

Maternal Re-Partnering and Non-Resident Father Investments in Children

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT:

Background

High rates of divorce as well as non-marital and multi-partnered fertility have been associated with a decoupling of marriage and childbearing and a rise in ‘complex’ families in the United States over the past half century. As a result, most children today will not spend their entire childhood living with their married biological parents. Most commonly, children will live apart from their biological father. Father absence is known to be adversely associated with child wellbeing; however, existing evidence also suggests that, among children with non-resident fathers, father investments of time and money may have a positive influence on child wellbeing.

Many children with non-resident fathers will experience the re-partnering of one or both of their parents through marriage or cohabitation. Prior research has found that paternal re-partnering is associated with reductions in both the amount of time fathers spend with their non-resident children and the economic support they provide for them. Whereas the literature on *paternal* re-partnering and non-resident father investments in children is relatively well developed, few studies have examined the influence of *maternal* re-partnering on non-resident father investments. As such, there is limited evidence on the effects of maternal re-partnering (and new-partner fertility) on (particularly changes in) non-resident father involvement with children over time. Likewise there is limited evidence with regard to associations between maternal re-partnering and child support receipt (the scant existing evidence generally suggests that parental re-partnering is associated with declines in child support payments, but results have varied by sample characteristics (low SES/welfare recipients vs. higher SES) and types of support (formal vs. informal) examined). Finally, existing research has not examined the role of residential moves that may accompany maternal re-partnering.

A recent study by Tach, Mincy, and Edin (2010) presents what is potentially the most compelling evidence to date with regard to associations between parental re-partnering and non-resident father involvement with children. Results from both random and fixed effects models suggest that, among parents who were unmarried at the time of their child’s birth, father involvement declines when either mothers or fathers re-partner during the first five years of the child’s life. Furthermore, declines in father involvement are larger when the mother re-partners than when the father re-partners, and are particularly large when a maternal re-partnership occurs within 3 years of the birth. However, the study also has several limitations. First, its results are generalizable only to urban, relatively disadvantaged parents who experienced a non-marital birth and re-partnered within five years of that birth. Second, the study assesses associations between parental re-partnering and father-child contact, but is silent with regard to child support

payments, an important means through which non-resident fathers may invest in children. Third, the study does not address salient mechanisms through which parental re-partnering may influence father involvement, most notably residential moves that may accompany the formation of new partnerships.

This paper examines associations of maternal re-partnering, in the form of new marriages and cohabitations, with changes in non-resident father investments in children vis-à-vis both visitation and child support payments. Specifically, we estimate associations of maternal re-partnering with whether and how frequently non-resident fathers have contact with their children, as well as whether they make formal child support payments and, if so, how much they pay. We focus on both levels of and changes in these investments over time, and attempt to adjust for social selection by using standard ordinary least squares and logit regressions with extensive controls and also estimating random effects and fixed effects regressions. Finally, we investigate whether there are differences in associations of maternal re-partnering with non-resident father investments in children by whether maternal re-partnerships constitute marriages or cohabitations, whether they are accompanied by new-partner fertility, and whether they are accompanied by maternal residential moves.

Data

We use longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), a nationally representative sample of 14 to 21 year olds in 1979 who were interviewed annually from 1979 to 1994, and biennially thereafter. In 1986, the NLSY began a separate biennial survey of children born to women of the original 1979 sample. Together, the adult and child data provide detailed information on marriage, family structure, and living arrangements; a host of economic, demographic, and other characteristics and behaviors; and non-resident father involvement and child support payments for children living with their biological mothers.

Our analysis sample is based on approximately 3,300 children younger than 14 years old who spent some part of their childhood living with a single mother and whose non-resident father was alive. A child enters our sample when his or her mother is first observed being “single” (living in a residence that does not include her romantic partner or spouse); we exclude families in which parents reunify. Our analyses are conducted using a “stacked panel” consisting of child-wave observations. In all, we utilize 10,776 child-wave observations of 3,293 children.

We focus on 4 measures of father investments in children: (1) whether the father has seen the child during the past year; (2) how often the father has seen the child during the past year; (3) whether the father pays any (formal) child support; and (4) the amount of child support the father pays. We note that, although we model them separately, there is consistent evidence that child support and father involvement are positively correlated. In addition, in some models, we investigate whether maternal re-partnering is associated with changes in the geographic distance between fathers’ homes and those of their children as a result of residential mobility on the part of either parent.

Our primary predictors of interest include measures of maternal re-partnering and new-partner births. Specifically, we assess whether a mother re-partnered between contiguous interview

waves (38% of mothers re-partnered at some point during the observation period) and, in some models, whether new partnerships took the form of cohabitation (17%) or marriage (25%). We also model whether a mother had a birth with a new partner (49%).

Our models control for a range of child and maternal/household characteristics. Child characteristics include age, sex, race/ethnicity, birth order, low birth weight, and disability status. Maternal/household characteristics include age, education, US born, age at birth of first child, married at focal child's birth, lived with both parents at age 14, had a physical fight at work or school, self-esteem, locus of control, aptitude (AFQT), number of children and adults in the household, unrelated child(ren) in the household, household income, welfare receipt, and work hours. In some models, we also adjust for maternal residential moves, defined by whether the mother's address changed by 50 or more miles since the last interview.

Methods

Our analytic approach consists of standard regressions and, following the strategy of Tach, Mincy, and Edin (2010), both random effects and fixed effects models. The standard regressions (ordinary least squares and logit models) are identified by between-child variance and assess whether there are static differences in *levels* of non-resident father investments in children by whether children's mothers have remarried or formed new cohabiting unions, as opposed to having remained single. They adjust for observed (time variant and invariant) child and family characteristics that may be associated with both selection into maternal re-partnering or new-partner births and father investments in children, but are subject to omitted variable bias. The random effects models utilize both within- and between-child variation to estimate between-child differences in levels of father investments for families that do or do not experience a maternal re-partnership or new-partner birth. Like the standard regressions, they adjust for observed (time variant and invariant) selection factors. In addition, they adjust for within-child differences by accounting for individual intercepts as a component of the error term. Results from these models are subject to bias if unobserved heterogeneity between children is correlated with the key outcomes and explanatory variables. For this reason, we also estimate fixed effects regressions. These models are identified by within-child change over time and have the advantage of adjusting for unobserved time invariant child and family characteristics. That is, they assess the extent to which father investments *change* when mothers enter into new partnerships or have new-partner births, while differencing out all (observed and unobserved) time invariant factors. Nonetheless, the models are subject to bias due to omitted time variant factors as well as time invariant factors that have time varying effects on the outcome.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results reinforce Tach et. al's (2010) finding that maternal re-partnering is adversely associated with non-resident father involvement with children. We find that, on average, children whose mothers have re-partnered spend less time with their biological father and are less likely to see their biological father over the course of a year than children living with a single-mother who has not re-partnered. Indeed, results from all three estimation strategies (standard, random effects, and fixed effects regressions) reveal that both the likelihood that a non-resident father

has seen his child in the past year and the number of times the father has seen the child decrease after a mother re-partners.

We find less consistent evidence of associations of maternal re-partnering with child support payments. None of the three estimation strategies produces a significant association between maternal re-partnering and whether child support is received. At the same time, results from both the OLS and random effects (though not fixed effects) models suggest that maternal re-partnering is associated with a decrease in the amount of child support paid by non-resident fathers.

Turning to new-partner births, we find inconsistent evidence that father-child contact changes when a mother has a birth with a new partner, but consistent evidence that mothers' new-partner births are associated with decreased child support payments. Finally, we find that the geographic distance between fathers' homes and those of their children increases when mothers re-partner and that this is only partially explained by residential moves on the part of the mother; non-resident fathers are also more likely to move away from their children after a maternal re-partnership.

In further analyses (prior to the conference session), we will also examine the moderating roles of marital status, new-partner fertility, and residential moves. Specifically, we will examine whether associations of maternal re-partnering and non-resident father investments vary by (1) whether maternal re-partnerships take the form of marriage or cohabitation, (2) whether maternal re-partnerships are accompanied by new partner fertility, and (3) whether maternal re-partnerships are accompanied by a residential move. We will also conduct a variety of robustness tests to assess the sensitivity of our results to alternative assumptions regarding the endogeneity of residential moves.

Implications

Given that a sizeable proportion of children will experience maternal re-partnering, coupled with evidence that non-resident father involvement may positively influence children's wellbeing, it is crucial to understand how maternal re-partnering affects non-resident fathers' investments in children. Implications of this research for public policies regarding marriage, family formation, and child support enforcement, as well as for designing programs to promote child wellbeing in complex families, will be discussed.