

Identifying, Interviewing, and Intervening: Fathers and the Illinois Child Welfare System

An investigation conducted by Chapin Hall in 2009 in collaboration with DCFS, US Dept of Health and Human Services, Admin for Children and Families, Children's Bureau

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Study Overview: This study examined the extent to which fathers – stepfathers, putative fathers, legal fathers, adoptive fathers, or biological fathers – were interviewed as part of the IA process and the factors associated with them being interviewed.

- This study examined a randomly selected subsample of integrated assessments from 49 DCFS cases (representing a total of 53 fathers) where temporary custody was awarded between July, 2007 and October, 2008.
- Case service plans (SP) for these cases were reviewed and compared to integrated assessments (IA) to determine if the IA recommendations matched the SP, whether the recommendations were included in the IA but missing from the SU, or whether recommendations were missing from the IA but added to the SP.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a randomly selected group of 22 caseworkers who had completed at least 2 assessments with IA assessors. The selected group included bilingual caseworkers and represented all regions of the state and both public and private child welfare agencies. Caseworkers discussed their experiences in engaging or working with fathers.
- Lastly, this study examined how parents' participation in the IA interview is associated with higher rates of reunification.

Father Involvement in the IA: Over 9000 IA cases were completed between 2005 and 2008, and the largest proportion included interviews with both the mother and father; fathers alone were interviewed in a small number of cases. A father was interviewed in 45 percent of the cases over the 3-year period, with the trend over time increasing from 40.5 percent in 2005 to 55.4 percent in 2008. Age, race, type of placement, prior placements and geographic region were all significantly associated with whether one, both, or neither parent was interviewed.

- One reason that fathers are not interviewed as part of the IA process may be that they are not identified. Clearly, whether a father has been identified on a given case will impact the extent to which the interview can be completed.
- In slightly more than one-third of all IA cases completed between 2005 and 2008 (N=9,909), the father of the child was not identified at the time of the IA screener was involved.
- Previous research has revealed several reasons why mothers and relatives do not identify nonresident fathers, including concerns about the status of or imposition of child support payments, undocumented immigrant status, outstanding arrest warrants, and domestic violence.

I. A Closer Look at Interviewed Fathers

The subsample of 49 cases involving both resident and nonresident fathers yielded the following

Individual and Case Characteristics:

- A majority of the fathers were white; a majority of the cases involved neglect; and the proportion of cases in which both parents were interviewed was predominant.
- Half the fathers interviewed were over age 36; slightly less than half were between 22-35; and a few were age 21 or under.
- Three-fourths of the fathers interviewed were biological fathers; the remaining fathers interviewed were stepfathers, paramours, putative fathers, adoptive fathers, and legal fathers.
- More than half resided with the child at the time DCFS took custody, although some of these resident fathers were under legal “no-contact” orders. The remaining fathers in the sample were not living in the child’s home at the time the child entered care.
- Several of the interviewed fathers had children with the mother other than those in care, and almost a quarter had fathered other children with someone other than the mother named in the report.
- Two-thirds were married or in a relationship at the time of the interview, although not necessarily with the mother named in the report.
- The vast majority of the perpetrators were mothers or mothers and fathers together. For three quarters of these cases, the charge was neglect. A small proportion of the cases named only the father at the alleged perpetrator and in those cases almost three-fourths involved physical abuse. In some cases, the family was struggling with a child’s emotional or behavioral issue that led to one or more psychiatric hospitalizations.

Father’s Circumstances and Problematic Behaviors:

- For over half of the cases, the fathers had a stable and adequate residence.
- Just over one-third of fathers cohabitated with adults other than the mother or paramour. In the majority of these cases, the father was living with relatives.
- It was often unclear whether living with relatives was supportive or detrimental. In some cases, screeners documented the benefits of having other adults available to provide childcare; and in other cases, they raised concerns about risks due to smoke inhalation, domestic violence, or drug use by other adults in the home.
- Slightly fewer than half of the fathers dropped out before completing high school; of those, half obtained their GED. For most of the other half, a high school diploma was their highest level of educational attainment; some attended college or trade school; few had a postsecondary degree.
- Half of the fathers were employed at the time of the IA. Overall, one-third described a history of unstable and sporadic employment. Many currently unemployed fathers indicated their employment was recently interrupted by crisis events such as lay-offs, incarceration or a poor health diagnosis.
- Five of the fathers served in the military and were discharged for medical reasons and/or reported effects of service on functioning (i.e., PTSD).
- Educational attainment and employment status were highly correlated.
- Approximately one-third of employed fathers also received public or private financial assistance, primarily from sources other than family.

- Finances were clearly strained for the vast majority of the fathers who were not working. Most relied heavily on family support for money and/or housing, rather than public benefit programs. Some unemployed fathers had reliance on SSI-D (disability payments).
- The overwhelming majority of fathers interviewed indicated they had informal support networks (usually immediate or extended family networks) on which they could rely as needed for housing, childcare, financial assistance and emotional support.
- Information on domestic violence was not collected in a consistent manner in all IAs; however, the data collected show that domestic violence was a factor contributing to the child's removal from the home in approximately 10 percent of cases, but it was noted by the screeners as a concern in more than fifty percent.
- In more than a third of the cases in the sample, alcohol or drug abuse was a contributing factor to the removal of the children.
- More than half of the fathers interviewed had a history of drug and/or alcohol abuse, and a small group of fathers acknowledged an existing problem with substance abuse. Another one-fourth denied an existing problem with illegal substance, but other information from the IA indicated there were drug or alcohol related problems.
- Most of the fathers with a history of substance abuse described some form of addiction treatment in their past and many acknowledged need for continued or new treatment; however, few fathers acknowledged the negative effects of their substance abuse on their children and/or families.
- The vast majority of the fathers who were interviewed for the IA admitted to or had documented evidence of having a criminal background.

Nature of Fathers' Involvement

Based on the comprehensive interviews fathers were broken into the following groups:

- 1) **Potential Resource/Positively Involved:** perceived to contribute or have potential to contribute to development of a child including participation in visitation, actions that promote contact with child, earnest attempt to bring positive change to family, and/or legitimate permanent placement option for child.
- 2) **Negatively Involved:** involvement or interactions that might be perceived to be ultimately harmful to the child, including untreated, convicted sex offenders; operators of meth labs in the home unwilling to take responsibility; perpetrator of intense domestic violence, unwilling to participate in treatment; in violation of a no contact order.

In this sample of interviewed fathers, resident fathers were close to evenly split between negatively involved and potential resource/positively involved; however, the majority of nonresident fathers were considered potential resource/positively involved.

How Do Fathers' Circumstances and Problematic Behaviors Differ According to the Nature of their Involvement?

- More "negatively involved fathers" than "potential resource fathers" had dropped out of high school.
- Negatively involved fathers were less likely to be employed and more of them reported instability in their work history.
- Negatively involved fathers were more likely to have been convicted of a violent crime.

- Negatively involved fathers who lived with their children minimized their problems with substance use; nonresident, negatively involved fathers were more forthcoming about problems with addictions.

Father's Willingness to Engage in Services:

- Of the interviewed fathers, just under one-third had a history of counseling, mental health or other treatment services.
- Of those that did, a handful reported that service involvement was prior to current DCFS case and most viewed counseling as "helpful."
- In over one-third of the cases IA Screeners noted that fathers were willing to engage in services, and sometimes commented on the fathers' insights into or acknowledgement of problems
- Resident fathers were more apt than nonresident fathers to be involved in services prior to or at the time of the IA.

II. Comparison of IA Reports to Service Plans

Most caseworkers articulated an understanding of the connection between assessment activities and the development service plans, but the information in the assessments and recommendations made in either the IA reports or the service plans were not perfectly aligned.

- A previous evaluation of the IA program indicated that 20 percent of service plans omitted important recommendations included in the IA report and 46 percent incorporated recommendations not mentioned in the IA report. Therapy recommendations were often those left out of service plans.
- In this sample, recommendations for therapy and visitation were made for 78% of fathers.
- Family therapy was often included in IAs but left out of service plans. These IA recommendations were sometimes accompanied by qualifying statements such as "when approved by mom's therapist" or "once domestic violence issues are addressed."
- IA recommendations related to classes/education (including parenting and anger management classes) and substance abuse for fathers were frequent, but education recommendations were often missing from the service plans.
- Recommendations for further assessment of fathers were made in one-third of the cases and were most often included in both the IA and Service Plans.
- More concrete needs (housing, employment) were frequently stated in the service plans in terms that father should secure such things. Thirty-four percent of fathers received these recommendations; only 2 fathers had recommendations for specific services such as job training.
- Employment and housing recommendations were often added to service plans and not originally included in the IA recommendations.

Overall, the degree to which the assessments, service plans, and services themselves are reflective of and responsive to fathers' needs and circumstances was not clear.

III. Interviews with Caseworkers: Caseworkers' Experiences with Fathers and Identified Barriers

- Responses indicate a disparity between actual father involvement in IA and caseworkers' perceptions of involvement. According to the data, fathers participated in the IA in over 50 percent of cases where as many caseworkers seemed to view father participation as rare, revealing a common misperception.
- Interviews with caseworkers revealed that many services are being recommended at the same time for an individual father and raised questions about the logistics of arranging for participation in multiple services and consistently engaging fathers for the duration those services are needed. This also raises questions about coordination across providers or whether there is any evidence on service effectiveness to guide the order in which these services are put in place.
- Several caseworkers felt there just were not as many services for fathers as there were for mothers, thereby requiring a greater level of effort to be put forth by fathers who are interested in making changes and gaining or re-gaining custody of their child.
- Caseworkers also described challenges in getting services to fathers who were incarcerated.
- Despite apparent barriers, a number of workers were able to identify fathers who were active in services and spoke of how involved are a positive resource for the children or family.

IV. From Researching Fathers to Reunifying Children and Families

Despite the systemic bias and barriers present in this study as well as others, research indicates that children with highly involved nonresidential fathers – particularly those who provide nonfinancial support – have higher likelihood of reunification.

Reunification Is Higher among Children whose Fathers Were Interviewed

The likelihood of reunification is significantly different according to which parents were involved in the IA process. Over the 2005 to 2008 period:

- 38.2% of children for whom both parents completed IA interviews were reunified
- 29.1% of children for whom only the father completed an IA interview were reunified
- 28.7% of children for whom only the mother completed an IA interview were reunified
- 9.9% of children for whom neither parent completed an IA interview were reunified
- For children in the group with both parents interviewed, the likelihood of reunification was 3.2 times greater than for children in the group in which neither parent was interviewed.
- Likelihood of reunification among children in both of the groups in which only one parent was interviewed was 2.4 times greater than for children in the group in which neither parent was interviewed.
- There were no significant differences between the groups in which only the mother was interviewed vs. only the father was interviewed.

Assessment Report Prognosis for Reunification Often Leaves Fathers Out

A prognosis about the likelihood of family reunification should be made upon completion of the IA and is included in the IA report. In comparison to other sections of those reports, the content in the Prognosis section varied dramatically from case to case, and in some instances the prognosis for reunification was altogether absent.

- Approximately one-quarter of the fathers were described as having a good/favorable prognosis for reunification.
- All but one of the good/favorable prognoses were for potential resource/positively involved fathers and most were residents at the time the child was taken into DCFS custody.
- For almost half fathers, the prognosis for reunification was guarded or poor.
- Among resident father cases, the prognosis generally described both parents, rather than describing the prognosis for reunification for each parent separately.
- Most of the IAs including nonresident fathers described the mother as the first priority for reunification.

Is there a Systematic Bias Towards Reunifying the Child with the Mother?

- Several interviewed caseworkers perceived or articulated a systemic bias toward reunifying the child with the mother rather than the father. They also noted challenges – such as having sufficient space – that may thwart fathers even when they complete the recommended services.
- Caseworkers' statements indicate that the willingness to participate in and complete services is the driving factor in assessing the prospects for reunification.

Conclusions

Overall, Three Distinct Groups of Fathers were Identified:

1. Resident fathers who are *a potential resource/positively involved*
 - a. Resident fathers often were often members of families with unusual circumstances, such as cases where the mother or child was suffering from mental illness. In many of these families, the child welfare system has an opportunity to provide services and supports to resolve crisis situations, leading to reunification.
 - b. All four step-fathers in the sample were positively involved and residents. The legal commitment to partnership in a marriage with step-children may indicate meaningful differences in engagement and supportive capacity as compared to partners who are paramours.
 2. Resident fathers who are *negatively involved* – “the most challenging group”
 - a. This group experienced a number of difficulties including failure to complete high school, unemployment, domestic violence, substance abuse, and criminal behavior. Many of them did not understand or acknowledge the impact of their behaviors on their child/family.
 - b. These fathers may be more difficult to engage. When considering how to engage fathers who are seen as a negative influence in the family and on reunification efforts, caseworkers must be attuned to and equipped to address the dynamics of the entire family and the potential resistance they may encounter.
 3. Nonresident fathers who are *a potential resource/positively involved*
 - a. Despite their contributions or potential to contribute to their child’s well-being, some of these fathers also faced resource constraints that prohibited them from assuming a custodial role, and child welfare caseworkers seemed to indicate that few resources were available to meet these fathers’ needs. Efforts to draw on these fathers’ extended resource networks and to support their ongoing involvement in their children’s lives may have significant payoff.
- One reason that fathers are not interviewed as part of the IA process may be that they are not identified. Whether a parent has been identified on a given case will impact the extent to which the interview can be completed, particularly within the timeframe of the IA. Efforts need to be made to identify all caregivers up front.
 - Previous research has shown that greater father involvement is related to shorter placement duration and higher likelihood of reunification. Findings in this study suggest an association between willingness to engage in the IA interview and willingness to participate in services, creating the sense that while not all fathers engage with workers and services, those that do have a better prospect for reunification.
 - Caseworkers play a key role in making linkages and based on findings from this study they may need to take a stronger role in monitoring not only the follow-through with referrals but also the levels of engagement and the extent to which the interventions are appropriately addressing the identified needs and concerns of these fathers.