

# Father and Child Well-Being

# A SCAN OF CURRENT RESEARCH



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Office of Family Assistance



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# 01. INTRODUCTION

Besides their role as financial providers, fathers today are also recognized for their roles as caregivers, playmates, and nurturers.

This is demonstrated by the growing research on the link between fathers' involvement and children's well-being, as well as the shifting focus and rigorous evaluation of programming designed to improve broad outcomes for fathers and their families.

This research scan provides information on recent data with a focus on what fatherhood looks like today. For more information on past research, see the Helpful Resources section at the end of the document.

**This update provides key statistics on characteristics of U.S. fathers; the links between father involvement and children's well-being; and the ties between fatherhood and men's well-being. We also identify limitations and gaps in the research.**





## KEY TAKEAWAYS INCLUDE:

1. Most fathers who have minor children live with them.
2. Most fathers who live with their minor children are married.
3. A growing percentage of single custodial parents are fathers.
4. Positive father involvement is linked to children's social and behavioral well-being. For example, children are more likely to graduate from high school when they have involved fathers.
5. Father absence is associated with widespread negative outcomes for children at all stages of development.
6. Fatherhood benefits fathers in many ways, including having a positive influence on their employment outcomes, mental health, and general health and well-being.

## 02. CHARACTERISTICS OF U.S. FATHERS

Fathers play an important role in their children's well-being and development, and fathers' characteristics\* can shape their relationships with their children.

Documenting characteristics such as whether fathers live with their children, their marital status, and whether they have biological children with multiple partners can help practitioners, fathers, and researchers better understand the role they play in their children's lives.



**75M**  
U.S. FATHERS

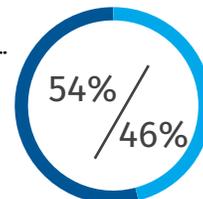
Estimated number of fathers in the United States.<sup>1</sup>



**59%**

of men over age 15 have fathered at least one child.<sup>2</sup>

**Majority of Fathers have Adult Children**



have at least one minor child

have only adult children<sup>3</sup>

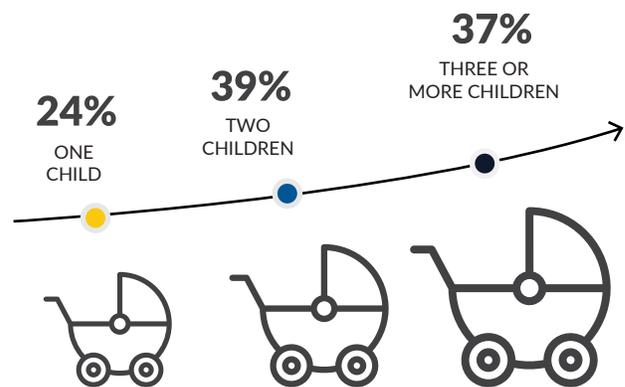
\* The authors acknowledge that characteristics beyond those reported here are important to document, but the availability of national data that can address other characteristics is limited.



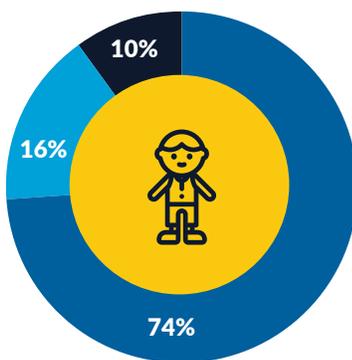
Fathers in the United States tend to have more than one child.



In 2014, 24 percent of fathers had one child, 39 percent had two children, and 37 percent had three or more children.<sup>4</sup>



### Most fathers who have children under age 18 live with their children.

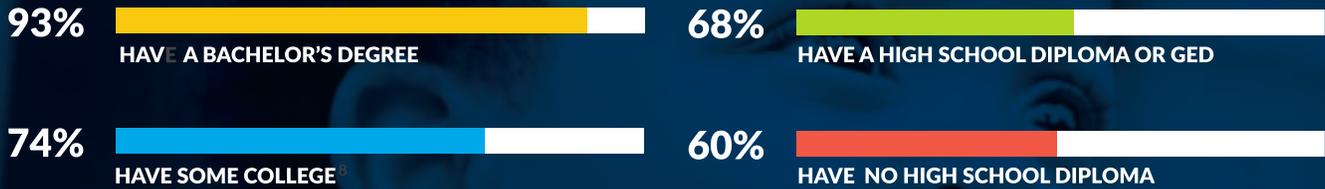


- FATHERS WHO LIVE WITH ALL OF THEIR MINOR CHILDREN AT LEAST SOME OF THE TIME<sup>5</sup>
- FATHERS WHO LIVE WITHOUT ANY OF THEIR MINOR CHILDREN<sup>6</sup>
- FATHERS WHO HAVE A MIX OF RESIDENT AND NON-RESIDENT MINOR CHILDREN

### Likelihood of living with minor children.

- A father's age, education, race, and ethnicity are linked with his likelihood of living with his minor children.<sup>7</sup>
- The older a father is when his first child is born, the more likely he is to live with all of his minor children.
- The more education a father has, the more likely he is to live with all of his minor children.

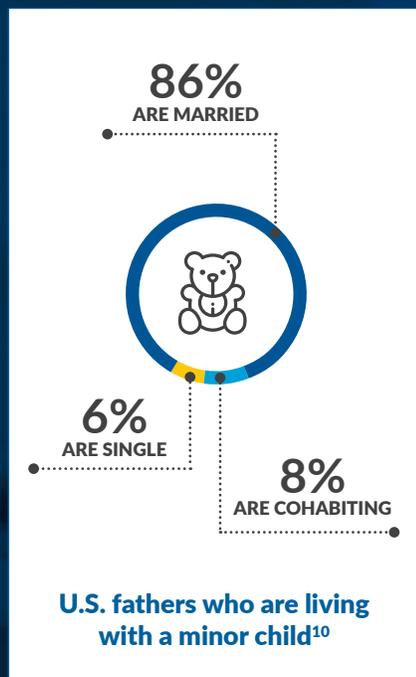
## Percentage of fathers who live with their minor children by education



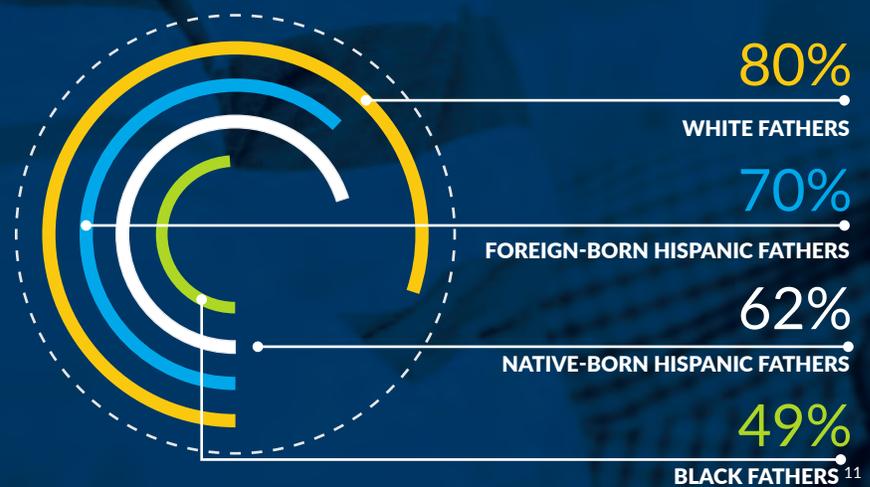
Most fathers who live with a minor child are married.

**69%**

More than two thirds of minor children live with two parents.<sup>9</sup>



## Comparison of U.S. fathers who reported living with all of their children



## A growing percentage of single custodial parents are fathers.<sup>12</sup>

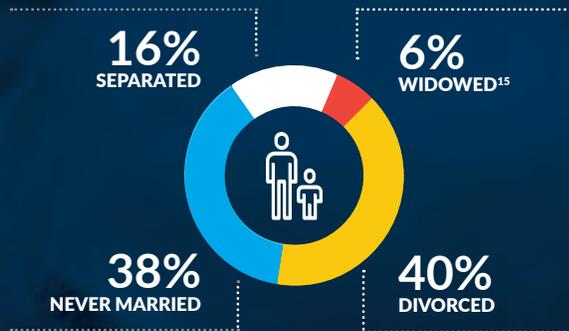


About 17 percent of all single custodial parents are fathers, which translates to roughly **3 percent** of all fathers.<sup>13</sup>

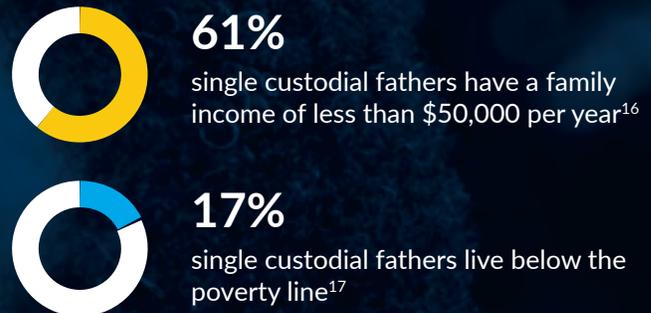
**9%** of single custodial fathers are raising three or more minor children.<sup>14</sup>



**Among single custodial fathers**



**Single custodial fathers may be economically disadvantaged.\***



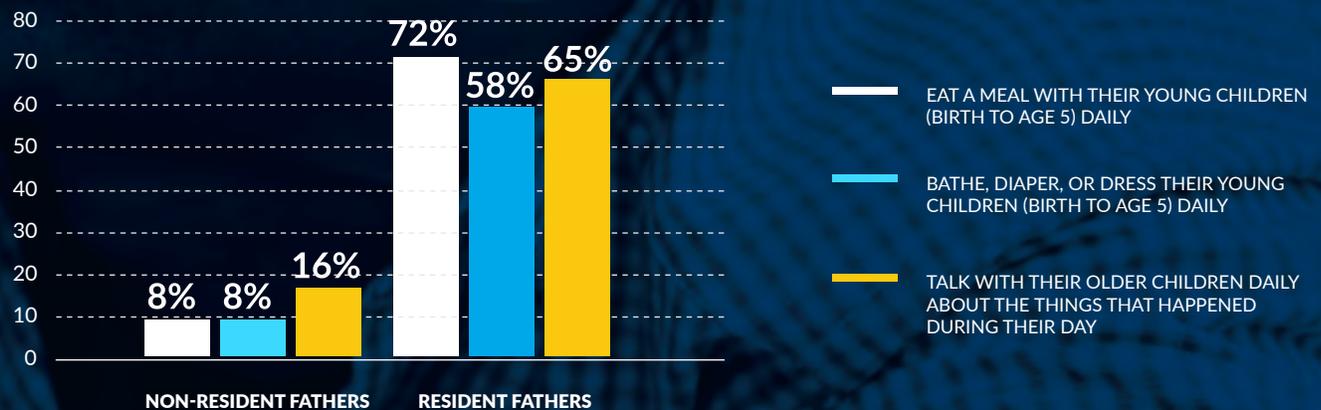
**Resident Fathers**

- Because resident fathers have constant access to their children, they tend to have high levels of involvement with them.<sup>18</sup>
- There is evidence that cohabiting fathers are more involved with their children than married fathers.<sup>19, 20, 21</sup>

**Non-Resident Fathers**

- Non-resident fathers are also involved in their children’s lives, although they are less involved than resident fathers because they do not have constant access.
- However, since 1976, an increasing number of non-resident fathers have had weekly contact with their children, and a declining percentage have had no contact with their children.<sup>22</sup>

**Resident vs. non-resident father involvement with their children<sup>23</sup>**



\* Note that nearly twice as many single custodial mothers are economically disadvantaged; 31 percent live below the poverty line, compared to 17 percent of single custodial fathers. Grall, T. (2016).

## Fathers who have children with more than one partner.

1. Fathers who have children with more than one partner are more likely to have a child as a teenager and be unmarried when their first child is born, compared to fathers who have a child with only one partner.<sup>24</sup>
2. Black fathers are more likely than white or Hispanic fathers to have children with multiple partners.<sup>25</sup>
3. Fathers with lower educational attainment are more likely than those with a college degree to have children with multiple partners.<sup>26</sup>
4. Fathers who have children with more than one partner tend to spend less time and money with their previous biological children (possibly because they do not live with them anymore).<sup>27,28</sup>

# 14%



More than 1 in 7 fathers have children with multiple partners<sup>29</sup>

# 20%



Nearly 1 in 5 fathers who have two or more biological children have children with more than one partner<sup>30</sup>





# 03. FATHERHOOD AND CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

## WHAT FATHERHOOD MEANS FOR CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Fathers' involvement and positive interactions with their children are important for their children's health, self-esteem, social skills, and educational attainment. Multiple studies have found positive links between father involvement and their children's graduation from high school, social-emotional adjustment during childhood, and mental health in adulthood.<sup>31</sup> Conversely, children who do not live with their fathers are more likely to experience a variety of negative outcomes.



### BETTER SOCIAL SKILLS

High-quality interactions between fathers and children are particularly important for children's socio-emotional and behavioral development. When fathers have high-quality interactions with their children in toddlerhood, those children have better social skills in third grade.<sup>32</sup>



### CLOSER FAMILY TIES

When fathers are involved in core family leisure activities (e.g., eating dinner as a family, playing sports or participating in hobbies together, playing board games or video games), families tend to experience more closeness, more easily adapt to change, and are more likely to report that their family members are supportive compared to when fathers are less involved in these activities.<sup>33</sup>



### FEWER RISKY BEHAVIORS

Teenagers who report more emotional closeness with their fathers are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as drinking alcohol than teenagers who report less emotional closeness with their fathers.<sup>34</sup>



### FEWER DELINQUENT BEHAVIORS

Teenagers who have more involved non-resident fathers are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior (e.g., stealing, cheating in school, using drugs or alcohol) than those who have less involved non-resident fathers.<sup>35</sup>





**One study, which looked across 34 studies, found that compared with mothers, fathers better prepare their children for life (e.g., by focusing on school readiness or building social skills), have a more accurate assessment of their children's capabilities, and their involvement and monitoring are more strongly linked to good behaviors.<sup>36</sup>**

When children are raised in father-absent homes compared to two-parent homes, they are more likely, on average, to abuse drugs and alcohol, show signs of antisocial and delinquent behavior (including illegal behavior), and drop out of high school.<sup>37,38</sup>

These children are also more likely to have or experience the following:

 <p>POVERTY<sup>39</sup></p>	 <p>BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS<sup>40</sup></p>
 <p>TEEN PREGNANCY<sup>41</sup></p>	 <p>DEATH IN INFANCY<sup>42</sup></p>
 <p>CHILD ABUSE<sup>43</sup></p>	 <p>NEGLECT<sup>44</sup></p>

## 04. FATHERHOOD AND MEN'S WELL-BEING



### WHAT FATHERHOOD MEANS FOR MEN'S WELL-BEING

Research shows that being a father is linked to a number of positive outcomes for men. Fathers experience better physical and mental health than men who do not have children and are more involved in their communities.

However, fathers often report being dissatisfied with how they are doing as a parent; this is particularly true for fathers who have children with multiple partners.

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#### Employment outcomes

- Being a father is linked to positive employment outcomes including an increase in wages and work effort.<sup>45</sup>
- For non-resident fathers, spending more time with children is linked to more working hours and higher annual wages.<sup>46</sup>

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#### Involvement in Community Service

- Fathers are more likely than childless men to be involved in community service and to provide support to friends and extended family.<sup>47</sup>

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#### Effects on Health

- Fathers tend to be healthier than men who do not have children, and some research suggests they may live longer.<sup>48</sup>

## Fathers' Confidence as Parents

- Among older fathers who have children with more than one partner, 14 percent say they are doing a “bad job” parenting their nonresidential children.
- This is true of only 2 percent of older fathers who have children with only one partner.<sup>49</sup>

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### Despite these positive linkages, fathers are less likely than mothers to say they are doing a good job raising their kids.<sup>50</sup>

- This is particularly true for fathers who have children with more than one partner.
- These fathers are less likely to be satisfied with their performance as a parent than fathers who have children with only one partner.<sup>51</sup>

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### Fatherhood improves men's mental and emotional health and their confidence.<sup>52</sup>

- When fathers of preschool-aged children (ages 3 to 5) are more involved with their children, the fathers have lower rates of depression.<sup>53</sup>
- Non-resident fathers who are highly involved with their children in early childhood (ages 1 to 3) experience lower rates of depression than their peers as their children get older.<sup>54</sup>
- However, when their children are very young, involved non-resident fathers experience higher rates of depression, perhaps because of stress from the demands of child care and from staying involved after their romantic relationship dissolves.<sup>55</sup>
- As children get older and become more verbal, independent, and capable of receiving emotional support and guidance, involved non-resident fathers may get more satisfaction and fulfillment from fatherhood.<sup>56</sup>



## 05. LIMITATIONS IN THE RESEARCH

There are gaps in our understanding of fathers and fatherhood in the United States. The research field has not kept pace with the increasing diversity of U.S. fathers and families. Therefore, we generally have a poor understanding of fatherhood among diverse racial and ethnic populations. Specifically:

- 1. INSUFFICIENT DATA**

There is insufficient demographic data on fathers in general. For example, research has documented some characteristics of fathers who live with their children, but very little information is available about what U.S. fathers as a whole look like and experience.
- 2. DIFFERENT POPULATIONS**

There is a lack of research about fatherhood across different populations of fathers (e.g., fathers who are formerly incarcerated, immigrant fathers, resident versus non-resident fathers, and fathers who have children with multiple partners).<sup>57</sup>
- 3. RESEARCH IS NEEDED**

More research is needed on the effects of fatherhood on men. For example, do men experience the benefits of fatherhood in terms of employment, health, and community involvement if they have one or more children with whom they are not in contact?



## 06. THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

The ultimate goal of fatherhood programs and practice is to improve the well-being of fathers and children. To do this, we must learn more about who fathers are, especially through research focused on diverse populations.

The field of fatherhood research is growing, in part because of federal initiatives, intervention, and evaluation work focusing on the importance of fathers and fatherhood. For example, the Administration for Children and Families funds rigorous research examining topics related to fatherhood (e.g., intimate partner violence in fatherhood populations and co-parenting among Responsible Fatherhood program participants). Promising evaluation of federally and non-federally funded fatherhood programs also is taking place.

The Helpful Resources section on the next page provides more information about these efforts.

Historically, fathers were left out of parenting research. Although they are now part of this conversation, they are still understudied.



## HELPFUL RESOURCES

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- The History of Research on Father Involvement, Michael Lamb  
[https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J002v29n02\\_03](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J002v29n02_03)
- Misleading Assumptions in Fatherhood Research, Justin Dyer  
<https://ifstudies.org/blog/misleading-assumptions-in-fatherhood-research>
- Ten Key Findings from Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives, Karin Martinson & Demetra Nightingale  
<https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/75391/report.pdf>
- Ongoing Research and Program Evaluation Efforts, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation  
[https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/es\\_fatherhood\\_ongoing\\_research\\_program\\_evaluation\\_efforts.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/es_fatherhood_ongoing_research_program_evaluation_efforts.pdf)
- Fatherhood Research and Practice Network  
<http://www.frpn.org/evaluating-programs/our-research>

## ENDNOTES

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