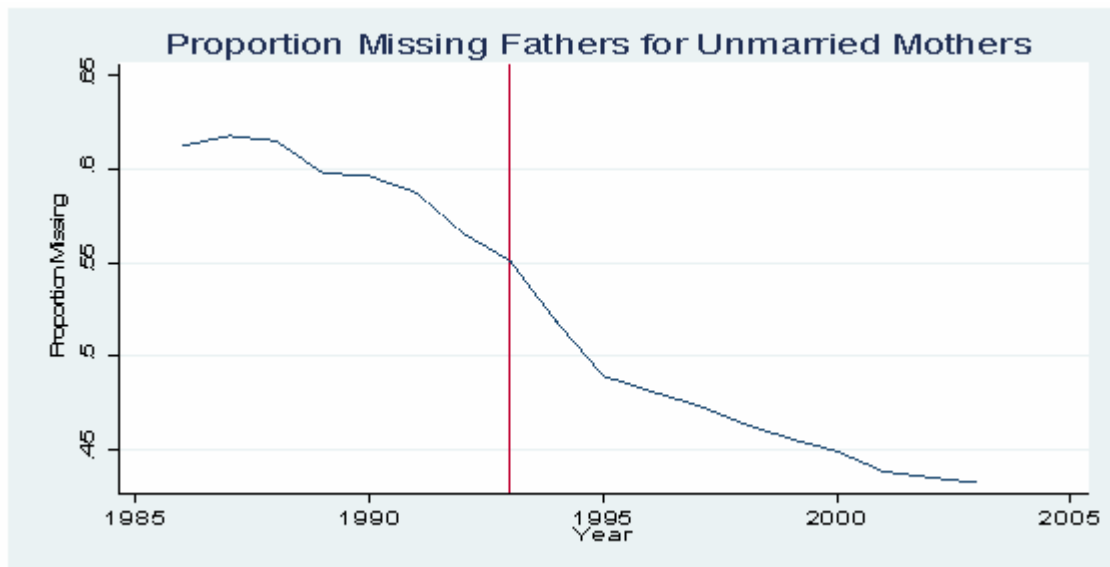


Child Support Policies and Information about Fathers on Birth Certificates

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While hospital administrators have routinely collected information on the fathers of children born to married women, birth certificates are often missing information on the fathers of children born to unmarried women. However, among unmarried women the percent of birth certificates with missing father information declined by about twenty points between 1985 and 2003, as seen in the figure below. Presumably, part of this reduction in missing information is due to the increased fraction of nonmarital births that occur to cohabiting women (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Raley 2001). Another factor, which we highlight in this study, is changes in child support and paternity establishment policies.



Beginning in the mid-1980s, Congress passed a series of acts aimed at increasing the payment of child support and the establishment of legal paternity for children born outside of marriage. The 1993 OBRA, in particular, focused on increasing paternity establishment rates with the requirement that all states implement in-hospital voluntary paternity establishment processes. Exploiting state-level variation in child support and paternity establishment policies between 1985 and 2003, this study examines the influence of these policies on the provision of father's information on birth certificates for nonmarital births. The importance of this research endeavor is discussed in closing.

Hypotheses

We have developed three hypotheses concerning the influence of child support enforcement and paternity establishment policies on the provision of father's information on nonmarital birth certificates:

H₁: States with stronger child support enforcement and paternity establishment policies will have less missing father information on birth certificates.

H₂: Associations between policies and missing data will be weaker for less educated women than for more educated women.

H₃: Associations will be stronger before 1993 than after this time.

In order to be eligible for child support a woman who is not married to the father of her child must first establish paternity. Although having the father's name on the birth certificate and legal paternity are not identical, they are highly correlated.¹ Therefore, strengthening child support enforcement and paternity establishment policies should increase the proportion of nonmarital births where the father's information is put on the birth certificate. We expect child support enforcement and paternity establishment policies to have weaker effects for less educated women because lower income fathers are more likely to be loosely attached to the formal labor market, and lower income mothers may have more to gain by establishing informal arrangements with the father of their child, thus reducing the need for legal paternity establishment. Mothers receiving welfare, in particular, favor informal support because states typically do not pass through father's child support payments and use these funds to reduce the amount of TANF they pay to mothers who have a child support order. We predict that state policies will have weaker effects after 1993, because the strong federal mandate reduced the variation in state policies. As evidence of this, we find that the between-state variation in whether father information was missing on birth certificates dropped from about one-half to about one-fifth between the years of 1985 and 2003 (results not shown).

Measures and Models

To evaluate the influence of policies on missing father information, we use Vital Statistics data from 1985 and 2003, in addition to key variables measuring the strength of child support enforcement and paternity establishment in states obtained from various years of the Child Support Enforcement Agency Annual Report. Due to the large number of cases over the years (i.e., tens of millions of births), for each state and year nonmarital births are stratified by characteristics of the mother (i.e., age, education, and race), and by the sex of child. Our dependent variable is the proportion of nonmarital births (for each of the 289,028 cells) in which father's race and age are missing. As independent variables, we include lagged measures for the paternity establishment rate for nonmarital births (PATRAT), the ratio of child support collections per administrative expenditures (COLLEX), and child support administrative expenditures per case (EXPCASE); these last two measures respectively capture a state's effectiveness and effort collecting child support payments. Because incentives or willingness to establish paternity may vary by

¹ Beginning in 1996 federal law required that paternity had to be formally established before the father's name could be put on the birth certificate, but prior to 1996, his name could appear on the birth certificate even if paternity had not been formally established. It is also possible that legal paternity is established several months or years after the birth, but the father's name is not included on the birth certificate.

the mother's characteristics, and by the sex of the child, we also include these variables as controls.

Our models use weighted least squares to account for the fact that cells are based on a varying number of observations. We estimate three different sets of models. The first set takes into account both state and year fixed effects. The second set drops the state fixed effects due to the concerns that within-state changes in missing data from one year to the next may not be meaningful. The third set adds interaction terms between our three policy variables and indicator variables for whether the mother has a high school education or less.

Preliminary Findings

The table below shows results for the effects of key variables in our preliminary models. Results indicate that increased paternity establishment and child support enforcement reduce the likelihood of missing father's information. The more pronounced effects of paternity establishment and child support expenditures in the second model (column two) are expected given the possibility that this model fails to take into account unmeasured characteristics of states that influence both child support enforcement and data collection practices in hospitals. Results for the third model (column three) suggest that the effects of these variables are indeed weaker for lower income women. In fact, the paternity establishment rates has virtually no influence on whether information is missing for these women (i.e., $-.549 + .498 = -.047$ versus $-.549$ for more educated women).

Lagged policy plus controls	With state fixed effects	No state fixed effects	No state fixed effects
PATRAT	-.332***	-.516***	-.549***
COLLEX	-.331***	-.011	-.027#
EXPCASE	-.031	-1.023***	-1.909***
PATRAT (<=HS)	---	---	0.498***
COLLEX (<=HS)	---	---	0.018
EXPCASE (<=HS)	---	---	1.085***
MOM BLACK	.671***	.965***	.973***
MOM OTHER RACE	-.020	-.111**	-.034
MOM < HS	.220***	.194***	.195***
MOM SOME COLLEGE	-.158***	-.160***	.424***
MOM COLLEGE	-.501***	-.635***	-.040

To investigate the robustness of our results and the relevance for several subpopulations of interest, we plan to conduct several additional analyses that:

- Experiment with different policy measures, especially those relevant to the intersection between welfare and child support (e.g., benefit levels, sanctions for non-cooperation, and pass through / disregard policies).
- Control for aggregate state characteristics that might be related to the prevalence of cohabitation or other incentives for unmarried fathers to be more involved with their children.
- Investigate more thoroughly practices of different states for putting the father's name on birth certificates.

Importance

This topic is important for a number of reasons. First, the proportion of missing father's information for nonmarital births is substantial, and our study sheds light on the circumstances under which birth certificates more completely provide information about fathers. In addition, most studies that impute father's age when it is missing on birth certificates assume that it is missing at random (conditional on mother's age). Our results suggest that assumption may not be valid, and imply that any imputation should be done within state and year. Finally, if being on the birth certificate is an indicator of father involvement, our results show that child support policies can increase that involvement.

References

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