



Are low earnings of nonresidential fathers a barrier to their involvement with children?

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Father involvement
Nonresident fathers
Unmarried parents
Father-child relations

ABSTRACT

Understanding the correlates of nonresident fathers' involvement, particularly the association between involvement and fathers' economic status is important for improving child well-being. However, previous research has produced mixed results. Using data from the longitudinal Survey of Wisconsin Works Families ($N = 828$), and administrative records that improve the accuracy of measuring economic status, this study revisits the relationship between fathers' earnings and father-child contact, while controlling for whether the father has children with multiple partners. Using logistic regressions and lagged dependent variable analysis, we find that low earnings are to some extent a barrier to nonresident fathers' involvement with their nonresidential child. When predicting contact at least once a year we find a consistent and significant association between earnings and contact. In contrast, when predicting frequent contact, earnings were not statistically significant once previous contact was controlled. We conclude that fathers' earnings *open the door* for contact, as the models predicting contact once a year show. However, the frequency, after the initial contact, is better predicted by other variables. The results underscore the need to complement policy attempts to increase noncustodial father's involvement with policies aimed at improving father's economic status. Moreover, they highlight the importance of interventions that simultaneously work to enhance fathers' economic resources and relationship with the resident mother.

1. Introduction

Children's living arrangements in the U.S. have become more diverse and fluid, with an increasing number who live apart from their father. Yet some research suggests that nonresident father involvement, particularly in the context of positive high quality interactions, would have beneficial effects for child development in a wide range of outcomes (Amato, 1994; Amato & Rivera, 1999; Carlson, 2006; Jeynes, 2015). A variety of policies have been implemented to try to increase nonresident father involvement. These include joint legal custody, shared physical custody, and parenting plans. However, two trends complicate these efforts to encourage nonresident father involvement. First, there is new awareness of the deteriorating economic circumstances of many low-educated men, especially men of color (e.g., Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2011). Second, many nonresident fathers have had children with more than one mother, so there is increased difficulty in managing multiple relationships (e.g., Guzzo, 2014; Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2005). The combination of limited economic means and needing to connect with children across multiple families could result in nonresident fathers having difficulty remaining involved in their children's lives.

Understanding the determinants of nonresident fathers' involvement, and especially the relationship between fathers' economic status and involvement is important for improving child well-being. However, previous research has produced substantially mixed results, perhaps due in part to sample and measurement limitations. Using data from a longitudinal survey, a sample of fathers from both rural and urban areas who are likely to have economic difficulty, and administrative records to improve the accuracy of economic status and the extent of obligations to multiple families, this study revisits the relationship between fathers' economic resources and contact with their children, while controlling for whether the father has children with multiple partners. We examine two questions: (a) Are a nonresident father's low earnings associated with the likelihood of in-person contact with his child? (b) Does the association remain after controlling for whether he has had children with multiple partners and other measures of family complexity?

2. Conceptual framework

In this section, we review three sociological perspectives on nonresident parent (mostly father) involvement after divorce or separation summarized by Stephens (1996). First, we describe the socioeconomic

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advantage perspective, which directly inform our study. We then review the social-parenting and marital-involvement perspectives, which inform our choice of control variables. At the end of this section, we summarize the limitations of previous work and introduce our study.

2.1. Socioeconomic advantage perspective

This approach directly suggests that higher-status fathers are more likely to maintain contact with their nonresident children. One factor is that fathers may need economic resources to be able to travel to visit their children. In addition, the stability of paternal employment and income may enable fathers to provide economic resources for their children, which may then facilitate involvement (Carlson, Vanorman, & Turner, 2017; Castillo, Welch, & Sarver, 2011; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Coley & Hernandez, 2006). Employment may be linked to higher levels of personal responsibility and may increase a father's willingness and ability to fulfill a provider role. Fulfilling a provider role can directly or indirectly affect the level of contact between the father and the child through lessening parental conflict or increasing a mother's willingness to allow contact. From identity theory (Dyer, 2005), the process of men's identification as a father might be weakened by his inability to provide financial resources, potentially leading to a father distancing himself from fathering roles, including involvement with children.

Research has shown mixed support for this framework. Those with higher earnings (or what some have considered as a proxy for higher earnings, higher education) have been found to have more contact with their children in some studies (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Carlson, et al.; Cheadle, Amato, & King, 2010; Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Stephens, 1996) but in other studies some of these economic variables are not statistically significant (e.g., Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Ryan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2008; Sano, Smith, & Lanigan, 2011). Mixed results in this area may come from the lack of accurate information on the fathers' financial resources or from whether additional variables measuring family relationships and parental conflict are included.

2.2. Social-parenting perspective

From this perspective, resident and nonresident parents' experiences of repartnering and new children are expected to affect nonresident parents' level of involvement. This perspective also draws from family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 2003). Townsend (2002) proposes that the father-child relationship is just one of the components of a "package deal" in that it is linked to the father's relationship with the child's mother. She plays a vital role in validating men's identity as a father (Goldberg, 2015; Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010). This perspective suggests that nonresident fathers' involvement will decrease after relationship dissolution, especially when either parent moves on to a new partnership or when their relationship has high conflict and low quality.

Consistent with this perspective, competing parenting responsibilities and the presence of additional children with other partners are associated with decreases in contact with nonresident children (Manning, Stewart & Smock, 2003; Nepomnyaschy, 2007). As time passes, fathers who have had children with multiple partners may exhibit "serial, selective fatherhood," in which children from older relationships are displaced by the presence of children in new relationships (Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Tach, Edin, Harvey, & Bryan, 2014). Some research has found that mother's transitions into marriage or cohabitation with a new partner often have a negative association with a father's connection to his children, even more than father's transitions into new relationships (Berger, Cancian, & Meyer, 2012; Juby, Billette, Laplante, & Le Bourdais, 2007; Meyer & Cancian, 2012; Seltzer, 1991). In contrast, some studies among low-income fathers show that visitation is more frequent among fathers married to a new partner; the new partner seems to be a positive influence on their spouse's involvement with his children (Garasky, Stewart, Gundersen, & Lohman, 2010; Manning, Stewart, & Smock, 2003). The quality of the

relationship between the father and the mother is one of the most significant predictors of a father's involvement with nonresident children. Fathers with a better relationship quality with the resident mother are more likely to remain involved in their children's lives (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Goldberg, 2015; Sano et al., 2011; Tach et al., 2010; Turney & Halpern-Meekin, 2017).

This perspective implies that contact will decline as the time since separation increases, since both parents may be more likely to move on to other relationships. However, Cheadle et al. (2010) highlight the multiple trajectories that nonresident father contact can take over time in addition to the typical trajectory of decline; they conclude that a pattern of reduced contact was more common among fathers with children who were relatively young at the time of separation. These varying trajectories may explain why some studies demonstrate that contact, at least in person, decreases as the child ages, while others show the opposite or no relationship (Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Seltzer, 1991).

Although not always seen as a part of this perspective, fathers with higher economic status may feel more able to connect with their children in that fathering and economic support are also linked in the "package deal" (Townsend, 2002). The Socioeconomic Advantage Perspective and the Social-Parenting Perspective may work together. As fathers are able to accumulate greater financial resources that enable them to support their nonresident children and their mothers through formal and informal contributions, they are also able to potentially maintain a better relationship with the child's mother and therefore with their children. Similarly, parents with fewer economic resources may be more likely to experience relationship dissolution and new-partner fertility (Guzzo, 2014), which may then lead to fathers being less connected to their nonresident children.

2.3. Marital-involvement perspective

This perspective shifts the attention from the events happening after separation, such as repartnering and the arrival of new children, to events happening before the separation. From this perspective, and based on Becker's conceptualization of "marital-specific capital" (Becker, 1981), father's level of involvement during their time of coresidence is associated with the sense of investment fathers establish and the level of involvement post-separation. From this perspective, high levels of investment pre-separation on the father-child relationship are often translated into post-separation investments as fathers already have a stronger connection to their children, and as they aim to retain some of the capital they have already accumulated.

Since the study of fathers' involvement prior to separation requires longitudinal data or at least retrospective reports, many studies have used correlates of prior paternal involvement. Those include the duration of the marriage or relationship, marital status at child's birth as well as characteristics of the child as proxies for fathers' commitment to the relationship (Stephens, 1996). Those who have been married longer, or who had been married to the child's mother are more likely to be involved in their children's lives post-divorce and separation (Aquilino, 2006; Cheadle et al., 2010; Cooksey & Craig, 1998). There are mixed results around the significance and direction of the association between child's sex and nonresident father-child contact or other forms of involvement prior and after separation. Most of the analyses show non-significant results (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Manning et al., 2003; Seltzer, 1991). However, a few studies show more father involvement with boys than girls, but only in a sample of married (or formerly married) parents (Lundberg, McLanahan, & Rose, 2007). Finally, a few studies have shown an association between nonresident father involvement and a child's temperament (McBride, Schoppe, & Rane, 2002)¹ and a reciprocal

¹ See Belsky (1984) for a more theoretical explanation on how child's temperament is related to parenting.

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