

Introduction

Family scholars have tracked the diversification of family types in the United States during the past 30 years. Multiple factors, such as high divorce rates, the explosion of complex stepfamilies, and increases in nonmarital childbearing and cohabitation, have contributed to this phenomenon (Brown 2004). As a result, the absolute number and proportion of children living with both biological married parents has decreased steadily, with a concomitant increase in the number of non-traditional family types (stepfamilies, cohabiting, single). These changes have led researchers to examine child well-being¹ in many family types (see Pollard and Lee 2003 for a recent review of both measurement issues and results in the field.), but analyses have often been limited to comparisons between children in certain types of family structures, such as married families, children in single-mother families, or children in remarried stepfamilies (Brown 2004).

One often overlooked family structure is that of custodial father, wherein the biological father lives with his children and the biological mother lives elsewhere. Studying child well-being in custodial father families is important because there are currently over 2.3 million custodial father families (Grall 2006), single fathers tend to have more coresident children than single mothers (McLanahan and Casper 1995), and custodial father families are growing more quickly than custodial mother families (Leininger and Ziol-Guest 2008; Meyer and Garasky 1993). Custodial father families now constitute over 15% of all families where one parent lives elsewhere (Grall 2006), and this number is likely to grow.

Few studies have examined child well-being in custodial father families, and only one distinguishes between cohabiting, single, and married father custodial families (Eggebeen,

¹ Although developmental psychology and other specialty fields use the terms ‘adolescent’ and ‘child’ to refer to different age groups, I will herein use the term ‘children’ to denote all offspring, unless referencing a specific article employing different terms. The term ‘child’ refers to both an age, as in developmental psychology, and a reference to a family relationship. As such, I feel it is the best term to employ when discussing the broad age range in the data utilized here.

Snyder and Manning 1996). Several studies observe differences in child well-being in custodial father families relative to other family types (Ambert 1982; Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch 1996; Hilton and Desrochers 2002; Hilton, Desrochers and Devall 2001; Van Houtte and Jacobs 2004). To my knowledge, however, no study to date has examined child well being within custodial father families using individual level data from a nationally representative sample.

Drawing data from the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), I employ two measures of child well-being in custodial father families and distinguish between three types: single, non-cohabiting father; cohabiting father; and married father families. I first test for differences between the three types, then examine if differences in socioeconomic standing account for the difference in child well-being between the three family types. Finally, I explore gender differences in child well-being across these custodial father family types.

Child Well-Being in Custodial Father Families

Research on child well-being in custodial father families has generally not examined differences within father family types. As a result, little is known about child well-being within single, cohabiting, and married custodial father families. In this section, I synthesize what we know about child well being in custodial father families and outline why, based on extant literature, we might expect differences in child well-being between single, non-cohabiting, fathers; single, cohabiting fathers; and married custodial father families.

I divide the section into two parts. First, I discuss what we know about child well-being in custodial father families compared to other family types, such as single mothers, two-parent biological families, etc. Second, I review the limited knowledge we have of child well-being within custodial father families and outline several possible reasons why we could expect differences in child well-being within custodial father families.

A large body of literature has examined child well-being in a variety of different family structures. Although this body of research has primarily examined children in step-families, single-mother families, and two-parent biological families (Brown 2004), many of these studies include custodial father families in their comparisons. One weakness of this literature to this point, however, is that single fathers living by themselves are rarely separated from fathers with a cohabiting partner. As a result, researchers and policy-makers need to be cautious about making substantive interpretations of the findings comparing custodial father families to other family types.

I first discuss comparisons between single father families and non-custodial father family types. Research finds that single fathers have greater financial resources and are more likely to be employed than single mothers (Meyer and Garasky 1993), but worse off economically than married couples (Brown 2000). Growing up in single-parent family environments has detrimental implications for future life chances. Children of single parents tend to have lower educational attainment, increased likelihood of teenage childbirth, and are more likely to be on welfare later in life (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Single-parent families may also lack the social capital that two-parent families have (Coleman 1988). Leininger and Ziol-Guest (2008) find that children from single-father families have poorer access to health care than children in other family structures and may therefore be more susceptible to preventable diseases and have worse health outcomes than other children. Hilton (2001) finds that children living with single fathers exhibit fewer behavior problems than those living with single mothers. Children from single father homes score slightly higher on tests than children from single-mother homes, who earn higher GPAs (Downey 1994).

Additionally, adolescents living with their fathers had higher scores of trouble behavior than those in the other two residential arrangements (Buchanan et al. 1996). However, these single fathers are also more likely to get custody when the mother is less involved, has personal problems, or when the children have behavior problems, all of which could explain this difference.

However, differences in child well-being across family types are minimal (Buchanan et al. 1996). Children tend to be remarkably similar across a multitude of outcomes (Hilton et al. 2001). Buchanan and Maccoby (Buchanan et al. 1996) find only modest differences in adolescent adjustment to divorce. Dual-resident adolescents fare slightly better and father-resident adolescents slightly worse, with mother-resident adolescents in the middle. Furthermore, Amato and Keith (1991) find only small differences in school performance b/w children of single and two-parent families. Caution is therefore in order when interpreting results. Care must be taken to differentiate substantive from statistical significance.

There is research examining child well-being in custodial father families relative to other family types, particularly custodial mothers. Custodial father's satisfaction with parenting is higher than custodial mother's satisfaction because their children are better behaved and verbalize appreciation for their father more often than children of custodial mothers (Ambert 1982). Divorced fathers are sometimes perceived as less caring than fathers from intact families (Dunlop, Burns and Bermingham 2001). Differences in children's behavior could therefore drive differences.