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A National Study of Male Involvement Among Families in Contact With the Child Welfare System

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Few studies inform the frequency and type of adult male involvement in families in contact with child welfare, and even fewer explore how male involvement relates to child welfare outcomes. This study employed data from a sample of 3,978 families in contact with the U.S. child welfare system, drawn from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being. The nature of male involvement in these families and its relationship to (a) caseworkers' perception of children's risk for maltreatment rereport and (b) entry into out-of-home care were explored. Results indicate that most caregivers report male involvement, distinct types of male involvement are related to the likelihood of out-of-home care, and households that include nonparental adult males are perceived by caseworkers as relatively risky. No male involvement indicator tested, however, was related to maltreatment rereport. Implications include the need to appropriately assess, include, and engage adult male family members across diverse family systems.

Keywords: *men; family relationships; surveys*

The role of men in families has received increased attention in recent years; but child welfare has largely maintained its focus on maternal caregivers (Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006). A growing body of research indicates that men, particularly those who play a father-type role in families, can affect their children both positively and negatively. An overly narrow focus on female caregivers neglects the role of males in children's lives. Only a small number of studies have examined male involvement among families receiving child welfare services. This study examines the extent to which adult males are present in families involved in child welfare, and whether their involvement in families is related to child welfare caseworkers' assessment of risk to the child, entry into out-of-home care, and maltreatment rereport using a secondary analysis of data drawn from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW).

Background and Significance

The current literature on adult members of families served by child welfare can be organized into three themes: absence, unimportance, and dangerousness. The absence theme relates to the belief that men are rarely

active members of high-risk families, or so inconsistently involved as to be nearly impossible to track, let alone target for services. The unimportance theme suggests that even when fathers are present, their relative contribution to families is trivial or far less important than that of mothers. The last theme, dangerousness, supports the exclusion of adult males from services because they are dangerous or contribute little but risks to families. Each of these themes is discussed in detail below.

Absence

Men's participation in low-income high-risk families, such as those often served by child welfare, has been characterized as inconsistent and fleeting at best (e.g.,

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Hecker, 1991; Polansky, Gaudin, & Kilpatrick, 1992). Despite the prevalence of mother-headed households in child welfare, some small studies suggest that most children at risk for maltreatment or reported to child welfare services have an adult male who plays a father-type role in their lives (Dubowitz, Black, Kerr, Starr, & Harrington, 2000; Marshall, English, & Stewart, 2001). From the perspective of a family, important male figures in the family may or may not include biological or legal fathers. For example, Marshall and colleagues (2001) conducted a study of biological and nonbiological father figures in families referred to child protective services using Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect data. Only 38% of mothers identified the biological father as the primary father figure in their children's lives. Other father figures identified included unmarried nonbiologically related males, stepfathers, foster fathers, and other male relatives. Other child welfare researchers have also found that a variety of adult males play a supportive role in children's lives, and that benefits conferred by this supportive male figure were not moderated by the children's biological or legal relationship to him (Dubowitz et al., 2001).

The landscape of U.S. families is no longer dominated by two biological parents and marriage (Bramlett & Blumberg, 2007). Declines in marriage and increases in nonmarital child birth can lead to complex parenting arrangements where more than one man plays a parenting role in a single family (Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007; Roy & Burton, 2007). These trends are often reflected, or even amplified, in child welfare-served populations (Sonenstein, Malm, & Billing, 2002). Diverse constellations of male involvement in families forged through marriage and other romantic partnerships, biological relationships, or household membership might each have distinct implications for children, families, and the provision of child welfare services. This complexity suggests the need for research that considers the possibility that multiple types of males are involved in families receiving child welfare services.

Unimportance

Research indicates that adult males, especially those who play a fathering role, have an influence on child well-being independent of mothers or other female caregivers (e.g., Connell & Goodman, 2002). Children who have positive and engaging relationships with these men are less likely to be neglected (Dubowitz, Black, et al., 2000) and have better developmental outcomes in general (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Children in high-risk families who have a positive relationship with a supportive adult male figure have been found to

have better cognitive scores, perceived confidence, and social acceptance than children without positive male involvement (Dubowitz et al., 2001).

Likewise, children who experience inconsistent and aggressive relationships with father figures have more behavioral and emotional problems (e.g., Stormshak, Bierman, McMahon, & Lengua, 2000). Even though child welfare services have not traditionally targeted adult males through services, many families are involved in child welfare at least in part because of male-related risk factors like domestic violence and substance abuse (Duggan et al., 2004). Taken together, this research indicates that adult males are potentially important targets for research and services aimed at supporting children's well-being. It is unknown, however, whether male involvement has any relationship to outcomes for children in contact with child welfare.

Dangerousness

Unfortunately, studies of sexual abuse represent the bulk of research dedicated to adult males in child welfare-involved families (Taylor & Daniel, 2000). Although these types of cases are an important area of study, they represent only a fraction of child welfare cases (DHHS, 2006), and a narrow lens through which to view male involvement. These dominantly negative representations of male involvement in families in contact with child welfare could influence caseworkers' perceptions of these men. An important question to consider is whether perceived risk is reflective of observed outcomes. In other words, is the involvement of males who are perceived to be risky linked to outcomes such as placement into out-of-home care or maltreatment rereport?

This study seeks to quantitatively examine the themes of absence, unimportance, and dangerousness among families in contact with the child welfare system. Four questions are explored in this article: (a) To what extent are adult males absent from child welfare-involved families? (b) Is male involvement related to caseworkers' perception of children's risk? (c) Is male involvement related to maltreatment rereport? and (d) Is male involvement related to entry into out-of-home care?

Method

Sample

The NSCAW sample of children was selected using a two-stage combined stratification and cluster design. In the first stage, the United States was divided into nine strata. The majority of children in child welfare reside in

eight states that constituted the first eight strata. The ninth and final stratum consisted of the remaining 42 states and the District of Columbia. Within each stratum, individual areas served by a single child protective service (CPS) agency constituted the primary sampling units (PSUs). The PSU sampling frame included all service areas with approximately 60 or more cases per year. The smaller service areas that were not included in the sampling frame constituted about 3% of all cases nationally. One hundred PSUs were randomly selected from each stratum using a probability-proportionate-to-size procedure. Of the 100 PSUs selected, 8 were considered ineligible because they were in states requiring first contact to the target child's caregiver to be made by a CPS worker, rather than an NSCAW field representative (for more detail regarding the NSCAW methods, see NSCAW Research group, 2002).

NSCAW data include information on 5,501 children reported to CPS. These data provide information about the child and their families collected from the children's primary caregivers and the child welfare caseworker. Families were identified from PSU lists or files of children ages 0 to 14 years who were investigated for child abuse or neglect between the months October 1999 and December 2000. The subsample used for the current study included only those children whose primary caregivers included a legal or biological relative. These legal and biological relatives included biological parents, step and adoptive parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings. Families who reported that another unspecified relative was playing a primary caregiver role were not included in these analyses. Families whose children were in out-of-home care at baseline were also excluded resulting in the final sample of 3,978 families.

Measures

Male involvement. Data on up to 10 household members were provided by primary caregivers, including age, gender, and relationship to the child at baseline. Household membership was collapsed to four mutually exclusive categories by male membership, including households with (a) biological fathers, (b) step or adoptive fathers, (c) other adult males, or (d) no adult male membership. Primary caregivers also reported on their own marital status, cohabitation with a romantic partner, any secondary caregiver's relationship with the child, and child's contact with any noncustodial parent in the last year. Each of these different types of male involvement was constructed as dichotomous variables to allow for different combinations of male involvement.

Family violence. Caseworkers reported maltreatment type, and whether a male was reported to be a perpetrator. The most severe type of maltreatment reported was based on the caseworkers' assessment. Caseworkers identified the type of maltreatment representing the most significant threat to the child out of all the different types of maltreatment identified in the initial report. Caseworkers also reported on whether the child experienced severe harm as a result of maltreatment or a high level of risk at baseline, regardless of the outcome of the child welfare investigation. The caseworkers' assessment of the harm experienced by the child as a result of the maltreatment was reported on a 4-point scale ranging from *none* to *severe*. The presence or absence of domestic violence was also reported by the caseworkers who were asked to assess whether there was active domestic violence at the time of the investigation.

Demographics. Family demographics, including the age, gender, and race/ethnicity of the child, as well as household poverty, were reported by the primary caregiver. Household poverty was determined using the 2000 census poverty thresholds. These thresholds were calculated based on the specific combination and number of children and adults living in the household relative to the poverty threshold for that type of household.

Outcomes. Similar to the harm measure, caseworkers were asked to assess the risk to the child using a 4-point scale ranging from *none* to *severe*. Measures of out-of-home care and maltreatment rereport were also derived from caseworker and caregiver reports. Maltreatment rereport was a dichotomous variable representing any subsequent rereport of maltreatment at any wave (1 through 4) subsequent to the investigation. Although the maltreatment rereport variable has been found to be underreported and therefore negatively biased, analyses that dichotomize children on the basis of rereporting, as in this article, are not subject to bias (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2007). Entry into out-of-home care was similarly measured as a dichotomous variable that indicated whether the child was living in any type of out-of-home care at any follow-up wave.

Analyses

Analyses for the current article were performed using Stata Statistical Software Release 9 (StataCorp, 2005). Stata's survey commands were used to account for the sampling and weighting strategy of the NSCAW.

Multiple imputation. Multiple imputation (MI) was employed in the current study to proactively address the

complex patterns of missing data that exist in the NSCAW. Although the use of MI requires some strong assumptions about the nature of the missing data, in simulation studies, MI generally outperforms other approaches such as listwise deletion and setting missing values to the mean (Croy & Novins, 2005). For more information about the use of MI and other methods for missing variables, please see Croy and Novins (2005) for a recent and accessible discussion.

In the current study, five fully imputed databases were created. Analyses were performed separately in each imputed data set, and the final point estimates reported in the results are a statistical average of the results of analyses carried out with each of the data sets individually. Standard errors are calculated using an ANOVA-like formula that accounts for both sampling variation within modeled data sets and variability among data sets that reflects the models' uncertainty. Royston's (2004) multiple imputation by chained equations (MICE) procedure was used to impute each of the data sets. This procedure employs switching regression, an iterative multivariable regression technique. Univariate imputation sampling is called multiple times by Stata's MICE program to impute missing values in each specified variable based on a multiple regression modeled on specified predictors. *Micombine* commands are then used to produce model estimates with reasonable standard errors.

All of the variables used in this study were included in the imputation model (Pigott, 2001), and all variables with missing data were imputed. The variable with the largest percentage of missing cases was the poverty variable (23%). All remaining imputed variables were missing for 8% or less cases.

Statistical models. Male involvement among families in contact with the child welfare system was first explored descriptively by using proxy indicators, including male reported as a primary or secondary caregiver, marriage, household membership, and contact with a noncustodial biological parent when the biological father is not reported to be living in the home.

Next, three logistic regression models were used to test the association between different types of male involvement and the outcomes of interest: caseworkers' perception of risk to the child, maltreatment rereport, and entry into out-of-home care controlling for demographic and family violence factors. All variables were entered into the model simultaneously to test the robustness of any associations between male involvement and outcomes controlling for these factors.

Table 1
Unweighted Baseline Sample Male
Involvement Type ($n = 3,978$)

	Percentage
Household types	
Biological father	31.70
Step or adoptive father	10.52
Other nonparental adult male	9.41
No adult male	48.49
Primary caregivers marital status	
Married	26.71
Not married	73.29
Noncustodial parent ^a	
Contact within last year	72.83
No contact within last year	27.17
Primary caregivers	
Male relative	8.30
Female relative	91.70
Secondary caregivers ^b	
Male relative	73.33
Female relative	26.63

a. Among those families reporting a noncustodial parent.

b. Among those families reporting having a secondary caregiver.

Results

Male Involvement

Table 1 presents the unweighted baseline proxy male involvement indicators. Thirty-two percent of children were living with their biological father, and the remainder were reported to be living with a step or adoptive father (11%) or another adult male (9%). The remaining children (48%) were not reported to be living with any adult male. Most primary caregivers were not married (27%); however, for households that did not include a biological father, most children had contact with a noncustodial parent (73%).

Although female relatives were most often reported to be playing a primary caregiver role (92%), male relatives were most often reported to play a secondary caregiver role when a secondary caregiver was reported (73%). In sum, 38% of primary caregivers reported that a male relative played either a primary or secondary care-giving role in their children's lives.

Overall, the majority of primary caregivers (88%) reported some form of male relative involvement, whether that included a relationship by caregiver status, marriage, household membership, or contact with a noncustodial biological parent.

Among families that reported having a male relative caregiver, this caregiver was most often a biological

Table 2
Weighted Logistic Regression Predicting Caseworker Perception
of High Risk by Male Involvement ($n = 3,978$)

	β	<i>SE</i>	Wald	<i>p</i>	OR
Male involvement					
Household membership ^a					
Biological father	-1.08	.50	-2.16	.03	.34
Step father	-.94	.60	-1.57	.12	.39
No adult male	-.85	.37	-2.32	.02	.43
Contact with noncustodial parent	.36	.33	1.07	.29	1.43
Male caregiver	-.14	.23	-.60	.55	.87
Primary caregiver married	.51	.35	1.45	.15	1.66
Covariates					
Maltreatment history					
Male perpetrator	.46	.26	1.73	.09	1.58
Physical abuse	-.30	.25	-1.20	.23	.74
Sexual abuse	-1.19	.38	-3.09	.00	.30
High-perceived harm	4.61	.29	15.84	.00	100.42
Child race/ethnicity					
African American/Black	-.20	.30	-.66	.51	.82
Hispanic/Latino	-.31	.31	-.97	.33	.74
Child age	-.07	.02	-2.64	.01	.94
Child gender	-.21	.25	-.82	.42	.81
Household poverty	-.04	.11	-.34	.73	.96
Domestic violence	.74	.25	3.00	.00	2.09

a. Other adult male is the comparison group.

father (81%) or step and adoptive fathers (19%). In some families, other men, including grandfathers (3%), uncles (3%), and other nonspecified male relatives (1%) were also reported to be playing a care-giving role (please note that more than one male might play a caregiver role in a family). One family reported that an adult brother was serving in a caregiver role. In households that included an adult male, many of these males were also biological fathers (62%) and step or adoptive fathers (23%). Households additionally included uncles (13%), grandfathers (12%), and other unspecified relatives (7%) and nonrelatives (8%).

Child Outcomes

Caseworkers' perception of risk. Caseworkers rated 5% of children as being at high risk. Using a logistic regression model, the only type of male involvement associated with the caseworkers' perception of high risk to the child was household membership. The results (Table 2) indicate that children who lived in households that included a biological father were more than 60% less likely to be considered high risk by caseworkers as compared with children who live with nonparental male adults (OR = .34, $p = .03$). Similarly, caseworkers perceived children who did not live with any adult male as

being more than 50% less likely to be at high risk (OR = .43, $p = .02$). This association was statistically significant, even when controlling for family violence and demographic variables.

Maltreatment rereport. In the second logistic regression model, maltreatment rereport was regressed on male involvement, family violence, and demographic variables. There were no statistically significant relationships between male involvement and maltreatment rereport.

Entry into out-of-home care. The majority of children in the sample did not enter out-of-home care (85.76%). Results of the third and final logistic regression model (Table 3) indicate that both household membership and contact with a noncustodial parent were related to the likelihood of entry into out-of-home care. Children who lived with biological fathers (OR = .23, $p = .00$), step or adoptive fathers (OR = .20, $p = .00$), or did not live with an adult male (OR = .33, $p = .00$) were all less likely to enter out-of-home care than children who lived with a nonparental adult male. Also children who had contact with a noncustodial parent in the last year were 46% less likely to enter out-of-home care. These associations were robust when controlling for demographics and family violence-related covariates.

Table 3
Results of Weighted Logistic Regression Predicting Entry
Into Out-of-Home Care by Male Involvement (*n* = 3,978)

	β	<i>SE</i>	Wald	<i>P</i>	OR
Male involvement					
Household membership ^a					
Biological father	-1.49	.38	-3.91	.00	.23
Step father	-1.60	.45	-3.54	.00	.20
No adult male	-1.10	.29	-3.79	.00	.33
Contact with noncustodial parent	-.62	.21	-2.92	.01	.54
Male caregiver	.20	.24	.81	.42	1.22
Primary caregiver married	.14	.28	.48	.63	1.15
Covariates					
Maltreatment history					
Male perpetrator	-.12	.22	-.54	.59	.89
Physical abuse	-.29	.23	-1.29	.20	.75
Sexual abuse	-1.37	.31	-4.37	.00	.25
High-perceived harm	.21	.29	.75	.46	1.23
Child race/ethnicity					
African American/Black	.30	.19	1.59	.12	1.35
Hispanic/Latino	-.17	.27	-.63	.53	.84
Child age	.01	.02	.51	.61	1.01
Child gender	-.17	.21	-.80	.43	.84
Household poverty	.21	.09	2.40	.02	1.23
Domestic violence	.29	.24	1.20	.23	1.34

a. Other adult male is the comparison group.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the majority families receiving services from child welfare have male relative involvement in their lives. This study not only challenges the notion that males are absent but it also provides some insight as to who is present. Biological, step, and adoptive fathers are most often the adult males involved in families as caregivers, romantic partners, and household members; but other males, including uncles, grandfathers, and romantic partners of primary caregivers were also regularly present. Although households less often include these men, the potential for them to have an influence on outcomes for children and families should not be discounted. Research on male involvement suggests that biological and residential relationships are less important overall than the quality of the relationship between adults and children (Amato & Day, 1999; Connell & Goodman, 2002; Jackson, 1999; Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997; Perloff & Buckner, 1996). The important question in future research may revolve less around who is involved in children's lives but, rather, how can the quality of relationships across diverse family contexts be optimally supported.

This study also challenges the assumption that males, especially nonresidential males, are a relatively unimportant consideration as compared with mothers and other female caregivers. The identified relationship between the involvement of a noncustodial parent, most often a biological father, and a reduction in the likelihood that children are placed into out-of-home care is a unique finding. This author did not identify any prior studies linking noncustodial parental involvement with any child welfare specific outcomes. One explanation is that these men provide additional instrumental or emotional support to the family. Another explanation is that men who are considered harmful by the child's caregivers are less likely to remain in contact with the child. Lack of contact could be a proxy for a perceived risk of harm. This finding merits further study.

Assessing the dangers these men do or do not confer to children and families is a complex task. Despite the relationship between caseworkers' perceptions of risk and children's entry into out-of-home care, having a non-parental adult male in the household was not associated with future maltreatment reports. One possible explanation is that although caseworkers perceive children living with these males to be at a higher level of risk, this

perception is an inaccurate assumption. The accuracy of the perceptions and beliefs of caseworkers about the dangers and risks posed these men is unknown. Earlier research indicates that caseworkers generally feel less capable in their work with males (Duggan et al., 2004) and oftentimes lack basic information about them, including marital status, sources of income, and education (O'Donnell, 1999).

If caseworkers are unfairly biased in their perceptions of risk, work is needed to develop strategies to increase the accuracy of risk assessments made by caseworkers. Caseworker training may be one promising vehicle for improving skills and strategies around how to work with men and their families. Training has been linked to increased and more varied efforts to find and engage nonresidential fathers in particular (Malm et al., 2006). Taken together, these findings suggest the need for supports to help caseworkers work more confidently and successfully with adult males. More systematic efforts are also needed to learn how to best engage males in child welfare services. Ideally, child welfare services provided to families should be balanced to allow for and support positive male involvement while at the same time protecting children from negative male influences.

Another explanation for the lack of a relationship between nonparental male involvement and maltreatment rereport is that maltreatment rereport may not be an accurate reflection of children's maltreatment experience. Maltreatment rereport is not the same as maltreatment recurrence (e.g., Chaffin & Bard, 2006). Just because maltreatment reports do not occur, does not mean that children do not experience subsequent abuse or neglect. Future work in this area would benefit from the inclusion of other measures of the quality of parenting and child safety.

Finally, another explanation for this null finding is that if these men are perceived as harmful, efforts may be made to separate him from the child to reduce the likelihood of maltreatment. Household membership and family relationships are fluid. The family's contact with the child welfare could directly affect these patterns contact between children and adults who are perceived as threatening.

Like most efforts to describe male involvement in children and youth services, this study primarily relies on the reports of mothers and caseworkers. The proxy indicators of male involvement drawn from the NSCAW data do not capture the quality of adult male relative relationships with children. Progress in this area of research would be supported by studies that elicit data about male involvement from multiple perspectives, including those of children and males themselves. Qualitative studies may also be particularly helpful in examining the intersection between male involvement and child welfare by

allowing for a rich exploration of potentially complex family systems.

Including males in child welfare system services is challenging in the context of family fluidity and stretched system resources. A recent study produced by the Urban Institute reaffirms the relative difficulty of identifying and working with nonresidential fathers in particular (Malm et al., 2006). Recent changes in family structure, the prevalence of domestic violence in this population, and the historically low rates of participation of men in child and family services complicate efforts to provide services to fathers and other men in the context of child welfare. Future efforts are needed to answer important questions around male involvement for the field of child welfare. For example, little is known about which adult males should be included and engaged in child welfare services, how they should be included in services once they are identified, and what, if any, impact their inclusion has on child welfare and family outcomes. The complexity of U.S. family contexts will require creative service approaches that explicitly address male involvement and the diversity of current family constellations.

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