

Teenage pregnancy and out-of-wedlock child-bearing are the subject of much social concern and political debate. There has been an enormous amount of research in this area, most of which focuses on young mothers (Luker, 1996). Comparatively less attention has been paid to young fathers, leading some to refer to young fatherhood as an area of "empirical neglect" (Robinson, 1988). Although the past decade has seen an increase in studies of young fathers, there is still insufficient research attention paid to the psychological experiences and life stories of these young men (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998).

There has also been insufficient attention paid to young fathers by practitioners and policymakers, although this has changed in the recent past (Lerman & Ooms, 1993). This lack of attention seems unfortunate as there are resources--both financial and emotional--that young men may be able to bring to their families. Social work literature has encouraged us to pay more attention to this group of young people who have been "neglected too long" (Barret & Robinson, 1982). Further empirical work should help us better understand these young men and perhaps move us away from a societal stereotype of the irresponsible young father (Robinson, 1988).

This article presents findings from a longitudinal qualitative study following 25 low-income young fathers for one year. They were interviewed about the contexts of their lives, the connections with their children and the young mothers, and the implications these have for their sense of self. Although some of the young men fit the popular stereotype of being uninvolved fathers, the large majority of them were very involved with their children, thus belying this stereotype.

The findings have clear implications for social policy, especially in the context of welfare reform, as there have been major changes in the way that government addresses the needs of poor families. The young men in these families may be more committed to supporting their children financially and emotionally than previously believed.

Review of the Literature

The earliest studies of young fathers assumed them to be psychologically unstable (Futterman & Livermore, 1947; Reider, 1948) and to offer little support or concern for the young mothers (Vincent, 1961). These assumptions continue into the present, as stereotypes of irresponsible young fathers define popular perceptions and discourse (Robinson, 1988). There is a growing body of research that helps clarify the role of young men in their families, and the extent to which they take responsibility for their children (Johnson, 1998). Findings from national data sets suggest that some young men may be more involved with their children than previously thought (Johnson, 2001; Lerman, 1993; Marsiglio, 1987). Other research shows that although these young men may struggle economically and are not always able to support their children, many express a strong wish to support them and to be involved in their lives nevertheless (Johnson, 2000; Johnson, Levine, & Doolittle, 1999; Roy, 1999; Sullivan, 1989).

The economic context of young fathers is a particularly important one to consider. Whereas some believe that the constraints of poverty lead young men to exploit young women and distance themselves from their children (Anderson, 1990), others speak to a sense of responsibility that remains despite these economic constraints (Allen & Doherty, 1996; Johnson, 2001). In his study of absent young fathers in the inner city, Sullivan (1989) found a strong commitment to fatherhood across poor urban neighborhoods: "In none of these communities is any honor given to fathers who do not at least try to support their children. All the accounts we have heard indicate that failure to support one's children is experienced as a loss of manhood" (p. 57). These findings are supported in more recent research conducted by Johnson (2001).

There is a large body of literature on the effects of poverty and poor neighborhoods on teenage pregnancy (Anderson, 1991). Young women in these neighborhoods are seen as turning to parenthood as a way to add meaning to their otherwise disadvantaged lives (Luker, 1996). The neighborhood context is an extremely important one for young fathers as well (Johnson, 2000; Thornberry, Smith, & Howard, 1997; Young, 2000). The "double bind" for them, however, is that although their poverty may lead to fatherhood as a way to find meaning in their lives, it also may render them unable to support their children financially (Cazenave, 1981).

Research has shown that young fathers tend to come from poor families (Pirog-Good, 1995). They have been found to complete fewer grades in school and earn less than other young men (Brien & Willis, 1997; Nock, 1998). This clearly has implications for their ability to provide for their children. Although young fathers may be more involved with their children than is typically expected (Miller, 1994), this involvement tends to decrease with time (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993; Johnson, 2001; Lerman, 1993). Levels of education and employment have been shown to be predictive of involvement over time (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999). Finally, although there is some variability as to whether or not young fathers live with their children, research has shown that even though a young man may not live with his child, he may still often be connected to that child (Mott, 1990). As Danziger and Radin (1990) stated, "absent does not equal uninvolved."

Also, as the research has shown, young fathers feel it is important to be responsible toward their children, although they often worry about their ability to do so financially (Allen & Doherty, 1996; Johnson, 2000; Roy, 1999). In writing about this tension around providing, Marsiglio (1994) stated, "since many disadvantaged fathers feel inadequate about their ability to fulfill the breadwinner role they often dissociate themselves from it in order to minimize their sense of inadequacy" (p. 330). This reminds us of an earlier generation of low-income men described by Liebow (1967), when poor fathers were found to distance themselves from their children for these same economic reasons. This also may explain the findings of a study of young fathers in areas of highly concentrated urban poverty who were found to provide comparatively low levels of economic and financial support (Rangarajan & Gleason, 1998).

The inability to provide for his children has implications for a sense of self (Johnson, 1995). As young fathers are at a developmental stage when they are dealing with issues of self and identity (Erikson, 1968), they are particularly vulnerable. This struggle is especially difficult for fathers who are poor (Lee, 1994; Rainwater, 1970). This is what may have led some of these young men to fatherhood in the first place. As Edelman and Pittman (1986) noted, "in a country where one's worth is judged primarily in three arenas--school, work and family--it should not be surprising that youth who face failure in the first two are not easily dissuaded from parenthood" (p. 68).

Although some studies have shown young fatherhood to be problematic for a young male's sense of self (Robinson, 1988), other studies have shown psychological benefits to self (Buchanan & Robbins, 1990; Smith, 1988). Researchers and practitioners are thus calling for more programs to support young men as they take on the fathering role (Kiselica, 1995; Kost, 1997; Lane & Clay, 2000; Weinman, Smith, & Buzi, 2002).

Although there is much to be learned from the studies on young fathers, there are clear gaps in the research literature. Most of the research cited is quantitative in design. Although statistical data can help us learn about the numbers and scope of young fatherhood, they are less helpful in terms of learning the experiences and feelings of these young men. Although there are some recent qualitative studies of low-income fathers (Hamer, 2001; Johnson et al., 1999), these studies have an age range that goes beyond young fatherhood. A qualitative design seems most appropriate for an area as intimate as fatherhood, with its implications for self and its focus on children and families. Qualitative method--with its focus on interview data and thematic analysis--can be seen as especially useful in exploring sensitive and relatively new areas of study such as young fatherhood (Padgett, 1998). It is also very relevant to this particular study, as it gives voice to a group of young people whose voices are not always heard by society.

Another gap in the literature is that of time frame. Furstenberg included fathers in his important longitudinal work on Baltimore low-income young parents (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993). More recent studies with national data sets also follow young fathers over time (Garfinkel, McLanahan, Tienda, & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Lerman, 1993). Much of the research cited does not take this longitudinal approach, however. If we are to truly understand the life stories and fathering experiences for these young men, it is important to follow them over time. Combining qualitative method with longitudinal design is perhaps the most useful approach to take as we explore and try to understand the life experiences of low-income young fathers.

Method

The low-income young fathers for this study were recruited from the maternity floors of a major urban teaching hospital. Low-income young mothers ages 21 and under were identified and assessed to see if the fathers of their newborn babies were involved with them and their children. The young men designated as involved were then approached while visiting the hospital to see if they would be interested in participating in this study. For those who were interested, informed consent was obtained and the initial interview

was done at that time. The participants were told there would be a follow-up interview one year later.

Limitations

It should be noted that there was a sampling bias inherent in this study design, given that the sample consisted of young fathers involved with the young mothers and visiting them in the hospital. Also, this study design yields data that are largely self-reported. It may be that in an effort to "please the interviewer" these young men reported an overly positive picture of their fathering.

Participants

This interview sample consisted of 25 young men who had low incomes and lived in poor urban neighborhoods. The), ranged from 19 years to 27 years of age, with an average age of 21. Only one young man was married at the time of the initial interview, although nearly one-half (48 percent) were living with the young mothers. Slightly more than one-half (52 percent) were African American, with the remainder split between white and Hispanic (24 percent each).

Initial Interview

A qualitative interview with the young fathers occurred in a room separate from the young mothers (typically a common area on the maternity floor). The interview lasted an average of 45 minutes and consisted of semistructured questions about overall life contexts; connections with mother of baby and baby; and sense of self. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Respondents were aware of the tape recorder and were given the option of not being taped; all agreed to have their interviews taped. Common themes were explored during data analysis in the initial interviews and served as a basis for comparison with the final interview data (Padgett, 1998).

Young men were typically nervous at the beginning of the interviews. This was likely the first time that many of them had been asked about their experiences, consistent with the themes in the literature review. Many were probably worried that the focus of the interviews would be on their ability to provide for their children, also consistent with themes noted earlier. Finally, there were very real differences between the interviewer and these young men--differences of race, socioeconomic status, and gender--all of which needed to be acknowledged. The interviewer tried to address all these issues by establishing an interview space that helped these young men feel trusting of the process, hence enabling them to more openly tell their stories.

Interview One Year Later

The same 25 young men were interviewed again one year later. A semistructured interview instrument similar to that at the initial interviews was used. Brief phone interviews with the young mothers were also conducted one year later. As with any

longitudinal research, it was a challenge to locate and connect with these young men one year later. A majority (75 percent) returned for the final interviews. This high return rate arguably spoke to the importance this research had for these young men. Payment for the interviews (\$10 at initial interview, \$50 at year-end) was clearly an incentive. But more than that, the young fathers seemed to appreciate the way in which the study allowed their voices to be heard. As one young man said at the end of his year, "I just want to comment on the whole thing. I think this is pretty good what you're doing here, this interview thing. I hope you collect lots of information." He continued, "because you're actually talking. Sitting down and talking to people. Most people, you just walk right by people every day. You don't really think about what's going on in everybody else's life. Most people just don't care."

Findings

Contexts

The interviews began with questions on life contexts: family of origin and neighborhood, and work and school to let the young fathers know at the outset that this study was not just about their ability to provide for their children and be good fathers, but more broadly about the life experiences and contexts they brought to this role. This presumably helped some young men relax and open up as they began to talk about their lives. Furthermore, this provided a theoretical framework for low-income young men as their own life stories and struggles may have helped explain the way they were (or were not) able to play the father role.

Neighborhood and Family. The neighborhoods in which these young men grew up were defined by urban problems such as drugs and violence. This was a theme that ran throughout the interviews and provided the background for much of what followed. One young father said his neighborhood was "the worst neighborhood you could possibly live in." Another young man said, "it's like growing up in hell. People hustling you. Taste this, do that. I'm not the type of a guy that would do that." These young men reflected on their neighborhoods as they considered their new roles and responsibilities toward their children. One young father said,

I think I need to move out of the city. Little quiet neighborhood where it's not too wild and rowdy. People running out on the streets late at night. Don't need that around my kid. I have been around that 19 years. I don't want that child around that.

Many young men made moves in the course of the interview year that took them away from these neighborhoods; others took a resilient stance that allowed them to remain there and stay apart from the problems. The pain of these growing up years remained, as indicated by this young man who spoke to the worst parts of his childhood, "living in them projects, and knowing that my father would never be there when I wanted him to be there. That's pretty hard."

Families of origin played an important role in the lives of these young men. Nearly one-half (48 percent) of the 25 men were raised by their mothers; the remainder were either raised by both parents (36 percent) or by other relatives (16 percent). Those raised by their mothers described them as caring and warm-hearted. Many broke into wide smiles during the interviews as they talked about their mothers. It seems to have been these maternal relationships that kept many of these young men going. One young man spoke of his mother: "She's the greatest. She's my everything. She's always been there for me. Never let me down."

Experiences with their own fathers were decidedly more complicated. Although some had positive relationships with their fathers and were appreciative, several reported more negative experiences. Some young men never knew their fathers; others knew them but their memories were quite painful. When asked about the worst part of his childhood, one young man said, "not having a dad. The only type of father figure I did have was my brothers. Other than that there was no type of role model." Another young man noted that he was still trying to find his father who left when he was two. When asked why, he said, "I just want to give him a piece of my mind."

As these young men went on to play the father role themselves, their relationships with their own fathers became particularly significant. Many looked back on how things were with their fathers and vowed to do things differently. For those who grew up with a father present, the wish was often to be more present and involved. One young father said, "I want to be able to spend time with my kid more than my father did with me when I was growing up. I want to go and be able to play sports with him. My father hardly ever did that with me."

For the young men who grew up with a father absent, the wish to do things differently was especially strong. One young man said he thought of his father "constantly" now that he was a father himself and did not want his new family to experience father absence the way he did as a child: "That's the thing that I don't want to see happening. So I try my best to keep the relationship flowing. Keep everything calm, all the do's and don'ts." Another young man spoke of his father: "I really don't want to be too much like him. That just motivated me more to be there for my daughter. I just want to be the exact opposite of that."

The young men were clearly using their experiences with their own fathers as a sort of benchmark as they considered how they would play the father role. This may, be one of the more important explanations of why, despite the economic odds, low-income young men may remain involved with their children. As one young man (who remained involved with his child over the study year) said, "I just don't want my children to grow up feeling the way I feel about my dad. That's all. So, if I have to work two jobs and go to school all at the same time, and sleep only two hours a day, that's what I'll do. To be sure that they don't feel the way that I feel."

School and Work. Slightly more than one-half (52 percent, $n = 13$) of the young fathers were high school graduates. Nevertheless, many reported difficulties in school. Some

became bored and dropped out, others reported behavioral problems, and others said it was hanging with the wrong crowd that became problematic. As they reflected on their school years, most recognized the importance of an education. One young man said, "I think education is all there is." Another young man said, "School is the foundation of what you can achieve and what you can't in our society. It's the only thing you have. Without it, you can't get anywhere." School took on an added importance for these young men when they became fathers. Many reported they were now motivated to go further, given the new responsibilities they had to their children. One young man completed a computer-training program during the interview year and said, "It helped me make the decision to get training. If it was not for my son, I probably would not have gone back to school."

Fatherhood was also a critical factor in helping these young men advance in the world of work. They consistently spoke of the need to work now that they were fathers. One young man said, "because babies, they need a lot of stuff. I don't want to depend on anybody else. So I have to have a job. I have to work." At the initial interview, the majority of young fathers were employed, most in full-time jobs. However, a sizable minority of these young fathers (20 percent, $n = 5$) were unemployed at this time. They were quite concerned about how this would affect their ability to provide for their children financially.

One young father who was unemployed at the time of the initial interview and quite disappointed about it said, "I want to work very bad." He proudly reported at the final interview that he had found a job five days after the baby was born. Another young man who was unemployed at the initial interview voiced similar themes: "I need a job. I know I have a big responsibility and priority on my hands. So I got to deal with it and do it right." He reported at the final interview that he had found work and this makes him feel better about himself: "Yeah, definitely. Actually my career is going quick. I'm taking the police exam this summer."

Indeed, all of the young fathers who were unemployed at the initial interview had found work in the course of the research year and were employed at the final interview. These young men spoke repeatedly of the need for more and better paying jobs. They were keenly aware that society expected them to be good financial providers for their children, and thus they asked for better access to the economic means to do so. For some, this brought them back to the role of education. As one young man said, "To me, education is the key. Education opens so many doors. Once you have the knowledge, no one can ever take that away from you."

One young father who was employed at the initial interview lost his job in the course of the year. Being unemployed at the final interview was particularly painful for him, as he felt bad about not being able to provide for his child. He did feel good about being able to be at home with his child (describing himself as "Mr. Mom") while his girlfriend worked to support the family. Nevertheless, one could see the vulnerability felt by him and other young men like him, as there was no guarantee of stable jobs and thus no guaranteed ability to provide for their children financially.

Connections

The interview findings on contexts help us better understand the connections these young men made with the mothers and babies. Many of them had led lives where meaningful connections had not always been easy to find. They struggled in their neighborhoods and families of origin and had problems with school and work. For some, this may have left them unable to form meaningful connections with their new families and thus they drifted away. For others the opposite may have been true, as they spoke of the value they placed on relationships throughout the research year, and remained connected to mother and child.

Relationship with Mother of Baby. At the initial interview, the young fathers had been dating the young mothers for an average of three and a half years. Only one young couple was married. At the final interview, the majority of these couples (84 percent, $n = 21$) were still together. One other couple had gotten married during the year. It is important to note the extent to which these young people stayed together over time. The young fathers repeatedly spoke of the ways in which the young mothers meant a lot to them. As one young man said, "She's a very nice person. She helps when you need help and she's there for you, regardless of the situation." Considering that people have not always been there for these young men, this seemed important.

These relationships were not necessarily ones of marriage, however. Although most young fathers reported plans to marry the young mothers eventually, they believed this would take time. When asked about his plans to marry, one young father said, "I'd like to. I believe she's the one." When asked when, he said, "It's hard to say, because I believe marriage is a very major thing. Having a child is one thing, marriage is a major step. And I'd like to be in better shape financially to take care of her and the baby before I was to do that." Wanting to feel more secure financially is a theme that was mentioned throughout the interviews. As one young man said, he wanted to see his "piggybank more set" before marrying.

It is important to consider the stories of some of the young couples who did not remain together. The first young couple interviewed for this study had a lot of strengths--both were in college--and seemed likely to remain together over time. A lot happened in the course of the year, however. The young father refused to come in for the final interview and was rather angry when called. The young mother subsequently reported they had broken up three months after the birth of their child. She felt that the father of baby had felt threatened by her earning more money and being more gainfully employed than he. She reported that he stayed in contact with the child, but not as much as would really be helpful to either her or the baby.

Another young couple had seemed somewhat troubled even at the initial interview. The nursing staff had picked up on some stress in their relationship, although the young parents themselves had reported that things were going well for them. When contacted for his final interview, the young father reported that they had broken up shortly after the baby was born. He was very glad to come in for his final interview, however, and spoke

at length about his feelings of sadness and loss. He acknowledged problems with his girlfriend, including some abuse in their relationship, but still wanted very much to be a good father to his child. The mother of the baby was not allowing him to see this child, and he experienced that as a real loss.

It is important to acknowledge the difficulties experienced by these young couples, as these represent potential areas of conflict down the road. Economic issues got in the way of the first couple and led to the end of their relationship; relational issues were problematic for the second. But these couples were the exception in this study, as the majority of these young people did continue to get along and stay together over time. There was a use of relational language (for example, "bonding to each other," "closer, more attached") that was quite striking as the young fathers described their ongoing connections to the young mothers, although this language was perhaps not that surprising given the lack of meaningful relationships in the lives of many of these young men. When asked how his relationship had changed now that he was a father, one young man said, "Actually, it's brought us a little closer together." When asked how, he said, "We want to break the cycle of not having a dad around. That's why I'll do most anything to stay with her."

Relationship with Baby. There were 12 boys and 13 girls among the newborn babies. More than half (58 percent) of the boys were named after the young fathers. Most of these pregnancies were not planned. These young men reported feelings of joy and happiness as they considered their new roles. One young man said, "It's only been a day or two, but I can't wait to read, tell stories, take places, just make her happy." Another young man said that being a father "empties this weird space," and continued, "I didn't have much affection when I was growing up. I know babies are affectionate. They're caring. They like to have fun. So, it will take the place." This is similar to the theme voiced by another young father: "Like something's different from my past. Now I got somebody there that's mine." Given the fact that these young men had not always felt good about their past, these themes seem important and may help explain why these young fathers remained involved over time.

The majority of young fathers saw the children frequently and reported being actively involved in their care. Slightly more than half (52 percent, $n = 13$) were living with the mother and baby at the final interview, seeing the child daily, and being actively involved in the infant's care. The remaining young fathers reported seeing their children an average of one and a half days per week and also reported active levels of involvement.

One young man described his fathering activities: "I bathed her. I prepared food. Just basically everything." All reported contributing financially for their children. They reported an average of \$65 provided for each child in a given week. Some refused to state a specific dollar amount, saying instead that they provided the child whatever was needed. One young man said, "I gave her everything she want. I have a bank account for her. Basically whatever she needs I get anyway."

These young fathers also recognized the importance of providing for their children emotionally. For those with limited economic resources, the ability to provide emotionally seemed especially important. As they defined what it meant to be a good father, they seemed to be speaking to the multiple meanings of this role. One young man said, "Being a father is basically you do it as you go. Always being there. Caring. The baby needs lots of attention." Another young man said, "You have to love your child. Teach your kid the right way. Give them love. These kinds of things."

The theme of "being there" was mentioned throughout the interviews. Considering that people were not always there for these young fathers as they were growing up, this is not surprising. And they worried about not being able to be there. As one young man said, "I worry about being a failure. Not even being able to provide for my child how I wanted my father to provide for me." These worries informed the recommendations these young men made for social policy and programs. Several spoke to the need for more parenting programs for fathers: "Maybe set programs so all the young fathers can go and learn about themselves and how to be good parents. It's not easy having a baby." And many spoke to the need for more and better paying jobs: "Have more jobs out there. Good jobs that pay well."

Sense of Self

The contexts and connections of these young men's lives have clear implications for sense of self. Some young men worried about feeling like a failed self should they be unable to adequately provide for their child. This was a major concern for these young men. Nevertheless, they also spoke of feeling better about themselves, now that they had a child to care for. This is indeed a theme that runs throughout the interviews, as the young fathers described selves that felt more accomplished, more defined, and more complete.

In describing how he felt about himself now that he was a father, one young man said, "I'm kind of proud of myself. I'm happy. I'm looking forward to taking care of the baby and stuff." Another young man said, "I am proud that I have accomplished something great." And another said, "I feel more confident in myself. There is more to expect from life. It also brings out a bigger challenge." These young men spoke about feeling more responsible now that they were fathers. This attitude belies the stereotype of the irresponsible young father. They took this responsibility seriously and felt better about themselves in so doing. One young man described the best thing about being a father: "Being responsible. I want to be there for my baby. I want to prove to everybody that I can do it on my own."

The young fathers also spoke of selves that were more defined. Many named their children after themselves; several spoke of how much their babies looked like them. This arguably speaks to a process of identification when a young man comes to have a clearer sense of self because of a relationship to his child. As one young father said, "I used to feel down because I always wanted to have somebody that I could tell them this is who I

am. This is how I am. This is what I like to do. And I want you to know that I care for you."

Finally, the young men felt more complete or whole: "It makes me more strong inside. It fills my life up." One father said being a father "empties a weird space" and made life different from how it was in the past: "I feel a lot better. My self-esteem has gotten up." They also felt a greater sense of direction:

At the time before my son I didn't feel very good about myself. I didn't have any direction, guidance, or focus in life. I was like a tumbleweed, just drifting and blowing around in the wind. But now I'm like a strong, tall oak. I've planted roots. I can see myself growing, just like an oak tree, straight up.

It should be noted that implications for sense of self may not remain so positive over time. Young men had spoken throughout this study of feeling somewhat vulnerable, given their concerns about sustained employment and ability to provide for their children. Society should be concerned about this: Will these young men continue to feel so good about their selves should they find themselves unable to be the good fathers and providers they want to be over time? We also should worry about the implications--for both father and child--of a young man's self so heavily reliant on his child for a sense of emotional well-being. Consequently, the need for stronger social programs and policies to support these young men as they try to be good fathers and to support their children is quite clear.

Discussion and Implications

The findings described in this article suggest that low-income young fathers may be more involved with their children than is typically believed. Exploring the life contexts within which they became fathers helps explain some possible reasons for this, and looking at sense of self helps describe some of the implications these connections have for young male identity.

Indeed, there is a body of literature (Anderson, 1990; Rainwater, 1970) that speaks to the psychological struggles faced by young men who are poor as they try to form a meaningful identity. Taylor (1991) wrote of a "subculture of disengagement" for these young men; Majors and Billson (1992) wrote of a "cool pose" adopted by some as they search for meaning. Although at times this search may distance these young men from others, the wish for connection remains. Although Clark (1965) wrote more than 30 years ago, his thoughts continue to have relevance today:

The marginal young people in the ghetto, through their tentative and sporadic relationships, are seeking love, affection, and acceptance perhaps more desperately than young people elsewhere. Person-to-person relationships are, for many, a compensation for society's rejection. (p. 72)

This arguably helps explain the findings of this study, when low-income and marginal young men spoke lovingly of the young women in their lives and proudly of being there for their newborn children. Sense of self grew stronger and benefited as a result. The theory of self-in-relation (Miller, 1991) posits that self grows and develops in relation to others. Although this theory is typically applied to female psychological development, it clearly has relevance for men as well (Bergman, 1991). This may help explain the findings of this study, as young men consistently spoke of feeling better about themselves now that they were fathers and had someone to relate to and care about. As one young man said, "Now, I feel greater than ever. I feel like if I have discovered something that I really wanted to look for deep inside my heart. And I think it was a baby. I was looking for another person to love like I love my mom and my girlfriend. And I got that person. It's my baby."

Psychological benefit arguably extends beyond a young male self to his child and family as well. When young men take on responsible selves and remain involved with their children, there is a benefit to the young family, as young fathers may be able to bring resources to the family in ways not previously anticipated. There is much popular and policy discourse around young fathers as irresponsible (Vinovskis, 1988). Although this may, be true for some young men, the findings of this study suggest it is a mistake to assume this is true for all. The young men of this study spoke consistently and eloquently of their wish to be there for their children. Many related this back to the way their fathers were not there for them; most vowed to do things differently.

What was missing for many was their ability to do so, as they spoke of their struggles in school and work and their inability to be good financial providers as a result. This has clear implications for social policy and programs. The work of Sullivan (1993) is important in this regard, as he encouraged a movement away from often punitive child support policies, which assume fathers' unwillingness to provide for their children, and a movement toward providing more economic opportunities for young men, assuming willingness on their part to provide if able to do so. If young men who are poor have greater access to education and jobs, they will be more stable economically and better able to provide for their families. This seems to be what the young fathers of this study were asking for themselves, as they spoke of the need for good jobs to have the financial means to provide for their children. As one young father said, "they should help the fathers get back to school. And then try helping them get a job. Then there won't be no deadbeat dads around."

But it is interesting to note that they also spoke to the emotional side of providing, stressing the importance of being there for their children and taking care of them. In so doing, they seemed to be adopting the role of "new father," which shifts them away from the traditional male breadwinner role defined by economic providing, and toward a newer role defined by emotional care and concern. This arguably helps sustain many of these young men as they tried to feel good about playing the father role, even if they were not always able to provide financially for their child. Although some may take issue with these changing male roles (Blankenhorn, 1995), for many of the young men in this study

this role change sustained them and helped them feel good about themselves as young fathers, regardless of their ability to be the breadwinner.

Although often seen as "walking wallets" by policymakers (Sander & Rosen, 1987), many young fathers can and do provide resources for their young families that go beyond only the financial ones. This is important to recognize. Society could arguably be doing a better job of supporting young men as they try to balance these roles of financial provider and emotional caregiver.

The findings of this study demonstrate how young men do provide more than just financial support for their families. They were actively involved in caring for their children and were not the "absent fathers" that society often defines them to be. It is important to note that despite their willingness to be involved with their children, being a father was not always an easy role for these young men. It is especially unclear how the young fathers of this particular study will do over time. Although many of their experiences throughout the study year were positive ones, there were negative experiences as well. There was much concern and economic vulnerability. There were relational stresses that led some young couples to separate. The economic and relational issues experienced by some of these young fathers could arguably be experienced by many more over time, given the difficult life experiences they have had. Longitudinal research could be useful to see how these young men and others like them do in the future.

Research that captures the experience of a broader group of young fathers would also be useful. There is a sampling bias in this particular study because the young fathers were involved with their children at the initial interviews by nature of sample definition. Yet, the findings show that many remained involved over the research year despite whatever obstacles they faced. But the findings do not speak to the life experience and fathering activities of young men who may be less involved with their children, or not involved at all. New research designs need to be developed to find these less-connected young men and hear their life stories, as they are less likely to be reached through traditional institutions or through the young mothers. This may call for a return to the days of Liebow (1967) and the ethnographic method of spending time on street corners and connecting with fathers who are poor in their own neighborhoods. The stories of these less-involved and uninvolved young men are equally important to hear.

Whatever the research method or design, it seems important to continue to reach out to low-income young fathers and listen to their stories. Although the small sample size and qualitative method of this study prevent generalization to a larger group of young men, they do allow an in-depth understanding of the experiences of this particular group of young fathers. This was a group of young men who clearly wanted their stories to be heard. Although young fathers are often seen by researchers as being difficult to reach and uninterested in being part of a research study, this was clearly not the case with this group of young men. They were generally quite willing to be interviewed at the initial interview, and a sizable majority returned for the final interview. Several expressed surprise that this study had their life stories as its focus; most were grateful and seemed to

benefit from the process of the research itself. Society does not always accord these low-income young men the attention or respect they deserve.

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