

Longitudinal Effects of Growing up with a Nonresident Father

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Abstract

Prior research shows that children with nonresident biological fathers experience lower well-being compared to children with resident biological fathers. However, this body of research mainly focuses on childhood or adolescent well-being. Using a sample of offspring from Waves I, III and IV of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, we extend current research by examining trajectories of offspring well-being from adolescence into adulthood. We measure offspring's depressive symptoms and problem drinking during adolescence, young adulthood and early adulthood, and examine whether differences in these outcomes between offspring growing up with a nonresident father versus those with a resident father persist over time. We also examine whether these differences vary based on the length of time spent without a father in the household, and for sons versus daughters.

Background

High rates of divorce and increasing rates of nonmarital fertility limit many fathers' opportunities to be involved in the lives of their children (Amato and Booth, 1997). The strength of the father-child relationship is often challenged when fathers are not in the household, and compared to resident fathers, nonresident fathers have much lower levels of involvement with children. However, the accumulating evidence suggesting that father involvement, even when fathers are absent from the household, contributes to positive child well-being, has resulted in growing pressure for fathers to be highly involved parents (Amato and Sobolewski, 2004; King and Sobolewski, 2006; Lamb, 2004). For example, previous research suggests that divorce and living in a single parent household negatively affects children's educational and occupational attainment, psychological well-being, physical health, engagement in risky behaviors such as delinquency and substance use, and interpersonal relationships (Amato and Booth, 1997, Cherlin, Chase-Landale, and McRae, 1998; Manning and Lamb, 2003; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994).

These studies have mainly focused on well-being during childhood or adolescence, with less research on adult offspring well-being, although there is some evidence that early family structure, family transitions and parent-child relationships can have a significant influence on

offspring's relationships and well-being during adulthood (Barrett and Turner, 2005; Belsky, Jafee, Caspi, Moffitt, and Silva, 2003). Little is known about the role that nonresident fathers play in shaping these adult experiences and behaviors. Once offspring gain more independence from their parents, form new relationships, and acquire new adult roles, the quality of nonresident father-offspring relationships may decline, especially for offspring who never lived with their fathers or who have lived apart for a greater number of years. Alternatively, fathers may become more involved in assisting with education and employment decisions, or offspring may reach out to their fathers once they leave the household and have greater freedom to seek out their fathers, resulting in enhanced relationships during adulthood. The main goal of this study is to examine the longer term effects of growing up with a nonresident father by comparing the well-being of offspring who grew up with and without a resident father at three different time points – during adolescence, during young adulthood and during adulthood.

The ways in which nonresident families are formed may also have implications for father involvement and child well-being. The percentage of children born outside of marriage has increased dramatically (NCHS, 2006), resulting in a greater number of children that may never live with their biological father. Although a substantial proportion of unmarried fathers cohabit with their children's mothers at the time of birth, these unions tend to be unstable and of short duration (McLanahan et al., 2003). Research suggests that divorced fathers maintain more contact with their nonresident children than never-married fathers, and living with their child for some period of time provides greater opportunities for men to enact the paternal role and develop emotional ties to their children (Amato, Meyers, and Emery, 2009). However, the transition from being a residential to nonresidential parent can be especially difficult for divorced fathers, and these fathers may disengage more from their children if they have difficulties redefining

their parental role once outside the household (Harper and Fine, 2006). In the proposed study we will examine differences in offspring well-being based on the length of time spent in a nonresident father family.

At all ages, daughters may not benefit from nonresident father involvement in the same ways as sons if they do not participate in the same types of activities with their fathers, or if they do not have the same access to fathers' social capital as sons. Not only are nonresident fathers more involved with sons compared to daughters (Harris and Morgan, 1991; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 2002; Stamps-Mitchell, Booth and King, 2009), some research supports the hypothesis that sons benefit more from the same levels and types of involvement than daughters, at least on some dimensions of well-being (Amato, 1994; King and Sobolewski, 2006).

Research also consistently shows that females are more likely to experience internalizing problems and males are more likely to exhibit externalizing problems (Avison and McAlpine, 1992; Gore, Aseltine and Colton, 1992) so that nonresident father involvement may have a stronger positive influence on daughters' mental health and on sons' risky behaviors such as substance use. Thus, a final aim of this study is to examine differences in the effects of father absence on the well-being of sons versus daughters.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a social capital framework. The amount of time fathers spend with their children, the quality of relationships between fathers and offspring, and the level of father involvement in offspring's activities all contribute to family social capital (Parcel and Dufur, 2001; Parish and Menaghan, 1993). The concept of social capital refers to social resources that are gained through networks of relationships that facilitate interaction among individuals within networks, and facilitate the exchange of informal resources such as social

support, knowledge, and perceived obligations among social actors (Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988). Within the context of the family, social capital is typically measured by the strength of ties between family members. Following this framework, then, father absence may reduce family social capital by weakening relationships between fathers and children, and sometimes between mothers and children. Single mothers are often unable to provide emotional support and monitor their children effectively if they are overburdened by emotional strain or are unable to successfully balance work and family responsibilities, resulting in lower well-being for children (Cherlin, 1981; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). However, if nonresident fathers can continue to provide the types of resources needed for strong family social capital when they are not living with their children, they may better protect offspring against the risks associated with father absence.

We also draw upon the life course perspective, which emphasizes the interdependence of lives over-time and at different stages of development from adolescence and into adulthood, the importance of the timing and sequencing of events such as a father's departure from the household, the active role individuals play in shaping their relationships and experiences, and the importance of historical and social-structural context for understanding individual behavior (Elder, 1994).

Data and Methods

We use data from the first, third and fourth waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). The Add Health is a nationally representative, longitudinal study of adolescents in grades 7 through 12 (ages 12-18) in the United States in the 1994-1995 school year. The study involves four waves of in-home interviews and includes a parent interview in the first wave. In the first wave (1995), 20,745 students from 80 high schools or

feeder schools were selected via a multistage, stratified, school-based, cluster sampling design for extensive in-home interviews (Harris et al., 2009). The second wave of data was collected one year later (1996), when 14,738 students were re-interviewed; teens who were in twelfth grade at Wave I did not participate in Wave II. The third wave of the survey (2001-2002) followed respondents as they transitioned into adulthood (ages 18-26). Relationship, childbearing, education and work histories were collected for 15,197 of the original Wave I respondents. The fourth wave of the survey was conducted in 2007-2008 when respondents were aged 24-32. Approximately 17,000 original Wave I respondents participated in Wave IV.

There are several advantages to using the Add Health data for this study. First, the age range of the respondents in Wave I, and the approximate 13 year interval between Waves I and IV, facilitates the study of offspring as they move from adolescence through the transition to adulthood, and into adulthood. Second, the Add Health data provide detailed information on respondents' current and past family structure and resident father status, allowing for comparisons of offspring with resident father families and diverse nonresident father family forms.

The sample for this study includes respondents who were 12-18 years old in Wave 1, and who were living with either two biological parents or a biological mother at Wave I. For those who were living with a bio mom, but no bio dad, they had to know something about their biological father and had to report that their bio father was still alive. The biological mother only family subgroup includes mothers who were single, cohabiting or remarried. The final sample consists of approximately 10,000 resident father families and 5,000 nonresident father families.

Dependent Variable. We examine two measures of well-being, problem drinking and depressive symptoms. Each outcome was measured the same way in Wave I, Wave III, and

Wave IV. Problem drinking is the average of two items measuring the number of days in the past year that the adolescent had five (four for females) or more drinks in a row and the number of days in the past year they had been “drunk or very high on alcohol.” The response categories range from 0 = never to 6 = every day/almost every day.

Depressive symptoms were measured using nine items measured consistently across all three waves. These items assessed how often in the past seven days (ranging from 0 = never/rarely to 3 = most of the time/all of the time) the respondent felt bothered by things that usually didn’t bother them, felt they could not shake off the blues, had trouble keeping their mind on what they were doing, felt depressed, felt too tired to do things, enjoyed life, felt sad, felt they were just as good as other people, and felt that people disliked them.

Independent Variables. Our key predictor is fathers’ residential status during adolescence (Wave I). This measure is based on the household roster from Wave I, combined with adolescent reports of the length of time since they had last lived with their biological father among those who were not currently living with them at Wave I. From these reports, we created three family structure categories reflecting the residential status of the adolescents’ biological fathers, and whether or not the adolescent had ever (vs. never) lived with their father if they were not living with them during adolescence. The following categories were created: Resident Father Families (RF, 68%), Nonresident Father Families – Never Lived with Father (NRF-never, 7%), and Nonresident Father Families – Ever Lived with Father (NRF-ever, 25%). Future analyses will explore a more detailed measure consisting of different subcategories of the NRF-ever group, based on the number of years since the father was out of the household.

We also included measures of respondents' age, race/ethnicity, nativity status, feelings of closeness to fathers, feelings of closeness to mothers, and father and mother education. These measures serve as important individual and parental background control variables.

Analytic Strategy. We first present descriptive results showing the average problem drinking and average depressive symptoms for adolescents in the RF, NRF-never and NRF-ever categories, by gender and across the three waves of data. We next conducted preliminary OLS regression analyses to examine changes in problem drinking and depressive symptoms between Wave I and Wave III and between Wave III and Wave IV. We examined changes in the outcome variable by controlling for prior levels of problem drinking or depressive symptoms in the prior wave. For example, to examine changes in problem drinking between Wave I and Wave III, our dependent variable was measured in Wave III, and we controlled for Wave I levels. In Model 1, we included only dummy variables for fathers' residential status, comparing adolescents in the two nonresident father categories to those with a resident father (RF), plus the measures of prior problem drinking or depressive symptoms. Model 2 adds all of the other control variables described above.

Preliminary results

Tables 1 and 2 present our descriptive results for females (Table 1) and males (Table 2). Overall, we found low levels of problem drinking, although males reported higher levels of problem drinking, on average, than females. Both males and females experienced an increase in problem drinking between adolescence and young adulthood. Adolescents with resident fathers had the lowest levels of problem drinking during adolescence, but their drinking appears to increase at a faster rate over-time. Offspring that never lived with their biological fathers have the lowest levels of problem drinking at older ages.

For the depressive symptoms outcome, females exhibit slightly higher levels of depressive symptoms than males, although both groups experienced an increase in depression starting in young adulthood. When comparing respondents in each category based on fathers' residential status, we found that having a resident father during adolescence or living with your nonresident father at some point appears to be protective. Males and females who never lived with their resident father have the highest levels of depressive symptoms.

Table 3 and Table 4 present the multivariate results based on OLS regression analyses. Our analyses for problem drinking (Table 3) suggest that at both time periods (Wave I – Wave III, Wave III – Wave IV) offspring who did not live with their biological father during adolescence experienced less of an increase in problem drinking compared to offspring with a resident father. In fact, offspring who *never* lived with their dad experienced the least change. We found similar results for females, although among females, adolescents who lived with their nonresident father at some point did not differ from those with a resident father.

Once we add in our controls in Model 2, the differences between the nonresident father and resident father categories became nonsignificant. This finding suggests that there are important differences in terms of both individual and family background characteristics between these groups that help to explain differences in offspring well-being. For example, one interpretation we have is that adolescents with resident fathers may be more likely to have greater financial resources, which may allow them more access to alcohol. This hypothesis is somewhat supported by the fact that parental education was positively associated with increased problem drinking in these models. These results suggest that socio-economic status is linked to differences between resident and nonresident father families, but higher SES may not always be protective.

Our analyses for depressive symptoms (Table 4) suggest that offspring, and particularly females, experience more changes in depression over-time if they had a nonresident father. This is especially the case if offspring never lived with their father.

Similar to problem drinking, most of these results became nonsignificant after we included our controls, but we do see that net of controls, daughters who never lived with their biological father experienced less of a decline in depressive symptoms between adolescence (Wave I) and young adulthood (Wave III) compared to those with a resident father.

Next steps

In order to more formally analyze trajectories of well-being over time, we plan to estimate growth curve models using all three time points in a model together. We are also exploring growth curve analyses using four waves of data (both outcome variables are also available in Wave II). The models that include each outcome measured at four different time points will allow for more flexibility in the types of non-linear growth curve analyses that we can estimate. As mentioned above, we will also create a measure of fathers' residential status that includes more detail about the number of years that a nonresident father was out of the household. For example, we will compare offspring whose biological father has been out of the household for less than 1 year, vs. 2-5 years, 6-10 years, or more than 11 years.

We are also exploring the role of additional independent variables, including whether or not adolescents in nonresident father families live with a stepfather, and whether or not the respondents' biological parents were married at the time of the respondents' birth.

Table 1. Family Structure Differences in Average Problem Drinking and Average Depressive Symptoms, Females

	Average Problem Drinking			Average Depression		
	Wave I Ages 12-18	Wave III Ages 18-26	Wave IV Ages 24-32	Wave I Ages 12-18	Wave III Ages 18-26	Wave IV Ages 24-32
Resident father (RF)	0.48	1.03	0.88	0.65	0.51	0.76
Nonresident father, never lived with father (NRF-never)	0.59	0.87	0.7	0.82	0.69	0.92
Nonresident father, ever lived with father (NRF-ever)	0.66	0.97	0.91	0.74	0.58	0.83

Table 2. Family Structure Differences in Average Problem Drinking and Average Depressive Symptoms, Males

	Average Problem Drinking			Average Depression		
	Wave I Ages 12-18	Wave III Ages 18-26	Wave IV Ages 24-32	Wave I Ages 12-18	Wave III Ages 18-26	Wave IV Ages 24-32
Resident father (RF)	0.67	1.68	1.49	0.52	0.44	0.69
Nonresident father, never lived with father (NRF-never)	0.89	1.12	0.98	0.62	0.51	0.82
Nonresident father, ever lived with father (NRF-ever)	0.85	1.55	1.5	0.6	0.44	0.73

Table 3. Unstandardized OLS Regression Coefficients for Problem Drinking

	Wave I - Wave III				Wave III - Wave IV			
	Males		Females		Males		Females	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
NRF-never	-0.66***	-0.19	-0.19*	0.08	-0.33**	-0.22	-0.09	-0.02
NRF-ever	-0.16*	-0.04	-0.10	-0.04	0.07	0.8	0.07	0.08
(RF)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)
Prior Problem Drinking	.23***	.26***	.22***	.24***	.44***	.42***	.44***	.41***
Age		-.09***		-.08***		-.05**		-.06***
Black		-.82***		-.73***		-.29**		-.16**
Latino		-.14		-.27**		-.10		.04
Native American		.17		.16		.52		.97**
Asian		-.40		-.34*		-.03		.00
(White)		(1.00)		(1.00)		(1.00)		(1.00)
Born in US		.44**		.17		.17		.29**
Father-child closeness		.00		.01		-.02		-.02
Mother-child closeness		-.10		-.03		-.00		-.04
Father education		.06**		.04**		.00		.03***
Mother education		.06**		.06***		.01		-.00

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<.05

Table 4. Unstandardized OLS Regression Coefficients for Depressive Symptoms

	Wave I - Wave III				Wave III - Wave IV			
	Males		Females		Males		Females	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
NRF-never	0.05	-0.01	0.13**	0.10*	0.12**	0.03	0.12***	0.07
NRF-ever	-0.02	-0.04	0.04	0.01	0.03	-0.00	0.05*	0.01
(RF)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)	(1.00)
Prior Depressive Symptoms	.32***	.29***	.30***	.28***	.39***	.38***	.33***	.31***
Age		-.01*		-.03***		.00		-.01
Black		.03		.01		.08*		.02
Latino		.06*		.06		.02		.03
Native American		.16		.03		-.15**		.09
Asian		.12*		.06		.02		-.02
(White)		(1.00)		(1.00)		(1.00)		(1.00)
Born in US		-.02		.00		.07*		-.03
Father-child closeness		-.01		-.01		-.02*		-.02*
Mother-child closeness		-.00		-.03*		-.02		-.03**
Father education		-.00		-.00		-.00		-.01
Mother education		-.00		-.01		-.01***		-.01*

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<.05

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