



PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT IN CHILD CARE:  
DO BAD NEIGHBORHOODS KEEP FATHERS AWAY?

RESEARCH BRIEF | SAIJUN ZHANG & TAMARA FULLER | December 2012

Largely driven by the dramatic increase of unwed births over the past several decades, about one third of children in the U.S. live in families without the presence of their biological fathers (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008), which can unfavorably affect child social, emotional, and cognitive development (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, Capps, & Zaff, 2006; Carlson, 2006; Coley & Medeiros, 2007). This issue is particularly prominent for children involved in the child welfare system, a large proportion of whom live in single parent families (Dolan, Smith, Casanueva & Ringeisen, 2011). In response, federal and state initiatives have emerged aimed at engaging nonresident fathers in childcare to strengthen families and thereby improve child outcomes and reduce child maltreatment risk (National Quality Improvement Center on Nonresident Fathers and the Child Welfare System, 2011).

Although many studies have examined factors within families that affect paternal engagement, few have looked at the influence of community environment. Community environment affects human behavior in many ways, and may shape father's participation in the care of their children. If so, community environment may have a different influence on the childcare involvement of resident fathers who live with the mother and child versus nonresident fathers who live away from the mother and child. The current study used a nationally representative dataset to examine whether neighborhood disorder, indicated by community problems such as violent and illegal activities, is associated with paternal childcare involvement.

**Study Description**

The study used a sample of 775 nonresident father families and 1,407 resident father families from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW). FFCW initially interviewed mothers and fathers of about 5,000 newborns in 20 large U.S. cities across 15 states during 1998-2000, with about two thirds of the newborns being unwed births. Parents were interviewed again when the children were about 1, 3, and 5 years old.

*Paternal engagement* was measured with a 12-item scale asking mothers how often fathers helped look after the child, ran errands, fixed things around home, and took the child to places such as the daycare or doctor, and the mothers' feeling that the fathers discussed childcare problems, acted as expected and could be trusted in childcare. *Neighborhood disorder* was measured with an 8-item scale regarding mothers' perception of neighborhood problems, such as the prevalence of drug dealers, drunks, and gang activities. Other variables in the analysis included mother and fathers' demographic characteristics, relationship quality, social and economic status, and child age, gender, and health status.



### **Study Findings**

Among the resident father families, 62% of the mothers and fathers were married, and 38% were cohabiting. Among the non-resident father families, 44% of the mothers reported their relationship with the father as a friend, 16% as a romantic relationship, 14% as divorced or separated status, and 27% as no relationship. The primary findings show:

- Nonresident father families are more likely to live in more disordered neighborhoods than resident father families;
- Neighborhood disorder is associated with less paternal engagement in nonresident father families, but not that of resident father families;
- In both nonresident and resident father families, paternal engagement was greater when mothers and fathers had a higher quality relationship.
- Among nonresident father families, mothers and fathers reporting having a romantic and friend relationship is associated with a higher level of paternal engagement than those reported having no relation; mothers or fathers partnering with others is associated with a lower level of paternal engagement.

### **Study Implications**

Previous research has shown that disadvantaged community environment can impair child social, emotional, and cognitive development (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). The current findings also suggest that disadvantaged community environment, indicated by neighborhood disorder, may harm nonresident father families by reducing paternal engagement with their children. It is possible that nonresident fathers may be deterred from visiting the mothers and children in those neighborhoods, or such neighborhoods may lack the norm of strong family commitment because of the high proportion of single parent families. However, the interpretation of the causality of the relationship between neighborhood environment and

father engagement should be cautious. It is also possible that families with less engaged nonresident fathers are in worse financial status and are therefore less likely to be able to afford to live in better neighborhoods.

The findings from this study provide tentative policy and practice implications for the emerging initiatives aimed at promoting fathers' involvement with their children:

- Negative community environment may inhibit paternal involvement of nonresident fathers but not resident fathers, suggesting that different intervention strategies may be needed to improve engagement in these two types of families. Programs targeting paternal engagement in nonresident families need to take the effect of negative community environment into account, such as examining fathers' neighborhood environment concerns regarding their engagement activities.
- It is especially important in disadvantaged communities to connect nonresident father families with relevant community resources or develop alternative social supports such as networks among families of similar status as a way to compensate for the lack of father involvement.
- Given its importance for fathers' involvement, development of the quality of mother-father relationships should be a critical component of programs aimed at improving paternal engagement in both resident and nonresident father families.



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