

“The Changing Demography of U.S. Fatherhood”

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Background

Family patterns have changed dramatically over the past half century, including delays in first marriage, increases in cohabitation, high levels of divorce, and notable increases in nonmarital childbearing. These changes have had profound implications for the family experiences of individuals (men, women, and children) and more broadly for the fundamental societal role of families in rearing the next generation. Overall, the intersection of rising union instability amidst relatively high fertility rates (at least compared to other Western countries) implies that many children will be raised in families other than a stable, nuclear family (Furstenberg 2014). This also suggests that adults will experience multiple partner and parenting roles over their life course. For children, all else equal, those reared in stable, two-parent families are shown to have higher wellbeing across a variety of measures (McLanahan, Tach and Schneider 2013)—although not all children in two-parent families experience the close family relationships associated with higher wellbeing (Booth, Scott and King 2010). Overall, changing family patterns suggest growing heterogeneity in children’s outcomes across a range of family contexts.

While a large and growing literature has considered the nature of family change and its implications for children, far less well understood are the implications of changing family demography for adults/parents and especially for men in their role as fathers. Yet, the consequences of demographic changes for men’s family roles are large. Historically, the so-called ‘package deal’ linked men’s involvement with children to their role as spouse/partner (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991, Townsend 2002); when the ‘package’ ends via divorce or dissolution of an unmarried relationship, men’s involvement with children typically declines. This is because children are more likely to live with mothers after parents split up, so fathers’ involvement is often contingent on mothers’ cooperation. Also, men often repartner after union dissolution and may have new children with their new partners; studies suggest that paternal involvement with prior children diminishes when men father new children (Manning and Smock 1999, Manning and Smock 2000), and this pattern has been observed both after divorce and after nonmarital unions break up (Tach, Mincy and Edin 2010).

Taken together, these patterns imply that at the aggregate level, fewer men are becoming fathers in the first place and that men are spending less time living with biological children. At the same time, we suspect that fathers’ experiences of other types of fathering has increased. In particular, we expect that many fathers are living away from biological children as non-resident fathers and that many fathers are living with children to whom they are not biologically related in a social or stepfather capacity. Yet, there has been limited attention to the changing nature of fatherhood across cohorts and over the life course. To our knowledge, only one paper has focused on these patterns in the U.S. Using data from the Current Population Survey over 1965-1995, Eggebeen (2002) examined the change in men’s experience of living with children across cohorts. He finds that there has been a dramatic decline in the prevalence of men living with children from older cohorts to more recent cohorts; he finds that co-residing with children typically occurs during middle age (early 30s to late 40s). Also, he observes notable differences in fatherhood patterns by education

and race/ethnicity. In a similar analysis for England and Wales, Henz (2013) finds that there has been a steady decline in men's co-residence with children in England and Wales for men born 1930-1979. She finds that father's living with children has shifted to slightly older ages, especially for men with higher education.

In this paper, we use data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) to provide new information about men's fatherhood experiences for cohorts of U.S. men born from the mid-1950s to the late-1980s. We first describe the prevalence of men becoming fathers by considering the birth of biological children over the life course for 5-year cohorts of men born 1955-1989, using data that spans 1968 to 2015. Then, we evaluate the proportions of men who are living with biological children – and who are non-resident to at least one biological child – by age and cohort and consider the proportion of men living with unrelated children (i.e., as 'social fathers'). Finally, we aggregate fatherhood experiences across cohorts for men of the same age to consider the level and change in the overall demography of fatherhood in the recent era. Overall, this paper provides new information about the nature of changing fatherhood, more broadly defined than in prior research, thus illuminating how men today participate in rearing the next generation.

Data and Method

We use data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a nationally-representative, longitudinal study of U.S. families that began in 1968 and is housed at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. It is the longest-running household panel survey in the world, and as of 2015, 39 waves of data had been collected over 47 years. The study currently includes nearly 10,000 families and 25,000 individuals. Re-interview response rates have been exceptionally high – fully 96–98% in nearly all waves. The PSID includes a wide range of information about social, economic, demographic, health and psychological measures. The study has a genealogical design, with biological or adopted children of respondents followed as they establish their own households.

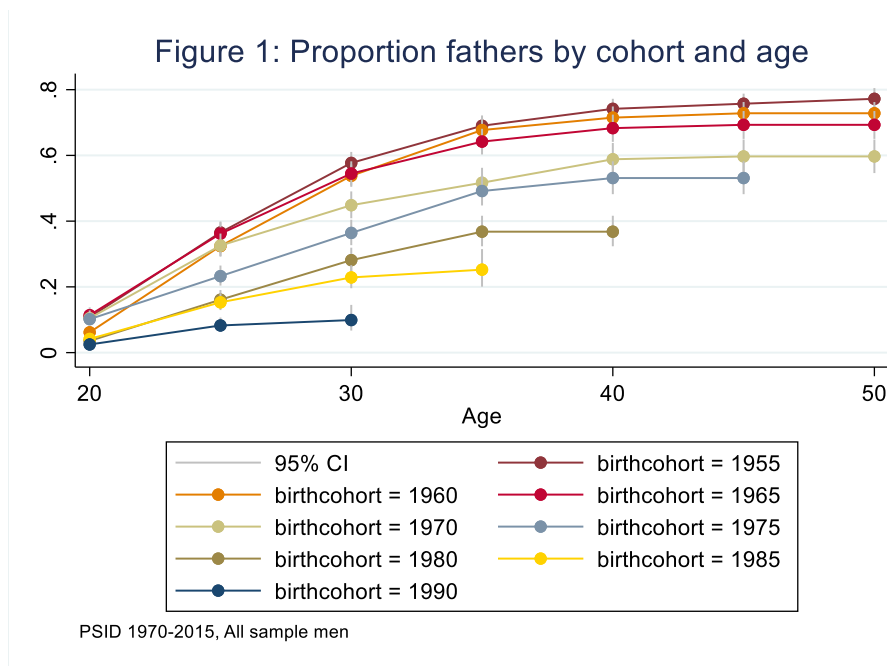
The PSID is ideally suited to describing the evolving course of fatherhood in the U.S. for two reasons. First, the panel nature of the study allows description from both a time-series and a longitudinal perspective. Through its genealogical and multigenerational design, the PSID sample is perennially replenished by the children and grandchildren descended from original respondents, and periodic immigrant refreshers allow the sample to remain nationally population-representative. Thus, PSID allows comparison among same-aged men in different historical periods to assess cohort changes in the timing and experiences of fatherhood. At the same time, because individuals are followed longitudinally, men's life course trajectories are recorded prospectively for sequential cohorts. This perspective allows us to observe changes over time in the probability, timing, context, and sequencing of various dimensions of fatherhood, including age at first birth, co-residence, stepfatherhood, and multipartner fertility.

Second, the PSID sample following rules permit a view of fatherhood that is often missed in other research designs, particularly in child-centered studies where access to children's fathers, and particularly to nonresident fathers, is contingent on a mother's knowledge about and willingness to share a father's contact information and his own willingness to participate. The PSID sample includes men who were never resident with their biological children as well as those who became nonresident; the study also includes men who never become fathers, allowing researchers to better account for selection into parenthood.

In this study, we focus on men who were born 1955-1989. The sample includes men who resided in a PSID family in 1968 (at the time of sample recruitment) or were born to or adopted into a PSID family and who were present in the study at least once since 1985, the first year in which birth history information was collected. We exclude men added to the PSID via the 1997 immigrant refresher because the study lacks data on their co-residence with children prior to that year. We also exclude men who became fathers after age 49 (less than 1% of the sample). Thus, the analytic sample is representative of men whose families resided in the U.S. at least since 1968 and includes 6,601 men ages 15-49 who contribute 223,956 person-years in total.

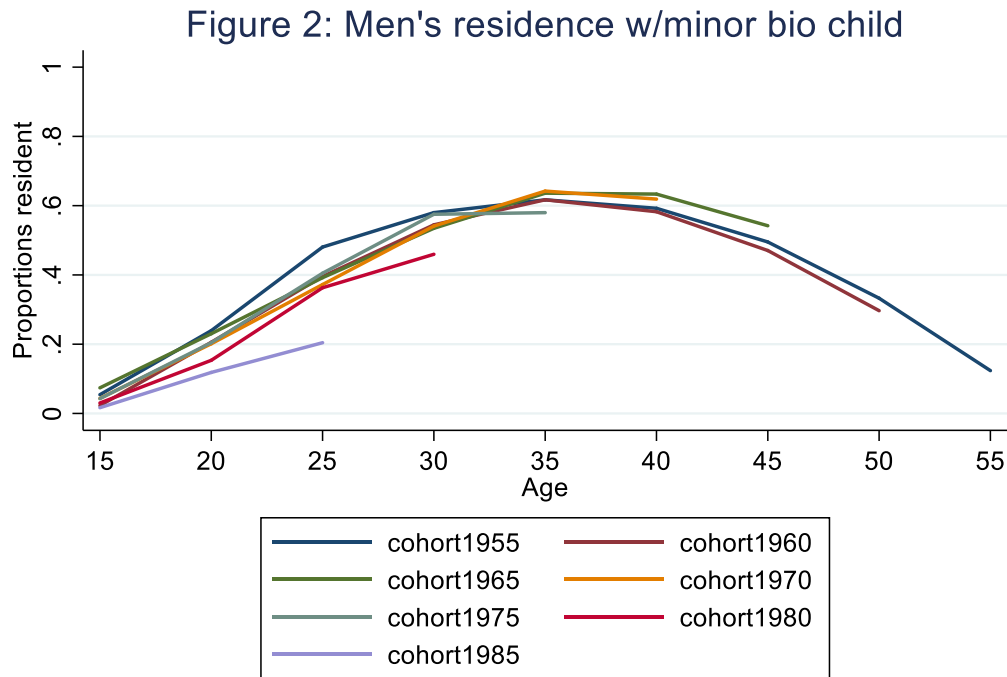
Preliminary Results

We first present initial data about the cohort prevalence of men becoming fathers by age and over time. We use event history life table models to estimate the share of men who become fathers across cohorts by 5-year age intervals (see Figure 1); these data are unweighted (but note that we are continuing to evaluate whether we should weight the data and which weight to use). We find that the decline in fatherhood over time has been dramatic. For men born 1955-1970—for whom we can observe childbearing through ages 45-50, we find that the proportion who had become fathers by those ages declined from 77 percent of men born 1955-59 to only 60 percent of men born in 1970-74. The declines are even greater when we consider more recent cohorts, who we cannot observe as long. For example, by ages 35-40, fully 74 percent of men born 1955-59 had become fathers, compared to only 37 percent for men born in 1980-84. Also, whereas nearly 58 percent of men born 1955-59 had become fathers by ages 25-30, the comparable figure is only 23 percent for those born in 1985-89. Overall, these data present a stark decline in the prevalence of becoming a father across the age spectrum for men born since the middle of the 20th century; the decline is especially dramatic for more recent birth cohorts.



Second, we focus on the share of all men who are living with a minor child by birth cohort and age (Figure 2). Here we find a less consistent pattern of decline across cohorts. For men born 1955-59 through 1975-79, the likelihood of living with a minor biological child was quite similar, with a

peak of ~60 percent of men in such a situation around age 35; the one difference here is that the earliest cohort (1955-59) was likely to live with children at quite young ages—starting in their early/mid-20s, whereas for subsequent cohorts the ages were slightly older. The biggest difference appears to emerge with the 1980-85 and 1985-89 cohorts, who have a lower likelihood of living with a minor child over ages 20-30 than their predecessors.



PSID 1970-2015 all sample men

As we continue to work on this paper, we will provide new information about the share of fathers who have a non-resident minor biological child by age and across cohorts, as well as men who are living with an unrelated child (i.e., the child of their partner) by age and across cohorts. Finally, we will aggregate all potential father roles to consider men’s conjoint experiences of fatherhood at particular age ranges (e.g., 35-39), comparing across cohorts.

Conclusion

Using information from the longest-running U.S. longitudinal study (the Panel Study of Income Dynamics), this study will provide new information about the changing nature of fatherhood for men over the past three decades. Overall, we find that fewer men are becoming fathers than during earlier years and that fewer men are living with children—although change in the former is much greater than change in the latter. Next steps on the paper will enable us to consider additional variation in paternal roles by age and across cohorts.

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