

# LOW-INCOME FATHERS

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■ **Abstract** This article reviews recent literature on low-income fathers, including the transition to fatherhood for young unmarried fathers and levels of father involvement among married, cohabiting, and nonresident low-income fathers. I discuss predictors of father involvement as well as available evidence concerning their effects on children's well-being. Although mounting qualitative evidence argues that unmarried low-income men may be more favorably disposed to fatherhood than previously recognized and that such intentions may greatly influence subsequent fathering behavior, studies of fertility intention remain largely separate from those of father involvement. I propose that subsequent research should also pay greater attention to the effects of fatherhood on low-income men.

## INTRODUCTION

Once it was customary to begin an article on fathers with a complaint over their relative absence in the sociological literature (and with some hard feelings over mothers getting all the attention). Such grievances are no longer warranted. In the past 15 years there has been a groundswell of attention paid to fathers and issues related to fatherhood, not only in our own field but also in demography, psychology, economics, social work, and anthropology. Quantitative and qualitative studies of fathers and their effects on children's well-being are being published at an accelerating rate, and theoretical work on fathering—while certainly lagging behind empirical work—is developing in fits and starts.

The expanding number of articles, monographs, and edited collections dealing with fathers has been largely spurred by the treatment of fatherhood as a social problem. The growth in single-parent households over the past several decades has meant that an increasing proportion of fathers do not live with their offspring, pay any or adequate child support, or maintain contact with their children. It is ironic, then, that we are just now learning more about what fathers do and how this affects their children at a time when American men are spending less of their lives as resident fathers—and to fewer children—than ever before (Eggebeen 2002).

Given this general concern over the state of fatherhood, why do I choose to focus here on low-income fathers? There are four basic reasons. First, there are

several recent and fairly comprehensive reviews of the literature on involvement among fathers in general (Lamb 2000, Marsiglio 1995b, Pleck 1997) and on particular subgroups of low-income fathers such as urban and minority fathers (Coley 2001), but not on the population of low-income fathers as a whole. Second, class matters tremendously in American family formation and functioning, and many of the problematic elements of contemporary fatherhood—teenage and unmarried childbearing, relational volatility between parents, lack of economic support for and contact with nonresident children—are directly and indirectly related to fathers' income levels. Third, there are signs that the proportion of fathers who are low-income may be increasing. There has been a decline in the labor force participation of men overall since the 1960s, particularly for low-income and African American men, and those who have stayed in the labor force have suffered wage declines (Wilkie 1991). Recent evidence shows that these declines in earnings and labor force participation rates among young, unskilled men (again, African Americans especially) has continued, even during the economic boom years of the late 1990s (Offner & Holzer 2002). Finally, a number of recent studies have featured fathers who are minority, young or teenage, unmarried, or incarcerated, as well as fathers of children in Head Start or whose mothers are on welfare. There is now enough information about low-income fathers scattered here and there that some attempt to organize what we know on the subject is in order. After a brief discussion of what I mean by "low income" and some of the methodological issues pertaining to researching low-income fathers, I review recent literature on fertility patterns of low-income men, focusing particularly on issues of early transition to fatherhood and nonmarital childbearing, as well as the complex issue of fertility intentions. Next I examine patterns of financial and behavioral involvement with children among resident and nonresident low-income fathers and what available evidence says about the effects on their children's well-being. Finally, I take up the relatively neglected topic of the consequences of paternity and father involvement for low-income men themselves.

## CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The category of low income is generally more inclusive than that of poor and includes those who are near-poor and live somewhat above the poverty line. In this review I do not have the luxury of precision in defining the boundaries of low-income because the studies I review all use a somewhat different definition (usually between 120% and 150% of the federal poverty standard), and sometimes use a combination of income, education, and occupational status.

Most qualitative studies use nonrandom samples and thus are dogged by persistent questions of representation. However, when studying low-income fathers both quantitative and qualitative methods are on a more equal (and less sure) footing because large, random samples miss many low-income men, and even those who are captured and interviewed in surveys often misreport their parental status.

The underrepresentation of low-income men is largely due to three factors that plague even the largest data gathering efforts: they exclude military personnel and the institutionalized population, and they use households as sampling units. A substantial number of men aged 20 to 39 are currently enlisted in the military (2–4% of whites in this age group, 3–5% of blacks, and 1–3% of Hispanics), a large proportion of whom are likely to be low-income fathers (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). The proportion of men in jail or prison has grown markedly over the past 15 years (particularly among young African Americans), and in 1999 over half of male prisoners (about 668,000) reported being fathers (Mumola 2000). Finally, almost all surveys (including the Census) are household based, and low-income men are often only loosely attached to individual households. Hernandez & Brandon (2002) estimate that the combination of these three sources of underrepresentation means that between 5% and 10% of white men, 15% and 25% of Hispanic, and 20% and 40% of black men in their prime childbearing years of 20–40 are not included in major national surveys.

## TRANSITION TO FATHERHOOD

The life-course timing and relational context of men's transition to fatherhood are important factors that have profound consequences for the men themselves and the children they sire. Unfortunately, men's fertility has received relatively little sustained attention, partly because men appear to be less reliable reporters of their own fertility than are women, and this is especially true of low-income men. In the 2000 National Health Interview Survey, 57% of poor men reported ever having a biological child (compared with roughly 67% of nonpoor men), but 77% of poor women report having children—a rate almost identical to that of nonpoor women (Child Trends 2002). Because of assortive mating by income, this almost certainly means that all men—but especially poor men—are underreporting their fatherhood status, either because they do not know they are fathers or because they intentionally misreport. Despite these methodological problems, Greene & Biddlecom (2000) argue that interviewing men separately from women about their fertility is becoming increasingly important because rising levels of multiple partner fertility (owing to increases in serial marriage and nonmarital childbearing) mean that it is less likely that couples share their entire fertility history together.

### Fertility Timing

Existing studies of men's fertility have tended to concentrate on the relationship between poverty and early transition to fatherhood. Twenty-one percent of poor men report that they fathered a child before age 20—twice the rate for nonpoor men—and this ratio holds for whites as well as minorities (Child Trends 2002). In addition, Marsiglio's (2000) analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY) found that poor white teenage fathers are more likely to be in the younger age range (11–16 years old) than other white teenage fathers (11.1% versus 6.2%).

Why are low-income men more likely to become young fathers? One set of hypotheses centers on their sexual practices—that is, poor youth may initiate sex earlier, have more frequent intercourse with a greater number of partners, or use effective contraception less frequently than their better-off peers. The 1988 National Survey of Adolescent Males indicates that 85.7% of *all* teen males have had intercourse by the time they are 19 (Sonenstein et al. 1993), and the National Survey of Children puts the average age of first intercourse for all men at 16.5 (Baumer & South 2001). One national study found that low-income males are only somewhat more likely to initiate sex earlier in their teens: 21% of poor men initiated sex before age 15 compared with 14% of nonpoor men (Child Trends 2002). However, smaller studies with samples of only lower income males tend to find much earlier ages for sexual debut than the national average—aged 12.6 for black teens in a Memphis study in the mid 1980s (Rivara et al. 1985), and between ages 13 and 14 for primarily minority males in Philadelphia (Gohel et al. 1997). Thirty-nine percent of the high-risk, primarily low-income boys in a longitudinal study in the Pittsburgh public schools (about equally black and white) had sex by the time they were aged 13, and close to 70% by their fifteenth birthday (Stouthamer-Loeber & Wei 1998).

However, these studies do not conclusively show that earlier sexual initiation explains higher rates of adolescent fatherhood. The Philadelphia and Memphis studies compared the fathers in their samples with similar boys who had not yet fathered a child and found no significant differences on age at first intercourse (however, when the Memphis group was interviewed almost two years later, age at first intercourse did predict subsequent pregnancies) (Rivara et al. 1987). A small longitudinal study of high-risk, low-income whites in Oregon found no connection between age at first intercourse and teen fatherhood, even though early initiators had more partners over time, higher rates of intercourse, and less consistent condom use (Fagot et al. 1998; Capaldi et al. 2002). Conversely, two other studies of high-risk youth, one in Pittsburgh and one in Rochester, New York, did find that early sexual initiation predicted teen fatherhood in their samples (Stouthamer-Loeber & Wei 1998, Thornberry et al. 1997).

As for frequency of sex and number of partners, national survey data from 1995 show that all males 17–19 years old engaged in an average of 20.9 acts of intercourse over the prior year and had an average of 3.6 lifetime partners (Child Trends 2002). Unfortunately, there are no comparable data for low-income teens in the same age group. In the small studies referred to above, the results are again mixed as to whether these two variables predict early fatherhood for poor men. The Philadelphia study found no significant difference between fathers and nonfathers on frequency of intercourse or number of partners (although they asked about the number of current rather than lifetime partners); the Memphis fathers, however, were having intercourse significantly more frequently than nonfathers (they did not ask about number of partners in that study).

A third hypothesis maintains that it is not how early, how often, or with how many partners young men have intercourse, but simply how much they use effective contraception. Young men of all backgrounds tend to be risk takers in

this regard: Data from the late 1980s show that fully one-quarter of unmarried males between ages 18 and 22 used no contraception the last time they had sex (Baumer & South 2001), and the rate for 15- to 19-year-olds was almost identical. Furthermore, Sonenstein and associates (1993) found that more than half of all sexually experienced teenage boys had unprotected intercourse at some time during the prior year. How do these figures compare with those for low-income young men? The data on this issue are sketchy and nearly impossible to synthesize because they come from samples with different age parameters, racial compositions, and fatherhood statuses, and some are of high-risk populations or samples of paroled fathers in the juvenile justice system. The most one can say is that rates of unprotected intercourse do seem higher among low-income young men than among all young men but that more systematic comparison is needed. One study randomly sampled 389 adolescent girls who gave birth in Baltimore in 1983 and asked about the circumstances of their pregnancies. They found that only about 6% of whites and 16% of blacks had been using contraceptives at the time of conception (Hardy et al. 1989). A much smaller study of 26 teenage expectant fathers in North Carolina found that only a third had used contraception (Barret & Robinson 1982), and Nurse's study of 250 young parolees in Northern California reports that two-thirds of her respondents had never used contraception with their children's mothers and that an additional 22% only used it "some of the time" (Nurse 2002, p. 32).

One intriguing finding here is that neighborhood context can interact with income in two surprising ways. First, young men living in higher poverty and more urban neighborhoods are actually *more* likely to have used effective contraception at last intercourse than are those who are out of the labor force (although this may be because African Americans are more likely to have these characteristics and they use condoms more often than do whites) (Ku et al. 1993). Second, teen males with higher family income and who work more hours are more sexually active and are more likely to have made someone pregnant. However, higher neighborhood unemployment rates also increased risk of impregnation, suggesting that higher levels of personal resources, particularly in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, may attract more partners and thus lead to greater risk of pregnancy (Ku et al. 1993).

## Fertility Intention

The issue of contraceptive use raises a very important question that often remains implicit in much of the fertility literature reviewed above. Given the often low levels of contraceptive use in these studies, can we attribute the resulting pregnancies to accident, intention, or perhaps some shady and ambiguous territory between the two? Is having unprotected sex more connected to a high-risk profile that may include delinquency, dropping out of school, and other forms of present-oriented behavior, or is it because these young men actually desire to become fathers? Of course, the concept of intentionality, particularly when it comes to conception,

is far from straightforward. It involves the general desire for children, attitudes toward the timing of a particular pregnancy (Bachrach & Newcomer 1999), and, for unmarried women and men, the desire for children with a particular partner (Zabin et al. 2000).

Zabin (1999) has argued that “the concept of ambivalence toward both conception and contraception is of central importance” in understanding how couples use (or do not use) birth control, and the curious findings about contraceptive use certainly suggest that high levels of ambiguity toward childbearing abound. For example, many young unmarried couples express surprise upon learning that the woman is pregnant, despite the fact that many of them have been using no birth control at all (Furstenberg 1995, Nelson et al. 2002b, Nurse 2002). Roughly half of these same couples say that they knew the risks (sex education and access to contraception is rarely the issue) but had never discussed the matter with their partners. Furthermore, poor women characterized a higher proportion of their pregnancies in 1994 as unintended (61.4%) than did women with incomes at or above 200% of poverty (41.2%), but poor women were also less likely to abort an unintended pregnancy than their wealthier counterparts (49.0% versus 61.5%). Thus, of the 949,242 births to poor mothers in 1994, fully 44.8% were the result of a pregnancy that the mother characterized as unintended (Henshaw 1998). Data on the attitudes of low-income men hint at a similarly inconsistent and ambiguous pattern: Men with less than a high school education are much more likely to agree or strongly agree that “people who never have children lead empty lives” (41%) than men with a college degree (13%), but poor men are also almost twice as likely as nonpoor men to agree or strongly agree with the statement “it is better not to have children because they are such a heavy financial burden” (9% versus 5%) (Child Trends 2002).

Some have suggested that low-income men may be more favorably disposed toward young fatherhood because they are exposed to a culture (defined either as a set of general beliefs and outlooks or as the modeling influence of family structure) that encourages it, or at least is less discouraging than is middle-class culture. A study based on a clinical sample of roughly 91 black urban males aged 16 to 22 found that the fathers in the sample were less likely than nonfathers in the sample to believe that parenthood would interfere with their future, to have a concrete five-year plan, to feel that family or peers disapproved of early parenthood, or to have an adequate father figure than the nonfathers. They were also more likely to be sons of mothers who had a child in her teens (Gohel et al. 1997). A similar study that matched 100 black teen fathers to 100 similar nonfathers found that the fathers were less likely to view a pregnancy as seriously disruptive to one’s schooling (Rivara et al. 1985). However, the cross-sectional nature of both of these studies makes it impossible to determine whether these attitudes were developed before or after they became fathers. A study of 243 low-income youths in San Diego attempted to see if younger siblings of teen mothers were more likely to become teen parents themselves (East & Jacobson 2001). Although they only found an effect for sisters, the younger siblings’ fertility was not

observed after age 15, so the brothers were probably still too young to exhibit any effects.

One of the clearest windows into fertility intentions among young, low-income men is through their attitudes toward pregnancy resolution and abortion. We have very limited data on low-income adolescent males and their attitudes toward abortion, and we know even less about their influence in the couple's decision whether to carry a pregnancy to term. However, a small study of 12- to 24-year-old unmarried men whose partners had abortions revealed that most had defined their role in the decision as secondary and had deferred to their partners' preferences. Even so, a substantial number claimed that they had initially offered to marry the mother and raise the child together, or to pay child support if she brought it to term (Shostak 1993). Although Elijah Anderson's influential work (1990, 1993) has argued that poor African-American males actively avoid responsibility for pregnancies they have caused, mounting evidence shows that there is far more variation and that young men often readily acknowledge paternity rather than contest it (Furstenberg 1995, Sullivan 1993, Waller 2002). It is certainly problematic to read backwards from a young man's reactions after the fact to his intentions beforehand (particularly when that reaction is solicited after the child is born). Nevertheless, several recent ethnographic studies of young, low-income fathers report that a sizable number say they were happy upon learning their girlfriends were pregnant and that some claim they were trying to have children (Achatz & MacAllum 1994, Dallas & Chen 1998, Nelson et al. 2002b, Nurse 2002).

If these reports from low-income men regarding their intention to have non-marital children are suggestive, those of some low-income women are downright astonishing. In Edin & Kefalas' (2004) interviews with low-income, unmarried mothers in the Philadelphia area, the mothers report that the fathers of their oldest children actually "campaigned" for them to have their babies—often only several months into the relationship and at quite young ages.

What these studies suggest is that transition to fatherhood among low-income men may be less the result of accidental pregnancy owing to high-risk sexual behavior and more related to a positive desire for children than has been recognized. In my own interviews with low-income nonresident fathers, I have talked to more than a handful of adolescents who claimed that they were ready and able to become parents, in one case at the tender age of 14. Fully intentional pregnancies such as this are probably a small minority of cases. However, those that are the result of at least some level of intentionality, which I have characterized elsewhere as "unplanned but not accidental" (Nelson et al. 2002b), are probably far more common than scholars have realized. The issue is an important one because it suggests that low-income men may place a higher value on children and fatherhood than previously recognized, despite the potentially higher financial costs for them than for better-off men. It is also important because, "all things being equal, men who actively plan a pregnancy are probably more likely to be involved throughout the pregnancy and at least in the early stages of their child's life" (Marsiglio 1998). I turn next to these patterns of involvement and their effects on children's lives.

## INVOLVEMENT AND ITS EFFECTS

In what ways and to what degree do fathers act to shape the lives of their children? This question, so deceptively simple, has been at the heart of much of the research on fathers over the past 25 years. Here I address three main questions: How have scholars defined and measured father involvement, what are the patterns and predictors of involvement for both resident and nonresident low-income fathers, and what difference does this involvement have for their children's well-being?

### Issues in Conceptualizing and Measuring Father Involvement

In recent decades an increasing amount of theoretical effort has gone into broadening our conceptions of what fathers do for their children beyond the basics of providing for their financial needs. Lamb's (2000) threefold typology of engagement, accessibility, and responsibility has had enormous influence on the literature on father involvement. Engagement in Lamb's terms means hands-on activities, such as helping with homework; accessibility refers to fathers' physical availability and monitoring activities even when not directly engaged with the child; and responsibility signifies his ownership over tasks and decisions related to child-rearing. Beyond these three dimensions that inform much of the literature, some have called for more attention to how fathers invest in the human, social, and cultural capital of their children (Hawkins & Palkovitz 1999, Marsiglio & Cohan 2000), and others have suggested that more research be done on the indirect ways fathers contribute to their children's well-being, primarily through investments in their children's mothers (Hawkins & Palkovitz 1999, Marsiglio et al. 2000).

Although theoretical work has both expanded and refined what is meant by father involvement, most empirical work still employs only fairly simple measures of selected aspects of engagement. For example, many surveys simply tally the average number of hours that resident fathers spend with their children or record the frequency of nonresident fathers' visitation over specific time periods. These relatively crude measures may not accurately gauge the true extent of father involvement, much less its quality, which in turn has implications for measuring the effects of father involvement on child well-being.

A second methodological issue is that what we know about father involvement may depend, at least in part, on whom one asks. Most data come from a single source—either from the fathers themselves or, more commonly, from mothers' reports—and there is some concern that these may be biased in opposite directions. This is particularly relevant for nonintact families because nonresident fathers tend to overstate (and custodial mothers understate) the father's contributions (Seltzer & Brandreth 1994, Smock & Manning 1997b). However, a recent sample of 228 low-income unmarried families found general agreement between mothers and fathers, particularly for more objective items such as hours spent with child per week or frequency of visits. The level of conflict between the two parents was a

significant predictor of the degree of discrepancy, with high-conflict parents the furthest apart in their perceptions (Coley & Morris 2002). A related issue here is that some studies measure father involvement by asking the mother evaluative questions, such as her level of satisfaction with the father's involvement or her assessment of the father-child relationship (Danziger & Radin 1990). This is a less reliable indicator that greatly depends on implicit cultural norms of fathering behavior, standards that may vary significantly by age, race, class, and other factors.

Academics and policy makers are interested in levels of father involvement because they assume greater levels of involvement lead to better outcomes for children. So what difference does a dad make? The answer to this question is complex. Existing studies have looked at involvement effects across diverse demographic groups, family structures, ages of children and arrays of outcomes. There are also confounding effects that may be exaggerated for low-income families. First, increased nonresident father involvement may be accompanied by greater conflict with custodial mothers, leading to fewer positive outcomes. Second, when the quality of mothering is lower, fathers may respond by increasing their levels of involvement (Ihinger-Tallman et al. 1993), and this may account for some of the unexpected findings regarding greater levels of paternal involvement yet poorer outcomes for children (King 1994a).

## Involvement among Low-Income Fathers

The extent of a father's involvement and the forms that it takes are both profoundly shaped by his residential status. This is true not only because of self-selection (fathers who marry or cohabit with their children are different from fathers who do not, particularly by age, race, education and employment status), but also because resident fathers are, by definition, more closely involved in their children's lives and available to them in ways that nonresident fathers simply cannot be. Although existing empirical research on fathers is typically organized according to the resident/nonresident dichotomy I apply here, it is important to remember that this refers not to individual fathers, who may have *both* resident and nonresident children, but to the relationship between a father and a specific child. Also, a father's resident status has been shown to be quite fluid, even over short periods of time. Mott's (1990) longitudinal analysis of children in the NLSY from birth to age four found that about 60% had their father living with them the whole time, 20% never had their father living with them, and an additional 20% lived with him initially but not by age four. Although the general pattern was for fathers to leave, unmarried black fathers actually had a net tendency to join the household in the child's early years after being absent at the birth.

## Resident Fathers

**MARRIED FATHERS** Although they receive relatively little attention from academics and policy makers, more than 2.5 million married-couple families (4.7%) fell below the poverty line in 2000, about half the rate for families as a whole

(Dalaker 2001). In 1998 almost a quarter of men aged 15 and older lived with at least one of their minor children, and of these resident fathers—almost all of whom were married—7.7% had incomes below the poverty line, and 15.1% had incomes below 150% of the federal standard. These rates varied substantially by race, so that 4.9% of whites, 11.0% of blacks, and 20.1% of Hispanic married fathers were below the poverty threshold (each of these is roughly doubled for men earning 150% of the poverty standard) (Hernandez & Brandon 2002). Although a relatively small proportion of married fathers are poor, a substantial number of poor fathers are married. Although I do not have figures for fathers, CPS data show that in 2001, four out of every ten poor men over 18 were married, compared with between 54% and 66% of nonpoor adult men (Child Trends 2002). Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data from 1996 show that age at first marriage for ever-married men in both groups was nearly identical at roughly 25 (Child Trends 2002).

In terms of father involvement, data from a time use study conducted in 1998 show that married fathers as a whole spend just under four hours per day on average with their children, a figure that includes both engaged and available time, whereas married mothers spend almost six hours per day (Hofferth et al. 2002). Unfortunately, comparable figures for low-income married fathers and mothers are not available. However, data from the 1997 Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) indicates that children under age 13 in poor two-parent families do spend less time with their fathers than children in higher-income two-parent families, although time spent with mothers does not vary by poverty status for either single-parent or two-parent families (Child Trends 2002). When fathers were asked in the 1997 PSID if they engaged in any of the following kinds of activities with their 3- to 12-year-old child in the prior week, poor fathers were equally likely to report playing sports or doing an outdoor activity (67%) as nonpoor fathers (68%) and to talk about family (70% versus 72%). They were far less likely to look at books (26% versus 40%), but somewhat more likely to play board or card games or to do puzzles (40% versus 32%) (Child Trends 2002).

One might expect that low-income fathers who work part-time or on odd shifts may have opportunities for spending time with their children not enjoyed by higher-income fathers. Evaluation of SIPP data from the early 1990s showed that increased availability of fathers during mothers' working hours did increase the chance that he was providing primary childcare, although these were not necessarily low-income families (Casper & O'Connell 1998). On the negative side, however, the financial hardship associated with poverty has been shown to take a toll on parenting and family relationships. Although most studies of the links between income and parenting focus on mothers' behavior, Elder's research on married families under economic pressure found that when men experience financial strain and are forced to make adjustments to family finances, they become more negative and hostile to both wives and children (Elder et al. 1992). Similarly, Harris & Marmar (1996) found that a two-parent family's experience of poverty and welfare use reduced the father's level of behavioral and emotional involvement.

What difference does a married father's involvement make for the well-being of his children? Analysis of the PSID shows that father's wage rate and level of schooling increase his children's chances of completing school, earning a high wage, and avoiding nonmarital childbearing by the time they are in their 30s, and that father's church attendance is important for school completion (Yeung et al. 2000). Data from the NLSY show that young adolescents with a highly involved father exhibit less internalizing and externalizing behaviors and are less prone to substance abuse, regardless of family structure, although the benefits are greater in two-parent families (Carlson 1999). Controlling for mothers' involvement in their analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), Cooksey & Fondel (1996) found that younger children whose fathers shared more meals with them and helped them more with homework reported better academic performance (the relationship does not hold for teens).

Evidence for the effects of father involvement among low-income two-parent families is mixed. On the one hand, data from the National Survey of Children found that level of father involvement mattered for children's educational and economic attainment, but only for nonpoor families (Harris et al. 1998). Similarly, a study of 188 current and former African American welfare recipients in New York City found no relationship between father involvement and their children's problem behaviors (Jackson 1999). On the other hand, analysis of the NSFH showed that father involvement had a significant effect on the academic performance and behavior of children aged 5 to 18 in poor married families, particularly for boys (Mosley & Thomson 1995). Harris et al. (1998) found that father involvement in the poor families sampled by the National Survey of Children had a buffering effect on the delinquency of teens in persistently poor families but did not affect teen childbearing. Similarly, other studies have determined that having a resident low-income father may delay the sexual debut of urban African American teens and decrease their levels of adolescent childbearing (Chadiha & Danziger 1995, Dittus et al. 1997).

**COHABITING FATHERS** Although they are only a small portion of resident fathers (cohabiting families represented only about 3% of children's living arrangements in 1999, compared with 60% in married and 22% in single parent families—the rest of children are raised in other nonfamily arrangements), the proportion of cohabiting fathers is growing fast (Acs & Nelson 2001). Nearly four out of ten nonmarital births are now to cohabiting couples, and about two-fifths of all children will spend some of their childhood in a cohabiting household (Bumpass & Lu 2000). Cohabiting fathers are a relatively disadvantaged group. They earned about half of what married fathers earned in 1990 (Manning & Lichter 1996), and in 1997 24% of cohabiting fathers had incomes below the poverty line, compared with 8% for married fathers (Brown 2000). The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study found that the wages of the cohabiting fathers in their study were about \$6 less per hour than the married fathers, and they worked fewer hours per week and weeks per year than did married fathers (Rich 2001). Not surprisingly,

23.2% of children in cohabiting households were poor in 1999, compared with 7.6% of children in married households (Acs & Nelson 2002).

Despite its growing prevalence, cohabitation remains a relatively unstable relational and residential status. Smock & Manning's (1997a) analysis of cohabiting couples (not all of them parents) in the NSFH show that just 12 months after their initial interview, close to 23% had married and 11% had broken up (they also found that it was the male partner's earnings that predicted the relational change). Preliminary data from 1620 poor, unmarried parents in the Fragile Families Study interviewed roughly 36 months after they shared a nonmarital birth (the data are from the first 7 of 20 cities) show that 67% were living together when the child was born. Just 12 months later, 59% of these initially cohabiting couples remained in that status, 12% had married, 4% were no longer cohabiting but still romantically involved, and 25% had broken up. By 36 months after the birth, 33% of those who had cohabited initially still lived together, 17% had married, 5% were still romantic but not living together, and 45% had broken up (M.J. Carlson, personal communication).

Compared with married fathers, cohabiting fathers are less involved with their children, but are more involved than nonresident unmarried fathers. According to mothers' reports in the Fragile Families study, roughly 95% of their baby's fathers supported them during the pregnancy and visited them in the hospital (Carlson & McLanahan 2000). Analysis of mainland Puerto Rican families with young children shows that about 85% of cohabiting fathers made financial contributions to the mother at the time of birth (compared with 92% of married fathers and 40% of unmarried nonresident fathers) (Landale & Oropesa 2001). They were also more involved in caring for their infants than unmarried nonresident fathers, but less so than married fathers. Given the relatively small number of cohabiting fathers, we do not have data to compare father involvement among low-income cohabiting fathers with their better-off counterparts except to say that the greatest predictor of father involvement for cohabiting fathers is employment status (Carlson & McLanahan 2001, Landale & Oropesa 2001). We also do not know how the involvement of cohabiting fathers may impact the well-being of older children, largely because cohabitation has been so transitory that parents either marry or, much more commonly, break up while their children are still quite young. Finally, although some analysts may regard cohabiting couples as having a more or less marriage-like relationship, Winkler (1997) found that cohabiters do not pool their income in the same way that married couples do (although cohabiting couples with children were more likely to pool income). The implication of this is that, in allocating their financial resources, cohabiting fathers may fall somewhere between married fathers and nonresident but romantically involved fathers, with possible deleterious effects on children's well-being relative to children in married-couple households.

**STEP- AND SOCIAL FATHERS** Given the relatively high levels of family instability in low income households, poor children are far more likely to develop relationships with a male parental figure other than their biological father. These father figures

may be a stepfather, the mother's current romantic partner, or other male kin such as an uncle or grandfather. Mott (1990) discovered that 13% of black and 4% of white four-year-old children in the NLSY had a father figure available to them on a daily basis who was neither the child's biological father nor the mother's spouse or romantic partner. Most studies of stepfathers show that they are less involved than biological fathers and usually make very little positive contribution to their stepchildren; some even show negative outcomes relative to children in single parent families (Cooksey & Fondel 1996). We know very little about the residential and support patterns of social fathers, who may be the mother's romantic partner, kin, neighbor, or friend, or about the quality of these fathering relationships. We know next to nothing about their influence on children's well-being and development.

A study of Head Start mothers found that, after biological fathers (named as the most significant father figure by two thirds of the women), the child's grandfather was the next-most-identified significant father figure (13%), followed by uncles (9%), and then romantic partners (7%) (Fagan et al. 2000). In one of the few studies of social fathers (both kin and romantic partner of mother) among poor black single mothers with preschool-aged children, Rukmalie & Kalil (2002) found that about half of the focal children had no social father, one-fifth had a male relative, and almost a third had the mother's romantic partner as a father figure. Similar to findings for stepfathers, the presence of romantic partner social fathers actually decreased children's maturity levels, probably because of competition over the mother's time and attention. However, a study of black and white primary school children of mixed social class found that although discipline and control from men other than biological fathers did improve children's prosocial behavior, it did not lead to better school performance (Coley 1998).

## Nonresident Fathers

Low-income men in general are undercounted by national surveys, yet this problem is particularly acute for nonresident fathers who are more likely to be in jail or prison, the military, or not identified in household surveys. Garfinkel et al. (1998a) estimate that the 1987 NSFH missed as many as 3.6 million nonresident fathers, and these missing men are more likely to be poor, nonwhite, and not married at the time of their children's birth. The 1997 National Survey of America's Families found 7.2 million fathers who identified themselves as having biological children with whom they did not reside. Correcting for missing fathers and reporting errors increases the estimate to 10.2 million nonresidential fathers in 1997 (Sorensen & Zibman 2001). Adjusting for the undercount of this very disadvantaged group, nonresident fathers as a whole are younger, are less educated, earn less, and have fewer assets than do resident fathers. They are also twice as likely to have substance abuse problems. Meyer (1998) estimates from the NSFH that between 14% and 24% of nonresident fathers have household incomes below the poverty line, and Sorensen & Wheaton (2000) use SIPP data to derive a figure of 20%.

According to the most recent data, about 74% of all nonresidential fathers do not pay any child support at all, despite the fact that estimates of their annual average

earnings range from between \$27,000 to \$30,000 in 1995 dollars (Garfinkel et al. 1998a). Part of the problem is that only 57.7% of white and 24.5% of black custodial mothers eligible for support actually have a court award—a racial discrepancy that largely reflects the relative proportion of ever- versus never-married women within these two groups (Graham & Beller 1996). When fathers do pay, it is often sporadically and not the entire amount owed. One widely cited study estimated that if all nonresident fathers had child support orders and fully complied with them, they would have paid about \$34 billion more than the \$18 billion they actually paid in 1996 (Sorensen 1997a). Low-income fathers are even less likely to pay child support than are other nonresident fathers. In fact, employment and earnings are the strongest predictors of payment across many studies (Del Boca & Flinn 1995, Garfinkel et al. 1998a, Sorensen 1997b), and Garfinkel and his colleagues (1998a) estimate that nonpayers have only about half the annual incomes of payers (between \$16,782 and \$21,700 versus \$37,993). About 35% of nonresidential fathers (about 3.6 million) are poor, and the vast majority of this group (over 90%) does not pay any child support (Sorensen & Zibman 2001).

The correlation between income and compliance with child support orders leads many scholars to question whether poor men can afford to pay even minimal child support, and some effort has gone into determining the labor market experiences and human capital characteristics of low-income fathers. One study found that only one-quarter of noncustodial fathers with incomes less than 130% of the poverty line worked full-time year round, and that their average income was just \$6989 (just above the \$6800 poverty level for a single adult) (Sorensen & Lerman 1998). A more recent survey found that about 60% of poor fathers who do not pay child support are racial and ethnic minorities, and 29% were institutionalized (mostly in prison) at the time of the interview. Only 43% of the men not in prison were currently working, and of those employed at all in 1996, they worked an average of just 29 weeks and earned \$5627 that year. Their barriers to employment were also considerable: 43% were high-school dropouts, 39% had a health problem, and 32% had not worked in three years (Sorensen & Zibman 2001).

Fortunately, while low-income nonresident fathers have been the most under-represented group in national surveys, they have also been the subject of several recent in-depth qualitative studies. These studies have made a major contribution to the child support literature by showing that much of what low-income nonresident fathers do for their children is below the radar screen of official collection agencies and that welfare rules before Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) actually encouraged an informal system of support between fathers and their children's mothers (Edin 1995, Nurse 2002, Waller 2002). Fathers (and many of their children's mothers) often view the official child support enforcement system as racist, punitive, too inflexible to accommodate the often sporadic nature of their employment or to consider their own needs for survival, and unwilling to recognize in-kind ways of support, such as babysitting (Johnson et al. 1999). As a result, mothers often turn their children's fathers into the formal system only when their informal system has completely broken down, and they will threaten such

an action against the father to enforce compliance with the informally negotiated system (Edin 1995).

According to national survey data, fathers who do have official child support orders are more likely to pay them if they have regular contact with their child, live nearby, feel they have a role in parental decisions, and report a higher-quality relationship with the child. Gender of the child does not seem to influence payment levels, at least for cash assistance (Paasch & Teachman 1991). Joint custody arrangements are also associated with payment of child support, whereas the presence of a stepparent is associated with less payment (Fagan 1998, Greene & Moore 2000, Seltzer 1991, Seltzer et al. 1998). Studies of low-income fathers show that within this group employment and educational attainment is significantly correlated with child support (Stier & Tienda 1993).

In what other ways, besides financially, are nonresident fathers involved in their children's lives? The PSID Child Development Supplement, a sample of all U.S. children under age 13 in 1997, asked the children's primary caregivers (usually the mother) to report on nonresident fathers' activities over the prior year. The mothers of these preadolescent children report that one third of fathers had no contact with their children over the previous 12 months; of the remaining two-thirds, 68% had contact with their father at least once a month (Hofferth et al. 2002). Over time, nonresident fathers tend to decrease their contact with their children: Data from two waves of the NSFH (1987/1988 and 1992/1994) show similar patterns of visitation, but show that these levels change over time: 41% of fathers decreased their levels of visitation, 23% increased, and 36% did not change (Manning & Smock 1999). Furstenberg & Harris (1992) examined patterns of contact and affective bonds between children and their fathers following divorce. They found that divorced fathers rarely maintain frequent contact or close relationships with their children, and although some fathers become more active when children reach late adolescence and early adulthood, these increases rarely result in strong affective bonds between children and fathers.

Predictors of involvement include fathers' perceptions of personal (economic and psychological) resources, which increased cooperative communication between parents and positive evaluations of the father-child relationship (Rettig & Leichtenritt 2001). Others have used identity theory and hypothesize that the key issue is the degree of a father's identification with the status and roles associated with being a parent. Because nonresident parents are not exposed to daily interaction with their children, the parent role loses its salience and centrality (Ihinger-Tallman et al. 1993). In empirical studies, two of the most important predictors of both visitation and child support are the amount of control the noncustodial father feels he has over the parenting of his child(ren) and how much control he believes he had over the divorce settlement. Those who feel they have, or had, some control in either area are rarely deadbeat dads (Braver et al. 1993). Marital status is also an important determinant of nonresident father contact: Controlling for socio-economic status, divorced and separated fathers communicated with and visited their children more often than remarried or never married fathers (McKenry et al. 1996).

Overall, children in poorer single-parent families are less likely than those in higher-income families to have contact with a nonresident parent. Whereas 50% of poor children in such families had any contact with a nonresident father, 66% of those with family incomes of 200–299% of poverty and 71% of those with family income at 300% or greater of poverty had contact with their nonresident father. However, poor children in single-parent families who do have contact with a nonresident father see him just as often (about 69 days per year in 1997) as do children from higher-income families (Child Trends 2002). The general pattern here, as in the middle class, is less involvement from low-income nonresident fathers over time (Furstenberg & Harris 1993, Hardy et al. 1989, Moore 1998, Rangarajan & Gleason 1998). However, Coley & Chase-Lansdale (1999) found that almost two-fifths of unmarried black fathers in their sample actually became more involved during the period from birth to when the child turned three.

Qualitative studies have consistently identified several barriers to low-income nonresidential father involvement, including economic instability, the difficulties of nonresidential parenting, strained relationships with their children's mothers (and her extended family), and the competing demands of children by more than one mother (Achatz & MacAllum 1994, Hamer 2001, Nelson et al. 2002a, Waller 2002). Other studies have also pointed to poor socialization into parenthood for men as well as the lure of the street life, which consumes much of their time outside of the home (Furstenberg 1995, Nelson et al. 2002a). Incarcerated nonresident fathers face even higher barriers than most: Nurse (2001, 2002) found that most of the young fathers she interviewed claimed they either called their children (80%) or wrote to them (75%) while incarcerated, but about a third of inmates admitted they never saw their children while incarcerated because of prison regulations, distance, or other factors. These men had high hopes for reconnecting with their children when released. However, they quickly found that this was harder than they had originally supposed, often because of difficulties of finding employment with a prison record and because of relational issues with the child's mother. To cope with these barriers, men sometimes engaged in "selective parenting" by focusing on some of their children (usually from their current partnership) to the exclusion of others (Furstenberg 1995).

The effects of employment stability and the quality of relationship with their child's mother stand out in many of the studies of low-income nonresident fathers. One study of teen welfare mothers found that whether the father had worked or not in the prior year was the most important predictor of father involvement for both whites and minorities (Danziger & Radin 1990). Fragile Families data indicate that fathers who live with their children's mother at the time of birth contribute more than fathers who are romantically involved with the mother but not coresiding; they in turn contribute more than fathers who have no romantic tie to the mother. However, even within each of these categories, it is the quality of the father's relationship with the mother that predicts higher levels of contributions (Carlson & McLanahan 2001).

How important is financial support and involvement in affecting the well-being of these fathers' nonresident children? Analysis of the NLSY found that increased

child support was associated with higher cognitive functioning on math and vocabulary tests for children between 5 and 8 (Argys et al. 1998), but levels of visitation or child support had no effect on their problem behaviors (King 1994a,b). A recent meta-analysis of 63 studies found that increased levels of child support significantly boosted their children's academic achievement and led to fewer externalizing problems (misbehavior, delinquency, and aggression) but did not affect internalizing problems (depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem). Increased contact also contributed to academic achievement and to fewer internalizing problems, but the effects were weak. Nonresident fathers who engaged in authoritative parenting had the strongest and most consistent effects across all three outcomes (Amato & Gilbreth 1999), but this type of involvement may be relatively rare: more than one-third of mothers say they did not discuss their children with nonresident fathers at all during the prior year, while 20% had weekly discussions. Of those who did discuss the children, over half said the father had no influence over major life decisions like religion, healthcare, and education (Seltzer 1991).

For low-income nonresident fathers the evidence is, once again, mixed. Data from African American welfare families with young children in Fulton County, Georgia, show that informal contributions of child support were associated with higher cognitive functioning and that both informal and formal support led to higher scores on personal maturity scales (Greene & Moore 2000). A study of primary-school-aged children of single mothers found that receiving warmth and control from fathers was associated with better performance in school (although not with better behavior or self-esteem), but that poorer fathers exhibited less warmth and control (Coley 1998). Furstenberg's study of the children of adolescent mothers in Baltimore found that children who had some contact with their fathers were not doing any better than those with none; however, children with close ties to resident fathers were doing significantly better in terms of academic and occupational attainment (Furstenberg & Harris 1993).

In contrast, data from the National Survey of Children found that father involvement mattered for their children's educational and economic attainment, but only for nonpoor families (Harris et al. 1998). A study of 188 current and former African American welfare recipients in New York City found no relationship between father involvement and their children's problem behaviors (Jackson 1999), but a different study of low-income African American fathers with very young children found that the father's level of economic support and play nurturance positively impacted his child's cognitive and language skills and that fathers who were employed had children with fewer behavior problems (Black et al. 1999).

## CONCLUSION

This article has reviewed existing work on low-income men's transition to fatherhood and their involvement in their children's lives. Typically these two literatures remain somewhat segregated from one other, with scholars who study men's fertility and those who study involvement and its effects rarely referencing each other's

work. This state of affairs belies the fact that the timing and circumstances of fatherhood in men's lives impacts their willingness and ability to care for and support a child. The common threads that bind together these two aspects of fatherhood are men's fertility intentions and their views of how the father role is connected to the other aspects of their lives.

Although low-income men become fathers somewhat earlier in their lives than their middle-class counterparts (and usually outside of marriage), the reason for this pattern remains unclear. Low-income youth appear to take more risks in their sexual behavior and in their use of contraceptives, but are these risks tied to an inability or unwillingness to act responsibly and consider the future consequences of their actions, or is there at least some level of intentionality behind these behaviors? Studies of poor adolescent mothers have often assumed that their pregnancies are unintentional and unwanted, although more recent work has begun to explore conscious and preconscious motivations for these pregnancies and subsequent births (Adler & Tschann 1993, Kaplan 1997, Luker 1996). Yet despite this increasing attention to intentionality, most scholars still assume that young men are simply after sex and try to evade responsibility for any resulting pregnancies. Such a view ignores the mounting qualitative evidence that suggests that a significant minority of low-income men actually intend to become fathers, and an even larger proportion, although not necessarily intending to have a child, greeted the news of its impending arrival with some degree of excitement and happiness.

To understand such paternity intentions and reactions, we must investigate further the cultural place of fatherhood in low-income communities and families. Townsend's (2002) interviews with suburban fathers indicated that, for these men, fatherhood was part of a larger "package deal" that included such middle-class achievements as marriage, home-ownership, and a stable career, and the belief that these elements must be combined in a culturally appropriate sequence. What does fatherhood mean for low-income men who have no access to these resources? For those men living in dangerous neighborhoods or involved in criminal activity, having a child may leave "some evidence that I was on the planet," as a father once told me, or else can provide a reason to "straighten out" and stop selling drugs. Still others may see a child as their only chance for a kind of upward mobility; the father may encourage his child to stay in school and not make the same mistakes he did (Nelson et al. 2002a).

These motivations for fatherhood are clearly tied to some notion of involvement once the children are born. Although scholarly conceptions of how fathers parent continue to expand, we know very little about the parenting standards of low-income fathers, where these ideas come from, and how they affect their levels of engagement. There has been much talk in recent decades about a new ideal of fatherhood in which expectations on fathering behavior are beginning to look more like traditional notions of mothering. However, because this ideal is more often preached than practiced (Larossa 1988), even middle-class married men report a shortage of fathers that they consider role models, and most learn about

day-to-day parenting by watching their wives and mothers (Daly 1995, Hamer 2001). Although the new ideal of fatherhood as emotional nurturance and caretaking rather than mere financial provision originated among upper-middle-class professionals, there is some evidence that its emphasis on the noneconomic aspects of fatherhood may have some resonance for low-income men who have a harder time fulfilling the traditional provider role. Several studies of unmarried teenage African American fathers find that they almost universally endorse good fathering as continuing emotional and relational accessibility (“being there”) rather than as a matter of financial provision or active engagement (Allen & Doherty 1998, 1996; Furstenberg 1995; Hamer 2001; Jarrett et al. 2002; Waller 2002), although some men do talk about the necessity of having money when they visit their children in order to take them to museums or buy them small treats (Nelson et al. 2002a). More research is needed about how low-income men think about fatherhood, how these ideas may impact their fathering behaviors, and how they compare to the expectations of their children’s mothers.

Although much more research needs to be done on all fathers, the patterns of low-income father involvement and its consequences for their children deserves far more attention than it has received in the literature thus far. For example, some work has been done on the relationship between job-related stress and parenting (Bradley & Corwin 2000), but most often it is concerned with professionals rather than manual laborers, service workers, or illegal trades like drug dealing. One category of low-income father in particular, those raising children in two-parent married families, has been overshadowed by the focus on poor nonresident fathers on the one hand and married middle-class fathers on the other (Lamb 2000).

One very important issue that remains virtually unstudied concerns the consequences of fatherhood for low-income men. Here, as elsewhere, the limited findings tell a conflicting story. Brien & Willis (1997) have shown that early child-bearing has negative economic consequences for men, independent of selection factors. However, Eggebeen & Knoester (2001) found that fathers who resided with their children were more socially engaged and connected to friendship and kin networks. Further, Lerman & Sorenson (2000) found that higher levels of father involvement actually lead to increased earnings and employment. These are all studies of fathers in general, and we do not know if these patterns hold for low-income fathers.

One of the most pertinent areas of investigation concerning the consequences of fatherhood for low-income men is in the area of desistance from criminal activities. Sampson & Laub (1993) have argued that salient life events and adult social ties can modify criminal trajectories set in early childhood and that a good marriage is a significant factor in men’s desistance from crime. Could fatherhood, particularly highly engaged fatherhood, operate in a similar manner? And how might this function among poor nonresident fathers, who have less access than resident fathers to some of the more conventional turning points, such as marriage or steady employment? Some qualitative evidence suggests that fatherhood might indeed be a turning point for some poor nonresident fathers or at least have the potential to

if not swamped by the many countervailing forces that disconnect these men from their children (Achatz & MacAllum 1994, Nelson et al. 2002a).

In sum, although we can no longer complain about the neglect of fathers in the literature, clearly much more needs to be done. As the diversity of fathering roles continues to expand, scholars must move beyond studies of only middle-class fathers on the one hand and nonresident, deadbeat dads on the other. We are in great need of studies that consider the entire range of fathering experience, especially among those at society's lowest levels, and we must give far more consideration to how these fathers approach the task of parenting the next generation.

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