The Family-Go-Round: Family Complexity and Father Involvement from a Father’s Perspective

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Doing the Best I Can

Fatherhood in the Inner City

Kathryn Edin and Timothy J. Nelson
Data Sources

• Quantitative Data
  – NLSY – 1997 Cohort
  – Men born 1980-1984
  – Ages 23-28 in 2008 survey wave
  – 35% (N=1,473) are fathers

• Very Similar to 1979 cohorts, various ages (Lerman and Sorensen)

• Qualitative Data
  – Repeated in-depth interviews with 110 low-income, noncustodial fathers living in Philadelphia and Camden
Selection into Fatherhood: Number of Children, by Father Education

- Less than HS: 65.1
  - 3+ (Green): 39.6
  - 2 (Red): 25.5
  - 1 (Blue): 6.0
- HS Grad/GED: 28.6
  - 3+ (Green): 28.6
  - 2 (Red): 2.0
  - 1 (Blue): 0.0
- AA/Technical Degree: 12.1
  - 3+ (Green): 0.0
  - 2 (Red): 0.0
  - 1 (Blue): 12.1
### Fathers’ Multi-Partner Fertility in Young Adulthood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>All Fathers</th>
<th>With 2+ Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than HS</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Grad/GED</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA/Technical Degree</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA+</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Step/Social Children in Fathers’ Households

- Less than HS: 21.6%
- HS Grad/GED: 19.6%
- AA/ Technical Degree: 10.9%
- BA+: 5.5%

Compared to:
- Both Bio and Step at Once: 17.6%, 14.6%, 9.3%, 1.8%
Fathers Living Apart from Biological Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Ever Non-Resident</th>
<th>Always Non-Resident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than HS</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Grad/GED</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA/Technical Degree</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA+</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In sum, less educated men are....

- More likely to be a father
- Have more kids
- Have more kids by multiple partners
- More likely to be social fathers
- More likely to live in “blended” households
- More likely to have lived apart from a child

EDUCATIONAL GRADIENT IS HUGE (family complexity is not an equal opportunity phenomenon)
Child Involvement from a Father’s Perspective: Maximum Child Involvement

Take home message: Younger, less educated men (read: men with a non-marital birth) are rarely either saints or deadbeats. This has big implications for policy
Child Involvement from a Father’s Perspective: Maximum Child Involvement

No Contact: 3.6
Monthly: 4.3
Weekly: 11.1
Daily: 81.0

No Complexity: 9.3
Complexity: 9.2
No Complexity: 20.1
Complexity: 61.5

Note: Complex = MPF; Sample restricted to fathers with 2+ children.
Child Involvement from a Father’s Perspective: Least Child Involvement

Note: Complex = MPF; Sample restricted to fathers with 2+ children.
Serial, Selective Father Involvement
Serial, Selective Father Involvement

1. What accounts for the high level of intensive involvement among fathers in complex households?

2. Why do fathers have little, if any, involvement with some children yet maintain intensive involvement with others?
What do men “accomplish” through serial, selective fatherhood?

• They can put aside past failures and start anew

• They can invest most, if not all, of their meager resources in successfully performing the father role in one household at a time
  – Could Montay stay with Quinessa if she got only half of his contributions?
  – Could David maintain a relationship with Deborah if he gave only a fifth of his resources to her?
Lessons for Child Support Policy

• Prevent Multiple Partner Fertility!
  – Work to engage the father with the first child. KEEP HIM IN THE HOME IF POSSIBLE.
    • Changing state and local institutions to realize that there are no single mothers, only fragile families
      – Lesson from DBIC: No one is FOR these couples
  – Inform fathers of the high “tax” on MPF in the child support system
  – Once, he’s out, keep mom from “swapping daddies”
    • He shouldn’t have to have a new kid with another partner to satisfy his father thirst
    • Recognize though that his visitation could be destabilizing to mom’s new partnership
    • Relationship skills are needed!

• Recognize that CSE for past children may destabilize relationship a father is in at present.
  – Fathers need help in managing, but without encouraging MPF
    • EITC for singles may reduce zero-sum game
    • Credit fathers’ investments of time and in-kind contributions
    • Consider mom’s overall level of resources relative to dad’s

• Honor dads for what they ARE doing, not just what they aren’t (BUT EMPHASIZE THAT ALL OF THEIR KIDS NEED THEM ALL OF THE TIME)