

# Evidence of the Effectiveness of Child Support and Visitation: Examining Food Insecurity among Children with Nonresident Fathers

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**Abstract** Over six million children who reside with a single mother and have a father who lives elsewhere are food insecure. This study examines the effectiveness of two aspects of nonresident father involvement, in-person visitation and financial contributions, in reducing food acquisition problems using data from the National Survey of America's Families. We find that frequent visits by nonresident fathers are related to a reduced likelihood that the resident mother's household will experience indicators of food insecurity. The effects of child support receipt on reducing food acquisition problems, however, are less consistent. Our results support policies designed to recognize and encourage nonresidential parents to make both monetary and nonmonetary contributions to the lives of their children.

**Keywords** Child support · Father involvement · Father visitation · Food insecurity · National Survey of America's Families

## Introduction

In 2004, over six million children who resided with a single mother and had a father who lived elsewhere were food insecure (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2005). That is, these children did not always have access to enough food for active, healthy living

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because their household lacked money or other resources for food. About one in ten (11.9%) of all US households are food insecure. Access to food is a concern particularly for low-income single mothers with children; nearly half (48%) of them are food insecure (Nord et al., 2005). Even after the effects of income are accounted for, single mothers with children are more likely to be food insecure than married couples or single fathers with children (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2003).

The goals of the federal child support enforcement program include ensuring that children have the financial support of both their parents and fostering responsible behavior toward children. To these ends, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement FY2002 Annual Report points out that child support collections reached \$20.1 billion in FY2002, a 40% increase over FY1998 (Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2003). The implication of increased child support collections for children with nonresident parents is that these children will have a reduced likelihood of having unmet needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. This paper seeks to provide evidence of whether or not this presumption is true. More specifically, this study examines the effectiveness of child support payments and child visitation by nonresident fathers in reducing aspects of food insecurity.

While current child support policy affecting low-income families stresses greater nonresidential father involvement, little is known about how father involvement affects resident family food consumption. Research in this area is important because it is known that children who grow up poor and food insecure are at greater risk of negative childhood outcomes. For example, there is evidence that children who do not eat breakfast do not do as well in school as children who do (Bellisle, 2004; Gibson & Green, 2002), while food-insufficient children are more likely to have poorer health than food-sufficient children (Alaimo, Olson, & Frongillo, 2001). Furthermore, negative childhood outcomes resulting from poverty and food insecurity may affect children the remainder of their lives (Johnston & Markowitz, 1993; Mayer, 1997; Morley & Lucas, 1997).

In the next section of the paper, we examine the mechanisms through which nonresidential father involvement might affect the resident family's ability to meet their food needs. The third section of the paper describes our empirical methodology including our dataset [the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF)], key variables, and our analytical approach. The results of bivariate and multivariate analyses are presented in the fourth section. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for the effective design of policies and program outreach to further include fathers in strategies that enhance the well being of their children.

## Conceptual framework

The majority of studies that examine the link between father involvement and children's well being focus on child outcomes such as academic achievement (e.g., standardized test scores, grade-point averages, and high-school graduation), externalizing problems (e.g., behavior problems, delinquency), and internalizing problems (e.g., depression, low self-esteem) (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). There are relatively few studies that attempt to identify the *mechanisms* through which father involvement affects children's social and emotional well being. To get at these linkages, a few researchers have examined dimensions of father involvement beyond child

support payments and frequency of visits such as social capital, authoritative parenting and closeness (e.g., King, Harris, & Heard, 2004; Stewart, 2003).

The causes of food insecurity are numerous and complex, and include low and unstable income, unemployment and unstable employment, disability, family disruption, and lack of community and extended family support (Nord & Andrews, 2003). Gundersen and Gruber (2001) show that food-insufficient households are more likely to suffer from income shocks and to experience a greater variance in income than their food-sufficient peers. They also find that food-insufficient households are often unable to borrow to smooth consumption over any temporary drop in income.

The effects of involvement with nonresident fathers on food insecurity are likely to be complex, as well, and may operate through several mechanisms. The additional income from child support may increase the possibility that resident families will be able to meet their food needs. Moreover, some research indicates that mothers spend a higher percentage of child support compared to other income on goods used only by children, such as clothing (Del Boca & Flinn, 1994). Indeed, child support income has a stronger positive effect on children's outcomes than other forms of income (Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Graham, Beller & Hernandez, 1994; Knox, 1996; Knox & Bane, 1994; McLanahan, Seltzer, Hanson & Thompson, 1994). Another mechanism may be a so-called *monitoring* effect of nonresident fathers (Seltzer, 1994). The well-known positive correlation between child support and visitation (McLanahan et al., 1994; Seltzer, 1991; Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989) is often attributed to the father's desire to see "where his money is being spent," and visits provide nonresident fathers with information about their children's health and material needs. Finally, frequent visitation by a nonresident father may reduce food insecurity if the father provides informal *in-kind* economic support (e.g., diapers, formula, groceries, clothes, and dinners out) to the children during his visits (Hamer, 1997; Johnson & Doolittle, 1998; Stier & Tienda, 1993).

There also is the possibility that involvement from a nonresident father may increase food insecurity. He may discourage the children's mother from seeking outside assistance (e.g., obtaining food from a food pantry), either due to the stigma associated with welfare (Coe & Hill, 1998; Seccombe, 1999) or because he feels that taking care of their children financially is "a father's job" (Stewart, 2003), resulting in a kind of *breadwinner effect*. Furthermore, fathers who visit frequently may consume more food than they contribute, adding to the resident family's economic difficulties.

Finally, it is possible that the low levels of child support paid by most nonresident fathers, who often have low incomes themselves (Sorensen, 1997), may not be enough to affect the food insecurity status of their children's families. Similarly, infrequent visitation by fathers may not affect the ability of the resident family to acquire sufficient amounts of food to meet their daily needs.

This study extends previous research by identifying how nonresidential father involvement affects aspects of food insecurity of the child's resident family, among children in low-income families. We examine the effects of the amount of child support received and the frequency of father visits in order to identify more accurately how nonresidential father involvement affects food acquisition among children in low-income households who have fathers who live elsewhere.

## Methodology

### National Survey of America's Families

Our analysis is based on the 1997 round of the NSAF. Designed to study the devolution of responsibility for social programs from the federal government to the states, the survey is representative of the noninstitutionalized, civilian population of persons under age 65 in the nation as a whole and in 13 states: Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. Together, these states are home to more than half the nation's population (Urban Institute, 2005). The NSAF provides a range of information on the economic, health, and social characteristics of children, adults, and their families and contains information on over 44,000 households and 34,439 children.

The NSAF has several strengths that make it ideal for carrying out this investigation. First, it contains a very large number of children living apart from their biological father, roughly 10,000. Second, the NSAF contains an oversample of disadvantaged families with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level, a group that is more likely to be food insecure (Gundersen & Gruber, 2001). Third, the NSAF includes (1) questions related to food insecurity among a broad range of economic, health, and social dimensions of well being; and (2) information about children's social and financial involvement with nonresident parents. With few exceptions, this combination of variables is not found in recent nationally representative samples of US families with children.

The amount of child support received and indicators of food insecurity are measured for all members of the child's household. Yet, an important advantage of the NSAF is the richness of the data it provides for up to two randomly selected "focal" children per household, ages 0–5 and 6–17, including information on the focal child's visits with his or her nonresident father. All information is provided by the *most knowledgeable adult* (MKA), defined as the adult in the household that is most knowledgeable about the focal child's health and education, typically the child's biological mother.

### Analytic sample

All analyses are in reference to low-income children and their families. The analytic sample is comprised of 7,861 focal children, aged 0–17, who live with their biological (or adopted) mother and whose biological (or adopted) father is absent from the home.<sup>1</sup> Whether children have a nonresident parent is determined by their current living arrangement, as reported by the MKA. The small number of children whose parents have joint physical custody have been removed from the analysis. Additionally, our study sample is limited to families with incomes below 200% of poverty, which is slightly above the level necessary to qualify for most food assistance programs (Food and Nutrition Service, 2004).<sup>2</sup> We also have limited our analysis to White, Hispanic, and African American children, omitting a

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, *biological* is used in reference to both biological and adopted parents. The number of children with an adopted parent is small, representing about 2% of the sample.

<sup>2</sup> A 130% of poverty variable is not available in the 1997 NSAF public use data file.

small number of children ( $n = 248$ ) for whom their racial identity is not provided. Finally, we have removed a small number of cases missing data on key food insecurity items (1% of the sample).

## Key variables

### *Food insecurity*

The NSAF food insecurity questions focus on the respondent's and their family's food situation over the last 12 months. Questions include (a) worrying whether food would run out before getting money to buy more, (b) food not lasting and not having money to get any more, and (c) adults in the family ever cutting the size of meals or skipping meals because there was not enough money for food, and the frequency with which this happened. First, we treat each response as an independent indicator of food insecurity and measure frequency dichotomously (ever true or ever happened versus never true or never happened). We also assess the severity of food insecurity using our three indicators to create three new dichotomous variables: (a) ever experienced at least one of the above aspects of food insecurity, (b) ever experienced at least two of the above aspects of food insecurity, and (c) ever experienced all three food insecurity indicators.

### *Father involvement*

We examine two aspects of nonresident father involvement, in-person visitation and financial contributions via child support payments. In-person visitation is measured in terms of the number of times the child saw his or her father during the last 12 months, using a 5-point scale ranging from not at all to more than once a week. Separate categories are created (a) for children whose nonresident parent is deceased or whose whereabouts are unknown,<sup>3</sup> and (b) for children whose MKA reported only extended summertime and/or holiday visits with the nonresident parent or could not classify the frequency of visits. Financial involvement is measured using MKA reports of the total amount of child support coming into the household for each family member.<sup>4</sup>

We calculate the average monthly amount of child support the family received in the last 12 months and control for the number of children in the family as a proxy of nonresident parents' financial involvement.

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the NSAF does not allow the analyst to distinguish deceased fathers from absent fathers whose whereabouts are unknown. Questions about nonresident father involvement are limited to children whose fathers are known to be *alive and living elsewhere*.

<sup>4</sup> We use the MKA's report of whether any household member received child support because the NSAF does not contain reliable child-level data on child support amounts (Adam Safir, personal communication, 01/08/04). However, the household-level measure of child support is correlated with the MKA report of whether the child's nonresident parent made any financial contributions in order to support the focal child in the last 12 months ( $r = 0.520, p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that our use of the household-level measure is valid. About two-thirds (62%) of focal children in households that received child support in the previous year were reported as having a parent who paid child support in the previous year.

### Control variables

Our multivariate analyses include characteristics of the child, the MKA and the household. Child characteristics include the child's sex and age, whether he or she was born within a marriage, whether a child support order has been established, and whether he or she has any siblings living elsewhere. Characteristics of the MKA include his or her sex, age, level of education, employment status, health status, nativity, and the frequency in which he or she attends religious services. Household-level characteristics include household income excluding child support; household composition measured with indicators for having a single parent, a married stepparent, or a cohabiting stepparent; and the number of minor children and adults (other than parents and stepparents) in the household.

### Analysis plan

We estimate a probit model of the form:

$$\text{FOODINS} = \alpha \mathbf{FI} + \beta \mathbf{X}_1 + \mu, \quad (1)$$

where FOODINS is an indicator of whether the household experienced this aspect of food insecurity (= 1) or not (= 0). Experiencing an aspect of food insecurity is a function of father involvement (vector  $\mathbf{FI}$ ) as measured through child visitation and the payment of child support. For simplicity, we assume that the father's decision to be involved is exogenous to the resident family's ability to meet their food needs.  $\mathbf{X}$  is a vector of the other explanatory variables that were discussed above.  $\mu$  is an error term.

We examine the effects of child support and visitation on aspects of food insecurity in separate estimations of Eq. 1 using our six indicators of food insecurity (responses to each of the three food insecurity questions separately and our three composite measures of food insecurity severity). Because the NSAF employs a complex cluster sampling design, special weighting procedures are employed so that standard errors are not underestimated (Flores-Cervantes, Brick, & DiGaetano, 1997).

## Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for our analytic sample ( $n = 7,861$ ). The characteristics of the sample reflect our focus on families with incomes below 200% of poverty. A majority of these families have problems meeting their food needs. For example, 57% reported that in the last 12 months they worried that their food would run out before getting money to buy more. Half of the families experienced an instance where their food did not last and they did not have money to get more, while one-in-three (32%) households reported that adults had to cut the size of their meals or skip meals because there was not enough food. Overall, nearly two-thirds (62%) of the families in our sample experienced at least one of these three food problems in the previous year, half (49%) experienced at least two of these food problems in the previous year, and one-quarter (26%) experienced all three of these problems.

**Table 1** Analysis sample characteristics

	Mean or percentage
<i>Food insecurity in previous year</i>	
Ever worried food would runout	56.6
Ever had food not last	49.2
Ever had adults cut size of meals or skip meals	31.5
<i>Severity of food insecurity in previous year</i>	
Ever experienced at least one of the above	62.3
Ever experienced at least two of the above	48.9
Ever experienced all three of the above	26.1
<i>Characteristics of child</i>	
Sex	
Male	49.3
Female	50.7
Age	8.7
Race/ethnicity	
Hispanic	22.2
Non-Hispanic white	41.3
Non-Hispanic black	36.5
Birth status	
Born in marriage	53.8
Born outside marriage	37.8
Birth status unknown	8.4
Has siblings living elsewhere	19.3
Has child support order	42.3
<i>Characteristics of MKA</i>	
Sex	
Male	1.8
Female	98.2
Age	33.3
Education	
Less than high school	32.7
High school/GED	31.4
Some college	29.5
College degree or more	6.4
Employment in previous year	
None	54.7
Part-time	20.8
Full-time	24.5
Physical health fair or poor	20.5
Foreign-born	7.0
MKA religious attendance	
Never	22.9
Yearly	27.0
Monthly	18.2
Weekly	31.8
<i>Characteristics of household</i>	
Household composition	
Single mother	75.4
Married step-parent	16.1
Cohabiting step-parent	8.5

**Table 1** continued

	Mean or percentage
Annual family income without child support (1996 dollars)	14,043.30
Number of minor children in the household	2.7
Number of other adults in the household	0.3
( <i>n</i> )	7,861

All analyses were weighted using NSAF sample weights

Focal children are split evenly between boys and girls, averaging 9 years in age. Forty-one percent of the focal children are non-Hispanic white, 37% non-Hispanic black, with the remainder being Hispanic (22%). About half (54%) of these children were born to a married couple. Forty-two percent of them have awards for child support.

The MKA in this sample is almost always a woman (98%). The average age of these respondents is 33 years. Our MKAs have limited educations with one-third not graduating high school and another one-third having only a high-school diploma or GED certificate. Over half (55%) of the MKAs did not work in the previous year. Twenty-one percent suffer from fair or poor health; 7% are foreign-born. About one-in-three MKAs attend religious services on a weekly basis.

The majority (75%) of the households in our sample are headed by a single mother. On average, these households have three minor children each. Few households had other adults in them beyond parents and step-parents. Family incomes without including child support average about \$14,000 annually in 1996 dollars.

As can be seen in Table 2, father involvement in the previous year for these children varied considerably. Overall, over half (57%) of the focal children received an in-person visit from their father in the previous year. More specifically, about half (49%) of the children either did not receive a visit in the previous year from a father who was known to live elsewhere or received a visit from him less than once per month, while one-fourth were visited at least once a week. The fathers of 13% of the children was deceased or their whereabouts were unknown. Only one-third of the children resided in families that received any child support. Overall, the average amount of child support received by families receiving some support was \$219 per month, or slightly over \$2,600 annually (1996 dollars).

Consistent with Grall (2003) and Garasky, Peters, Argys, Cook, Nepomnyaschy, and Sorensen (2006), we find that having a child support award is not fully correlated with receiving child support (see Table 3). About 59% of the children with a child support award had families who received child support payments. Interestingly, among families reporting not having a child support award for the focal child, 16% reported receiving some child support payments.

Table 4 investigates relationships between father involvement and our measures of food insecurity. We employ a dichotomous measure of visitation frequency (any versus no visits). Children whose nonresident father is deceased or whose whereabouts are unknown are classified as having no visits. In addition, we examine effects of receiving any child support versus none. We see from these bivariate explorations that father visitation and our indicators of food insecurity are linked. Considering each measure independently (Panel A), we find only for the measure *ever experi-*



**Table 2** Father involvement

	Mean or percentage
<i>Father involvement in previous year</i>	
Any in-person visits in last year	
Yes	56.9
No	43.1
Frequency of in-person visits	
None	30.1
1–11 times a year	19.1
1–3 times a month	10.8
About once a week	7.6
More than once a week	17.9
Summertime or other type visits	1.6
Father deceased or whereabouts unknown	13.0
Any child support received by child’s family	
Yes	33.9
No	66.1
Amount of child support received per month for all children (1996 dollars)	74.20
Amount of child support received per month for only children receiving support (1996 dollars)	218.66
(n)	7,861

All analyses were weighted using NSAF sample weights

*enced food not lasting* is the difference statistically significant between households with nonresident fathers who visited in the previous year and those with nonvisiting fathers (46% vs. 53%,  $p < 0.01$ ). Overall, families with visiting fathers were less likely to report that any one of the three food access problems occurred in the previous year (60% vs. 65%,  $p < 0.05$ ) as shown in Panel B. The receipt of child support is not statistically related to the indicators of food insecurity in these bivariate relationships, although for most measures households that received some child support are slightly less likely to report experiencing difficulty meeting their food needs.

Tables 5 and 6 report our estimated coefficients for the independent variables of our logistic regressions. Table 5 reports results for the measures *ever worried that food would run out*, *ever had food not last*, and *ever had adults cut the size of their meals or skip meals*. Table 6 lists regression coefficients for which the dependent variable measures the severity of food insecurity, in terms of whether the focal child’s family experienced at least one of the above food acquisition problems, at least two of these types of food problems, and all three types. In analyses not

**Table 3** Relationship between child support order and child support received

Child support order	Received child support	
	No	Yes
No	84.4%	15.6%
Yes	41.1%	58.9%

All analyses were weighted using NSAF sample weights

Differences are statistically significant at  $p < 0.001$

**Table 4** Relationship between father involvement and food insecurity, and food stamp program participation

Panel A			
	Ever worried food would run out	Ever had food not last	Ever cut/skipped meals
Visitation			
Yes	55.2	46.2**	30.7
No	58.4	53.2	32.5
Child support			
Yes	55.9	48.4	32.8
No	56.9	49.7	30.8
Panel B			
	Ever experienced one of the above	Ever experienced two of the above	Ever experienced three of the above
Visitation			
Yes	59.9*	47.0	25.2
No	65.4	51.4	27.4
Child support			
Yes	60.8	48.2	28.1
No	63.0	49.3	25.1

\* $p < 0.05$ \*\* $p < 0.01$ 

reported here, we ran four separate models for each outcome: Model 1 incorporated our set of core explanatory variables (vector  $\mathbf{X}$  in Eq. 1). This core consisted of the characteristics of the focal child, the MKA, and the household as discussed earlier. Model 2 added to the core variables categorical indicators of the frequency of in-person visits by the nonresident father. Model 3 added the average monthly amount of child support received by the resident family to the set of core explanatory variables. Finally, Model 4 included the core variables, the indicators of visitation *and* the amount of child support received. Because our substantive findings remain unchanged across models, Tables 5 and 6 show only the results for the full model (Model 4) for each outcome.<sup>5</sup> Next, we discuss briefly our results for the core explanatory variables as reported in Tables 5 and 6. We follow that with a discussion of the effects of father involvement on our indicators of food insecurity.

As one would expect, family income (excluding child support) is related to all of our indicators of food insecurity. The likelihood of being unable to meet food needs decreases as income increases. The number of other adults in the household increases the likelihood of meeting food needs. Households with additional adults are more likely to have someone with the time and ability to prepare more economical meals for the family using basic ingredients (e.g., less reliance on expensive packaged foods). Living in a married step-parent household reduces the likelihood of adults ever cutting the size of their meals or skipping meals relative to living in a single mother household. Clearly, the composition of the household affects the distribution of food across its members.

<sup>5</sup> All results for Models 1 through 3 are available from the authors upon request.

**Table 5** Logistic regression estimates of father involvement on individual measures of food insecurity

	Ever worried food would run out	Ever had food not last meals	Ever cut/skipped
<i>Father involvement in previous year</i>			
Frequency of in-person visits			
<i>None</i>			
1–11 times a year	0.045	-0.148	0.053
1–3 times a month	-0.173	-0.239	-0.133
About once a week	0.110	-0.0106	0.010
More than once a week	-0.426***	-0.519***	-0.505***
Summertime or other type visits	-0.057	-0.535	0.517
Father deceased or whereabouts unknown	-0.269	-0.162	-0.564**
Child support in hundreds per month (1996 dollars)	-0.011	-0.025	-0.073**
<i>Characteristics of child</i>			
Sex			
<i>Male</i>			
Female	-0.046	0.010	-0.085
Age	0.011	0.018	0.005
Race/ethnicity			
Hispanic	-0.183	-0.1794	-0.264
<i>Non-Hispanic white</i>			
Non-Hispanic black	0.041	-0.182	-0.188
Birth status			
<i>Born in marriage</i>			
Born outside marriage	-0.068	0.026	-0.180
Birth status unknown	0.202	0.014	0.635
Has siblings living elsewhere	0.149	0.059	0.255*
Has child support order	-0.066	0.052	0.125
<i>Characteristics of MKA</i>			
Sex			
<i>Male</i>			
Female	0.8270**	0.779*	0.497
Age	0.001	0.009	0.009
Education			
Less than high school	0.457***	0.362**	0.273*
<i>High school/GED</i>			
Some college	0.292**	0.182	0.472***
College degree or more	-0.053	0.049	0.163
Employment in previous year			
<i>None</i>			
Part-time	-0.166	-0.116	-0.040
Full-time	0.043	-0.147	-0.170
Physical health fair or poor	0.628***	0.784***	0.722***
Foreign-born	-0.126***	0.103***	0.379***
MKA religious attendance			
Never	0.172	0.150	0.110
Yearly	0.007	-0.035	0.188
Monthly	-0.173	-0.166	-0.022
<i>Weekly</i>			
<i>Characteristics of household</i>			
Household composition			
<i>Single mother</i>			
Married step-parent	-0.074	-0.249	-0.406**
Cohabiting step-parent	0.448	0.258	0.172

**Table 5** continued

	Ever worried food would run out	Ever had food not last	Ever cut/skipped meals
Family income without child support	-0.225***	-0.250***	-0.088***
Number of minor children in the HH	0.084*	0.094**	0.079
Number of other adults in the HH	-0.041***	-0.113***	-0.136***
-2 log likelihood	10,236.121	10,169.944	9,238.040
( <i>n</i> )	7,861	7,861	7,861

All analyses were weighted using NSAF sample weights. Reference categories in italics

\* $p < 0.10$

\*\* $p < 0.05$

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$

Regarding the characteristics of the MKA, households for which the MKA is female tend to experience more aspects of food insecurity. This result is consistent with previous research on divorce that indicates that single fathers have more sources of social support compared to single mothers (Arendell, 1995; Greif, 1985). For instance, children whose primary caretaker (MKA) is their father may be more likely to get meals from friends and relatives than children living with their mother. The level of education of the MKA also is related to experiencing food insecurity, but in an inconsistent and unexpected way. One would expect having difficulty meeting food needs to be negatively related to education if we assume that more educated adults are able to make better use of their resources as they provide food for the members of their households. Our results support this expectation as we find MKAs with less than a high school education to be more likely to report experiencing aspects of food insecurity compared to those MKAs with a high school degree or a GED certificate, our base group. However, unexpectedly we find that MKAs with some college education also are more likely to report problems acquiring enough food compared to the base group. Perhaps this population of low-income college-educated women is unique in some way. MKAs in fair or poor health also are more likely to be in households that experience indicators of food insecurity. Without data regarding family medical expenses, we can only speculate that an MKA in poor health probably has higher medical expenses (e.g., prescription drug costs), which reduce the family's budget for food. The effects of being a foreign-born MKA on the household's ability to meet food needs are mixed, which could be the result of cultural differences in perceptions of food insecurity risks (i.e., they are less likely to worry but are more likely to run out of food). Experiencing indicators of food insecurity is not related to the age of the MKA, the employment experiences of the MKA in the previous year after we control for household income, nor the frequency with which the MKA attends religious services. The lack of effect of religious services is surprising given the involvement of churches in soup kitchens and the like. In general, the characteristics of the focal child do not affect our indicators of food insecurity for the child's household.

As can be seen in Tables 5 and 6, our *indicators* of visitation show that frequent—more than once a week—visits by the father reduce the likelihood that the focal child's resident family will experience episodes of food insecurity. This result is robust in that it is found for each of the three separate food insecurity measures and

**Table 6** Logistic regression estimates of father involvement on severity of food insecurity (ever worried food would run out, ever had food not last, ever cut/skipped meals)

	Ever experienced one of these	Ever experienced two of these	Ever experienced three of these
<i>Father involvement in previous year</i>			
Frequency of in-person visits			
<i>None</i>			
1–11 times a year	-0.069	0.032	-0.030
1–3 times a month	-0.302	-0.109	-0.171
About once a week	0.014	0.106	0.011
More than once a week	-0.603***	-0.447***	-0.453***
Summertime or other type visits	-0.388	0.025	0.305
Father deceased or whereabouts unknown	-0.379	-0.131	-0.546**
Child support in hundreds per month (1996 dollars)	-0.023	-0.030	-0.060*
<i>Characteristics of child</i>			
Sex			
<i>Male</i>			
Female	-0.014	-0.021	-0.096
Age	0.005	0.024*	0.025
Race/ethnicity			
Hispanic	-0.222	-0.213	-0.241
<i>Non-Hispanic white</i>			
Non-Hispanic black	-0.046	-0.279	0.023
Birth status			
<i>Born in marriage</i>			
Born outside marriage	0.063	-0.053	-0.183
Birth status unknown	0.207	0.105	0.564*
Has siblings living elsewhere	0.181	0.047	0.268*
Has child support order	-0.053	0.030	0.148
<i>Characteristics of MKA</i>			
Sex			
<i>Male</i>			
Female	0.932**	0.685*	-0.621
Age	0.005	0.002	0.010
Education			
<i>Less than high school</i>			
<i>High school/GED</i>	0.478***	0.333**	0.340**
Some college	0.358**	0.209	0.433***
College degree or more	0.008	0.0759	0.085
Employment in previous year			
<i>None</i>			
Part-time	-0.185	-0.1110	-0.034
Full-time	0.004	-0.1753	-0.128
Physical health fair or poor	0.686***	0.716***	0.845***
Foreign-born	-0.004***	0.070***	0.318***
MKA religious attendance			
<i>Never</i>			
Yearly	0.085	0.220	0.150
Monthly	-0.023	0.046	0.148
Weekly	-0.205	-0.099	-0.081

**Table 6** continued

	Ever experienced one of these	Ever experienced two of these	Ever experienced three of these
<i>Characteristics of household</i>			
<i>Household composition</i>			
<i>Single mother</i>			
Married step-parent	-0.146	-0.211	-0.5428*
Cohabiting step-parent	0.473*	0.253	0.210
Family income without child support	-0.220***	-0.256***	-0.112***
Number of minor children in the HH	0.070	0.094*	0.111*
Number of other adults in the HH	-0.031***	-0.124***	-0.158***
-2 log likelihood	9,852.172	10,226.530	8,444.494
( <i>n</i> )	7,861	7,861	7,861

All analyses were weighted using NSAF sample weights. Reference categories in italics

\* $p < 0.10$

\*\* $p < 0.05$

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$

for the severity measures. Furthermore, while any amount of visiting is typically found to be negatively related to aspects of food insecurity, the relationship is statistically significant only for visiting more than once a week, the most frequent level of visitation measured.

Child support receipt does not have the same consistently significantly negative impact on our indicators of food insecurity that is found with father visitation. With respect to each individual indicator of food insecurity, child support receipt is found to be effective in reducing only the likelihood that the adults in the resident family's household ever had to cut the size of their meals or had to skip meals. Only this relationship is statistically significant. The negative relationships between child support receipt and whether the receiving family reports worrying if food will run out, and child support receipt and ever having food not last are not statistically significant. Child support receipt significantly ( $p < 0.10$ ) reduces the likelihood of experiencing all three types of food insecurity. We hypothesize that the small amounts of child support received by families who receive it are not sufficient or consistent enough to impact their ability to access an adequate amount of food on a regular basis. Even with additional child support income, these low-income families continue to worry about having enough food and continue to experience times when there is not enough food for everyone to eat.

## Discussion

This paper examined how nonresidential father involvement affects the ability of the resident child's family to have access to enough food for active, healthy living. Our findings suggest that paying child support is only one way that nonresident fathers can positively affect the well being of their children. Our results indicate that, among low-income families, children whose fathers are frequent visitors are less likely to experience the aspects of food insecurity examined here. While child support payments likely have an impact, we have less evidence that receiving child support ameliorates food acquisition problems among low-income children.

We identified several ways in which involvement by nonresident fathers may affect food insecurity. Our results indicate that low-income families need more than their household income and child support dollars to meet their food needs. It appears that the small amount of child support received by the relatively few families that receive it may only moderate the severity of their food insecurity. Our results do not suggest that fathers who visit frequently increase food insecurity by behaving as the *family breadwinner* and discouraging receipt of assistance from outside sources. Regarding father involvement, more likely scenarios might be that fathers who visit regularly provide in-kind support to their children in the form of clothes and gifts (which may free up more of the mother's income for food), as well as food and/or dinners out. Fathers who visit also may monitor mothers' spending habits with respect to their children.

Our results contribute to a growing literature suggesting that paying child support is just one aspect of fathering, and that visiting as well as paying child support can improve the health and well being of children. For example, a recent study by Menning (2004) indicates that visitation with nonresident fathers is associated with less cigarette smoking by adolescents. Perhaps child support payments alone are an inadequate indicator of low-income nonresident fathers' contributions to their children's lives. In results not shown, we found weak evidence that children with high-visiting nonresident fathers (more than once a week) are less likely to receive child support than children whose fathers visit a moderate amount (monthly). This suggests that low-income nonresident fathers might be substituting visits for child support payments.

In summary, it is obvious that there is a great deal more to understand about the potential benefits of nonresident father involvement. As child support enforcement becomes more rigorous (Bartfeld, 2003; Bartfeld & Meyer, 2003; Garasky, 2000), it is important and timely to investigate how parental involvement that is encouraged by current social and welfare policy affects resident family assistance program participation and other outcomes such as their ability to meet their food needs. Furthermore, it is clear that understanding the effects of child support and visitation on these outcomes requires better data. We support those advocating that surveys expand their data gathering efforts in these areas (Argys et al., 2006; Garasky et al., 2006).

The goals of the federal child support enforcement program include fostering responsible behavior toward children. In light of this goal, our findings suggest that policymakers should continue to recognize and encourage nonresident parents' nonmonetary contributions to their children's lives. Policies and programs that capitalize on the ability of nonresident parents to provide informal resources to their children may find that this is another effective way to enhance child well being, especially for low-income single mother families whose nonresident fathers often have low incomes as well.

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