

Fathers and fatherhood in Britain

A growing interest in fathers and fatherhood in Britain today prompted an overview of research (funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation) and demographic analysis (funded by the Department of Health and Leverhulme Trust) undertaken by the Family Policy Studies Centre. The study looked at who today's fathers are, their role as breadwinners and in family life, non-resident fathers, fatherhood and the law, and policies supporting fatherhood. The study found:

f One-third of all fathers had their first child before they were 25 years old; of those fathers who had a second child, over two-thirds did so between 25 and 34. A majority of fathers - six in ten - reached their thirties before having their first child.

f More than eight in ten fathers of dependent children lived with all their own 'biological' children and seven in ten were doing so within their first family.

f One in six fathers of dependent children lived apart from some or all of his biological children but were no more likely to be living apart from daughters than sons.

f The law distinguishes between a father's obligation to make financial provision for his children and his right to contact with them. Some fathers, on the other hand, see a direct link between the two.

f Breadwinning is no longer the sole preserve of fathers; as the dual earner family has become the norm mothers' contributions to family incomes has increased. Nonetheless, mothers are more likely to work part-time than full-time. In this sense, fathers are still the primary breadwinner in the majority of families.

f Fathers' working hours are long - on average 48 hours a week in 1993 for those with children under 11 years. Sole earner fathers tend to work longer hours still. Working evenings, nights and/or weekends has become commonplace for many fathers.

f Changes in taxes and benefits have reduced the financial support received by men both as husbands and as fathers. As a result, families with children receive less financial support than was once the case, particularly those with low-earning fathers.

Fathers today

Social and economic statistics rarely distinguish men who are fathers from those who are not. Surprisingly little is known about what fathers want, and written accounts of fatherhood from fathers themselves are relatively scarce. What is more certain is that the world around fathers is changing - in personal relationships, the domestic domain, family structure, employment and breadwinning.

An analysis of the 1992 British Household Panel Study by Lynda Clarke and colleagues provides the first estimates of the lifetime fathering of a nationally representative sample of men living in private households. The study found that:

One-third of all fathers had their first child before they were 25 years old; of those fathers who had a second child, over two-thirds did so between 25 and 34.

Fathers were more likely to be married than were men who were not fathers. Nine out of ten children were born to married fathers.

Fatherhood was less common for young men than motherhood was for young women. Just one per cent of teenage men were fathers, while five per cent of teenage women were mothers.

A majority of fathers - six in ten - reached their thirties before having their first child.

More men were childless than were women at all ages (except those aged 50-59 years).

Despite upward trends in family breakdown and family change over the past 30 years:

More than eight in ten fathers of dependent children lived with all their own biological children and more than seven in ten were doing so within their first family.

Of the 84 per cent of fathers of dependent children living with all of their own biological children, six per cent were in a relationship subsequent to their first relationships, and five per cent were lone fathers.

One in six fathers lived apart from some or all of his own biological children. But these fathers were no more likely to be living apart from their daughters than their sons.

Fathers and the law

Significant changes have taken place in the law relating to fatherhood in the past twenty years. Both the Family Law Reform Act 1987 and the Children Act 1989, for example, link parental responsibility to biological fatherhood where once a child's legitimacy was critical to the legal basis of a father-child relationship.

But although unmarried fathers are not debarred from parental responsibility or the legal status of fatherhood, their parental rights in law fall short of those held by married fathers and they are not acquired automatically. The marital status of a father continues to be important in bestowing legal fatherhood as of right. As cohabitation and extra-marital childbearing increase, more fathers are subject to this legal disadvantage but very few fathers or mothers seem to be aware of this.

The rights and responsibilities of fatherhood in the Family Law Reform Act 1987, the Children Act 1989 and the Family Law Act 1996 centre unequivocally around the well-being of children. By contrast, it is parental (and thus paternal) financial responsibility that underlies those enshrined in the Child Support Act 1991 and also combines with parental responsibility for children's behaviour in the Criminal Justice Act 1991. The law, moreover, makes a distinction between a father's obligation to make a financial contribution for his children's care and his right to have contact with them. Some fathers, on the other hand, see a very direct link between the two and recent legal developments may well be at odds with their perception of the natural order in this matter.

Fathers as breadwinners

While more than eight in ten fathers are in employment, lone fathers are less likely to be employed than are fathers in two-parent families. Unemployment is high among young fathers and wage rates for those starting their first jobs have also fallen both absolutely and relatively. This has reduced the opportunities to support families that were available to young men twenty years ago.

Fathers' working hours are long - on average 48 hours a week in 1993 for those with children under 11 years. Sole earner fathers tend to work longer hours still. Working 'unsocial' hours - evenings, nights and weekends - has become commonplace for many fathers.

Breadwinning is no longer the sole preserve of fathers and, as the dual earner family has become the norm (Table 1), the contribution mothers' earnings make to family incomes has increased. Nonetheless, mothers are more likely to work part-time than full-time. In two-thirds of married couples with dependent children, only the husband works full-time.

Table 1 Economic activity of married couples with dependent children, Great Britain, 1995

	%
Two earners	62
<i>wife working</i>	
- full-time	22
- part-time	40
Husband only working	26
Wife only working	4
No earner	9

Source: General Household Survey, Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (1997).

Fathers and family life

Studies suggest that both fathers and mothers now spend more time than previous generations caring for their children. The increase in the time parents spend looking after their children has been greater for fathers than for mothers and the gap between the time mothers and fathers spend in childcare has narrowed. Mothers, none the less, still spend more time than fathers looking after their children and remain responsible for organising their children's care. Most mothers are also still chiefly responsible for most household chores (apart from repairs and DIY) even in those households in which both parents work full-time, where sharing domestic tasks is more common than in other families with an employed husband.

Fathers spend less time caring for their children as their hours of work increase. Fathers are more likely to do most of the childcare and household chores when their wives are the family's sole earner. But even within these families only a minority of fathers do most of the core household chores, such as cooking and laundry.

Social attitude data suggest a greater increase in support for sharing household tasks and childcare than in practice takes place. There are many possible explanations for this - cultural, social, structural and institutional. The divergence between attitudes and practice may reflect the nature of paternal care rather than the lack of it.

Non-resident fathers

When children and fathers live apart, contact between them is almost always reduced and this is likely to increase over time. None the less, seven in ten non-resident fathers report contact with their children and almost a half of all non-resident fathers

say they see their children every week. Lone mothers, on the other hand, report lower levels of contact between non-resident fathers and their children.

The quantity and quality of contact between non-resident fathers and their children may reflect, not so much a lack of interest by fathers in their children, as their personal, social, and financial difficulties, sometimes exacerbated by geographical distance.

The Child Support Act 1991 aims to increase the financial support that non-resident fathers make for their children. Its success in doing so has been limited. In November 1996 the average child support assessment was £22 a week; only just over a quarter of (the minority of) payments made via the Child Support Agency collection service were paid in full, a further third of assessments were paid in part and in the remainder of cases, no payment was made. The proportion of lone mothers who report receiving child support regularly was a third or less in both 1989 and 1994. By comparison, almost 6 in 10 non-resident fathers say that they are currently making payments and most report giving informal support (whether in money or kind).

Supporting fatherhood

Changes in taxation and social security have reduced the financial support received by men both as husbands and as fathers. As a result, less financial support is received by families with children than was once the case, particularly those with low-earning fathers.

There are indications that fathers' entitlement to paternity and parental leave is increasing as a result of employer provision. But without a statutory backing, not all fathers are guaranteed such an entitlement. Britain originally opted out of the European Commission Directive on Parental Leave - which guarantees employed fathers (and mothers) at least three months (unpaid) leave. It is now expected that the Labour Government will implement the Directive over a transitional period. However, many factors - particularly financial and institutional - may make it difficult for fathers to take up any such entitlement.

Conclusions and policy implications

A coherent policy for fathers needs to address three questions: what fatherhood is about; what policies are required to support such fatherhood; and who will provide this support? An essential starting-point will be how fathers themselves see the future of fatherhood.

A dominant theme in public discussion is the need to balance family and work responsibilities and the caring role of fatherhood is increasingly emphasised. But, with the exception of the vigorous

campaign against the Child Support Act, an organised 'voice' for fathers is rare and their representation in the social policy debate only indirect.

The call for closer father-child relationships has, because of family change, come at a time when more fathers live apart from their children and/or live with stepchildren. Much political and popular attention focuses on non-resident and absent fatherhood and its repercussions on child outcomes, juvenile behaviour and adult family formation. If fathers who do not live with their children are to provide the perceived benefits of resident, day-to-day fathering, the particular practical difficulties such fathers face will need to be addressed. These are in addition to the barriers - structural, cultural, institutional and economic - that fathers in intact families may themselves face in establishing close and involved relationships with their children.

This raises the question of where responsibility lies for providing the support and reducing the barriers that fathers face in meeting the multiple roles of fatherhood. Much will depend on how the public and private sectors define their roles and responsibilities as far as fathers and families are concerned, and the advantages these sectors perceive in their doing so. Key areas in the development of a coherent policy for a multi-role definition of fathering include the labour market, fiscal and social policies and the legal framework. In whatever way these roles are defined, key players will include central Government and employers, the European Union and the trade unions.

About the study

Fathers and Fatherhood in Britain was produced by Louie Burghes, Lynda Clarke and Natalie Cronin. Lynda Clarke (FPSC) undertook the demographic analysis with colleagues from the Centre for Population Studies (Andrew Sloggett) and the Social Statistics Research Unit at City University (Georgia Verropoulou). The review of research was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The initial demographic analysis was funded by the Department of Health and further demographic analyses were carried out under a Leverhulme Trust project at City University.

Further information

The full report, *Fathers and Fatherhood in Britain*, by Louie Burghes, Lynda Clarke and Natalie Cronin, is published by the Family Policy Studies Centre (price £9.95 plus postage and packing).

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