

The Second Time Around: Social Fathers in Fragile Families

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One third of children in the United States are born to unmarried parents.¹ Many of these children will live with both of their biological parents throughout their early formative years (zero to 3), while others will live with a single mother (or mother and grandparent). Still others will live with a mother and social father, defined as an unrelated man who is romantically involved with the child's mother.

Social fathers are likely to play an important role in the lives of children born to unmarried parents, yet we do not know very much about these men in terms of their human capital, relationships with the mothers, and involvement with the child. Although a large literature exists on the role and impact of stepfathers, most of these studies are based on samples of divorced mothers with older children who are married to their new partners. Previous research provides little information about cohabiting social fathers in early childhood. This paper focuses on the prevalence and characteristics of these men.

Data and Methods

We use data from the first three waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a national longitudinal study which follows a cohort of approximately 3,700 children born to unmarried parents and 1,200 children born to married parents. Although the Fragile Families Study is representative of all unmarried and most married births in large cities, the sample for this paper is based solely on the non-marital births since few children born to married parents have a social father by their third birthday.

Using mothers' reports from the baseline, 1-year, and 3-year interviews, we first ask how common it is for unmarried mothers to form new co-resident (cohabiting or married) partnerships one year and three years after their child's birth. Next, we explore how the characteristics of mothers' new partners compare to those of biological fathers. In doing so, we address two primary questions: 1) how do the characteristics of new social fathers compare to the characteristics of biological fathers who are currently living with their children (between-group comparison), and 2) how do the characteristics of new social fathers compare to those of the non-resident biological fathers (within-group comparison)? Our comparisons consider demographic, economic and psychosocial characteristics of social and biological fathers, including age, race, education, employment, drug/alcohol problems, incarceration history, and violence towards the mother.

After comparing the characteristics of social and biological fathers, we address the question of which mothers (among those living with social fathers) are most likely to have re-partnered with men whose characteristics are better than those of the child's biological father. Explanatory variables include mothers' race, age, education, immigrant status and parity, as well as characteristics of the biological father at birth. Finally, we explore how involved social fathers are with the focal child, comparing their involvement with that of resident biological fathers. We consider several domains of involvement, including warmth/affection, cognitive stimulation, and engagement/play.

¹ Ventura, S. J., & Bachrach, C. A. (2000). Nonmarital childbearing in the United States, 1940-99. *National Vital Statistics Reports* 48(16). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

Preliminary Results

The following are preliminary results from the first two sections of the paper: (1) the prevalence of social fathers and (2) the characteristics of social fathers, as compared with those of biological fathers.

Prevalence of Social Fathers (See Table 1)

Preliminary results show that approximately 6 percent of mothers with a non-marital birth are cohabiting or married to a new partner one year after their child's birth. Three years after birth, the figure is about 12 percent.

Among mothers who were not romantically involved with the child's biological father at the time of birth, 15 percent are living with a new partner one year after birth, and 24 percent are living with a new partner three years after birth.

Hispanic mothers are less likely than mothers of other race/ethnic backgrounds to live with a new partner three years after the birth; approximately 8 percent of Hispanic mothers have a new co-resident partner, as compared with 13 percent of black, non-Hispanic mothers and 15 percent of white, non-Hispanic² mothers. This finding is partially due to the fact that Hispanic mothers are more likely to be in a relationship with the focal child's biological father.

Table 1. Proportion of mothers with unmarried births with social fathers at 1 and 3 years, by race/ethnicity*

	Live with/married to SF at 1 year		Live with/married to SF at 3 years	
	All mothers	Not rom. involved with bio. dad at birth	All mothers	Not rom. involved with bio. dad at birth
	N=3,209	N=546	N=3,088	N=512
Total % with SF	6.0	15.4	12.0	23.6
% with SF by mother's race/ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic white and other	6.3 ^{NS}	19.1 ^{NS}	14.7 ³	29.6 ^{NS}
Non-Hispanic black	7.0 ³	16.2 ^{NS}	13.1 ³	21.6 ^{NS}
Hispanic	3.8 ²	11.0 ^{NS}	8.2 ^{1,2}	24.2 ^{NS}

*Among mothers living at least half-time with the focal child

¹ Significantly different from non-Hispanic white and other (p<.05)

² Significantly different from non-Hispanic black (p<.05)

³ Significantly different from Hispanic (p<.05)

² This group also includes a small number of non-Hispanic mothers of other races.

Characteristics of Social Fathers (See Table 2)

Preliminary results suggest that the characteristics of mothers' new partners are similar to or compare favorably to those of resident biological fathers. For example, resident social and biological fathers (columns 1 and 3) are equally likely to be working/in school, to have a drug or alcohol problem, and to be violent towards their co-resident partner. Resident social fathers (column 1) are significantly less likely than are resident biological fathers (column 3) to have dropped out of high school and to have ever been incarcerated.

Table 2 also provides results for the "within-mother" comparisons. These contrasts represent a unique contribution to the literature. Preliminary results suggest quite interesting (and perhaps surprising) findings.

When we compare the characteristics of social fathers (column 1) with those of non-resident biological fathers (column 2), we see that social fathers are significantly more likely to have a high school degree or GED, to be working or in school (85 percent compared with 56 percent), and to exhibit less violence than biological fathers. Social fathers (column 1) are also significantly less likely than non-resident biological fathers (column 2) to have a problem related to drug or alcohol use. The difference in the incarceration rates for these two groups of men is most striking: 24 percent of social fathers have been in prison or jail, compared to fully 73 percent of the non-resident biological fathers.

Table 2. Characteristics of resident and non-resident biological and resident social fathers, 3 years^a			
	Mothers living with social fathers		Mothers living with child's bio father^b
	1) SF (new partner)	2) Bio father (former partner)	3) Bio father (current partner)
Total N^c	371	371	1,314
Characteristics of fathers			
Mean age	27.55 ³	27.72 ³	29.91 ^{1,2}
Race			
White non-H and other	17.8 ^{NS}	15.6 ^{NS}	16.4 ^{NS}
Black	63.2 ³	64.1 ³	47.6 ^{1,2}
Hispanic	18.9 ³	20.3 ³	36.1 ^{1,2}
Education (3-yr for SF, bl for BF)			
Less than HS	8.2 ^{2,3}	42.3 ¹	36.2 ¹
HS degree/GED	68.5 ^{2,3}	40.4 ¹	37.6 ¹
Some college or more	23.3 ^{NS}	17.3 ³	26.2 ²
Working/in school	84.7 ²	55.6 ^{1,3}	82.1 ²
Drug/alcohol problem	1.4 ²	25.6 ^{1,3}	2.2 ²
Ever been in prison/jail	23.6 ^{2,3}	72.5 ^{1,3}	34.2 ^{1,2}
Mean level of violence towards mother (Range: 1-3)	1.01 ²	1.28 ^{1,3}	1.02 ²
^a Except where otherwise noted, all father characteristics are taken from mothers' reports at 3 years. ^b Includes those living all, most or some of the time with biological father. ^c Due to differing numbers of missing cases, Ns for specific variables may be lower than total N. ¹ Significantly different from resident social fathers (column 1), p<.05 ² Significantly different from non-resident biological fathers for mothers living with social fathers (column 2), p<.05 ³ Significantly different from resident biological fathers (column 3), p<.05			

Summary

In summary, our preliminary results suggest that a non-trivial fraction of women with non-marital births move in with or marry a new male partner by their child's third birthday. And this fraction will only increase over time, given the high rates of union instability in this population. Our descriptive comparisons show that the characteristics of mothers' co-resident partners compare favorably with the characteristics of resident biological fathers when the child is age three. They also indicate that mothers who re-partner do quite well in choosing their new mates, particularly in terms of education, employment, drug/alcohol abuse, and past incarceration. Results not shown here also suggest that social fathers are highly involved with the mothers' child. Perhaps, for many of these mothers, things are indeed better the second time around.