



Where's the daddy?

Fathers and father-figures in UK datasets

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Executive Summary

This document highlights key research evidence and recommendations from our Full Report about the identification and categorisation of fathers in major UK datasets.

We investigated how sixteen large-scale repeated cross-sectional and longitudinal studies identify, differentiate and collect data about British fathers.

In this document we briefly report what we found; explain why it matters; highlight relevant questions and fieldwork practice; and make recommendations as to how the data about fathers might be improved for the future. The detail is set out in our Condensed Report and Full Report - both available on the Fatherhood Institute website.

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The challenge

Only 11% of British men aged 70 years or older have never fathered a child or played a significant fathering role in the life of a child¹. Yet the information we have about many of these fathers and father-figures is meagre – despite the fact that Britain is in proud possession of some remarkable datasets that reveal vital information about family life, and on which a range of national and local policies and interventions are based.

What we did

We investigated how sixteen large-scale repeated cross-sectional² and longitudinal³ datasets identify, differentiate and collect data about British fathers.

Firstly, we wanted to assess how these datasets take account of and differentiate men in different fathering relationships to dependent or adult children (birth fathers, adoptive fathers or ‘social’ fathers such as stepfathers and foster fathers).

Secondly, recognising that the usual dichotomous classification of fathers who do not live full-time with their children as either ‘resident’ or ‘non-resident’ was limiting understanding and investigation, we developed a new typology to describe fathers’ full-time co-residence, part-time co-residence and non-residence with their children (rather than with their children’s mothers as in most of the research literature on separated families). This allowed us to differentiate a range of residence patterns of fathers, for example when a father, while not cohabiting with his child’s mother, was part-time resident with his child through regular overnight care.

¹Poole, E., Speight, S., O’Brien, M., Connolly, S., & Aldrich, M. (2013). Men and fatherhood: who are today's fathers? London: National Centre for Social Research. <http://www.modernfatherhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Pages-from-Who-are-todays-fathers.pdf>.

² We looked at cross-sectional research datasets whose main purpose is not specific to parents or children. These were the 2011 Census for England and Wales, British Social Attitudes, Labour Force Survey, Family Resources Survey, Health Survey for England, ONS Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, and 2000 and 2014/15 UK Time Use Surveys. We classified the Labour Force Survey as a cross-sectional dataset for the purposes of our review, but looked at elements of its panel design that potentially enable the identification of non-resident fathers.

³ We selected longitudinal studies that collect a variety of contextual data and ‘outcomes data’ about fathers, mothers and children over time (often from birth onwards) that can be used in analyses of fathers and their impacts. These were the National Child Development Study, the 1970 British Cohort Study, the Millennium Cohort Study, Alspac, Growing Up in Scotland, the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, and Understanding Society. We looked at both childhood and adulthood sweeps where this applied.

What we found

Many UK datasets continue to use the ‘full-time resident adults and children in one household’ as the basis for questionnaire design and data collection about families, despite the increasing prevalence of second addresses and of couples/families split across households.

Some of the datasets, or studies based on them, fail adequately to differentiate the men in a household who are birth fathers, adoptive fathers, foster fathers, stepfathers, a mother’s boyfriend or partner of another parent (usually mother).

Datasets also commonly fail to identify parent-child relationships across households: for example, children who regularly stay overnight and so live part-time in their other parent’s household; parents with children residing full- or part-time elsewhere; or partners who parent children together, while not cohabiting full-time. Key cross-sectional datasets such as the Census and Labour Force Survey do not identify as fathers those men whose children do not primarily live with them.

The datasets rarely use explicit definitions when presenting terms such as ‘own child’, ‘step-parent’, ‘lives with’, ‘main residence’ or ‘shared care 50-50’ to research respondents in fieldwork instruments. Instead, research respondents use their own interpretations of the meaning of these terms when selecting a category, sometimes guided by the interviewer’s instructions.

Fathers and father figures are far more likely to be overlooked in social surveys than mothers. This is because they are less likely to be full-time co-resident with their dependent birth child, and because UK cohort studies have not followed fathers who leave the household in which they once resided with their child and their child’s mother.

The overlooking of fathers in cohort studies also results from the fact that they are less likely to be interviewed than mothers. The interviewer may have a brief to interview only one parent (or even, specifically, the mother). Time allocated for father/ partner-interviews is usually much shorter than for mother-interviews.

Much of the information we have about fathers is not gathered from the men themselves, but from their partner and sometimes their children. By contrast, most information about mothers is gathered directly.

Why this matters

Policy devised on the back of partial information, particularly when the ‘missing’ fathers are vulnerable (for example young, poor, ‘new arrivals’, suffering from health/mental health deficits or a combination of the above) may fail to address key issues, and to meet parents’ and children’s needs.

The dichotomous classification of fathers as either ‘resident’ or ‘non-resident’ masks a wide range of care-and-contact patterns: for example no-contact, daytime care, minority overnight

care (one or two nights a week), equal overnight care, majority overnight care, living part-time in the child's household, temporary longer-term non-residence with the child.

Identifying and studying the full range of fathers and father-figures in, and attached to, modern families could provide nationally representative data about the men's health, wellbeing, employment, caretaking, social attitudes and finances, and their impacts on children and mothers, so usefully informing both policy and practice.

Where small sample sizes prevent detailed analysis, establishing population numbers for categories of fathers is an important baseline for future demographic change.

Examples of relevant practice

It is encouraging that, for almost all of our recommendations (see below), there is at least one dataset providing an example of relevant practice. Here we summarise some examples, more details of which are available in our Full Report and Condensed Report:

The Health Survey for England is rare among cross-sectional datasets in fully differentiating the men in a household who are birth fathers, adoptive fathers, foster fathers and stepfathers.

A number of the longitudinal studies differentiate 'long-term away' fathers who are expected to return to live with their children. The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) identifies men who live part-time with their partner and child, including those staying for only one or two days each week.

The 2011 Census form sought to identify 'second addresses' among adults and children who are not full-time co-resident in their main household.

In at least one 'sweep' of data collection, the datasets Growing Up in Scotland and Understanding Society can differentiate care patterns of separated fathers: 'majority overnight care', 'minority overnight care' and 'equal overnight care'.

Growing Up in Scotland, the Millennium Cohort Study (the MCS) and Understanding Society can identify dependent children whose birth father or mother, not primarily residing with them, has a married/cohabiting partner who may be considered to be a non- or partially-resident stepparent to the child. Most of these will be women, but male partners of gay fathers, and male partners of mothers whose children are not primarily resident with them, will also be in this group.

The MCS can identify cohort children who remain in contact with a previously full-time co-resident stepfather who no longer cohabits with the child's parent.

Understanding Society and adulthood sweeps of the National Child Development Study and the British Cohort Study identify, among adult men, fathers and father figures whose children live primarily or all of the time in another household.

Our recommendations

- Adequate parenthood questions for both men and women should be viewed as a priority for research instruments, alongside other core variables such as “sex”/gender, socioeconomic group and economic activity.
- In addition to ‘household grid’ questions that identify parents whose children live wholly or primarily in their household, datasets should routinely ask questions to identify (i) fathers and mothers with dependent and/or adult children living wholly or primarily elsewhere; and (ii) dependent children with a living birth (or adoptive) father or mother living wholly or primarily elsewhere. The questions asked should also establish patterns of part-time residence and overnight care.
- Organisations funding and directing cross-sectional and longitudinal studies should consider more comprehensively differentiating categories of fathers and mothers through adaptations and additions to questionnaires (see our Condensed Report).
- Some level of dataset harmonisation may be appropriate on these issues, taking into account the different purposes of different datasets. Cognitive interviewing might explore how respondents interpret questionnaire terms.
- Increased funding may enable longer interviews with, and observational data for, full-time co-resident fathers, in order to establish a more comprehensive picture of how these fathers affect cohort members’ childhoods and lives into adulthood.
- With increased budgets, cohort studies could trial data collection directly from the most involved separated fathers. Fathers with a substantial pattern of overnight care could be defined as a second household for data collection, including interviews with any cohabiting partner (step-parent).
- Cohort studies might track married/ cohabiting fathers into new households if they become non-resident, for example as a result of relationship separation, as in Understanding Society.
- With an ESRC review of longitudinal studies and preparations for the 2021 Census in progress, it may be an opportune time to re-evaluate how the design of data collections can take account of the much greater diversity of families in recent decades. In addition to input from individual studies, there may be roles for the National Statistics Harmonisation Group, the CLOSER harmonisation stream, the UK Data Archive and the Royal Statistical Society in considering our findings.

About the authors

Rebecca Goldman is a Research Associate at the Fatherhood Institute, and an independent research consultant specialising in evidence review to inform policy and practice. She previously worked in central government and the voluntary sector, commissioning and carrying out research reviews and primary research. She authored a widely cited book on fathers' involvement in children's education. Research areas include services for children and families, health interventions and social care.

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About the Fatherhood Institute

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