

# DATA BRIEF: Fathers in Child Welfare Cases

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) conducted an analysis of the frequency with which fathers are identified in child welfare cases in order to inform ongoing efforts to improve the engagement of fathers. The following is a summary of the first look at the data.

Healthy relationships with both parents benefit the development of children, but such relationships can be a particular challenge for children in the welfare system. A review of data from the Allegheny County child welfare system shows that fathers are less likely to be identified in child welfare cases than are mothers.

This analysis looked at relationships identified in DHS's child welfare case management system for children who were active in child welfare services on a particular day in March 2012. The data were limited to children with case activity that began sometime during the period that includes 2010, 2011 and 2012 up until the date of the review, which means that children whose cases had been open for several years were not included. Although the data offer percentages of parents identified in cases across several criteria, they do not measure the level of parent involvement in the case.

The child's biological mother was identified in 94 percent of cases, while biological fathers were identified in about 81 percent of cases. Other parental relationships were also examined, including stepmothers and stepfathers; adoptive, legal and foster parents; and parents whose biological or legal relationship to the child was unclear. All told, 99 percent of children had some type of mother relationship identified in their case compared to 88 percent whose cases reflected some type of father relationship. The data also show that the youngest children — those under the age of one — were the least likely to have a father identified in their cases.

One factor that appears to significantly influence the identification of fathers is the age of the child's mother. Biological fathers were identified in the cases of only 65 percent of children with mothers under the age of 18 compared to 84 percent of the cases involving children whose mothers were older. And when fathers were identified in cases involving a young mother, it was much less likely that their biological or legal relationship to the child was known.

Relatively few children experienced a family environment in which both parents were in the home prior to the time they entered the child welfare system. Only 28 percent lived in a home with both parents. Fifty-seven percent of children lived with their mother and four percent lived with their father; the other 11 percent of children lived with neither parent, or the data were not available.

The analysis also offers a glimpse of the extent to which children in the child welfare system are also parents of children in the system. About five percent of young women with active child welfare cases also had children with open cases. About nine percent of young women under the age of 20 and four percent of those 13 through 17 were found to be involved in the child welfare system as both a child and a parent. Only one percent of the young men active as a child with child welfare were documented as fathers on another case as well.

Increasing parental engagement, particularly that of fathers, is a focus of DHS's County Improvement Plan and the annual Quality Service Review (QSR). As part of the analysis of family engagement in child welfare cases, as well as barriers to such participation, the QSR measured indicators of engagement by fathers and found that they were approximately half as likely to be engaged as mothers (61 percent vs. 33 percent) in child welfare-related reunification activities (e.g., planning, meeting attendance). It is notable, however, that although they were not engaging with professional team members, QSR data indicate that 65 percent of fathers in the sample (15) had some type of regular contact with their child(ren), ranging from primary caregiving to sharing of some parenting responsibilities.

A variety of practice measures designed to increase engagement by families (and, by extension or design, by fathers) have been or are in the process of being implemented. These include: implementation of the DHS Conferencing and Teaming practice model; use of common assessments to identify family strengths and needs; expansion of the Permanency Roundtable process designed to improve permanency outcomes for children; participation in the initial pilot of a new training module by the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center (Building and Sustaining Father Engagement in the Welfare System); and enhanced training for all staff in activities related to family engagement.