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Fathering: The Relationship Between Fathers' Residence, Fathers' Sociodemographic Characteristics, and Father Involvement

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Abstract Literature and research examining father involvement has focused primarily on outcomes associated with the well-being and development of children. The contextual factors associated with fathers, and how these factors shape fathers' involvement with their young children, have received limited attention in this literature. Addressing this limitation, this study focuses on the relationship between fathers' residential status, age, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, financial status and father involvement. Results of the regression models indicate that fathers who reside with their children and fathers who are older are more involved with their children. Given these findings, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers have an opportunity to create and enhance policies and programs that may assist and support fathers in their development as parents and their involvement with their children.

Keywords Fathering · Father involvement · Fathers' residence

Introduction

Increases in the number of marital dissolutions, non-marital childbirths, single-parent households, and children not living with both of their parents over the past three decades have led policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to examine the impact fathers' residence and involvement has on the well-being and development of children [1, 2]. A considerable amount of research has documented both positive and negative associations between fathers' residence, fathers' involvement, and children's cognitive, social, and emotional development [3, 4]. Research has shown positive associations between fathers' residence, fathers' involvement, and children's higher cognitive and socio-emotional development, academic achievement, and development of healthy peer relationships [5, 6]. Research has also shown associations between fathers' non-residence, fathers' lack of involvement, and children's lower cognitive and socio-emotional development, lower academic achievement, and increased delinquent behaviors [7, 8].

Given these findings, policymakers and practitioners from across the United States have implemented numerous initiatives, such as the Responsible Fatherhood Initiative and Healthy Marriage Initiative, intended to foster more stable family unions among parents and strengthen fathers' involvement with their children. Despite such efforts, relatively little research has been conducted that fully explicates the differences between fathers who live with their children (resident) and fathers who do not live with their children (non-resident) and the influence residential status has on fathers' involvement with their children. Given resident fathers' general proximity and access to their children, it is expected that resident fathers would be more involved than non-resident fathers; however, we do not know how much fathers' residential status matters to father–child involvement because most father involvement research has come from married fathers who are living with their children [9].

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Fathers in the United States

Until quite recently, men and fathers have been largely missing from statistical portraits of families. Research and data on parenting, fertility, and family formation has focused primarily on women and mothers. In the last several years, policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates for fathers, and governmental agencies have led the charge for more and better information on the role of fathers in fertility, parenting, and family formation [10]. Using data from the National Health Interview Surveys, Halle found that approximately 64.3 million men are fathers in the United States [10]. Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study suggests that approximately 54% of fathers are married and living with their children; Hispanic and Asian or Pacific Islander fathers are the most likely to report living with their children (47 and 45%, respectively). Resident fathers are typically older (>30 years of age), have some college education, maintain employment, and earn greater than $50,000 annually [11].

In the U.S., 11% of fathers with children under the age of 18 do not live with their children and that number continues to increase [12]. According to Sorensen and Zibman [13], approximately 7–10 million fathers report having a biological child with whom they do not live. Non-resident fathers are dramatically different from resident fathers when considering factors including age, race and ethnicity, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, and financial status. Using data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), researchers found that non-resident fathers are more likely to be ethnic minorities, never married, younger, less educated, unemployed or underemployed, earning less money—14–24% of non-resident fathers have household incomes below the poverty line—and engaging in risky behaviors, including the use of alcohol and drugs [13].

Theoretical Framework of Father Involvement

In part as a result of changing cultural expectations concerning family structure and the role of fathers, the conceptualization of father involvement has evolved from a one-dimensional construct emphasizing fathers' physical or economic capacity within their own personal environment to a multidimensional construct emphasizing fathers' physical, economic, social, emotional, and spiritual capacities within the context of their cultural, economic, familial, social, and political environment [14, 15]. In the mid-1980s, researchers began to examine fathers more broadly, addressing issues such as the quality of father–child relationships, fathers' influence on child development, and the impact of fathers' involvement on the well-being and development of children and families [16]. Because of this change in focus, numerous theoretical models on father involvement emerged; Pleck's work on the identification and role of being a father and Lamb et al. [17, 18] work on engagement, accessibility, and responsibility have had enormous influence in the fathering involvement literature.

According to Pleck, the role identity of fathers has become one of the central constructs defining the concept father involvement and is particularly important because fathers' behavior is discretionary and less scripted by societal norms than mothers' behavior [17, 19]. A growing body of research drawing from identity theory suggests that fathers behave in ways that are dynamic and fluid in nature, reflect their role investments, and change dramatically following major life transitions—birth of a child, change in marital and non-marital relationships, and change in familial and household composition [20–22]. After the birth of a child, fathers face the difficult task of putting their own fatherhood self-image into practice [23]. If their self-image is conflict-free, fathers are able to experience a motivational force for greater involvement with their children [24]. If their self-image is not conflict free, fathers find it difficult to deal with the demands of their new role and easily experience feelings of exclusion and disconnect from their social surroundings, leading to less involvement with their children [24, 25].

Building upon Pleck's work, Lamb et al. [18] threefold typology of engagement, accessibility, and responsibility expands our conceptualization of fathers' involvement with their children. In Lamb et al. terms, engagement refers to the amount of time that fathers spend in direct one-on-one interaction with their children (e.g., hands-on activities); accessibility refers to the amount of time that fathers spend in close proximity with their children, but does not include direct interaction with the child (e.g., physical availability and monitoring activities); and responsibility refers to the extent to which fathers take responsibility for child care and make arrangements for such things as babysitters, doctor's appointments, and day care services (e.g., ownership over decisions and tasks related to childrearing) [26–28].

Fathers Social Characteristics and Father Involvement

Fathers' familial, economic, social, and cultural characteristics are important indicators when considering fathers' involvement with their children. While several studies find no association between father involvement and fathers' race and ethnicity, educational attainment, employment and income status, and residential status others find clear associations [28–31]. Several studies have found that non-minority fathers tend to differ from minority fathers in their form of involvement with their children. Compared to

White fathers, African American fathers are more likely to perform child-care tasks for preschool age children [32]. Seltzer [33] found that African American non-resident fathers are more likely to participate in childrearing decisions than are White and Hispanic non-resident fathers. Several studies, using data from the 1996 National Household Educational Survey (NHES), revealed that fathers with higher educational attainment have more positive engagement and accessibility with their school-age children [34, 35].

Using data from the NSFH, Blair et al. [34] found that higher paternal income was associated with more positive father–child engagement among children ages 5–18. Older and more educated fathers tend to be more highly involved with their children [30, 36]. Danziger and Radin [37] found that fathers who were employed during the past year were more likely than unemployed fathers to engage in childrearing activities and to maintain a high quality relationship with their young children. Harris and Marmer [38] found that poverty and welfare use reduced father's level of behavioral and emotional involvement with their children. Elder et al. [39] found that when resident fathers experienced financial strain, they became more negative and hostile toward their children.

Fathers Residential Status and Father Involvement

Fathers' residence, which is often a proxy for father involvement, plays an important role in fathers' involvement with their children and there are generally positive correlations between fathers living with their children and having high levels of involvement with those children [9, 15, 40, 41]. Fathers who live with their child's mother and are romantically involved with their child's mother are more likely to be involved with their children over time than non-resident fathers who are not romantically involved [42]. Despite such trends, the findings between residential status and father involvement are somewhat mixed, with some non-resident fathers establishing different levels of involvement and others changing levels of involvement over time [1, 43].

Non-resident fathers often face a variety of structural barriers, such as distance, time, and expenses, which preclude them from being involved with their children [44]. In 2002, about three in four non-resident fathers (73.6%) had contact with their children. On average, non-resident fathers' involvement declines during the years following an unwed birth, although the factors contributing to rates of non-resident father involvement over time are not fully understood [45, 46]. Several studies have found that non-resident fathers who visit their children frequently are more likely to assume parenting responsibilities and become engaged with their children than are non-resident fathers who visit less frequently [43]. Thomas et al. [47] found that a considerable number of non-resident African American fathers visit their children on a daily or weekly basis, although a substantial proportion rarely have contact with their offspring. A large percentage of fathers (41%), express dissatisfaction with their visits with their children, rating them only 1 on a 10-point satisfaction scale, which may account for low levels of involvement over time [48].

The more we know and understand fathers, the greater likelihood that policymakers and practitioners may be able to develop and implement policies and programs benefitting diverse groups of fathers in their involvement with their children. We contribute to the discussion on father involvement by examining all fathers, including those who are not married, do not live with their children, are minority, younger, less educated, unemployed and/or underemployed, earning less money, and engaging in risky behaviors. Given the mixed findings regarding the relationship between fathers' residence, fathers' social characteristics, and fathers' involvement in the lives of their children, this study examines what characteristics are associated with increased levels of father involvement. The hypothesis of this study is that fathers' residency status will be associated with higher levels of father involvement after controlling for fathers' age, race, education, and income.

Methodology

Data

The data used in this study was taken from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Fragile Families Study hereafter), a national study examining the consequences of non-resident childbearing in low-income families [49, 50]. Information gathered from respondents includes family characteristics, child well-being and fathering, mother–child relationship, father's relationship with mother, current partner, demographics, father's family background and support, environment and programs, health and health behavior, religion, education and employment, and income. The sample consisted of 4,898 fathers who ranged in age from 15 to 80 years old and whose children ranged in age from birth to 2 years old.

Measures

Dependent Variable

Father Involvement For this study, a father involvement scale was created to examine the engagement occurring between fathers and their children. As part of the original data collection process, fathers were asked to identify the

number of days in a given week they participated with their child in each of the following eight activities: played peek-a-boo, sang songs or nursery rhymes, read stories, told stories, played indoors, visited relatives, showed physical affection, and supervised bedtime routines. These values were converted to dummy codes identifying whether or not a father participated in the given activity with his child. Summing across these categories resulted in a scale score ranging from 0 (did not participate in any of the activities) to 7 (participated in all of the activities). The scale was then reverse coded so that the distribution of scores from the sample would match the statistical distribution (positively skewed) to be utilized in the analyses (poisson, to be discussed later). This changes the manner in which this variable is interpreted, with high scores representing less father involvement and low scores representing more father involvement. Analyses of the scale indicated adequate reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.825).

Independent Variables

Fathers' Social Characteristics and Residency Fathers' age was treated as a continuous variable and measured in years. Fathers' race and ethnicity was measured using a set of dummy variables that included White, Black, and Hispanic, with Hispanic serving as the omitted reference category. Fathers' educational attainment was measured using a set of dummy variables that included less than a high school diploma, high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) diploma, some college or trade educational training, or college graduate, with college graduate serving as the omitted reference category. Fathers' income status was measured using a set of dummy variables that included earning less than $5,000 annually, $5,001–$9,999, $10,000–$14,999, $15,000–$19,999, $20,000–$24,999, $25,000–$34,999, $35,000–$49,999, $50,000–$74,999, and greater than $75,000, with greater than $75,000 serving as the omitted reference category. Fathers' residential status was measured using a dichotomous categorical variable, father resided with his children or father did not reside with his children.

Analytic Strategy

Regression methods were deemed appropriate for addressing the research question by modeling the relationship between father involvement and fathers' residency status, age, race/ethnicity, education and income. Given the count nature of the outcome measure (i.e., number of activities father participated in with their child/children in a week), count regression models, namely the poisson and negative binomial regression models, were used. A comparison of the multiple linear regression models with the poisson and negative binomial models is provided. However, the latter models are utilized for inferences/generalizations because of the count nature of the outcome measure, which has been shown to be problematic with linear regression models [51]. A comparison between the poisson and negative binomials models was warranted because the poisson model relies on the assumption that the mean and variance of the father involvement variable are equal, which was not the case with this data. This fact also warranted fitting the negative binomial model, which adjusts for overdispersion (i.e., differences between the mean and variance). In the analytic model, fathers' involvement with their children was regressed on fathers' social characteristics and residency status.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Descriptive statistics for the sample are presented in Table 1. Resident fathers, on average, are older and more involved with their children. More variability was present in the distribution of responses within the categories of race, education and income for non-resident fathers. Regardless of residency status, a higher proportion of fathers in the sample are Black. Both groups are similar with regard to education, although more resident fathers are college educated. The biggest differences between the groups occur in the income category, with resident fathers falling in the upper income brackets in higher proportions and non-resident fathers falling in the lower income brackets in higher proportions.

Prior to fitting regression models, correlational analyses were conducted on all of the variables included in the study. The results are provided in Table 2, with the correlation coefficients reported in the lower diagonal and the sample size for each bivariate pair reported in the upper diagonal. Aside from the relationship between residency status and race, all of the relationships are statistically significant. Of primary interest is the relationship between each of the predictors and the outcome, father involvement. Race/ethnicity is the only variable with a positive relationship with father involvement. Residency status has the strongest negative relationship with father involvement, meaning resident fathers are more involved with their children than non-resident fathers.

Regression Models

Prior to analyses, the data was examined for the presence of extreme observations and possible violations of distributional assumptions. There were numerous extreme

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for the sample

Variable	Resident fathers n = 2,472 (73.4%) mean (SD)	Non-resident fathers n = 895 (26.6%) mean (SD)
Father involvement	2.24 (1.30)	3.99 (1.76)
Fathers age (years)	28.62 (7.07)	25.93 (7.33)
Variable	Count %	Count %
Fathers race and ethnicity		
White	608 (27.74%)	83 (11.22%)
Black	921 (42.02%)	521 (70.41%)
Hispanic	663 (30.25%)	136 (18.38%)
Fathers educational attainment		
Less than high school	684 (29.33%)	303 (38.40%)
High school/GED	723 (31.00%)	284 (35.99%)
Some college/trade	571 (24.49%)	174 (22.05%)
College	354 (15.18%)	28 (3.55%)
Fathers income status		
Less than $5,000	82 (6.08%)	61 (11.21%)
$5,001–$9,999	118 (6.08%)	41 (7.54%)
$10,000–$14,999	150 (7.73%)	65 (11.95%)
$15,000–$19,999	169 (8.71%)	68 (12.50%)
$20,000–$24,999	185 (9.53%)	47 (8.64%)
$25,000–$34,999	296 (15.25%)	72 (13.24%)
$35,000–$49,999	335 (17.26%)	78 (14.34%)
$50,000–$74,999	299 (15.40%)	73 (13.42%)
$75,000 or greater	307 (15.82%)	39 (7.17%)

observations in the age variable, which was positively skewed, but subsequent model fitting after removing possibly outlying observations and/or transforming the data revealed little to no impact on the significance and/or interpretation of the results. After listwise deletion was implemented, the sample size for the models was 2,149.

The focus of the analysis lies on the poisson and negative binomial models. The poisson and negative binomial models were both significant as indicated by their respective likelihood ratio chi-square values (Poisson: $\chi^2_2 = 7310.44,\ P < .001$; Negative Binomial: $\chi^2_2 = 7310.44,\ P < .001$). They were also deemed to fit the data similarly according to the ratio of the deviance statistic to the model degrees of freedom, which was 0.85 for the poisson model and 1.10 for the negative binomial model. This statistic provides an assessment of the equality of the mean and variance in the data, with a value greater than 1.00 indicating the true variance is greater than the mean and a value less than 1.00 indicating the true variance is less than the mean. The similarity in these values (and subsequent parameter estimates and standard errors) indicates overdispersion is not a significant problem and the estimates from the poisson model are accurate.

Table 2 provides a comparison of the estimates of parameters and corresponding standard errors obtained from three separate regressions models initially fit to the data: a multiple linear regression model utilizing optimized least squares estimation, a poisson regression model and a negative binomial regression model, both of which utilize maximum likelihood estimation. Results are consistent across models, indicating that residency status, age and, to some extent, race/ethnicity and income all significantly contribute to explaining variability in father involvement. Parameter estimates from the poisson and negative binomial models differ from the OLS model due to the unit of measurement used. That is, parameter estimates for the OLS model represent the original counts of the father involvement scale whereas the poisson and negative binomial models represent log counts of the father involvement scale. The most important comparison among these estimates is between resident and non-resident fathers. Holding the remainder of the variables constant, the poisson and negative binomial models indicate resident fathers have a log count in father involvement 0.58 more than non-resident fathers, indicating a significant difference between the groups when controlling for differences in the other variables. That is, resident fathers are significantly more involved with their children than non-resident fathers even when accounting for factors such as age, race and ethnicity, education and income. Father's age is significantly related to increases in father involvement and evidence suggests, although not conclusively, that differences may exist between certain racial and ethnic groups and financial status groups (Table 3).

Table 2 Bivariate correlations between fathers' social characteristics, residency status, and father involvement

Fathers'…	Involvement	Residency status	Age	Race/ethnicity	Education	Income
Involvement	1.00	3,035	2,839	2,666	2,837	2,292
Residency status	−0.46***	1.00	3,124	2,932	3,121	2,485
Age	−0.03*	0.16***	1.00	3,586	3,822	2,959
Race/ethnicity	0.06***	−0.03	−0.16***	1.00	3,581	2,768
Education	−0.09***	0.15***	0.30***	−0.35***	1.00	2,955
Income	−0.08***	0.16***	0.25***	−0.29***	0.48***	1.00

* $P < .10$; ** $P < .05$; *** $P < .01$

Table 3 Comparison of regression coefficient estimates of father involvement

Variable	OLS	Poisson	Negative binomial
Intercept	3.697 (.209)***	0.689 (0.089)***	0.682 (0.076)***
Resident father	−1.771 (.080)***	0.582 (0.031)***	0.579 (0.026)***
Fathers age	0.011 (.005)***	0.004 (0.002)***	0.004 (0.017)***
White	−0.165 (.089)*	−0.066 (0.040)	−0.061 (0.035)*
Black	−0.140 (.077)*	−0.055 (0.034)	−0.045 (0.029)
<High school	0.074 (.123)	0.029 (0.056)	0.029 (0.049)
High school/GED	0.043 (.114)	0.017 (0.052)	0.019 (0.046)
Some college/trade	−0.044 (.109)	−0.017 (0.051)	0.015 (0.045)
<$5,000	0.113 (.170)	0.044 (0.074)	0.053 (0.063)
$5,001–$9,999	0.082 (.162)	0.033 (0.072)	0.032 (0.062)
$10,000–$14,999	0.077 (.145)	0.033 (0.065)	0.034 (0.055)
$15,000–$19,999	0.303 (.139)***	0.112 (0.061)*	0.120 (0.052)***
$20,000–$24,999	0.158 (.139)	0.063 (0.062)	0.057 (0.054)
$25,000–$34,999	0.081 (.122)	0.035 (0.055)	0.037 (0.048)
$35,000–$49,999	0.041 (.115)	0.018 (0.053)	0.019 (0.046)
$50,000–$74,999	0.086 (.114)	0.036 (0.053)	0.040 (0.046)

Reference categories are: Non-resident father, Hispanic, College, Income of $75,000 or greater

*** $P \leq .01$; ** $P \leq .05$; * $P \leq .10$

Discussion

In this study, we used data from a nationally representative sample of fathers to examine their involvement with their young children. Our results partially support our hypothesis, underscoring the critical role residency has on fathers' involvement with their children as well as demonstrating the impact of fathers' age, race and ethnicity, and financial status on the association between fathers' residency status and involvement with their children. The results of this study align with previous findings indicating that fathers who reside in the same home as their children are more likely to be involved with their children [9, 15, 40, 41]. Clearly, not sharing a residence with their children may make it more difficult for non-resident fathers to be involved. Compounding the issue of residency are familial, social, and economic barriers non-resident fathers may encounter when trying to spend time with their children, all of which may preclude them from being more accessible and involved parents.

While several of the fathers' social characteristics variables demonstrated statistical significance on the association between fathers' residency status and involvement with their children, only the variable on fathers' age was strongly significant, with older fathers tending to be more involved than younger fathers. Consistent with previous literature indicating that age is related to emotional maturity, fathers who are younger may be less emotionally mature and less likely to identify and understand their roles and responsibilities as fathers [31]. Given these findings, it seems imperative that researchers continue to examine the development of young fathers and how proximity to their children affects their maturity as parents. Given that non-resident fathers have particularly stressful lives, the circumstances of young, non-resident fathers' lives may be especially detrimental to their family relationships, education, employment, health, housing, transportation, and income [9, 52]. Because prenatal and early involvement by fathers is predictive of involvement over time, our findings suggest that policymakers and practitioners pay particular attention to developing policies and implementing programs that support young, non-resident fathers and their families in a manner that is beneficial to the father–child relationship [53]. Several studies have found that helping young fathers stabilize their lives during the transition to parenthood allows them to be more involved parents and serves as a protective factor for father involvement over time [2, 53].

Limitations

The methodology and sample utilized in this study involve some limitations. First, the overall pattern of father involvement that emerged from our analysis, especially the representation provided by the multidimensional scaling analysis, is only as accurate as the stimuli used for input. Although we included a wide range of involvement items, the addition of other activities, notably those associated more closely with fathers' accessibility and responsibility, could alter the findings. Second, these findings cannot be generalized to all fathers because the sample consisted only of fathers with young children and those who lived in one of the 20 cities included in the national sample. Third, all of the data included in this study comes directly from fathers' self-reports and patterns of fathers' involvement may vary between the accounts provided by fathers and

mothers. Fourth, we cannot account for the mechanisms through which residence provides opportunities for, and constraints on, father–child involvement. For example, we cannot rule out the possibility that fathers select themselves into different household arrangements. Fathers with relatively little investment in fatherhood, for example, may be especially likely to divorce, separate from, or never marry the mothers of their children.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Our study makes new contributions toward understanding the relative importance of fathers' residence to fathers' involvement with their children and the relative importance of fathers' age, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, and financial status to the association between fathers' residency status and their involvement with their children. While numerous nationwide policies and programs have targeted non-resident fathers and their unique challenges, most of these policies and programs have been limited in scope and have tended to focus on non-resident fathers' employment and income status. These interventions have paid less attention to younger non-resident fathers, to emphasizing the role-identity development of fathers, and to helping fathers understand the value and importance of their involvement with their children [6].

By acknowledging the unique challenges affecting young, non-resident fathers, policy makers and practitioners can create fathering programs that are more relevant to these fathers' experience. Given the diversity of non-resident fathers, the manner in which fathers' development occurs, the frequency with which fathers' personal and familial lives change, and the timing and sequencing of these events, fathering programs could be established at multiple entry points, not only prior to or soon after the child's birth. Prenatal and parenting classes do not always consider the needs of young fathers, nor do they necessarily provide education and support appropriate to the distinctive roles that young fathers are taking on. Hospitals, public health departments, child welfare agencies, employment offices, schools, and local community resources may be in the best position to provide counseling, guidance, and educational support to young, non-resident fathers on a range of areas including but not limited to: social development of human beings, development of fathers' role-identity, parent education, father–child relationship development, educational and vocational training, health, housing, income, and transportation.

Social policies that can stabilize young, non-resident fathers' lives—particularly their participation in education, labor force, and job training—may allow young, non-resident fathers to be more involved with their children. Fathers who leave challenging circumstances behind during their transition to fatherhood, and those who have a trajectory characterized by factors of assistance and support, are more likely to experience better relationships with the mother of their children, more likely to establish subsequent co-residence with their children, and more likely to remain involved in their children's lives on a daily basis. Policies and programs that help young, non-resident fathers make positive life changes prior to or soon after becoming fathers have the potential to positively affect fathers' health and well-being, foster personal growth, and create opportunities for fathers to be more involved in the lives of their children in the short- and long-term.

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