

Low-Income, Nonresident Father Involvement With Their Toddlers: Variation by Fathers' Race and Ethnicity

Natasha J. Cabrera
University of Maryland, College Park

Rebecca M. Ryan
University of Chicago

Stephanie J. Mitchell
University of Maryland, College Park

Jacqueline D. Shannon
Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

Catherine S. Tamis-LeMonda
New York University

Using data from a racially and ethnically diverse sample of low-income mothers of 2-year-old children participating in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project ($N = 883$), the authors examined fathers' education and employment, mother–father relationship, and mothers' relationships with kin in the household to explain variation in nonresident father involvement across racial and ethnic groups. Nonresident White fathers were less involved with their children than were African American and Latino fathers. This difference was explained by the status of mother–father relationships. White nonresident fathers were less likely than minority nonresident fathers to maintain romantic relationships with their child's mother. Mothers in the White father group were also more likely to re-partner, which negatively related to biological fathers' involvement. These findings suggest that approaches to strengthen nonresident father involvement in children's lives need to consider how father ethnicity and mother–father relations are associated with differential patterns of father involvement.

Keywords: nonresident fathers, father involvement, racial and ethnic differences

Studies examining variation in father involvement by race and ethnicity have focused either on divorced fathers of older children or on resident fathers, with findings that nonresident minority fathers pay less child support, visit less, and are less engaged with their children than nonresident White fathers (Hofferth, 2003; King, Harris, & Heard, 2004). Fewer studies have focused on variations in nonres-

ident father involvement among low-income, never-married men with young children, a group that has dramatically increased (Martin, Hamilton, & Sutton, 2005). A notable exception is a study of teen mothers that found minority fathers to be more involved with their noncustodial children than White fathers (Danzinger & Radin, 1990).

Resource theory stipulates that parents with greater resources (e.g., education and income) will invest more money and time in their children than those with fewer resources (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994). Thus, differential levels of resources among never married, low-income, nonresident fathers may contribute to variations in father involvement. In our society, fathers are expected to provide for their children; fathers with higher levels of education and stable employment are better able to provide for their noncustodial children and consequently may be more involved with them than fathers who cannot fulfill this role (McLanahan, 2004). Because White families, even those who are low-income, have, on average, greater economic resources, White children are more likely to receive child support, and may also see their fathers more often, than minority children whose fathers may be unemployed and have lower levels of education (Huang, Mincy, & Garfinkel, 2005). But when fathers' financial contribution includes informal types of support, such as gifts or extra cash, minority nonresident fathers contribute at levels close to, or

Natasha J. Cabrera, Department of Human Development, College of Education, University of Maryland, College Park; Rebecca M. Ryan, Harris School of Public Policy Studies, University of Chicago; Stephanie J. Mitchell, Department of Human Development, College of Education, University of Maryland, College Park; Jacqueline D. Shannon, School of Education—Early Childhood Program, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York; Catherine S. Tamis-LeMonda, Applied Psychology Department, New York University.

We are grateful to the following individuals for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on drafts of this article: Sandra Hofferth, Jay Fagan, Hiram Fitzgerald, and Robert Bradley. We are also indebted to the families who participated in this study. This research was partly supported by National Institutes of Health Grant R03 HD049670-01 awarded to Natasha J. Cabrera.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Natasha J. Cabrera, College of Education, 3304 Benjamin Building, No. 3304E, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742. E-mail: ncabrera@umd.edu

equal to, their White counterparts (Hofferth, 2003), suggesting that minority fathers may also visit children as frequently as White nonresident fathers.

We draw from family systems theory in which relationships are viewed within a subsystem (e.g., marital) as sources of stress or support that can impact functioning within other subsystems (e.g., parental; Cox & Paley, 1997). Because the nature of family subsystems may vary by race and ethnicity, the quality of the relationship between nonresident fathers and mothers could differentiate levels of father involvement among racial and ethnic groups. Nonresident fathers visit their children more often when parents have positive relationships (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999) and less often when relationships are hostile or unstable (Cutrona, Hessling, Bacon, & Russell, 1998). Minority nonresident fathers are more likely to maintain romantic relationships with the child's mother than are White fathers (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2005), which is linked to father involvement (Cabrera et al., 2004).

It is also possible that the mother's relationships with a new romantic partner and extended family influence nonresident biological father involvement. Divorced fathers' visitation and child support payments are lower when mothers remarry than when mothers remain single (Hofferth, Pleck, Stueve, Bianchi, & Sayer, 2002). Overall, White mothers are more likely to remarry or cohabit with a new partner than are minority mothers (Page & Stevens, 2005). Conversely, minority mothers live in intergenerational households more often than is the case among White mothers; grandmothers may see fathers as unreliable and prevent them from visiting (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2004).

These findings support the hypothesis that nonresident fathers' resources (i.e., education and employment), mother-father relationship status, and mothers' household structure will predict father involvement and explain differences by race and ethnicity. Using data from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHS), we investigated how nonresident father involvement varies by race and ethnicity and whether these differences are explained by fathers' resources and parents' relationships with one another and others in the mothers' household.

Method

Participants

Data were drawn from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation (EHS) project (see Cabrera et al., 2004, for full description). From the main sample of 2,166 primary caregivers interviewed at 24 months, we restricted the sample to biological mothers ($N = 2,092$) who reported that the focal child's biological father was nonresident at 24 months ($N = 1,024$). *Nonresidency* was defined as the biological father not living with his child at all. The sample was restricted further to include mothers who reported mother-father relationship status (e.g., whether they were romantically involved or not; $N = 1,016$); fathers who were White, African American, or Latino ($N = 995$); and those with complete mother-report data on father involvement ($N = 883$). Par-

ticipating families with nonresident fathers were more likely to be older, educated, and employed than were nonparticipating families with nonresident fathers (for a complete description of the selection bias of the EHS study, see Cabrera et al., 2004).

Measures

Fathers' race and ethnicity. Fathers' race and ethnicity were obtained from mother report at recruitment or father report during the 24- or 36-month father interview. Missing data (24% of respondents had neither mother nor father report of father race and ethnicity) were imputed with the expectation-maximization (EM) algorithm (McLachlan & Krishnan, 1997).

Mother and child characteristics. During recruitment, data on mothers' age at the child's birth, education (1 = high school degree/General Educational Development Diploma [GED] or higher), nativity status (1 = born in the United States), child gender (1 = male), and firstborn status (1 = firstborn) were collected from mothers. At 24 months, mothers reported on family income (natural log of family income was used in analysis).

Fathers' age and resources. Mothers were asked about fathers' age at the time of the child's birth, level of education (1 = high school degree/GED or higher), and employment status (1 = working or in school) during the 24-month interview. Missing data values on fathers' age (8%), education (16%), and employment/schooling status (27%) were imputed with the EM algorithm (McLachlan & Krishnan, 1997). Income data are unavailable for nonresident fathers.

Household structure. Mothers' household was coded as intergenerational if mother lived with her parents, grandparents, and/or aunts/uncles (1 = intergenerational household) and coresident romantic if mother lived with a romantic partner (not the biological father; 1 = coresident romantic partner).

Parent relationship. Mothers' relationship status with nonresident biological fathers (e.g., romantic partners, friends, in no relationship, or separated/divorced/other) was recoded into two dummy variables: boyfriend (1 = romantic partner; 0 = all other relationships) and friend (1 = friends; 0 = all other); being in no relationship/divorced/other was the reference group. Parent relationship quality, measured as the amount of disagreement about the child between mothers and nonresident fathers, was based on six items adopted from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and adapted for use in the EHS (e.g., "How much disagreement do you have about how [child] is raised?" "How much disagreement do you have about how father spends money on [child]?"; Sweet & Bumpass, 1996). Items were rated on a scale ranging from 0 (*none*) to 2 (*a great deal*) and then averaged ($\alpha = .73$).

Father involvement. Mothers were asked to assess three aspects of father involvement: accessibility, engagement, and responsibility (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987). One question about accessibility (e.g., how frequently fathers contacted their child during the past 3 months) was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*everyday or*

almost). Four questions about engagement (i.e., how often fathers played with, ate, read to, and took a walk with the child in the past week) were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (several times a week) and averaged ($M = 2.68$; $SD = 1.82$; $\alpha = .95$). Three questions about fathers' financial responsibility (i.e., how often fathers gave the child clothing, toys, or presents; paid for medicines or doctors; and gave the mother extra money) were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 3 (often) and averaged ($M = 1.58$; $SD = 0.59$; $\alpha = .74$). Because the eight indicators of father involvement were highly correlated ($r = .68$ to $r = .86$), they were standardized and averaged into a father involvement composite scale with high internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$) and a normal distribution (skew = .41; kurtosis = 1.80).

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables. White fathers were more likely to have completed high school than either African American or Latino fathers and were more likely to be working or in school than were African American fathers. Mothers in the White father group were less likely to live with extended family and more likely to co-reside with a romantic partner than were mothers in either minority father group. Minority mothers were more likely to describe nonresident fathers as their boyfriends (both groups) or friends (African Americans only) than were White mothers. White fathers scored lower on the standardized measure of father involvement than did fathers in both minority groups, although the difference between White and Latino fathers did not reach statistical significance in pairwise tests.

Multivariate Analyses

To test whether parents' resources and relationships accounted for the variation in father involvement by race and ethnicity, we conducted a series of ordinary least squares regression models (see Table 2). In Step 1, we entered two indicator variables for African American and Latino fathers, with White fathers as the reference category, and controlled for family characteristics. In Step 2, we added fathers' resources (i.e., education, employment). In Step 3, we entered mothers' co-residence with extended family and romantic partner. In Step 4, we entered parents' relationship status. Parent conflict was not entered into models because it did not vary by race and ethnicity (see Table 1). Because there was little guidance from previous empirical findings we analyzed our data, entering resource variables before relationship variables. However, results did not change when the order of entry was reversed.

Step 1 reveals that the difference between White and African American fathers' involvement remained significant, and the difference between White and Latino fathers' involvement increased (results not shown), after controlling for family characteristics. Although White fathers were significantly more likely to have graduated from high school than minority fathers, and White and Latino fathers were more likely to be working at 24 months than were African American fathers, the small R^2 change for Step 2 indicates that fathers' resources explained little of the variation in involvement among the groups (although employment was positively associated with father involvement; $p < .05$).

When mothers' co-residence with extended family and mothers' co-residence with romantic partners were entered in Step 3, the coefficients for minority fathers were reduced by approximately 25%, significant reductions based on Wald post hoc tests (at $p < .01$). Only presence of a resident

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Nonresident Fathers by Race and Ethnicity

Variables	Total N = 883	White n = 249 (28%)	African American n = 482 (55%)	Latino n = 152 (17%)	F/ χ^2	p
Demographics/father resources						
Mother > high school education	62%	74% _a	63% _b	43% _c	40.00	<.001
Mother's age at birth, <i>M (SD)</i>	21.5 (5.8)	22.2 _a	20.7 _b	22.7 _a	9.63	<.001
Mother's household income (\$)	12,299	14,296 _a	11,232 _b	12,410 _c	7.40	<.001
Mother born in United States	92%	98% _a	98% _a	63% _b	206.04	<.001
Child is male	52%	49% _a	52% _a	56% _a	1.85	
Child is firstborn	68%	64% _a	71% _a	66% _a	3.37	
Father's age at birth, <i>M (SD)</i>	24.2 (6.2)	24.6 _{a,b}	23.6 _b	25.1 _a	4.35	<.05
Father > high school education	39%	48% _a	39% _b	26% _c	18.69	<.001
Father work/school	77%	82% _a	73% _b	81% _{a,b}	10.46	<.01
Household structure						
Intergenerational household	25%	19% _a	29% _b	25% _{a,b}	8.28	<.05
Resident romantic partner	11%	21% _a	8% _b	7% _b	30.80	<.001
Parental relationship						
Father is boyfriend	15%	8% _a	19% _b	17% _b	16.23	<.001
Father is friend	31%	22% _a	38% _b	26% _a	21.44	<.001
Parental conflict, <i>M (SD)</i>	.51 (.48)	.58 _a	.50 _a	.45 _a	2.75	
Father involvement (standard scores)	.00 (.82)	-.17 _a	.10 _b	.02 _{a,b}	9.19	<.001

Note. N = 883 for father involvement; N = 662 for parental conflict. Different letters across rows indicate significant pairwise group differences at $p < .05$ in either Bonferroni post hoc adjustments or pairwise chi-square tests.

Table 2

Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models Predicting Nonresident Father Involvement (Accessibility, Engagement, and Responsibility Scales Averaged)

Variable	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3			Step 4		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>									
African American	0.27	0.07	<.001	0.28	0.07	<.001	0.21	0.06	<.01	-0.01	0.05	
Latino	0.28	0.09	<.01	0.28	0.09	<.01	0.21	0.09	<.05	0.06	0.08	
White (reference)												
Mother > high school education	0.07	0.06		0.07	0.06		0.07	0.06		0.08	0.05	
Mother household income (<i>natural log</i>)	0.03	0.03		0.02	0.03		0.05	0.03	<.10	0.07	0.03	<.01
Mother's age at birth	-0.01	0.00	<.05	-0.01	0.00		-0.02	0.01	<.05	-0.01	0.01	
Mother born in U.S.	0.26	0.12	<.05	0.28	0.12	<.05	0.29	0.11	<.05	0.13	0.09	
Child is male	0.06	0.05		0.07	0.06		0.03	0.05		0.07	0.04	<.10
Child is firstborn	-0.06	0.06		-0.07	0.06		-0.06	0.06		-0.07	0.05	
Father's age at birth				-0.00	0.00		-0.00	0.01		-0.00	0.01	
Father > high school education				-0.03	0.06		0.02	0.06		0.03	0.05	
Father work/school				0.17	0.07	<.05	0.15	0.06	<.05	0.10	0.05	<.05
Intergenerational household							-0.09	0.07		-0.12	0.05	<.05
Resident partner							-0.73	0.09	<.001	-0.41	0.07	<.001
Father is boyfriend										1.29	0.06	<.001
Father is friend										0.69	0.05	<.001
Constant	-0.46	0.36		-0.54	0.36		-0.53	0.35		-0.99	0.29	<.01
Model <i>F</i>		4.17	<.001		3.64	<.001		8.66	<.001		41.50	<.001
Model <i>R</i> ²		.04			.04			.12			.42	
<i>R</i> ² change					.00			.08	<.001		.30	<.001

Note. *N* = 883.

romantic partner was negatively associated with father involvement (at $p < .001$), suggesting that higher rates of resident romantic partnerships among White mothers accounted for some of the variation in father involvement between White fathers and the other two groups, whereas higher rates of intergenerational living among minority mothers explained little of the difference.

When parents' relationship status variables (i.e., boyfriend and friend) were entered in Step 4, the coefficients for minority fathers were reduced to zero according to Wald post hoc tests (at $p < .01$). Although both being the mother's boyfriend and being the mother's friend were positively associated with involvement, being the mother's boyfriend was the strongest predictor, suggesting that minority fathers' higher likelihood of being romantically involved with the mother explained a large proportion of the variation in involvement between White and minority fathers.

Discussion

The present study yielded new findings on nonresident father involvement. Specifically, fathers' level of resources did not explain the variation in father involvement among White, African American, and Latino fathers. Even after controlling for parents' education, age, and child gender, White fathers had lower levels of father involvement than did minority fathers. This finding is noteworthy because White fathers were more likely to have resources such as a high school diploma and employment than minority fathers in our sample, which resource theory suggests should make them more involved than fathers with fewer resources.

The difference in father involvement was explained, however, by unique patterns of relationships and household structure within the groups. Mothers in the White father group were more likely to report new romantic partners and less likely to report the biological father as boyfriend or friend than were mothers with minority partners. These results are consistent with past findings that low-income fathers are more likely to maintain high levels of engagement in children's lives when they are in a romantic relationship with child's mother (King et al., 2004) and less likely to be involved when mothers re-partner (Hofferth et al., 2002). In contrast to previous findings, we found that parent conflict (measured as parental disagreement about the child) did not vary by race and ethnicity. It is possible that we might have found different results if we had measured other aspects of the partner relationship. Overall, our findings support family systems theory more strongly than resource theory when using these specific variables to explain differences in nonresident father involvement by race and ethnicity.

Our results advance the extant literature by extending these findings to unwed, nonresident fathers of toddlers and demonstrating that patterns of relationships between parents and household structures that are specific to each racial and ethnic group may account for differences in patterns of father involvement across racial and ethnic groups. Because minority nonresident fathers of toddlers are more likely to remain romantic partners or friends with their child's mother and minority mothers are less likely live with other romantic partners, minority fathers are more likely to be in

regular contact, and potentially be engaged in positive nurturing activities (e.g., eating and playing), with their biological children than are White fathers. The implications of these findings for child development need to be explored.

A strength of the present study is the use of a national data set on low-income families. However, the study is limited by its select sample, which is poorer and younger than national norms, and underrepresents rural families. Nonetheless, because unwed and non-cohabiting parents tend to be less advantaged than other parents (McLanahan, 2004), our findings highlight trends within the population most affected by rising rates of single parenthood. Another limitation is that because of the large number of missing data on fathers' reports of their own involvement, we relied instead on maternal report. Mothers may underreport involvement or, if visitation occurs outside their home, may simply not know how often fathers engage in certain activities with children. However, even if mothers' reports are biased, we have no reason to suspect that mothers in one race or ethnic group would be more biased than mothers in another group.

Our findings point to the need for more studies on racial and ethnic differences in father involvement over time, with particular attention to the quality of relationships with partners and extended kin. It is possible that many of the romantic and friend relationships among parents will dissolve later in the children's lives, diminishing father involvement. However, it is also possible that the longer fathers are involved in their children's lives, the more likely it is that they will feel invested and, hence, remain involved even when they are no longer in a relationship with their child's mother.

References

- Cabrera, N., Ryan, R., Shannon, J., Brooks-Gunn, J., Vogel, C., Raikes, H., et al. (2004). Low-income biological fathers' involvement in their toddlers lives: The Early Head Start National Research and Evaluation Study. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice About Men as Fathers*, 2, 5–30.
- Carlson, M., McLanahan, S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2005). *Unmarried but not absent: Fathers' investments in children after a nonmarital birth*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Coley, R. L., & Chase-Lansdale, P. L. (1999). Stability and change in paternal involvement among urban African American fathers. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 13, 416–435.
- Cox, M. J., & Paley, B. (1997). Families as systems. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 48, 243–267.
- Cutrona, C. E., Hessling, R. M., Bacon, P. L., & Russell, D. W. (1998). Predictors and correlates of continuing involvement with the baby's father among adolescent mothers. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 12, 369–387.
- Danzinger, S. K., & Radin, N. (1990). Absent does not equal uninvolved: Predictors of fathering in teen mother families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52, 636–642.
- Haveman, R. H., & Wolfe, B. S. (1994). *Succeeding generations: On the effects of investments in children*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Hofferth, S. L. (2003). Race/ethnic differences in father involvement in two-parent families: Culture, context or economy? *Journal of Family Issues*, 24, 185–216.
- Hofferth, S. L., Pleck, J. H., Stueve, J. L., Bianchi, S., & Sayer, L. (2002). The demography of fathers: What fathers do. In C. Tamis-LeMonda & N. Cabrera (Eds.), *Handbook of father involvement: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 63–90). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Huang, C., Mincy, R. B., & Garfinkel, I. (2005). Child support obligations and low-income fathers. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 67, 1213–1225.
- King, V., Harris, K. M., & Heard, H. E. (2004). Racial and ethnic diversity in nonresident father involvement. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 66, 1–21.
- Lamb, M. E., Pleck, J. H., Charnov, E. L., & Levine, J. A. (1987). A biosocial perspective on paternal care and involvement. In J. B. Lancaster, J. Altmann, A. Rossi, & L. Sherrod (Eds.), *Parenting across the lifespan: Biosocial perspectives* (pp. 111–142). Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Martin, J. A., Hamilton, B. E., & Sutton, P. (2005). Births: Final data for 2003. In *National vital statistics reports* (No. 54). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. Retrieved September 12, 2006, from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr54/nvsr54_02.pdf
- McLachlan, G., & Krishnan, T. (1997). *The EM algorithm and extensions*. New York: Wiley.
- McLanahan, S. (2004). Diverging destinies: How children fare under the second demographic transition. *Demography*, 41, 607–627.
- Page, M. E., & Stevens, H. (2005). Understanding racial differences in the economic costs of growing up in a single-parent family. *Demography*, 42, 75–90.
- Sigle-Rushton, W., & McLanahan, S. (2004). Father absence and child well-being. In L. Rinwater, T. Smeeding, & D. P. Moynihan (Eds.), *Public policy and families* (pp. 116–155). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Sweet, J., & Bumpass, L. (1996). *The National Survey of Families and Households—Waves 1 and 2: Data description and documentation*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin. Retrieved from <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/nsfh/home.htm>

Received April 13, 2007

Revision received January 30, 2008

Accepted February 8, 2008 ■