

### **Background and Motivation**

Family structures have become increasingly diverse and unequal in the U.S. (Carlson and England 2011; Carlson and Meyer 2014). The rise in divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital birth rates has resulted in the increased deinstitutionalization of marriage, and the subsequent decrease in the stigma surrounding other-than-nuclear families serves as a possible explanation for the shift from the nuclear family of married, biological parents and their children to complex family structures (Bumpass and Lu 2010; Cherlin 2009; Cherlin 2004). Researchers have examined various types of families, including single-mother, step-, blended, and cohabiting families, typically distinguishing between two types of fathers: the biological father and the social father. While the biological father has a clear definition, the meaning of social father is more subjective.

In most studies, social father is defined as mother's new, resident romantic partner who is not the biological father of the child (Bzostek 2008; Berger et al. 2008). Much less attention has been given to father figures who are not mothers' romantic partners, who may or may not live with and/or be related to the child (Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera 1999; Jayakody and Kalil 2002). Consequently, little is known about the circumstances under which such fathering arrangements form, whether these father figures serve as substitutes, complements, or both to other present or absent parents, and the long-term effects of such arrangements on children. My paper begins to fill this void. I examine social fathers under an expanded definition that includes male father figures who are not romantic partners of the biological mothers (e.g. grandfathers, uncles, older brothers and cousins, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, and priests or pastors). This broader definition is important as it deepens our understanding of how fathering may play a role in the wellbeing of children during their transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

### **Statement of Research Question**

Under what changing family circumstances and for which child characteristics and situations do social fathers enter the picture?

### **Data**

The data for this paper comes from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97). An advantage of using this data is the level of detail provided for the nature of the child-father figure relationship as well as the number of non-biological father figures who are also not romantic partners for the youths' mothers included. The longitudinal structure of the data also allows for tracking of individuals, their family characteristics/processes, and their social, behavioral, health, academic, economic, relational, and attitudinal outcomes over time.

I primarily use data from 1997 (when the youth respondents were 12 to 17 years old) and 2001-2005. For these years, the questions about the nature of the relationship of the father figure to the child as well as his residence are included. Most of the father figures are mothers' romantic partners, but the percentages across types stay pretty level over the 5 years from 2001 to 2005. Considering gender, males are more likely to report father figures who are not romantic partners for their mothers than are females. For those who report having a father figure, from 2001 to 2005, the percentage who do not live with him increases slightly.

### **Research Methods**

I use multinomial discrete time models to predict timing and type (related/unrelated, mother's romantic partner/non-romantic partner, none at all) of father figure entrance among those youths who did not have a father figure present at age 14. Based on findings of prior research on factors associated with family structure, I consider individual characteristics of the youth (gender, age, race/ethnicity, nativity, educational performance<sup>1</sup>, engagement in extra-curricular activities, delinquency<sup>2</sup>, and child mental health<sup>3</sup>) as well as contextual variables for the family (household income; youth's residence with the mother; presence of a biological father (resident or not) not identified as the father figure; presence of a step-father or mother's boyfriend not identified as the father figure; presence of full, half, or step-siblings; presence of

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<sup>1</sup> Educational performance is measured at age 14.

<sup>2</sup> Child delinquency is measured by the NLSY97's "Delinquency Score Index."

<sup>3</sup> Child mental health is measured by the NLSY97's "Youth Mental Health Scale" variable, which is an index with scores ranging from 1 to 20 such that higher scores indicate more positive mental health and lower scores indicate "more emotional problems."

non-biological mother figure; and mother's parenting behaviors<sup>4</sup>) and community (census region of residence, residence in a rural or urban area, school size, and school's student/teacher ratio). Following a similar approach to Bzostek and Beck (2011) for measuring (presence of and changes in) family instability, I also consider changes in the identification of father figures as well as changes in family contextual variables over time (i.e. in 1997, 2001, and 2005)<sup>5</sup>.

### **Expected Findings and Contributions**

I hypothesize that male adolescents and young adults will be more likely than their female counterparts to report having a father figure in the absence of a present biological father. In addition, I hypothesize that, while the introduction of a new (male) romantic partner for mother will increase the likelihood a young adult would report having a father figure of that type, multiple family transitions (due to mother's relationship entrances and exits) over time will decrease the likelihood of his or her reporting a father figure of any type.

Much of the literature on the significance of fathers to children's well-being focuses on the presence or absence of biological fathers. In the latter case, the literature suggests there is a need to be met, perhaps by father figures. Given the importance of fathers to the development of their (especially male) children, we should continue to pay attention to the presence of fathers in the family. This paper provides insight into the conditions under which youth identify having or gaining father figures, for at least some time, with or without the involvement (romantic relationship) of their mothers.

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<sup>4</sup> Mother's parenting behaviors is measured with several variables that include her support of the child's father, the degree of her parental monitoring, and her parenting style.

<sup>5</sup> I chose 1997 as it is the first year of the survey and includes a question on the relationship of the child to the father figure. The categories for this variable are more-detailed than in later waves, yet there are not as many follow-up questions on the nature of the child-father figure relationship in this initial wave. From 2001 to 2005, the same phrasing was used for the father figure relationship identification question as well as several follow-up questions. I could look at the 5 years in this range, but instead chose the two endpoints to maintain 4-year intervals for comparison (1997-2001-2005), and link on respondent ID to create a longitudinal data set. To accommodate for valid skip patterns based on youths' ages at interview dates, I focus on percentages and distribution trends rather than raw frequencies when presenting the descriptive results.

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