

“Examining the Antecedents of U.S. Nonmarital Fathering using Two National Datasets”

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The dramatic rise in U.S. nonmarital childbearing in recent decades has generated considerable attention from both researchers and policymakers alike, particularly with respect to the implications for women and children. In turn, an extensive literature has examined the factors that predict women’s nonmarital childbearing and found that low economic resources (measured as low income, low education or welfare benefit receipt) predict a greater likelihood of women having an unwed and/or teenage birth (Aassve 2003; Duncan and Hoffman 1990; Kiernan 1980; Lundberg and Plotnick 1995; Rosenzweig 1999; Upchurch, Lillard, and Panis 2002; Wolfe, Wilson, and Haveman 2001; Wu and Wolfe 2001). Other salient factors include family background and race/ethnicity (Cooksey 1990; Wu and Martinson 1993).

Far less is known about the antecedents of nonmarital fatherhood, largely because data about men, especially low-income men who are disproportionately unmarried fathers, have been much less readily available (Nelson 2004). Men—particularly non-resident fathers—are under-represented in national surveys because most surveys are household-based, and fathers tend to be less strongly attached to households than mothers, as a result of divorce, the military or incarceration (Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998). Information obtained from women about men’s fertility history has at times been used, but women may not have complete information about all the children men have fathered. To obtain a complete portrait of male fertility, it is important to ask men independently about their fertility (Goldscheider and Kaufman 1996; Greene and Biddlecom 2000).

Existing quantitative studies related to the antecedents of unwed fatherhood have mostly focused on teenage fatherhood or on the characteristics of men as partners of teenage women who become pregnant. Yet, only 23 percent of unwed births currently occur to women under age 20 (Hamilton, Martin, and Ventura 2009), so teen births represent a small sub-set of all nonmarital childbearing. Within this literature, race is shown to be a key factor, as men who are African American are at an increased risk of teen/unwed fatherhood (Hanson, Morrison, and Ginsburg 1989; Lerman 1993; Marsiglio 1987; Thornberry, Smith, and Howard 1997). Religious attendance and academic ability are linked to a lower likelihood of young unwed fatherhood (Lerman 1993), and being born to young parents predicts men’s own fathering at young ages (Pears, Pierce, Kim, Capaldi, and Owen 2005; Thornberry, Smith, and Howard 1997). There is mixed evidence on the role of aggregate-level employment opportunities, with some evidence suggesting that male unemployment affects nonmarital childbearing (Ku, Sonenstein, and Pleck 1993), and other studies suggesting it is not a major factor (Ellwood and Crane 1990; Lerman 1993). However, ethnographic research in low-income urban communities points to a strong link between poor job prospects for men and nonmarital childbearing (Wilson 1987).

In this paper, we use data from two national datasets to examine the antecedents of contemporary U.S. nonmarital fathering. First, we use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 cohort (NLSY79), which provides information about a cohort of 6,403 men born 1957-1964 that have been followed from 1979 (ages 14-21) through 2006 (ages 41-49), interviewed annually through 1994 and biennially since that time ($n=3,738$ in 2006). These men have been followed over their transition to adulthood, as they finished school, entered the labor market, got married, and proceeded through their

prime childbearing years, hence the data capture the first birth for all or nearly all men. Second, we use data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), which was historically a study of women ages 15-44 with six repeated cross-sections interviewed between 1973 and 2002; the surveys included detailed questions about women's sexual activity, contraception, pregnancy and birth, marriage, cohabitation, and divorce. For the first time in 2002, the NSFG included in-person interviews with 4,928 men ages 15-44 (and hence born 1957-1987) so provides data on a recent cross-section of men with retrospective data about family background, and sexual and relationship histories, as well as current socioeconomic variables; approximately one-third of the NSFG male respondents report having had a child as of the survey. Taken together, these datasets provide a complementary perspective on the factors that affect recent male nonmarital fertility in the U.S., and a direct comparison can be made for the oldest NSFG men born 1957-1964 who are ages 38-45 in 2002 ($n=1,000$)—the same years that the NLSY79 men were born.

We use multinomial logistic regression models to examine the factors that affect men having a first birth outside of marriage versus within marriage, as compared to not having had a birth by the observation period. Then, we estimate competing-risk event history models of fatherhood outcomes; these models have the advantage of accounting for right-censoring, since many men (particularly in the NSFG) have not yet had children at the time of the survey. A number of identical variables with respect to demographic, socioeconomic, social-psychological, and family background characteristics can be constructed across the NLSY79 and the NSFG to allow for direct comparison of the antecedent factors, adjusting for necessary differences in period and age as a result of study design.

Preliminary results suggest that across both datasets, black and Hispanic men are much more likely to have a child outside of marriage, and higher education and older age at first sex strongly diminish the likelihood of having a nonmarital birth. Living with both biological parents, mothers' working during childhood, and religious upbringing are shown to matter in one but not both datasets. In this work, we will further explore the similarities and differences in findings from analyses of these two data sources about contemporary U.S. men, including directly comparing the subset of men from the same cohort in both datasets who will have mostly completed their fertility. We will discuss the implications of our results for both future research and public policy aimed to support families across diverse circumstances.

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