



CPS Involvement in Families with Social Fathers

Background

Out of wedlock births, divorce, and repartnering have become increasingly common in America, contributing to greater complexity in family structures. In fact, one-third of American children are expected to live with a non-biological parental figure, usually a social father, at some point in their lives. As these experiences become more prevalent, policy makers and public advocates need to understand the dynamics and effects of various kinds of parental relationships.

A widespread belief, reflected in training materials from the Department of Health and Human Services for Child Protective Services (CPS) workers, is that families involving a non-biological (social) father figure pose a risk of abuse and neglect to children, regardless of whether the social father lives in the household or is simply dating the mother. This belief is supported by existing research that demonstrates a strong association between the presence of a social father and CPS involvement. Research studies conducted to date, however, have not fully accounted for factors that can influence mothers' selection into social father families as well as their involvement with CPS. In addition, prior research does not sufficiently explain the causal mechanisms by which social father families may be associated with increased risk of child maltreatment, or at least governmental attention due to suspected maltreatment.

This brief examines associations between children's exposure to a social father and CPS involvement using a wider range of control variables than previous studies have used. It also considers whether the social father is co-residing with the mother and whether he and the mother have joint biological children in the household. Finally, it investigates whether there are particular aspects of social father families that make CPS involvement more likely to occur.

Data and Methods

This study uses data from the three-year core and five-year in-home components of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal cohort study of 4,900 families with children born in 1998 to 2000. Information from the three-year core interview, collected around the child's third birthday, includes the mother's relationship status and demographics, family resources, and individual characteristics. Variables measuring CPS involvement were drawn from the five-year in-home survey. The analysis sample ($n = 2,927$) is limited to families that have no missing CPS involvement data; families who did not complete the five-year in-home survey or did not answer the CPS questions were excluded.

The primary outcome, CPS involvement, is a dichotomous measure of CPS contact between the three-year core and five-year in-home interviews. This data is self-reported by the primary caregiver of the child, who is the mother in 97 percent of cases. The key predictors are indicators of maternal relationship status, measured as 7 dichotomous variables: mother is living with (defined as marriage or cohabitation) the biological father of all her children, mother is living with the father of some of her children, mother is living with the father of none of her children, mother is dating the father of all of her children, mother is dating the father of some of her children, mother is dating the father of none of her children, or mother is not romantically involved. The main models were constructed with "living with father of all" as the reference category.

Control variables include basic demographics, such as race/ethnicity and city of residence; family resources, such as family income and TANF receipt; mother characteristics, such as age, education, and employment status; and mother's mental health and risky behaviors, such as smoking or drinking during pregnancy. Father-related

controls include how he treats the mother, both physically and emotionally, and personal characteristics, such as incarceration, education, and conditions impeding work ability.

Probit regressions are used to measure the association between mothers' relationship status and CPS involvement, with controls added in different models to see the degree to which confounding factors are important. These models estimate the marginal probability of CPS involvement associated with each relationship type, relative to living with the biological father of all children in the household. Wald tests are conducted to measure the robustness of the effects of maternal relationship types and the joint significance of covariate groups (results not shown).

Results

Table 1 presents simple descriptive statistics on CPS involvement, demographic characteristics, economic status, and other characteristics for the five most common family types. In general, the results support previous research. Families with two biological parents have the lowest rates of CPS contact, followed by families in which the mother lives alone and then families with a social father. Table 1 also shows that family types differ in terms of their resources and other characteristics. Mothers dating or living with a social father are more likely to be black, younger, less educated, on welfare, and more depressed than mothers living with the father of all of their children. As these factors may also influence CPS involvement, they

Table 1: Select Descriptive Statistics by Mother's Relationship Status

	Lives with Father of All	Lives with Father of Some	Lives with Father of None	Dating Father of None	Not Romantically Involved
CPS Contact When Child Was 3-5 Years Old	0.04	0.12**^	0.11*	0.07	0.08*
Proportion Black	0.31	0.59*^	0.64*	0.70*	0.65*
Number of Children	2.07	3.23*^	1.85*^	2.25*	2.35*
Mother's Age	29.29	28.95^	25.63*	25.87*^	27.44*
Mother Worked in Week Before Survey	0.51	0.55	0.57	0.59	0.58
Mother Completed More Than High School	0.48	0.28*	0.23*	0.25*	0.30*
Logarithm of Average Annual Income	10.50	10.10*	9.86*	9.89*	9.74*
TANF Participation	0.31	0.56*^	0.62*	0.64*	0.67*
Maternal Depression	-0.13	-0.02^	0.13*	0.17*	0.15*
Mother Used Substances While Pregnant	0.21	0.27*	0.32*	0.29*	0.29*

* Significantly different from "Lives with Father of All" at the 0.05 level

^ Significantly different from "Not Romantically Involved" at the 0.05 level

Table 2: Marginal Risk of CPS Involvement, Relative to Living with Father of All Children

	No Controls	Add Basic Demographics	Add Mother Characteristics	Add Family Resources	Add Mother Mental Health and Risky Behaviors
Lives with Father of Some	.11***	.08***	.09***	.07***	.06**
Lives with Father of None	.11***	.11***	.10***	.08**	.07*
Dating Father of None	.05*	.06*	.05*	.03	.03
Not Romantically Involved	.06***	.06***	.06***	.04*	.03*

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Estimates for “Dating Father of Some” and “Dating Father of All” were calculated, but due to small numbers of these relationship types, these estimates may be unreliable and are not presented here.

need to be taken into account in order to obtain unbiased estimates of the effect of family type on CPS involvement.

Table 2 reports the results from the probit models. Column 1 presents the uncontrolled percentage point increase in risk of CPS contact for mothers in four family types compared to mothers living with the biological father of all their children. Control variables are added in each of the subsequent columns. The table demonstrates that, in general, each of these family types is associated with increased CPS involvement. For example, column 1 shows that living with a social father (of either some or none of the children in the house) is associated with an increase in the risk of CPS involvement of 11 percentage points, whereas the risk of CPS involvement is 5 percentage points higher for dating mothers and 6 percentage points higher for those who are not romantically involved. These trends hold when basic demographics and then mother characteristics are added in columns 2 and 3, reducing the effects for social fathers to 9 and 10 percentage points and leaving the effects for dating and single mothers unchanged.

The general pattern – that resident fathers of all biological children pose the least risk of CPS involvement – also holds when family resources and mother’s mental health and risky behaviors are added in columns 4 and 5. The results for all relationship types except “dating father of none” retain statistical significance, although the strength

of the family type effects on CPS contact are reduced in the two final models. Nonetheless, social father families continue to show the greatest risk, at 6 and 7 percentage points higher than that for families that include the biological father of all children. Mothers who are not romantically involved have 3 percentage points greater risk than comparison families. Thus, although the control variables reduce the strength of the findings, these reductions do not fully explain the increased risk faced by both social father and single mother families.

An additional set of probit regressions, not shown, limited the analysis to cohabiting couples where there is a present father figure (the father of some, all, or none of the children) in order to add controls for father’s characteristics and behaviors. Even with these extended control variables, social father presence continues to be associated with increased CPS involvement. Given descriptive statistics suggesting that social and biological fathers are not very different from one another in terms of demographics and behavioral characteristics, these findings suggest that something about social father presence itself is associated with increased risk of child abuse or neglect.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This paper extends prior research through its use of a rich set of control variables. The results indicate that selection

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into different family types, at least in terms of observable characteristics, is not solely driving the association between CPS involvement and social father presence. Rather, they suggest that something about the absence of a biological father contributes to increased child maltreatment risk. Whether this comes from a social father's behavior toward a child, the absence of a genetic father's protective bond with his child, complications resulting from the presence of step- or half-siblings in social father families, or simply greater CPS monitoring of social father families cannot be determined.

Overall, the study suggests that CPS agencies, in general, have some justification in viewing the presence of a social father as elevating children's risk of abuse and neglect. This implies that agencies should expand programming that strengthens relationships between social fathers and children with whom they live, rather than focusing exclusively on mothers. Although most men do not abuse or neglect children, CPS programs can help mothers improve how social fathers interact with their children to reduce risk.

RECENT WORKING PAPERS

The following comprises a list of the most recent Working Papers authored by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) faculty and research associates. A complete list of Working Papers is also available for viewing and downloading on the CRCW web site: <http://crcw.princeton.edu/publications/publications.asp>

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For more information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu> and go to "About Fragile Families" and "Collaborative Studies." To review public and working papers from the Fragile Families Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/ffpubs.asp>.

This research brief was adapted from "Mothers, Men, and Child Protective Services Involvement" by Lawrence M. Berger, Christina Paxson, and Jane Waldfogel (published in *Child Maltreatment*, August 2009, Vol. 14, Issue 3, pgs. 263-276).

A Publication of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.