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BOOK REVIEW

Fathers under Fire: The Revolution in Child Support Enforcement, by Irwin Garfinkel, Sara S. McLanahan, Daniel R. Meyer, and Judith A. Seltzer (editors). New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998. 351 p.

The title of this book adequately reflects its timely focus on nonresidential fathers facing increased child support enforcement, examining how child support contributions (or failure to meet child support obligations) affect the lives of children as well as the fathers themselves. As the authors suggest, nonresident fathers have generally been treated as financial resources, with little attention paid to their rights as parents or their needs as providers for their children. A particular focus of this collection of studies is the role of indigent nonresident fathers and their role as parents and providers. Consequently, the scope of study adopted by the researchers, and the subsequent policy implications of their research findings, go beyond a simple attempt to extract greater economic resources from "deadbeat dads." This book provides a satisfying balance of empirical research and theory addressing these important topics.

Three crucial research questions are addressed in this collection. The first addresses current child support policies and their compatibility with fathers' abilities to meet their obligations. Analyses of survey data provide little support for the belief that increased child support enforcement will substantially ease society's welfare burden. Although it is commonly believed that enforcing child support obligations will shift the economic burden of child rearing from public welfare expenditures to nonresidential fathers, findings reported in the opening chapters indicate that many of the nonpaying fathers have incomes that are inadequate for supporting their children. Their financial shortcomings, however, are generally not a result of economic obligations stemming from new families, as less than one third of the nonresident fathers surveyed were living with a new partner and children.

The second research question focuses on the potential impact of stronger child support enforcement on children, fathers, and new dependents of fathers with child support obligations. This section addresses the impact of child support obligations on the economic status, remarriage, and fertility of nonresident fathers; the impact of these obligations on contact with their children by nonresident fathers; and the impact of child support enforcement on the male labor supply. The research indicates that poor fathers are ordered to pay a higher proportion of their incomes in child support than are wealthier fathers, but very few nonresident fathers would be pushed below the poverty line if they met their child support obligations. Although child support has no discernable impact on the fertility of nonresident fathers, its impact on remarriage suggests an ambivalent effect on the overall wellbeing of children. Specifically, fathers paying child support are less likely to remarry, reducing the possibility that these fathers would marry custodial mothers and assist in the support of their children. Also, the research in this section suggests that child support obligations do not discourage nonresident fathers from working. Poor labor market prospects, rather than an unwillingness to work, appear most responsible for the lack of success of child support enforcement as a substitute for public welfare. Finally, although paying child support is correlated with nonresident fathers spending more time with their children, it is also correlated with increased conflict between the father and mother. Hence, the unintended consequences of child enforcement tend to thwart the positive benefit of increased support.

The third research question's focus is on society's obligation to nonresident fathers, addressing the rights of these fathers as well as what we can do to help them meet their child support responsibilities. Many noncustodial parents argue that increased child support enforcement has not been matched by a corresponding increase in visitation rights. Chapters containing evaluations of visitation enforcement programs indicate that typical attempts at mediation or problem solving among parents are ineffective because they fail to resolve deeply rooted relationship disputes that discourage cooperative visitation agreements. The major implication is that increasing the employment status and earnings potential of nonresident fathers with marginal educations and job skills may be the only way

to encourage indigent fathers to assume additional parental responsibilities. Also, it is important that we nurture the ability of nonresident fathers to be a "parent" rather than simply an economic resource to their children.

Overall, this collection of empirical research and policy evaluations is an impressive attempt to analyze the role of nonresident fathers from a fundamental perspective of increasing the general well-being of children. Major strengths of the work are the impressive empirical evaluations of enduring questions and myths regarding the impact of child support enforcement and linking these findings to relevant policy implications. I applaud the authors for their focus on the well-being of nonresident fathers in general and indigent nonresident fathers in particular, as their fate is strongly tied to the fate of their children. As the authors conclude, nonresident fathers (even poor fathers) should be subject to child support obligations, but these obligations should be tied to efforts on the part of society to nurture the role of fatherhood among these men. In addition, conscious efforts to increase the employability and earnings potential of nonresident fathers will likely be more fruitful for increasing child support payments than the use of economic and criminal sanctions against fathers. In other words, we should focus on integrating fathers into fatherhood rather than alienating them from their parental responsibilities.

Fathers under Fire also makes clear the need for additional data collection to obtain accurate information on the earnings, families, and child support payments of nonresident fathers. Nonresident fathers are underrepresented in survey research, and the fathers that are surveyed may not admit to being parents. Thus, research on nonresident fathers is likely skewed as a consequence of the phenomena of "missing fathers" in survey data. Although researchers can make adjustments to data based on reasonable assumptions regarding the nonresident fathers that are not captured in surveys, findings must be reported with caution and interpreted while keeping these assumptions in mind. Innovative data collection and survey techniques are needed to derive more complete data on the population of nonresident fathers. Despite data limitations, *Fathers under Fire* represents an impressive analysis of relevant research and policy questions that help illuminate the role of nonresident fathers in the context of increased child support obligations.

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