

# Fathers' Socioeconomic Precarity and Mothers' Ability to Make Ends Meet



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*Economic and policy changes since Making Ends Meet was first published have fundamentally restructured the social safety net available to single mothers, while simultaneously eroding the economic position of the men with whom they share children. This study examines the degree of socioeconomic precarity among non-resident fathers and its implications for the economic well-being of mothers in the post-welfare reform era, using data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Nearly all nonresident fathers reported some type of precarity related to their employment, exposure to punitive systems, or financial and material resources; and the support they received from public or private sources was limited. Multiple aspects of fathers' socioeconomic precarity were also associated with mothers' experiences of material hardship and poverty. These findings suggest that nonresident fathers' own precarity precludes them from compensating for the loss of cash support following welfare reform.*

**Keywords:** single mothers, nonresident fathers, making ends meet, economic precarity, father employment, material hardship, poverty, system contact, child support

*Making Ends Meet* and the robust literature that followed vividly documented how single mothers' economic security is inextricably linked with that of their children's fathers. Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein's (1997) seminal work, published the year after the Personal Respon-

sibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), which promised to "end welfare as we know it," described how single mothers' income from welfare and low-wage work was insufficient to cover their expenses. Cash contributions from private sources like

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children's fathers were an important source of supplemental funds to fill the gaps in mothers' budgets. Indeed, more than half of the mothers in Edin and Lein's study (1997, chap. 6) turned to economic support from partners and fathers as a supplemental survival strategy. A fundamental assumption of the post-PRWORA social welfare state has been that private support, through mothers' own work and support provided by their children's fathers, would increase to compensate for the loss of cash welfare (Ananat et al. 2026). While the expansion of several programs shored up the safety net for some mothers (Pilkaskas and Bruey 2026, this issue; Bruch et al. 2026), the transition from cash support to a block grant program with work-based eligibility requirements meant mothers without strong connections to the formal economy fell deeper into poverty (Brady and Parolin 2020; Shaefer and Edin 2013).

Although nonresident fathers were not necessarily considered "reliable" providers by mothers in Edin and Lein's study, there is reason to anticipate that conditions since the passage of PRWORA have further compromised fathers' ability to shore up the economic situations of struggling mothers. Research in the decades since this book was published has underscored the importance of nonresident fathers' formal and informal contributions for the economic security of households with children (Nepomnyaschy et al. 2022; Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel 2011; Cuesta and Meyer 2018; Lewis and Kornrich 2020; Kane et al. 2015; Ha et al. 2011). Changes to the economic and policy landscape have created significant barriers for fathers' ability to provide time and resources to support their children's households. Economic restructuring over this period undermined the quality and remuneration of work for men without college degrees, a demographic disproportionately comprised of nonresident fathers (Binder and Bound 2019; Smeeding et al. 2011; Nepomnyaschy and Miller 2023). At the same time, policy changes that strengthened child support enforcement mechanisms and extended the reach of the criminal legal system have had serious collateral consequences for socioeconomically marginalized fathers and their families. Rather than compensating for the loss of cash welfare,

fathers have faced challenges more likely to erode than bolster their provision of support to single mothers.

This study provides an updated and comprehensive look at the socioeconomic circumstances of nonresident fathers much like those in *Making Ends Meet*, and the implications for mothers' economic survival in the post-welfare reform era. We find that fathers' socioeconomic precarity is both ubiquitous and closely linked to mothers' economic hardship, raising serious questions about the viability of support from nonresident fathers as a core survival strategy to compensate for gaps in the public safety net. Indeed, while this study provides a systematic investigation of men's socioeconomic vulnerability, our analysis is primarily motivated by an interest in understanding how this is linked to mothers' precarity. As documented in the other articles in this issue, the circumstances faced by many single mothers—who were already struggling at the end of the millennium—have become increasingly strained. While some are shored up by a work-based safety net, those not well served by this new regime are further destabilized by the precarity of their children's fathers.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF NONRESIDENT FATHER SUPPORT AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY FOR SINGLE MOTHERS

*Making Ends Meet* identified a set of survival strategies that mothers employed to patch together the resources needed to keep their households afloat prior to welfare reform, including work, cash welfare, network-based strategies (that is, family, friends, romantic partners, and nonresident fathers), support from agencies or community organizations, and other public benefits programs. As other studies in this issue illustrate (Bruch et al. 2026; Pilkaskas and Bruey 2026, this issue; Ananat et al. 2026; van der Naald et al. 2026; Fong and McCarthy 2026; Abbott et al. 2026), policy changes in the last thirty years have fundamentally altered the survival strategies available to mothers. Most notable of these changes was the passage of PRWORA in 1996, which replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and essentially removed

cash welfare from the suite of tools available to single mothers (Pilkauskas and Bruey 2026, this issue; Bruch et al. 2026). Only twenty-one out of every one hundred families in poverty received TANF cash assistance in 2020, with tremendous variation by state (for example, from 71 percent in California and Vermont to 4 percent in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas), compared to sixty-eight out of one hundred families in 1996 (Shrivastava and Azito Thompson 2022). Underscoring the seriousness of these changes, H. Luke Shaefer and Kathryn Edin (2013) found a large increase in extreme poverty in the years following the passage of PRWORA among mothers “disconnected” from both work and cash welfare.

The post-PRWORA public safety net, with time limited cash welfare and work requirements for many programs, also made mothers more reliant on private and network-based survival strategies (van der Naald et al. 2026; Kwon et al. 2026; Pilkauskas and Bruey 2026, this issue; Ananat et al. 2026). Using network-based resources ranked highly in the moral hierarchy of survival strategies among the mothers in *Making Ends Meet*, but strategies like “doubling-up” could also increase risk of abuse (Edin and Shaefer 2015; Edin and Lein 1997). Thus, while resources from private networks were an important source of support, this carried risks and was understood to be supplemental to cash welfare or work-based strategies.

Large-scale changes to the child support enforcement (CSE) system in the decades since *Making Ends Meet* sought to increase formal contributions from fathers, both lending the force of the state to mothers’ claim to economic support from nonresident fathers and further shifting responsibility to private support. Originally created in 1975 to recoup the cost of cash welfare paid to custodial mothers, CSE has evolved into an extensive system of policies and practices to establish legal paternity and child support orders and enforce collections (Tollstrup 2021). Consistent with the mantra of “personal responsibility,” extensive state investment in the CSE system began in earnest just after the enactment of welfare reform in PRWORA even as enrollment in public benefits declined and program generosity largely stag-

nated (Bruch et al. 2026). Most families in the CSE system are required to participate as a condition of custodial mothers’ receipt of public benefits (Selekman and Holcomb 2018), not because of parental preference for state involvement (Waller 2019; Rambert 2021). This means that while some mothers intentionally seek out involvement with CSE to secure resources to support their families, most do not engage voluntarily with the system and many do not participate at all. Indeed, only half of custodial mothers have a formal child support agreement (Grall 2020). Despite state efforts to enforce collections from fathers, less than one-third of children with a nonresident parent receive any formal child support (Grall 2020), a lower share than before welfare reform; this decline is the result of fewer child support orders being established, especially orders with any support due (Grall 2002; Pilarz and Cuesta 2025; Cancian et al. 2023).

The amount of formal child support due is typically set by the state, withheld from fathers’ paychecks (Office of Child Support Enforcement 2023), and then distributed to mothers or kept as repayment for benefits the mother has received. All but two states retain payments if mothers received TANF, either currently or in the past, though half pass through a small part of those funds to custodial parents (National Conference of State Legislatures 2023). Mothers who receive child support get direct cash payments, which affords them the freedom to use the funds as they deem necessary. While formal child support receipt has been shown to increase the regularity of low-income mothers’ total income and to reduce poverty and material hardship in children’s households (Ha et al. 2011; Cuesta and Meyer 2018; Nepomnyaschy et al. 2022), recent evidence suggests that only a small and select group of mothers receiving the highest amounts of formal cash support actually see a reduction in poverty or material hardship (Nepomnyaschy et al. 2022). Indeed, the large investment in CSE in recent decades has not resulted in substantial increases to either the proportion of mothers receiving any support or the amount of support received (Pilarz and Cuesta 2025; Cancian et al. 2025).

A large share of the monetary support mothers receive from their personal networks comes

from the fathers of their children outside of the formal CSE system, primarily as direct cash and noncash contributions. In-kind (noncash) contributions such as toys, clothes, food, medicine, and paying directly for child care, after-school, or other enrichment programs are common, with nearly 60 percent of custodial mothers receiving such support according to national data (Grall 2020; Sorensen 2021). Importantly, in-kind support also carries more emotional and symbolic value because it signals fathers' commitment, connection, time with children, and cooperation with their children's mothers (Waller et al. 2018; Craigie 2012; Waller 2002). Fathers are more likely to provide this voluntary support (Nepomnyaschy et al. 2020; Kane et al. 2015), and it may be of greater financial value than formal child support (Kane et al. 2015) as it cannot be intercepted by the state. In-kind support is also provided more consistently over the child's life (Sariscsany et al. 2019; Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel 2010), making it particularly beneficial for mothers' allocation of household resources and financial planning (Flanagan and Halpern-Meekin 2026, this issue). Evidence from the Future of Families Study shows that in-kind support is associated with improved behavioral and academic outcomes for children (Miller et al. 2020; Nepomnyaschy et al. 2020) and reduced material hardship in their households, especially when nonresident fathers are involved in their children's lives (Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel 2011, 2014; Nepomnyaschy et al. 2022). Thus, the importance of nonresident fathers' voluntary support as a survival strategy for mothers spans the pre- and post-welfare reform eras.

Although not an explicit focus of *Making Ends Meet*, nonresident fathers' positive coparenting, engagement, and time spent with children, as well as fathers' emotional and physical well-being, may also have implications for single mothers' economic precarity. Recent work indicates that fathers' engagement is associated with better child outcomes and improved economic standing of mothers' households, as well as reductions in socioeconomic disparities in child outcomes (Nepomnyaschy et al. 2020, 2022; Miller et al. 2020). Fathers' time spent with children is highly correlated with their provision of informal and in-kind support, as

they often purchase or bring things to children when they visit or spend time with them (Nepomnyaschy 2007; Waller et al. 2018). Further, fathers' time with children may reduce stress and provide mothers with time for other needed tasks.

#### **FATHERS' SOCIOECONOMIC PRECARITY**

Prior to welfare reform, Edin and Lein (1997, 167) observed: "As important as these contributions were to mothers' budgets, most mothers knew that they could not count on fathers over the long term because fathers' incomes were too precarious," echoing Carol B. Stack's (1975) assessment of the "reliability" of support from fathers in the early 1970s. Changes to public policy and the economy already underway in the 1990s, including the loss of manufacturing jobs, decline in union power, relocation of remaining work to less accessible areas, and declining real value of the minimum wage, further undermined the wages and employment of economically vulnerable men (Autor et al. 2016; Sugie and Lens 2017; Verick 2009; Wilson 1997). This is particularly true for the population of socioeconomically marginalized men most likely to be nonresident fathers (Berger and Langton 2011). As a result of these changes, fathers' ability to support their children has eroded rather than expanded to meet mothers' changing needs. Thus, while men are generally understood to be better off economically than women—even among those at the lowest end of the economic spectrum (Chun-Hoon 2023)—the deteriorated position of men with low socioeconomic status (low-SES) means that nonresident fathers may need to prioritize their own needs over supporting family members in other households. Coupled with the fact that they are often ineligible for more generous benefits from the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) if they are able-bodied and have no other dependents, nonresident fathers may have very limited resources to mitigate hardship faced by mothers struggling to make ends meet post-PRWORA.

This deterioration is evident across multiple metrics. Continuing a decades-long slide, the labor force participation rate of men declined from 75 percent in 1997 to 68.9 percent in early

2020 (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024). Likewise, rates of participation in the labor force among prime-age men (ages twenty-five to fifty-four) have decreased with each successive recent generation (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024; Binder and Bound 2019). Except for those at the highest end of the distribution, earnings for prime-age men have also declined or remained stagnant in the decades since welfare reform (England et al. 2020), and wage stagnation has been worst for men of color with the lowest earnings, compounding long-standing racial disparities (Wilson and Rogers 2016). These data reflect, in part, large-scale macroeconomic shifts that have contributed to the increasing precarity of men without a college degree, 64 percent of all men over age twenty-five in the United States (United States Census Bureau 2023). Following all but the most recent economic recession, as industries traditionally dominated by women were among the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2024), the return to employment has been slower for men than women following downturns (Sahin et al. 2010), with some evidence that nonresident fathers are hardest hit (Mincy et al. 2015). The jobs that remain available to such fathers frequently pay little while requiring irregular and nonstandard schedules, two features that make balancing family needs difficult and undermine well-being (Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021; Schneider and Harknett 2019).

These downward trends in economic stability have occurred alongside the expansion of the CSE system, often compounding fathers' precarity. Both the public and policymakers expect fathers to support their children, and fathers unable to meet their obligations have been pilloried as "deadbeats," driving the expansion of CSE (Mincy and Sorensen 1998; Rambert 2021). At the same time, enforcement measures have become increasingly punitive and focused on fathers' apparent willingness to pay while ignoring their ability to pay. Because orders often include retroactive support, such as the repayment of birthing costs covered by Medicaid, fathers can immediately find themselves in substantial child support debt when an order is established. It has also been

common practice, when fathers are not present at hearings or information is missing, for courts to impute their income in setting a child support order (Turetsky 2019), a practice that frequently overestimates the amount that fathers can contribute (Plotnick and Kennedy 2018). Similarly, not all states require the use of self-support reserves, which stipulate that child support orders include a set-aside that allows fathers to retain some income for basic sustenance, and reserves are not always implemented in states that require them (National Conference of State Legislatures 2020).

These practices have resulted in child support obligations that are beyond the means of many fathers, and falling behind on required payments can lead to serious penalties, including court-ordered reductions in time with children, driver's license suspension, interception of tax returns, criminal charges, and incarceration (Haney 2018, 2022; Sorensen et al. 2007; Tollestrup 2021; National Conference of State Legislatures 2021; Rambert 2021). Compounding the challenges of unrealistic orders, thirty-four states charge interest on child support arrears, with rates as high as 12 percent (National Conference of State Legislatures 2021). As a result of all of these CSE practices, fathers are much more likely than in prior decades to incur unmanageable child support arrears (Turetsky and Waller 2020), with 77 percent of nonresident parents in the child support system today carrying arrears (Office of Child Support Enforcement 2021) and only 40 percent of those arrears likely to be collected (Sorensen et al. 2007). Most of these arrears are owed by men making less than \$10,000 a year, and this debt is associated with a host of negative outcomes for men and their families (Miller and Mincy 2012; Nepomnyaschy et al. 2021; Robbins et al. 2022; Turner and Waller 2017; Sorensen et al. 2007; Rambert 2021).

The reach and punitiveness of the criminal legal system also grew in parallel with the expansion of CSE. The 1990s were an era of "tough on crime" laws that accelerated the growth of this system (Enns 2014) until 2009, when a peak of 7.2 million people, most of whom were parents, were incarcerated or under criminal justice supervision (Glaze 2010; Glaze and Maruschak 2010). As a result, even

those with nonviolent and low-level offenses found themselves coping with crippling levels of legal debt (Bing et al. 2022; Friedman and Pattillo 2019; Harris et al. 2022), and more extensive and extended periods of supervision (King 2019). This dramatic expansion in the criminal legal system disproportionately impacted Black and Latino men with less than a high school degree and those from disadvantaged communities (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2010; Kurlychek and Johnson 2019). Both the loss of income during supervision and the collateral consequences of these criminal legal entanglements directly undermine nonresident fathers' ability to support their children, and child support arrears can grow during this time. Interactions between labor markets and both the criminal legal and CSE systems trap men in ongoing cycles of unemployment, incarceration, and debt, which significantly limit their economic stability (Agan and Makowsky 2018; Apel and Horney 2017; Apel and Powell 2019; Dwyer Emory 2021; Haney 2018; Turetsky and Waller 2020). Unsurprisingly, criminal legal system contact has been shown to undermine fathers' contributions of time and resources to their families. Indeed, mothers who share children with formerly incarcerated men received less voluntary and formal support from either nonresident fathers (Geller et al. 2011; McLeod and Gottlieb 2018; Dwyer Emory et al. 2020) or others in their networks (Turney et al. 2012).

In sum, large-scale changes have unfolded in the decades since *Making Ends Meet* was first published that have substantially limited the viability of support from nonresident fathers as a survival strategy for single mothers. While some mothers have benefited from these changes, those unable to capitalize on the work-focused safety net that has emerged find themselves also unable to depend on support from their children's fathers, a key means of making ends meet in the pre-welfare reform era. Changes in the labor market and greater exposure to punitive systems have had profoundly negative implications for fathers' economic prospects, social connections, and even health, and virtually all of these changes have had a greater impact on lower-SES men and Black or Latino men (Battle 2018; Adams 2018; Pratt 2016; Nepomnyaschy and Miller 2023;

Smeeding et al. 2011). As fathers struggle to meet their own basic needs, fewer resources are available to support single mothers. Financially strained fathers are also more likely to experience physical and emotional problems, including poor physical health, depression, and substance use (Robbins et al. 2022; Massoglia and Remster 2019; Williams 2003), likely further limiting their ability to provide effective and consistent support. What resources they do have are likely to first go toward supporting their current-household needs over those of nonresident children and custodial mothers (Edin and Nelson 2013). There can even be a reversal in the flow of resources away from children's families through kinship networks as families struggle to support incapacitated men, as has been documented in cases of criminal justice involvement (Braman 2004; Katzenstein and Waller 2015; Miller 2021; Page et al. 2019). Thus, the socioeconomic precarity fathers face is likely to have implications for entire kin networks, as men have fewer resources to distribute and may even draw on the resources of kin and romantic partners to help meet their own needs.

#### CURRENT STUDY

In this study, we use longitudinal population-based data from an economically, racially, and ethnically diverse sample to identify and describe multiple dimensions of nonresident fathers' socioeconomic precarity and access to support that could potentially affect custodial mothers' economic well-being. We describe nonresident fathers' socioeconomic circumstances using five broad conceptual domains related to the policy changes outlined above and to existing research on the multifaceted sources of socioeconomic disadvantage fathers face (Osborne 2020; Smeeding et al. 2011; Nepomnyaschy and Miller 2023). We first capture three domains of fathers' socioeconomic precarity. Given the shift in the years after *Making Ends Meet* to a work-based safety net and co-occurring erosion in the low-wage labor market, we first examine fathers' employment precarity. Because of the expansion of the CSE and criminal legal systems over this period and their impact on low-SES families, we also measure fathers' exposure to these two punitive sys-

tems. Related to these, we also examine fathers' resource precarity, or their challenges meeting their own households' needs. We next measure two potential sources of support fathers may use to mitigate hardship, specifically support from private networks and receipt of public benefits. Finally, we examine the extent to which the three domains of fathers' socioeconomic precarity (employment, exposure to punitive systems, and resource precarity) are associated with economic insecurity in mothers' households, controlling for a rich set of individual, family, and structural factors that may confound this association.

## METHODS

Our study takes advantage of five waves of population-based data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). In many ways, the FFCWS is an ideal dataset for this study as it contains unparalleled information about a group of fathers who were first interviewed in the three years after *Making Ends Meet* was published and who were followed over the period when many of the policy and economic changes described earlier were unfolding. Specifically, FFCWS has followed a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born in large US cities between 1998 and 2000 and their biological parents, tracking these families in the period immediately following welfare reform and through the resultant changes to the economy and social welfare state. The study oversampled births to unmarried mothers (a 3 to 1 ratio) and is representative of all such births in large cities (population greater than 200,000) at that time (Reichman et al. 2001). Mothers and available fathers were interviewed at the child's birth, with follow-up interviews when their children were approximately one year old (interviewed in 1999–2002), three years old (interviewed in 2001–2003), five years old (interviewed in 2003–2006), and nine years old (interviewed 2007–2010). While additional surveys were conducted when children were ages fifteen and twenty-two, fathers were only consistently interviewed in the first five waves of the FFCWS. As most of the detailed indicators of fathers' precarity are self-reported, our study uses data from these earlier waves to capture with as much rigor as possible this population

of fathers who are famously invisible in most national surveys (Pettit 2012). This study thus focuses on the families whose pre-welfare reform experiences in the early 1990s were documented by *Making Ends Meet*, following them during a period of rapid policy change that led to the modern welfare state documented by the other articles in this issue. While data only cover the period from 1999 to 2010, there is strong reason to expect findings to apply to fathers in the current era, as the conditions underlying nonresident fathers' economic precarity have not substantively improved across most domains (Binder and Bound 2019).

## Sample

To focus on men most similar to those who were partnered with the women in *Making Ends Meet*, our analytic sample is limited to fathers who were not married to the focal child's mother at the child's birth and were not living with her at the observed wave. The single mothers in this analytic sample were never married to, and were living apart from, the focal child's biological father, regardless of whether they had repartnered. This conceptualization recognizes the fluidity of family relationships by defining them relative to a shared child rather than in relation to romantic ties, and allows parents to shift into and out of the sample at different waves. We do not use data from waves when parents were coresident, reflecting both the methodological challenge of disentangling the household resources of coresident mothers and fathers and the conceptual focus of *Making Ends Meet* on resources from nonresident fathers.

To maximize the analytic sample and include the most expansive period of time in the post-welfare reform era (1999–2010), we pooled data from four survey waves (years 1, 3, 5, and 9) when fathers were interviewed and met the analytic criteria. This generated an initial sample of 4,134 observations from 1,942 unique fathers, with each contributing an average of 1.8 observations. After these restrictions, 45 percent of variables were measured with no missing data. Of the remaining variables, only three were missing data for more than 5 percent of observations (whether the child was the fathers' first born, whether the father lived with

both biological parents at age fifteen, and whether he was US-born). To avoid further reductions to the samples for our multivariate analyses, we added a third category to these dichotomous variables indicating missingness (Allison 2001). Thereafter, we conducted complete case analysis, with sample sizes in the regression models varying between 3,952 and 4,134 observations, depending on the measure of fathers' precarity being examined.

### Measures

Our analyses focus on measures of mothers' economic precarity, fathers' socioeconomic precarity, fathers' sources of public and private support, and a set of covariates.

#### *Mothers' Economic Precarity*

Mothers' economic precarity, our primary outcome of interest, is indicated by their experiences of material hardship and poverty measured at the 1, 3, 5, and 9-year survey waves. Material hardship is measured using a series of questions about mothers' difficulties making ends meet, such as the inability to pay full rent or mortgage, the inability to pay bills, or the inability to get medical care because there was not enough money. We create a binary measure of whether the mother reports any such experience, with more detailed indicators of prevalence listed in table A.1. Mothers' poverty status is constructed from their reported household income from all sources, adjusted for household size and composition by the FFCWS, consistent with the official poverty measure used by the United States Census Bureau. We create a binary outcome indicating whether household income is below this official federal poverty level (FPL).

#### *Fathers' Socioeconomic Precarity*

The three domains of fathers' socioeconomic precarity (employment precarity, interactions with punitive systems, and resource precarity) are not mutually exclusive either practically or in our operationalizations. Our indicators of employment precarity measure the quality, stability, regularity, and remuneration associated with fathers' work. To capture as comprehensively as possible the complexity of their employment situations, we create a categorical

variable for type of work, distinguishing among work without irregular shifts, work with irregular shifts, and no reported employment. This is determined by questions of whether fathers were doing any work for pay, and whether they worked at different times each week. Second, we created an indicator for fathers who reported working fewer than both full-time (40 hours per week) and full-year (52 weeks per year) in the past year. Next, we consider a continuous measure of weekly earnings from all jobs in the past year, top coded to the 99th percentile, and an indicator for whether these earnings were below what would be expected for full-time work at the federal minimum wage.

Fathers' interaction with punitive systems is operationalized as exposure to the child support enforcement and criminal legal systems. Interaction with the child support enforcement system is measured by whether the father had any child support arrears. Criminal legal contact is categorized into three groups: fathers who had been incarcerated; fathers who had contact with the criminal legal system, including being arrested, charged, or convicted but not incarcerated; and fathers who had no contact with the criminal legal system. Following convention in previous work, criminal legal contact is defined by a combination of mothers' and fathers' reports to address potential underreporting.

Finally, fathers' resource precarity is captured using their reports of household income, material hardship, housing insecurity, and access to health insurance. A categorical measure of poverty captures fathers' reports of household income from all sources that was below the official FPL, between 100 and 200 percent of the FPL, or above 200 percent of the FPL. Fathers' experience of material hardship is constructed as a dichotomous indicator from fathers' interviews in the same way as described above for mothers. Next, following Amanda Geller and Marah A. Curtis (2011), we construct a binary indicator of housing instability, measuring whether fathers experienced any of the following: did not pay full mortgage or rent, moved in with others to save money, moved more than once in the past year, lived with others without paying rent, lived in a shelter or place not intended as permanent housing, or

were evicted. These two indicators of material hardship and housing instability are overlapping, with some measures of housing instability contributing to both variables. Finally, we create an indicator for fathers reporting that they had no health insurance, either public or private.

#### *Fathers' Private and Public Support*

In our descriptive analyses only, we analyze two additional domains which index the private and public support available to fathers. Fathers' perceived network support includes self-reports of whether they could borrow money—either \$200 or \$1,000—from someone or move in with someone if needed. Fathers' actual network support includes whether they reported borrowing money from friends or family to pay bills, moving in with someone out of need, or receiving free food because of a lack of resources. Last, we include two separate indicators for fathers' reports of receiving means-tested public benefits: receipt of TANF, SNAP, or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and receipt of the EITC.

#### *Covariates*

Our multivariate analyses include a number of characteristics that may be associated with fathers' socioeconomic precarity and commitment to the child, all taken from the baseline survey at the child's birth. Fathers' characteristics include their age, whether they were born in the US, race and ethnicity, education, whether they were ever interviewed in Spanish, and whether they lived with both biological parents at age fifteen. Mothers' characteristics similarly include self-reports of whether they were born in the US, whether the mother was the same race and ethnicity as the father, the difference in their ages, and whether she had more education than him. Characteristics of the child include their sex assigned at birth, whether the child was the mother's firstborn (mothers' reports) or the father's (fathers' reports), whether Medicaid paid for the child's birth, and a 4-item scale measuring fathers' level of commitment to the focal child at the birth (mothers' report). Finally, we include an indicator for whether the parents were cohab-

iting at the child's birth (mothers' report) and indicators for interview wave. Detailed information on the covariates is included in table A.1.

#### **Analytic Strategy**

The analysis proceeds in two phases. First, we identify and richly describe the three dimensions of fathers' socioeconomic precarity as well as their private and public support. This information draws primarily on fathers' reports from surveys collected between 1999 and 2010. As an initial assessment of the associations between parental circumstances, we then stratify these descriptive analyses by whether fathers shared a child with a mother who experienced hardship since the previous wave and test for statistically significant differences between these subgroups. Second, we examine whether and how each dimension of nonresident fathers' socioeconomic precarity (employment precarity, interactions with punitive systems, and resource precarity) is associated with the economic well-being of mothers using three-level random intercept linear regression models including the full set of controls described above. These models nest multiple observations within fathers and fathers within states, as fathers were included up to four times and lived in forty-two different states with wide ranging policy contexts. Because the dimensions of fathers' precarity are highly collinear, we consider each dimension in each model separately. In supplementary analyses, we describe our sample and re-estimate our multivariate models stratified by fathers' race and ethnicity and fathers' region of residence to examine whether regional differences in availability of supports, program generosity, and economic strength affected our results.

#### **RESULTS**

Our analysis describes fathers with nonmarital births who were living apart from their children's mothers during the post-welfare reform era, a group who are the counterparts of the men with whom the mothers in *Making Ends Meet* shared children. Our results indicate that struggles for this group persist. Overall, socioeconomic precarity among these fathers was

pervasive, with at least one type of socioeconomic precarity present for a stunning 96 percent of observations. To further contextualize this finding, over the four waves of data in our study, 98.4 percent of these nonresident fathers described at least one wave of exposure to employment precarity, system contact, or resource precarity; only 1.6 percent experienced no precarity. As illustrated in table A.1, while the overwhelming majority of the fathers in the sample were working age (98 percent), only 69 percent reported good health, and most had a high school education (39 percent) or less (38 percent). In addition, 39 percent of fathers reported that the focal child lived with them at least half of the time, and most of these fathers were also connected to children other than the study focal child: 54 percent had another biological or adopted child; 30 percent lived with another biological or adopted child in their current household; and more than half (55 percent) lived in a household with at least one minor child. These attributes put these fathers at greater risk of economic precarity and suggest that they may struggle to meet their own needs, those of their households, and those of nonresident children and custodial mothers. Nonetheless, the vast majority of fathers (85 percent) provided some kind of financial or in-kind support to the focal child's mother.

The level of hardship reported by the mothers with whom the fathers in our sample share children underscores the similarities between our sample and the families in *Making Ends Meet*. As shown in table 1, about half of mothers in our pooled sample across four waves of data reported experiences of economic precarity in the form of either poverty (53 percent) or material hardship (46 percent), and approximately 72 percent of mothers in the sample reported experiencing either of those outcomes. As illustrated in figure 1, while mothers and fathers have a good deal of overlapping economic precarity, mothers on average reported lower income-to-poverty ratios than fathers, indicating lower incomes and deeper poverty. Supplemental analyses (not shown) echoed this finding, indicating that on average mothers were more likely to report material hardship and economic precarity than the men with whom

they shared children. Thus, while our results and discussion emphasize the challenges faced by fathers and the constraints they face supporting their own households and those of their children's custodial mothers, we view their precarity as shaping the resources available to mothers struggling to make ends meet post-welfare reform.

### Dimensions of Fathers' Socioeconomic Precarity

We consider three dimensions of fathers' socioeconomic precarity of particular salience for fathers' ability to provide support to single mothers in post-welfare reform period. These are employment precarity, system exposure, and resource precarity.

#### *Employment Precarity*

Fathers experienced one or more types of employment precarity in just over three-quarters (78 percent) of observations in our pooled sample. Fathers living apart from their child's mother reported some employment in the vast majority of cases (84 percent), with about 39 percent working regular shifts or hours at the time of the survey and nearly 45 percent working irregular or variable shifts. In nearly 60 percent of cases, fathers reported less than full-time, full-year work over the past year. In our sample, average weekly earnings were \$573, with fathers reporting earnings over the past year that fell below the threshold of full-time minimum wage work 40 percent of the time. Thus, while most fathers were largely working when observed, this work was often unstable or low paid. Fathers working less than full-time and full-year were also more likely to share a child with a mother experiencing material hardship, though the other measures of employment precarity did not significantly differ by mothers' hardship.

#### *System Exposure*

Contact with punitive systems was also extensive, reported by just over three-quarters of fathers (77 percent). In 31 percent of cases, fathers had accrued child support arrears, putting them at risk for a range of punitive enforcement practices from driver's license sus-

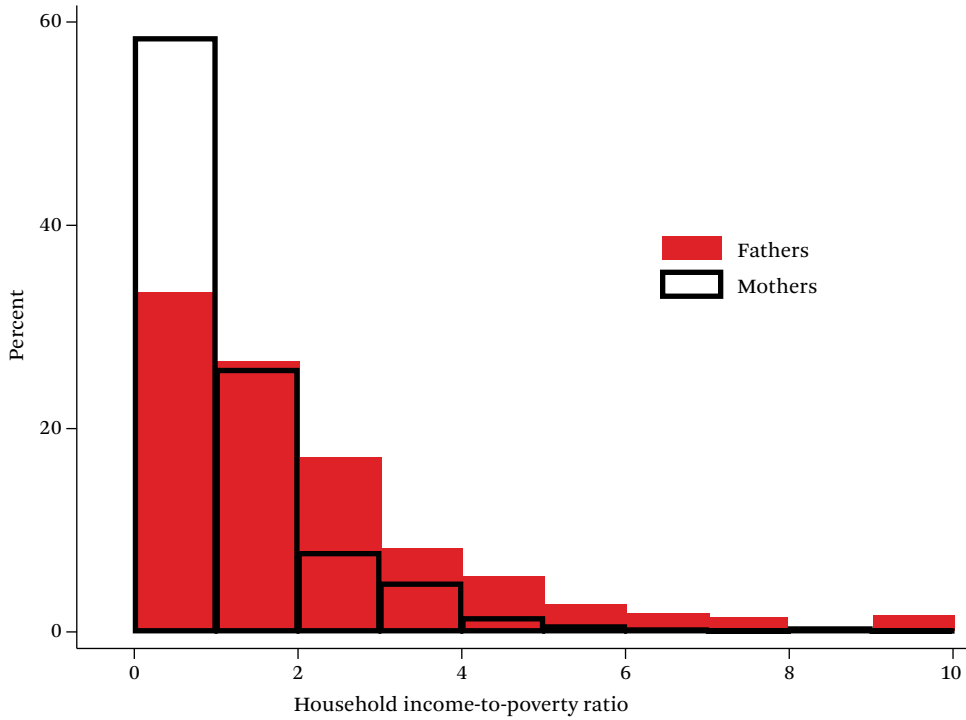
**Table 1.** Nonresident Fathers' Socioeconomic Precarity and Maternal Material Hardship

	Mean (Standard Deviation) or Percent			Difference by Maternal Hardship
	Full Sample	Mother Not Experiencing Hardship	Mother Experiencing Hardship	
<b>Mothers' socioeconomic precarity</b>				
Any material hardship	46.20%	0%	100%	
Household below federal poverty line	53.50%	48.60%	59.30%	***
<b>Fathers' socioeconomic precarity</b>				
Any socioeconomic precarity	95.55%	94.60%	96.65%	***
Employment precarity				
Working only regular shifts	39.40%	40.80%	37.90%	+
Working any irregular shifts	44.70%	44.30%	45.00%	
Not employed	15.90%	14.90%	17.10%	+
Working less than full-time, full-year	57.70%	54.80%	61.10%	***
Earning less than the equivalent of full-time minimum wage	37.50%	36.60%	38.60%	
Weekly earnings (\$)	572.5 (936.6)	591.7 (959.9)	549.8 (908.0)	
<b>Fathers' system exposure</b>				
Any arrears	31.40%	27.70%	35.60%	***
No criminal legal contact	31.10%	34.40%	27.30%	***
Criminal legal contact without incarceration	15.40%	17.40%	13.20%	***
Incarceration	53.50%	48.20%	59.50%	***
<b>Fathers' resource precarity</b>				
Household below federal poverty line	31.70%	30.20%	33.50%	*
Household earnings between 100% and 200% of poverty line	25.20%	24.10%	26.50%	+
Household earnings > 200% of poverty line	43.10%	45.70%	40.10%	***
Any material hardship	33.30%	26.30%	41.40%	***
Any housing problems	30.90%	28.90%	33.10%	**
No health insurance	57.70%	56.30%	59.30%	+
<b>Fathers' supports</b>				
Fathers' network support				
Perceived support	0.75 (0.33)	0.77 (0.32)	0.74 (0.33)	*
Received support	0.16 (0.25)	0.13 (0.22)	0.19 (0.27)	***
<b>Fathers' receipt of public benefits</b>				
Received any public assistance (SSI, TANF, SNAP)	14.20%	11.90%	16.90%	***
Received EITC	24.40%	24.00%	24.90%	
Complete sample size	4,134	2,224	1,910	

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Sample size varies from  $n = 4,134$  to  $n = 3,820$  based on item-specific nonresponse. Asterisks indicate significance level of bivariate OLS regressions of each indicator of nonresident father's socioeconomic precarity on the material hardship of his child's mother.

+  $p < .1$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Figure 1.** Income-to-Poverty Ratios Among Fathers and Mothers at Year 1

Source: Authors' calculations.

pensions to incarceration. Criminal legal system contact was even more common among these men. Fathers reported no criminal legal exposure less than one-third of the time (31 percent), while lower-level criminal legal contact (15 percent) or a history of incarceration (54 percent) were more common. Fathers' arrears accrual and criminal system contact were both substantially higher in cases in which children's mothers were experiencing material hardship.

### *Resource Precarity*

Unsurprisingly given the prevalence of precarious employment and exposure to punitive systems, nonresident fathers reported experiencing at least one type of resource precarity nearly 85 percent of the time and lived in households whose combined earnings fell below the federal poverty line about one-third of the time. Despite these experiences of resource precarity, in 43 percent of cases fathers were living in households with incomes above 200 percent of the FPL, indicating important heterogeneity in

fathers' economic standing. Fathers in households with incomes more than double the poverty line were significantly more likely to share a child with a mother not reporting material hardship than a mother reporting this type of resource precarity, while differences for the other two income groups (less than 100 percent FPL and 100–200 percent FPL) were somewhat smaller. In approximately one-third of observations, fathers reported experiencing material hardship or housing instability. A substantially higher proportion of fathers who shared a child with a mother experiencing material hardship themselves reported material hardship (41 percent), while the proportion was lower among mothers without hardship (26 percent). Finally, most nonresident fathers (58 percent) reported having no health insurance (either public or private) when observed. It is important to note that these data predate the Medicaid expansion, enacted by the Affordable Care Act in 2010 and implemented beginning in 2014, which likely would have extended coverage to many men in our sample. There was only a margin-

ally significant association between fathers lacking health insurance and mothers' material hardship ( $p < .10$ ).

### **Dimensions of Fathers' Public and Private Support**

We consider two dimensions of fathers' public and private support that could provide an important buffer to fathers' precarity. Private support, which includes both perceived access to support and actual support received from their networks, and receipt of public benefits.

#### *Network Support*

Fathers' perceived support averaged 0.75 on a scale ranging from 0 (no perceived support) to 1 (all three types of support included in the scale), indicating that most fathers believed they could access some type of support if needed. Fathers' actual received support averaged 0.16 on a scale from 0 (no support) to 1 (received all three supports), indicating that fathers rarely received any type of support. Fathers received greater support when mothers were experiencing hardship (0.19 versus 0.13), suggesting that receiving support is a strong indicator of precarity and need within the family system. Unlike actual support, the level of perceived support was significantly higher in cases in which fathers' former partners were not experiencing hardship. This imbalance between perceived and received support likely reflects differences in both needs and network resources.

#### *Receipt of Public Benefits*

Despite the relatively high levels of socioeconomic precarity described above, only 14 percent of fathers reported receiving any of the three types of federal public assistance considered here (TANF, SSI, SNAP). In cases where mothers reported hardship, nonresident fathers were substantially more likely to receive benefits (17 percent of the time versus 12 percent), likely reflecting fathers' own economic need and the tendency for the neediest fathers to have partnered with mothers in the most difficult circumstances. On the other hand, fathers reported receiving the EITC nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of the time, and there was no difference in the likelihood of receipt

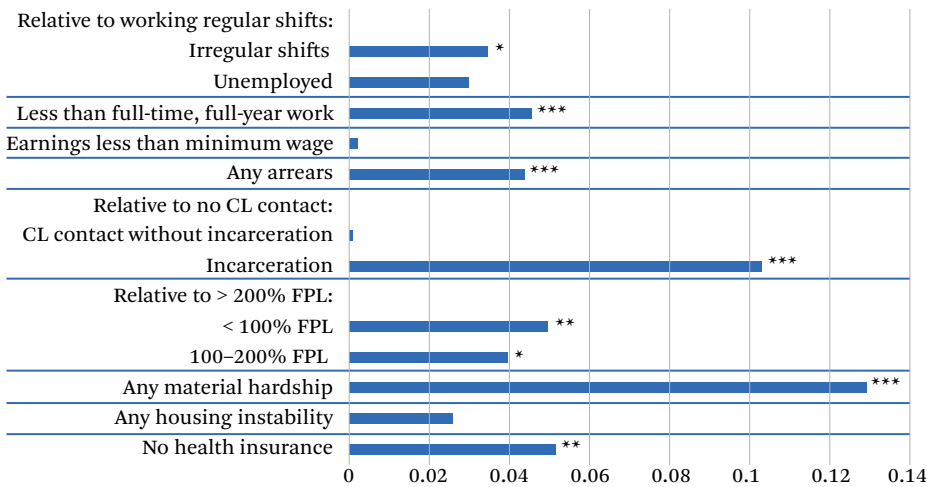
by mothers' experiences of material hardship. This rate of receipt likely reflects the tax complexity of nonresident parents, as eligibility depends on tax filing and dependent children the parent claims (Micheltmore and Pilkauskas 2022).

### **Multivariate Results**

Figures 2 and 3 present results of our multilevel linear models that account for the nesting of observations at the father and state levels, possible confounding variables measured at the child's birth, and survey wave. These models separately capture the associations between different facets of fathers' socioeconomic precarity (employment precarity, punitive system exposure, and resource precarity) and mothers' economic precarity (material hardship and poverty). They do not include measures of fathers' private or public support, which, while relevant for understanding the depth of fathers' precarity, are indirectly tied to mothers' resources in ways that our data cannot adequately capture. Full results are available as appendix tables.

Figure 2 presents coefficients from regression models examining associations between each indicator of fathers' precarity and the likelihood of mothers experiencing material hardship. Only two of the indicators of father employment precarity were associated with maternal hardship. Working irregular shifts was associated with a greater likelihood of mothers' material hardship relative to fathers working consistent hours, as was fathers' less than full-time, full-year work status. Interestingly, neither fathers' unemployment nor low earnings were significantly associated with mothers' hardship. Two indicators of exposure to punitive systems, having child support arrears and having been incarcerated, were associated with a greater likelihood of maternal material hardship. Fathers' criminal legal contact without incarceration was not, however. Finally, turning to resource precarity, fathers' experiences of being in poverty (less than 100 percent of the FPL) and being near poverty (100–200 percent of the FPL), having material hardship, and lacking health insurance were all associated with a higher likelihood of mothers' material hardship. Of these measures of re-

**Figure 2.** Fathers' Socioeconomic Precarity and Mothers' Likelihood of Experiencing Any Material Hardship



Source: Authors' calculations.

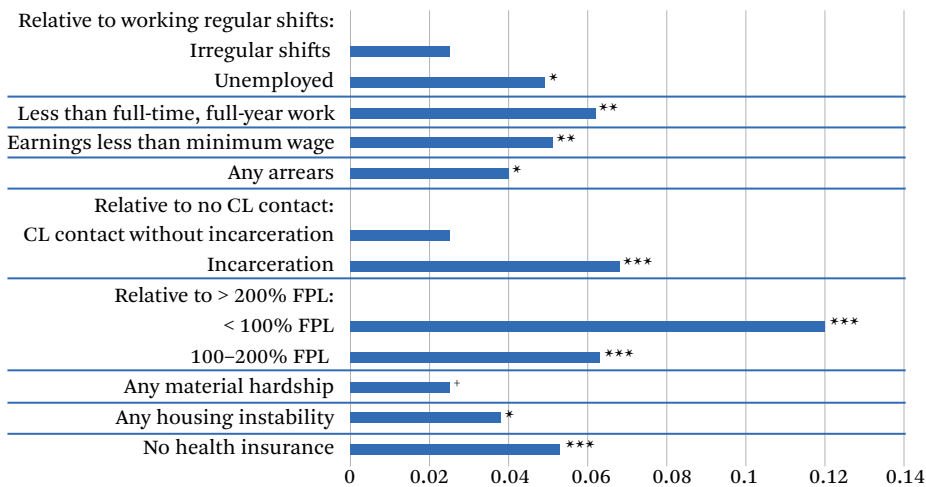
Note: Bars represent increases in probability of mothers' household poverty associated with each indicator of fathers' socioeconomic precarity from separate multivariate random effects models including all previously described covariates.

+  $p < .1$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

source precarity, only fathers' housing instability was not associated with mothers' hardship. The strongest predictors (fathers' material hardship and incarceration) were associated with approximately 24–26 percent higher likelihood of mothers' material hardship, while the other indicators were associated with 8–11 percent higher likelihood (compared to the 53 percent sample mean).

Figure 3 presents associations between these same indicators of fathers' socioeconomic precarity and mothers' poverty, revealing some interesting differences from the results for material hardship. Like in the previous figure, fathers' working less than full-time, full-year was associated with a greater likelihood of maternal poverty. Associations with the other facets of employment precarity diverge, however. While irregular work was not significantly associated with maternal poverty in these models, being unemployed (compared to employed with no irregular shifts) and earning less than the minimum wage were associated with a higher likelihood of mothers' poverty. Weekly earnings were also associated with greater poverty but not material hardship, as

shown in table A.2. Like the hardship outcome, having child support arrears or a history of incarceration was associated with a higher likelihood of poverty among mothers, though other types of criminal system contact did not differ from no contact at all. As with the measures of employment precarity, notable differences emerge for our measures of resource precarity. Only fathers' poverty level and lack of health insurance were significantly associated with the likelihood of both material hardship and poverty among mothers. In contrast to the results for mothers' material hardship, fathers' experience of material hardship was only weakly associated with mothers' poverty and fell short of conventional statistical significance ( $p < .10$ ), while fathers' housing instability was associated with a significantly higher risk of poverty only. For this outcome, the strongest relationship was for fathers' poverty, which was associated with a 23 percent greater likelihood of maternal poverty, while the other indicators were associated with 7–13 percentage-point greater probability of maternal poverty (compared to the 46 percent sample mean).

**Figure 3.** Fathers' Socioeconomic Precarity and Mothers' Household Poverty (< 100% FPL)

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Bars represent increases in probability of mothers' household poverty associated with each indicator of fathers' socioeconomic precarity from separate multivariate random effects models including all previously described covariates.

+  $p < .1$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

### Sensitivity Checks

We first examined differences in our indicators of precarity by fathers' region of residence and race and ethnicity, as shown in table A.5. As expected, White fathers had children with mothers who had lower levels of economic precarity than did Black and Latino fathers. Similarly, White fathers experienced less of most types of precarity compared to Black and Latino fathers except for material hardship, types of work schedules, and having any arrears. Most surprisingly, fathers' experiences of criminal legal system contact did not differ by race or ethnicity in our sample. Fathers' residence in the Midwest was associated with greater maternal and paternal economic precarity than in other regions, with the notable exception of fathers' income and risk of poverty, type of work schedule, and lack of health care coverage. Next, we stratified models of the association between fathers' and mothers' poverty status by race and ethnicity and region of residence to test for potential heterogeneity in our results (not shown). Post hoc tests comparing coefficients across models indicated that the strong association between parents' poverty status did not differ by fathers' racial

and ethnic background. The association between fathers' and mothers' poverty was present across all regions, but it was significantly stronger for those in Western than Midwestern states.

Finally, we tested whether mothers' economic precarity was worse if the biological father of the focal child was never interviewed. Based on prior work (Teitler et al. 2003), we expect that fathers who were never interviewed would be more economically disadvantaged than those for whom we have data, and that mothers associated with such fathers would also be experiencing more precarity. However, our results showed that mothers' economic precarity did not differ by whether fathers were ever interviewed. In light of these findings, we hypothesize that if fathers' lack of participation in the study is a marker of being less connected to the mother and focal child from the very start, then perhaps these mothers were more likely to repartner earlier and thus their economic circumstances might on average be better. This hypothesis aligns with prior work (Bzostek et al. 2012) showing that in most cases mothers who repartnered did so with more economically advantaged men.

## DISCUSSION

This study provides insight into the inextricable link between the socioeconomic precarity of nonresident fathers and that of single mothers in the post-welfare reform era, suggesting that the deterioration of fathers' economic standing has made it even more difficult for mothers to draw on private support to make ends meet. Edin and Lein (1997) documented the range of survival strategies that poor single mothers used in the early 1990s to fill gaps in their household budgets, including support from nonresident fathers. While this support was an important survival strategy for mothers in this era, it was also understood to be supplemental to income from work, welfare, and other network-based strategies. The restructuring of the social welfare system shortly after *Making Ends Meet* was published forced mothers to rely more heavily on private support both through their own work and from their children's fathers. As captured by other papers in this issue, mothers have been pushed into low quality, unstable jobs both to meet their basic needs and to access public benefits.

Amidst these changes, it was expected that private support from nonresident fathers could compensate for the loss in cash benefits when women were forced out of the welfare system (Kurz and Hirsch 2003). The expansion of the child support enforcement system in this era was intended to offset the loss in cash welfare and compensate the state for mothers' use of public benefits. In practice, this expansion has yielded few benefits for single mothers and has sometimes come at great cost to family systems (Cuesta and Meyer 2018; Robbins et al. 2022; Nepomnyaschy et al. 2021; Turner and Waller 2017; Nepomnyaschy 2007). This study illustrates that nonresident fathers face multiple forms of socioeconomic precarity, perhaps even more than was the case in the early 1990s, which undermine their ability to fill mothers' resource gaps. These fathers have instead found themselves buffeted by changes in economic and social policy that have created stagnancy in the labor market for all but the highest earning men, and have disproportionately exposed the most vulnerable fathers to punitive systems that exacerbate their economic insecurity.

Our study draws on data from the first decade after welfare reform using a large population-based sample of fathers who are much like those described by mothers in the original *Making Ends Meet* study. Our descriptive analysis shows that nearly every father (98 percent) experienced at least one type of socioeconomic precarity. Although most were employed, nearly half reported having work that was irregular, unstable, or insufficient to keep their earnings above the equivalent of the minimum wage. Fathers also reported extensive involvement with both the child support enforcement and criminal legal systems (including over half reporting a history of incarceration) that likely compounded their employment and resource precarity. In turn, a substantial proportion of the fathers also reported lacking the resources needed to support their households, pay bills, maintain housing, or access health care. Fathers also reported receiving relatively limited private and public safety net support to offset these challenges. Whether this finding reflects fathers' ineligibility for more generous public benefits available to custodial parents like the EITC, lack of knowledge about available resources, or circumstances in which fathers have used all available resources and goodwill from their private networks, our study paints a picture of a population of men who are struggling on multiple fronts with few sources of support. While fathers reported having more household resources on average than their children's mothers, these fathers were nonetheless not in a strong position to provide support for mothers' households. Rather than having surplus resources to fill the gaps in single mothers' budgets left by the restructuring of the social safety net, this widespread precarity more likely led fathers to draw on their networks to support themselves and the dependents in their current household.

Results from bivariate and multivariate regressions further illustrate that the economic precarity of mothers and nonresident fathers is closely linked even after their romantic relationship has ended. Not all aspects of fathers' precarity are equally consequential for mothers, however, and our findings shed light on important nuances in how parents' situations are linked. First, fathers' exposure to punitive

systems was more consistently linked with both material hardship and poverty among mothers than their employment or resource precarity. The consistency of these associations emphasizes how policies primarily targeting men can have serious negative implications for the economic stability of mothers and children. Second, there was a consistent association between fathers' experiences of material hardship and poverty and mothers' experiences of the same type of precarity, though the strength of the association was greatest for the most disadvantaged fathers. These patterns suggest that policies designed to assist the most disadvantaged fathers could have positive spillovers for economically vulnerable mothers. Finally, there was important variation in which types of maternal economic well-being were sensitive to different measures of fathers' precarity. Among the indicators of fathers' employment and resource precarity, only fathers' lack of full-time, full-year employment, poverty, and lack of health insurance were associated with both mothers' poverty and material hardship. Future research should examine why and how different forms of fathers' precarity are associated with different aspects of mothers' economic well-being.

The data used in this study provide a snapshot of fathers in the post-welfare reform era, from 1999 to 2010. While we do not document the precarity of nonresident fathers after 2010, the persistence of the sociodemographic, political, and economic changes that gave rise to the pronounced levels of hardship documented in this analysis suggests the circumstances of these men are unlikely to have substantially changed in the intervening fifteen years. Fathers' employment precarity continues to be shaped by declining men's labor force participation (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024), a labor market increasingly characterized by unstable jobs (Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2021), and ongoing wage stagnation (Binder and Bound 2019). These trends, many of which also impacted low-SES single mothers, were exacerbated by the COVID pandemic's disruption of low-wage labor markets (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2024). Fathers' system exposure has shifted somewhat over the last fifteen years. Incarceration rates began de-

clining nationally around 2009 (Carson 2020), though this trend reversed after a sharp but temporary decline during the COVID pandemic (Mueller 2024; Zeng 2024; Kaeble 2024). The benefits of lower incarceration rates are likely attenuated by the lingering collateral consequences of past criminal justice contact and the strain of even low-level system involvement (Kohler-Hausmann 2018). Similarly, while fewer child support orders are being established (Cancian et al. 2023), the amount of arrears in the CSE system has increased over the last few decades, and there has been little abatement of punitive collection measures (Nepomnyaschy and Miller 2023; Battle et al. 2024). While fathers' resource precarity was likely improved by the 2014 Affordable Care Act's expansion of health care access, this gain is balanced against losses to the overall health of men most likely to be nonresident fathers (Pathak et al. 2022) and rising housing costs (DeLuca and Rosen 2022). Moreover, nonresident fathers remain largely ineligible for public benefits programs that kept mothers afloat during the most difficult years of this period. Thus, today's fathers are likely in similarly, if not more, precarious positions than those documented in this study.

These findings must be considered in light of some potential limitations. First, though our findings paint a robust picture of the link between nonresident fathers' precarity and the economic well-being of custodial mothers and their children, our analyses are not causal and results should be interpreted with all the usual caveats pertinent to analyses of observational data. Thus, while we can firmly conclude that the circumstances of nonresident fathers and their children's mothers are connected, we cannot assess whether fathers' precarity causes that of mothers. Rather, our findings likely show both a relationship between fathers' and mothers' economic standing as well as the well-recognized tendency for homogamy, or mothers with the fewest resources partnering and having children with fathers in similar circumstances. Second, our reliance on fathers' reports of their socioeconomic circumstances limits our analyses to fathers who were interviewed at each wave. While the use of data on this group of fathers, who are mostly missing in national datasets (Pettit 2012), is a key con-

tribution of our study, the interviewed fathers are more economically advantaged and more connected to their children's mothers than those who were not interviewed. While our sensitivity analyses did not find worse outcomes for mothers who shared children with fathers who never participated in the survey, our study cannot fully capture the experiences of mothers who do not know or who have no connection with their child's father. Thus, our results likely underestimate the economic precarity of both fathers and mothers as well as the strengths of these associations in the population of such families.

Our study set out to examine how nonresident fathers have fared since the publication of *Making Ends Meet*, and how their circumstances are linked to those of mothers closely resembling the original subjects of Edin and Lein's book. Whatever the cause of the link between mothers' and fathers' circumstances, our findings support a key conclusion from that seminal work: that single mothers cannot rely primarily on private contributions from nonresident fathers to survive. Despite the assumption that fathers' support could compensate for the loss of cash welfare, this updated portrait of nonresident fathers finds them struggling to meet their own needs. Relying on either fathers' voluntary support or punitive child support enforcement mechanisms to provide economic security to mothers has been largely counterproductive given the extent and level of socioeconomic precarity among nonresident fathers. Indeed, this interpretation is supported by declining collections in the past several decades (Pilarz and Cuesta 2025; Grall 2002, 2020). Thus, while some mothers have benefited from the reconfigured social safety net, those who fell through the cracks of public support likely found themselves without a strong private safety net, as fathers' own precarity undermined the viability of this survival strategy.

Our findings suggest a two-pronged policy approach that seeks to promote both fathers' and mothers' economic well-being may better support vulnerable families. First, the results demonstrate the need for addressing the socioeconomic precarity of nonresident fathers with whom single mothers share children. Fathers'

well-being, social and financial, matters for the well-being of their children and their children's households. Rather than becoming a reliable private resource for mothers in the post-welfare reform era, the evidence shows that fathers face omnipresent, multifaceted precarity that likely compounds the precarity of the most vulnerable mothers. Addressing the sources of socioeconomic precarity among fathers is thus likely to have spillover benefits for mothers most reliant on fathers as sources of private support. These findings indicate that fathers' incarceration, child support arrears, material hardship, and poverty are most salient for mothers' economic insecurity.

The multifaceted and interconnected nature of fathers' precarity precludes simple policy solutions, instead requiring a systematic reconfiguration of the policy supports available to low-SES families. As outlined in greater detail in other scholarship (Osborne 2020; Nepomnyaschy and Miller 2023; Turetsky and Waller 2020), this would involve improving access to high-quality employment opportunities and public benefits, whether by making these supports more universal or ensuring that nonresident parents are not excluded from existing programs. Commonsense reforms to the CSE and the criminal legal systems could have immediate benefits and mitigate the impact of these systems on other types of precarity. For example, implementing federal requirements to ensure that child support orders reflect actual earnings and ability to pay, include a self-support reserve, and are able to be modified during incarceration would ensure that fathers are better able to meet their own needs and contribute to their children while avoiding unmanageable debt. Reducing or eliminating penalties for the nonpayment of child support arrears, such as incarceration or driver's license suspension, would further help fathers maintain formal employment. Likewise, reducing the scale and scope of criminal justice involvement and the collateral consequences that follow would help to promote fathers' ability to support custodial mothers, for instance by minimizing barriers to stable employment.

Second, efforts are needed to shore up the economic standing of mothers falling through the cracks of the reconfigured social safety net

directly rather than leaving these mothers to rely on increasingly scarce sources of private support. Single-parent families in the US have a much greater risk of poverty than those in other rich countries, in large part due to differences in public benefits available to them (Aerts et al. 2022). Policies that address mothers' needs directly, such as guaranteed minimum child support assurance, child tax credits, and child-focused allowances that are provided to families in most other rich countries, can effectively provide mothers and children with economic stability, even in the face of nonresident fathers' economic precarity (Pilkauskas and Bruey 2026, this issue; Bruch et al. 2026; Cancian and Meyer 2018; Nepomnyaschy et al. 2022). The possibilities of these programs are illustrated by findings such as the rate of child poverty more than doubling after the expanded, fully refundable Child Tax Credit expired in 2022 (Shrider and Creamer 2023. Ma-

terial hardship, such as food and housing insecurity or difficulty paying rent and bills, also decreased after the implementation of cash transfer programs during the COVID pandemic, especially for the lowest income households (Cooney and Shaefer 2021).

In sum, our findings identify a critical weakness in implicit assumptions that private support would fill the gaps in the restructured safety net faced by single mothers in the post-welfare reform era. Fathers, whose own socioeconomic precarity has been exacerbated by efforts to enforce expectations of support, cannot provide a sufficient private safety net to catch mothers who fall through the holes in the reconfigured public support system. Private support from fathers thus remains an unreliable survival strategy for the most vulnerable single mothers, perhaps even more unreliable now than it was when Edin and Lein first asked how these mothers made ends meet.

## Appendix

Table A.1. Detailed Descriptive Statistics for the Full Study Sample

Domain	Variable	N	Mean (Standard Deviation) or percent
Mothers' economic precarity	Household in poverty	4,427	53.50%
	Any material hardship	4,425	46.20%
	Unable to pay bills in full	4,419	29.76%
	Unable to afford health care	4,424	6.09%
	Received free food	4,424	13.25%
	Did not pay rent in full	4,420	16.60%
	Evicted	4,421	3.80%
	Stayed in a shelter or unhoused	4,424	11.26%
Fathers' employment precarity	Working only regular shifts	4,105	39.40%
	Working any irregular shifts	4,105	44.70%
	Not employed	4,105	15.90%
	Underemployment	3,952	57.70%
	Earning less than the minimum wage equivalent	3,820	37.50%
	Weekly earnings (\$)	3,820	572.50 (936.60)
Fathers' system exposure	No criminal legal contact	4,035	31.10%
	Criminal legal contact without incarceration	4,035	15.40%
	Incarceration	4,035	53.50%
	Any arrears	3,928	31.40%
Fathers' resource precarity	Household in poverty	4,134	31.70%
	Household earnings between 100% and 200% of FPL	4,134	25.20%
	Household earnings > 200% of FPL	4,134	43.10%
	Any material hardship	4,134	33.30%
	Unable to pay bills in full	4,119	19.20%
	Unable to afford health care	4,127	5.84%
	Received free food	4,134	8.73%
	Did not pay rent in full	4,124	15.40%
	Evicted	4,129	2.66%
	Stayed in a shelter or unhoused	4,131	4.53%
	Any housing problems	4,132	30.90%
	More than one move	4,118	7.31%
	Staying without paying rent	4,058	7.00%
	Staying in a shelter or unhoused	4,131	4.53%
	Moved in with friends or family	4,131	13.50%
	Evicted	4,129	2.66%
Did not pay rent in full	4,124	15.40%	
No health insurance	4,078	57.70%	
Fathers' network support	Perceived support	4,127	0.756 (0.33)
	Could move in with someone	4,095	86.60%
	Could borrow \$200	4,075	82.80%
	Could borrow \$1,000	3,886	55.30%
	Received support	4,134	0.159 (0.25)
	Moved in with friends or family	4,131	13.0%
	Borrowed money from friends or family	4,131	25.50%
	Received free food	4,134	8.73%

**Table A.1.** (continued)

Domain	Variable	N	Mean (Standard Deviation) or percent
Fathers' receipt of public benefits	Received any public assistance	4,134	14.20%
	Received SNAP	4,122	10.70%
	Received TANF	4,122	2.84%
	Received SSI	4,080	4.56%
	Received EITC	3,937	24.40%
Fathers' contextual factors	Healthy	4,134	69.10%
	Working age (18–65)	4,134	97.70%
	Children under age 18 living in household	4,134	55.40%
	Focal child lives with father at least half time	4,134	38.70%
	Live with any biological or adopted children	3,855	30.20%
	Number of other biological or adopted children in household	3,855	0.51 (0.93)
	Father has any biological or adopted children other than focal child	4,134	53.70%
	Any child support, cash, or in-kind support provided to nonresident mother and focal child	4,134	84.90%
	Living with a new partner	4,124	20.00%
Control variables	Coresiding at birth	4,134	41.30%
	Father White, not Hispanic	4,134	9.80%
	Father Black, not Hispanic	4,134	68.30%
	Father Hispanic of any race	4,134	18.70%
	Father other race, not Hispanic	4,134	3.14%
	Mother same race as father	4,134	84.60%
	Father born in the US	3,638	93.90%
	Mother born in the US	4,134	95.60%
	Father ever took survey in Spanish	4,134	3.27%
	Father less than high school education	4,134	38.20%
	Father high school degree or equivalent	4,134	39.00%
	Father more than high school education	4,134	22.80%
	Mother more educated than father	4,134	27.20%
	Father lived with both parents at age 15	3,629	35.10%
	Mother lived with both parents at age 15	4,134	31.30%
	Focal child's birth insured by Medicaid	4,134	74.70%
	Focal child is father's firstborn	3,627	43.90%
	Focal child is mother's firstborn	4,134	39.30%
	Father commitment at birth	4,134	0.87 (0.22)
	Focal child is boy	4,134	51.20%
	Father age in years	4,134	26.17 (7.16)
	Difference in years between father and mother ages	4,134	2.63 (5.11)
	Future of Families Survey - wave 2	4,134	24.20%
Future of Families Survey - wave 3	4,134	25.10%	
Future of Families Survey - wave 4	4,134	27.90%	
Future of Families Survey - wave 5	4,134	22.90%	

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Shaded rows represent measures of fathers' socioeconomic precarity included in the reported analyses.

**Table A.2.** Multivariate Models of Nonresident Fathers' Employment Precarity and Mothers' Economic Precarity

	Mother Reported Any Material Hardship			Mother's Household in Poverty				
Irregular shifts	0.035* (0.02)			0.025 (0.02)				
Unemployed	0.03 (0.02)			0.049* (0.02)				
Less than full-time, full-year work	0.046** (0.02)			0.062*** (0.02)				
Less than minimum wage equivalent earnings	0.002 (0.02)			0.051** (0.02)				
Logged weekly earnings				-0.001 (0.00)		-0.005* (0.00)		
Observations	4,105	3,952	3,820	3,820	4,105	3,952	3,820	3,820

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All models include wave fixed effects and nest observations within state and family. Models control for whether father's commitment to the child at baseline, focal child is a boy, focal child is the mother's firstborn or father's firstborn, whether Medicaid paid for the child's birth, whether the mother and father lived with both of their respective biological parents when they were aged fifteen, father race/ethnicity, whether the mother was a different race-ethnicity than the father, father ever took the survey in Spanish, father born in the US, mother born in the US, father education, whether the mother had more education than the father, father age, age difference between the mother and father, and whether the parents were cohabiting at the birth.

+  $p < .1$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table A.3.** Multivariate Models of Nonresident Fathers' System Exposure and Mothers' Economic Precarity

	Mother Reported Any Material Hardship		Mother's Household in Poverty	
Arrears	0.044* (0.02)		0.040* (0.02)	
Reference: no CL contact				
CL contact without incarceration	0.001 (0.02)		0.025 (0.02)	
Incarceration	0.104*** (0.02)		0.068*** (0.02)	
Observations	3,928	4,035	3,928	4,035

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All models include wave fixed effects, and nest observations within state and family. Models control for whether father's commitment to the child at baseline, focal child is a boy, focal child is the mother's firstborn or father's firstborn, whether Medicaid paid for the child's birth, whether the mother and father lived with both of their respective biological parents when they were aged fifteen, father race-ethnicity, whether the mother was a different race/ethnicity than the father, father ever took the survey in Spanish, father born in the US, mother born in the US, father education, whether the mother had more education than the father, father age, age difference between the mother and father, and whether the parents were cohabiting at the birth.

+  $p < .1$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table A.4.** Multivariate Models of Nonresident Fathers' Resource Precarity and Mothers' Economic Precarity

	Mother Reported Any Material Hardship				Mother's Household in Poverty				
Household below FPL	0.05**				0.12***				
	(0.02)				(0.02)				
Household 100–200% of FPL	0.04*				0.06***				
	(0.02)				(0.02)				
Any material hardship		0.13***					0.03+		
		(0.02)					(0.02)		
Any housing problems			0.03					0.04*	
			(0.02)					(0.02)	
No health insurance				0.05**					0.05***
				(0.02)					(0.02)
Observations	4,134	4,134	4,132	4,078	4,134	4,134	4,132	4,078	

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All models include wave fixed effects, and nest observations within state and family. Models control for whether father's commitment to the child at baseline, focal child is a boy, focal child is the mother's firstborn or father's firstborn, whether Medicaid paid for the child's birth, whether the mother and father lived with both of their respective biological parents when they were aged fifteen, father race-ethnicity, whether the mother was a different race/ethnicity than the father, father ever took the survey in Spanish, father born in the US, mother born in the US, father education, whether the mother had more education than the father, father age, age difference between the mother and father, and whether the parents were cohabiting at the time of their child's birth.

+  $p < .1$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table A.5.** Parents' Economic Precarity by Fathers' Region of Residence and Race-Ethnicity

	Fathers' Region of Residence				Fathers' Race-Ethnicity		
	Northeast	Midwest	South	West	White	Black	Latino
<b>Mothers' economic precarity</b>							
In poverty	0.51	0.57	0.53	0.51	0.36	0.57	0.53
Income-to-poverty ratio	1.29	1.13	1.27	1.32	1.80	1.14	1.25
Any hardship	0.41	0.54	0.44	0.43	0.48	0.48	0.41
Hardship scale	0.12	0.16	0.13	0.13	0.15	0.14	0.12
<b>Fathers' economic precarity</b>							
Any hardship	0.29	0.40	0.30	0.34	0.34	0.34	0.30
Hardship scale	0.08	0.12	0.08	0.11	0.10	0.09	0.09
In poverty	0.31	0.33	0.30	0.35	0.15	0.34	0.32
Income-to-poverty ratio	2.29	2.13	2.21	2.46	3.02	2.11	2.15
Any housing problems	0.29	0.35	0.29	0.32	0.38	0.29	0.32
Earning less than minimum wage	0.37	0.42	0.35	0.34	0.21	0.42	0.31
Type of schedule							
Regular work hours	0.53	0.49	0.52	0.49	0.57	0.49	0.54
Irregular work hours	0.31	0.33	0.35	0.3	0.37	0.32	0.36
Unemployed	0.17	0.18	0.12	0.21	0.05	0.19	0.09
Unstable work	0.57	0.61	0.54	0.65	0.47	0.61	0.52
Criminal legal system contact							
None	0.37	0.27	0.31	0.31	0.36	0.31	0.31
Contact without incarceration	0.14	0.17	0.16	0.1	0.14	0.15	0.18
Incarceration	0.49	0.56	0.53	0.60	0.51	0.54	0.51
Any arrears	0.25	0.36	0.34	0.25	0.34	0.32	0.28
No health coverage	0.56	0.58	0.60	0.54	0.53	0.57	0.63
N	964	1,253	1,569	346	405	2,824	775

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Asterisks indicate significance of differences between categories based on ANOVA tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for binary and categorical variables.

+  $p < .1$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

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