Effects of the Full Child Support Pass-Through/Disregard on Marriage and Cohabitation

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There are a number of reasons why we might expect that family structure would be affected by Wisconsin's experimental child support policy that allowed all support paid by nonresident fathers of children on welfare to be passed through to the mother and fully disregarded in calculating cash assistance. The fathers may be encouraged to take more financial responsibility for their children if the support is passed through in full and disregarded in calculating benefit checks. The fathers may be more connected to the mothers of their children than fathers whose support payments are only in part transmitted to the children; as a consequence, the parents in the full disregard group may be more likely to marry or live together. There may be less conflict between these parents, again leading to an increased likelihood of marriage or cohabitation.

There are also other avenues through which the pass-through/disregard might influence marriage, though the direction of the influence is not necessarily predictable. Custodial mothers receiving regular child support may be more attractive marriage partners, so those in a full pass-through group may be *more* likely to be married or partnered. Or if mothers are expecting and receiving more child support, they may be more able to live independently, and thus those in the full pass-through and disregard group may be *less* likely to live with a husband or partner.

This report extends the initial experimental evaluation for the first cohort of participants in the Child Support Demonstration Evaluation (CSDE) (Meyer and Cancian, 2001). That evaluation did not include an assessment of the longer-term effects on marriage and living arrangements. In the next section, we discuss data, sample, and methods; we then present our results, and discuss implications for policy and research.

DATA, SAMPLE, AND METHODS

As in the first evaluation, we use data on the first cohort of cases: participants who entered Wisconsin's TANF program (Wisconsin Works, W-2) in its first 9 months of operation. We rely on

administrative and survey data, including information on family structure collected in the spring and summer of 2004 as part of the third wave of the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families.

Our primary sample includes mothers who responded to the third wave of the CSDE Survey of Wisconsin Works Families (n = 709).[1] Of the original sample drawn for the survey, 91 percent responded to at least one of the two first waves of the survey, and were thus eligible for the third wave. Of these, 82 percent responded to the third wave.[2] Using administrative data available for both respondents and nonrespondents, weights were created to account for nonresponse; they are used in this report (see Ziliak, 2004).

In addition to the Wave 3 survey data, we use data from the earlier waves of the survey and administrative data from the CARES and KIDS systems for this analysis. For more details on the original survey see Krecker (2001). For more details on the administrative data see Cook and Brown (2001).

Table 1 reports basic demographic characteristics for our sample at baseline—the point at which they entered W-2. Most mothers were in their twenties. Almost two-thirds were black and one quarter were white. Many mothers had low levels of formal education—53 percent had not completed high school and only 10 percent had more than a high school education. At the time they entered W-2, most mothers had one or two children, but 37 percent had three or more. Most women had at least one child age 2 or younger. In more than a third of all cases (about half of all cases in which mothers had more than one child), mothers had children with more than one father.[3]

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[1]We do not have a survey measure of the living situation of mothers at entry to W-2, but we do have administrative data on their marital status. Our analyses include 33 mothers who were married at entry.

[2]The first and second surveys each had an 82 percent response rate, with 91 percent responding to at least one of the first two waves. Of those, we selected a random one-third of the respondents (those in the first 10 of 30 survey replicates); 82 percent of this sample responded to the third wave. See Krecker (2005) for details on the survey.

[3]This measure of multiple-partner fertility includes all paternities legally established by December 2004 for children born at baseline. For more information on multiple-partner fertility see Meyer, Cancian, and Cook (2005).

Table 1
Mothers' Demographic Characteristics

	N	Weighted %
Age		
< 20	92	12.3
20–29	392	56.2
30–39	185	26.5
40 and over	40	5.0
Race		
White	221	25.3
Black	434	64.9
Hispanic	32	6.1
Other	22	3.7
Education at Baseline		
Less than high school	352	52.9
High school	275	37.0
More than high school	82	10.1
Number of Children at Baseline		
0	11	0.9
1	256	34.2
2	200	28.2
3 or more	242	36.7
Number of (Legal) Fathers at Baseline		
0	40	8.0
1	404	54.1
2	195	27.8
3	55	7.8
4+	15	2.3
Age of Youngest Child at Baseline		
0–2 years[a]	426	58.7
3–5 years	118	17.1
6–12 years	134	19.9
13–17 years	31	4.3

[a]Includes child born within 7 months of baseline.

Table 2 reports welfare, child support, and employment history. At entry to W-2, more than half the mothers had received welfare in at least 19 of the previous 24 months. Only 14 percent had no history of AFDC receipt in Wisconsin in the two years prior to entering W-2. At entry, 31 percent entered an upper tier, 53 percent entered a Community Service Job, 8 percent entered W-2 Transitions, and 9 percent entered as a Caretaker of a Newborn. Most women had a child support order in place at baseline, though only a third had received support in the prior year, and only 17 percent had received at least $1,000. In the two years before entering W-2, over 80 percent of mothers had some formal employment experience, as measured by earnings recorded in the Unemployment Insurance system, and 13 percent had worked in every quarter.

Our key outcome of interest is the mother's marital and cohabitation status at the time of the third wave interview. Table 3 shows the distribution of marital status at that interview, in 2004. Most mothers, 69 percent, were single (no partner). Among the remainder, 15 percent were married and 16 percent were cohabiting with a partner (7 percent were cohabiting with the father of at least one child, and about 9 percent with nonfathers). In this report, "father"/"nonfather" distinguishes men who are identified by the mother as the father of one of her children, regardless of when that child was born or whether paternity was formally established.[4]

We evaluate the impact of the full pass-through and disregard of child support on family formation by comparing outcomes for mothers in the experimental and control groups. For the experimental analysis we report regression-adjusted differences in the distributions for the experimental and control groups (see Meyer and Cancian, 2001, pp. 29–30, for details). Our interest in marriage and cohabitation is motivated by an interest in the effects of policy change on the resources available to

[4]Because sample sizes are limited we do not distinguish between marriages to a father and marriages to a nonfather. Marriage is associated with more stable unions and greater pooling of resources (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). Thus, we might expect the biological ties to be less important to the distribution of resources within marriage than within cohabiting unions. In addition, data limitations mean that for 23 of the 114 marriages we are unable to distinguish whether the husband is a biological father of one of the mother's children.

Table 2
Mothers' Welfare Receipt, Work, and Child Support at W-2 Entry

	N	Weighted %
E/C Status		
Experimental Group	337	49.2
Control Group	372	50.8
Months of AFDC Receipt in 24 Months Prior to Baseline		
No AFDC	165	14.0
1–18 months	257	33.6
19–24 months	287	52.5
W-2 Tier at Baseline		
W-2 Transition	57	7.6
Community Service Job	319	52.9
Caretaker of Newborn	77	8.8
Upper Tier	256	30.8
Quarters Employed in 8 Quarters Prior to Baseline		
0 quarters	93	15.8
1–4 quarters	257	42.4
5–7 quarters	228	29.2
8 quarters	131	12.6
Child Support Order at Baseline		
Yes	406	57.6
No	303	42.4
Child Support Receipt in 12 Months Prior to Baseline		
No child support	454	64.7
$1–999	124	17.9
$1,000 or more	131	17.4
Total	709	100.0

Table 3
Mothers' Marital Status at Wave 3 Survey (2004)

	N	Weighted %
Married	114	15.1
Cohabiting with Father of Children	52	7.0
Cohabiting with Nonfather	65	8.9
Single	478	69.0
Total	709	100

children. With this in mind, we also report some new evidence on financial and nonfinancial support provided by fathers to their biological children and to other children who might be living with the mother.

EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

We are interested in the effects of the full pass-through and disregard on marriage and cohabitation. Because theory suggests that increased child support might have positive and negative effects on marriage and cohabitation rates, the ultimate effect is an empirical question. In the case of cohabitation, we are particularly interested in whether child support might alter living situations between parents and nonparents.

Table 4 reports the basic experimental results.[5] It shows that mothers eligible for the full pass-through and disregard for the entire period (the experimental group) were significantly less likely to be cohabiting with a partner in 2004. The lower rate of cohabitation is almost exclusively due to a lower probability that mothers are cohabiting with nonfathers: about 7 percent of mothers in the experimental group, compared to 11 percent of those in the control group, were living with men who were not the fathers of any of their children. There was no discernable difference in marriage rates between the two groups. Although the point estimates suggest that women in the experimental group were more likely to be single, the difference is not statistically significant in this model.

These results are consistent with the hypothesis that increased child support would increase mothers' economic independence and reduce their need to cohabit in order to make ends meet. In the case of cohabitation with biological fathers, it may be that this cohabitation-reducing "economic independence" effect is offset by a cohabitation-increasing reduction in conflict with noncustodial fathers

[5]This table reflects regression-adjusted differences between the experimental and control groups. The standard "short" set of controls used in the Phase I final evaluation is used here (see Meyer and Cancian 2001, pp. 29–30). These controls include: assignment period, months of AFDC receipt in the 24 months prior to entering W-2, child support receipt in the year prior to entering W-2, and whether the mother is black. We also estimated these effects using the longer set of control variables. The estimates were qualitatively similar. One difference is that the difference in the likelihood of being single is statistically significant when using the "long" set of control variables.

Table 4
Marital Status at Wave 3 Survey (2004)
Experimental Versus Control Group Mothers

	All Mothers				
	N	Exp.	Control	Diff.(%)	p-value
Married	114	14.6	14.7	-0.2	0.958
Cohabiting with Father of Children	52	5.8	6.1	-0.3	0.883
Cohabiting with Nonfather	65	6.5	10.7	-4.2	0.081
Single	478	73.1	68.4	4.7	0.229
Total	709	100.0	100.0		

*All percentages are regression-adjusted, using short list of control variables.

in the experimental group. The original evaluation found some evidence of reduced conflict between parents in the experimental group (see Meyer and Cancian, 2001, pp. 77–80). It may be that those mothers eligible for a full pass-through and disregard are able to be more economically independent, but at the same time may be more likely to chose to live with the fathers of their children, in part because there is less likely to be conflict.

Table 4 shows no discernible difference in the total marriage rates for the experimental and control groups. Although data limitations and small sample sizes limit our ability to distinguish differences in rates of marriage to fathers and nonfathers, in other analysis we do find evidence suggesting that women receiving the full pass-through and disregard are more likely to marry fathers, and less likely to marry nonfathers, than women in the control group.[6]

We also tested the experimental effects for the four key subgroups used for the main evaluation (see Meyer and Cancian, 2001, pp. 31–33, for a discussion of the subgroups). We considered the difference in marriage and cohabitation patterns for: (1) mothers who entered W-2 in a lower tier (and therefore were more likely to be subject to a reduced pass-through and disregard if they were in the control group); (2) mothers who had no history of AFDC receipt in the two years prior to entering W-2 (and therefore were potentially more responsive to the policy change because they had no recent experience with a partial pass-through and disregard); (3) mothers with a child support order at entry to W-2; and (4) mothers with a history of substantial child support receipt (i.e., more than $1,000 in the year prior to entry to W-2). To further test our hypothesis of economic independence, we also considered a subgroup for whom child support income might be especially salient, given their own limited earnings potential: women with less than a high school education at baseline.

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[6]See footnote 4. We are working to develop some additional data from administrative sources to allow us to better capture this distinction.

The results for all five subgroups are summarized in Table 5. Given smaller sample sizes for the subgroups, some reduction in statistical significance might be expected.

- Among mothers entering in a lower tier, marriage and cohabitation patterns are similar to the full sample, but the different rate of cohabitation with nonfathers is no longer statistically significant.

- Among mothers without a history of AFDC receipt, the estimated differences in cohabitation with nonfathers are larger and are statistically significant. In contrast to the findings for the full sample, differences in marriage rates are large and statistically significant. Mothers without a history of AFDC receipt who were in the experimental group were much more likely to be single (87 percent compared to 64 percent for mothers in the control group). This difference was due both to lower rates of marriage and lower rates of cohabitation with nonfathers. The larger effects among this subgroup are consistent with findings from the first evaluation for other outcomes. Nonetheless, the point estimates should be interpreted with caution given small sample sizes. While the sign and statistical significance of the effects are robust, the point estimates are sensitive to alternative specifications.

- There are no statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups among mothers with child support orders at entry. But in contrast to the other groups, this subgroup has lower estimated rates of cohabitation with fathers and nonfathers, though the difference is not significant.

- Mothers with a history of high child support receipts show the same pattern as the full sample—rates of cohabitation with nonfathers are lower among mothers in the experimental group, though the difference is not statistically significant at conventional levels (p=.158).

- Mothers with less than a high school education also show significantly lower rates of cohabitation with nonfathers.

In summary, when we compare mothers in the experimental and control groups we find that mothers receiving the full pass-through and disregard are less likely to cohabit with men who are not fathers of any of the mothers' children. This result generally holds across subgroups. Among mothers with no recent AFDC history at the time of entry to W-2—a subgroup that showed particularly strong effects of the experiment in other domains (see Meyer and Cancian, 2001)—those in the experimental group were less likely to cohabit with nonfathers and to marry.

RESULTS RELATED TO MARITAL STATUS AND FATHERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

A key motivation for examining the potential effects of policy on marital status is the concern for children's access to material and emotional support. Understanding the resources available to children is complex when biological parents are not sharing a household, or when the mother has had children with

Table 5
Marital Status at Wave 3 Survey for Subgroups,
Experimental Versus Control Group Mothers

	N	Exp.	Control	Diff.(%)	p-value
Mothers Entered in Lower Tier					
Married	59	10.6	13.4	-2.8	0.417
Cohabiting with father	30	5.7	4.4	1.3	0.588
Cohabiting with nonfather	39	6.2	10.2	-4.0	0.188
Single	325	77.5	71.9	5.6	0.232
Total	453	100.0	100.0		
No AFDC History					
Married	30	10.4	23.4	-13.0	0.096
Cohabiting with father	14	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.000
Cohabiting with nonfather	12	2.3	12.8	-10.5	0.037
Single	100	87.4	63.8	23.6	0.005
Total	156	100.0	100.0		
Child Support Order at Entry					
Married	63	13.9	16.9	-3.0	0.452
Cohabiting with father	29	4.0	6.9	-3.0	0.230
Cohabiting with nonfather	41	7.5	9.5	-2.0	0.533
Single	276	74.6	66.7	7.9	0.115
Total	409	100.0	100.0		
High Child Support History ($1,000/yr or more pre-W-2)					
Married	23	17.5	21.2	-3.7	0.674
Cohabiting with father	8	2.6	2.1	0.4	0.846
Cohabiting with nonfather	15	4.4	13.0	-8.7	0.158
Single	80	75.6	63.7	11.9	0.222
Total	126	100.0	100.0		
Less than High School Education					
Married	44	13.0	10.7	2.4	0.555
Cohabiting with father	39	7.6	7.9	-0.3	0.911
Cohabiting with nonfather	30	5.4	11.1	-5.8	0.086
Single	239	74.1	70.3	3.8	0.485
Total	352	100.0	100.0		

multiple fathers, some of whom may also have had children with other mothers. Elsewhere we have analyzed formal child support payments in the context of multiple-partner fertility (Meyer, Cancian, and Cook, 2005). But lack of data has previously limited the discussion of the *informal* support that fathers might provide to their biological children and, especially, to children who live in the same household and have the same mother, but a different father. Here we offer some evidence on that issue.

As part of the third waves of the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families we asked mothers about the support and involvement of fathers.[7] As noted earlier (Table 1), more than half of all women with more than one child at baseline had children with more than one father. Rates of multiple-partner fertility grew over the period; 19 percent of mothers had a child with a new father between the baseline and the third wave of the survey.

Table 6 shows the share of fathers who provided material support, spent time with, or were involved in decisions regarding their biological children and other children of the mother.[8] The 709 mothers in our sample identified 1203 fathers of their children. Two hundred and thirty-eight mothers identified a single father, resulting in 238 fathers, with only their own biological children living with the

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[7]We also asked fathers about their level of support and involvement with their own children. We do not report their responses, as our focus is on the children in the mother's household, and we did not attempt to interview all of these fathers, but only the fathers of a focal child. In addition, the sample of completed interviews for fathers is small.

[8]We discuss fathers' contributions of formal and informal child support, time spent with children, and involvement with children. Formal child support is applicable only to biological children. We have somewhat different information on informal resource transfers for the different groups. Informal transfers to biological children were measured using 6 questions on the types of informal transfers: (a) During 2003, did father buy any shoes or clothes for children? (b) Did father give the children money for chores, spending money, or an allowance during 2003? (c) During 2003, did father give any birthday, holiday, or other gifts to children? (d) Did father give you food or groceries for children during 2003? (e) Did father give you money for your rent or mortgage, or pay for it directly during 2003? (f) During 2003, did father give you money to spend on children? Informal transfers to nonbiological children were measured using one general question: (a) During 2003, did father provide anything for your other children? For example, did he give things like shoes or clothes, birthday or holiday gifts, pay for any expenses, or give you money for the children? Time spent with the father's biological children and with other children in the household was assessed using two similar questions: (a) During 2003 did the biological child's father spend time with his child, even one time? (b) Did he spend time with your other child/ren, even one time? Involvement with the father's biological children and with other children in the household was also assessed using two similar questions. (a) How involved was child's father in decisions about child's everyday life during 2003? (b) How involved was he in decisions about your other child/ren's life during 2003?

Table 6
Fathers' Relationships with Biological and Nonbiological Children

A. Father's Provision of Formal or Informal Transfers to Children

	Transfers to Biological Children				Transfers to Nonbiological Children	
	Fathers with Bio Kids Only		Fathers with Bio & Nonbio		Fathers with Bio & Nonbio	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes*	178	74.8	586	60.7	216	22.4
No**	59	24.8	358	37.1	711	73.7
Missing	1	0.4	21	2.2	38	4.0
Total	238		965		965	

* Includes coresidence.
** Includes fathers in jail during previous 12 months (skipped in both informal transfer questions)

Note: Formal child support is applicable only to biological children. Informal transfers to biological children are measured using 6 questions on the types of informal transfers; informal transfers to nonbiological children are measured using one general question. See text for details

B. Spent Time with Biological and Nonbiological Children

	Spent Time with Biological Children				Spent Time with Nonbiological Children	
	Fathers with Bio Kids Only		Fathers with Bio & Nonbio		Fathers with Bio & Nonbio	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes*	146	61.3	514	53.3	319	33.1
No	69	29.0	343	35.5	524	54.3
In jail 10–12**	20	8.4	86	8.9	83	8.6
Missing	3	1.2	22	2.3	39	4.1
Total	238		965		965	

* Includes coresidence.
** Fathers in jail for 10–12 months are skipped in "spent time with biological kids," whereas fathers in jail during 12 months are skipped in "spent time with nonbiological kids."

C. Father's Involvement with Biological and Nonbiological Children

	Involvement with Biological Children				Involvement with Nonbiological Children	
	Fathers with Bio Kids Only		Fathers with Bio & Nonbio		Fathers with Bio & Nonbio	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Not at all involved*	103	43.3	413	42.8	626	64.9
A little involved	24	10.1	80	8.3	42	4.4
Somewhat involved	15	6.3	90	9.3	53	5.5
Very involved	19	8.0	63	6.5	33	3.4
Extremely involved**	49	20.5	159	16.5	90	9.3
In jail 10–12***	20	8.4	86	8.9	83	8.6
Missing	8	3.3	74	7.7	38	4.0
Total	238		965		965	

* Includes those with no contact.
** Includes coresidence.
*** Fathers in jail for 10–12 months are skipped in "spent time with bio kids," whereas fathers in jail during 12 months are skipped in "spent time with nonbio kids."

mother (though the father may have had other children with another mother living in a different household). For the remaining 965 fathers, both their own biological children and children of another father were living in the mother's household. Table 6 shows support provided in three cases: resources shared with biological children by fathers with only biological children (column 1); resources shared with biological children by fathers with both biological and nonbiological children living with the mother (column 2); and resources shared with nonbiological children by fathers with both biological children and nonbiological children living with the mother (column 3).

The first panel shows mothers' reports of material resources shared by the father with the mothers' children. Three-quarters of fathers with only biological children provided either formal child support or informal transfers. In comparison, when there were nonbiological children in the home, fathers were somewhat less likely to provide support (61 percent). Transfers to nonbiological children were much lower, but even then, more than one-fifth of fathers provided resources for children who were not their biological offspring.

The second panel shows mother's reports of the time spent by fathers with the mothers' children. Among the fathers with only biological children, 61 percent spent time with their children and 29 percent did not. Another 8 percent were unlikely to spend time with their children because they spent a substantial portion of 2003 incarcerated. Fathers with their own and another father's children living with the mother were somewhat less likely to spend time with their own children (53 percent) and substantially less likely to spend time with the mother's other children (33 percent). Nonetheless, a substantial minority of fathers spent time with the children of other fathers.

The third panel of Table 6 shows mothers' reports of fathers' involvement in decision-making about the children's lives. Forty-three percent of fathers were not at all involved with their biological children (whether or not children of another father lived in the mother's household), and 65 percent were not at all involved with the children of other fathers. At the other extreme, 29 percent of fathers with only biological children were very or extremely involved (a figure that includes all cohabiting fathers). Fathers' involvement with their biological children dropped to 25 percent when both their own and

another father's children lived in the mother's household. It is nonetheless noteworthy that 13 percent of fathers were described as very or extremely involved with the children of other fathers.

CONCLUSIONS

Our results suggest that the policy of full pass-through and disregard of child support is associated with significantly lower rates of cohabitation between mothers and men who are not the fathers of their child(ren). Thus a higher proportion of women remain single, given that rates of marriage and of cohabitation with fathers are similar. Overall, these results are consistent with the hypothesis that increased child support increases women's economic independence, reducing the incentive for women to cohabit with men who are not related to their children. Although earlier work suggested that the full pass-through and disregard may have reduced conflict between parents (see Meyer and Cancian, 2001, pp. 77–80), we find no evidence for an increase in marriage rates for parents in the full pass-through group.

The findings regarding reduced cohabitation in the experimental group are robust to alternative sets of regression adjustments, and persist across most subgroups. As was found for many other outcomes in the original evaluation, the effects are particularly strong among families new to the welfare system.[9]

The effects are particularly notable given the limited difference in the treatment received by those in the experimental and control groups. Those in the experimental group received all current child support paid, regardless of their W-2 participation status. Those in the control group received a partial pass-through and disregard from entry to W-2 (in 1997 or 1998), until they stopped receiving TANF, or until the full pass-through and disregard were made universal, in July of 2002. After that period, both experimental and control group participants received a full pass-through and disregard. Thus, the experimental assignment directly affected receipt of child support for a fairly short period for most

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[9]These families may have been more responsive to the new policy because of less exposure to the previous system (or because of other differences among new and continuing or returning participants).

participants. For this reason, the estimated effects of the policy on family structure are likely to be conservative.

Appendix:
Calculating Regression-Adjusted Distributions of Marital Status

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The distribution of mothers' marital status reported in Table 4 and Table 5 are regression-adjusted. We use multinomial logit regressions to predict marital status, controlling for assignment status and the following control variables: assignment period, mother's age and race, and whether the mother had a history of high child support receipts. The distributions of the control variables are shown in below Appendix Table 1.

Our basic approach follows that used for the initial experimental evaluation. A detailed explanation of the logic for the regression adjustments and control variables is provided in Volume III Chapter 1 of the Phase I Final Report. In this appendix we explain modifications required to apply this approach to estimates derived from multinomial logit regressions.

The regression-adjusted proportions was calculated as follows. First, the outcome (proportion of each marital status) was estimated using multinomial logit regression using the control variables and an indicator for experimental status. Multinomial logit regression is used because the outcome variable has three or four categories. Second, weighted means of the control variables were calculated. The predicted value for the proportion of each marital status was generated by keeping each case's value of experimental group indicator and inputting the weighted mean values of control variables to the estimated regression equation.

The statistical significance of estimated differences in the proportion married, cohabiting and single for the experimental and control group was calculated using a t-test. The standard deviation was calculated from confidence interval created by "prvalue" command in STATA program. Separate t-tests comparing two groups were conducted using the weighted number of cases, predicted proportion of each outcome categories and the standard deviation.

Appendix Table 1
List of Control Variables Used in Regressions

Variable	%
Assignment rates	
20% experimental group, 20% control group, 50% not in experiment	88.9
30% experimental group, 30% control group, 40% not in experiment	5.9
50% experimental group, 50% control group	5.2
High child support history (more than $1,000 paid to mother during October 1996 through September 1997)	17.0
Mother's age 31 or greater	28.3
Mother is African American	64.9

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