



Fathers' Work and Child Wellbeing

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Providing financial support is one of the many important things that fathers do for children. Even with more mothers working in the United States today, fathers' earnings remain the primary source of income for most couples with children. The chances of children growing up in poverty are much greater when fathers earn too little, or do not contribute adequate child support to children not living with them.

Low wages make it hard for fathers to support their families, but so do the problems of unemployment, insufficient hours of work, and inability to get year-round work or hold a steady job. Our research on the impact of these factors helps policymakers and citizens better understand how patterns of employment differ across fathers in various family situations – and what the various patterns of work can mean for children's wellbeing.

What is Family Life Like for New Fathers?

In the United States today, four in ten babies are born to unmarried parents. But the lack of a marriage certificate does not mean that the fathers are out of the picture.

- About half of babies born to unmarried parents will go from the hospital to a home where both the mother and the biological father reside.
- Two in ten babies – about half of all those born to unmarried mothers – will live apart from their fathers. But even when fathers are not married to babies' mothers or living with their offspring, they are often involved in the lives of their children.

The Hours New Fathers Work

Working full-time throughout the year is not a common experience for all men who become fathers.

- Fathers without a college education – and especially those without a high school degree or GED – work fewer hours weekly than college-educated fathers.
- Not surprisingly, fathers who are in poor health, or who are addicted to drugs or have criminal records, have trouble getting and maintaining stable jobs with full-time hours.

How Does Parenthood Change Fathers' Work?

In a study of the work hours of 1084 fathers, we looked at how much men worked in the year before they had their first child. We also tracked how much their work hours had changed by their child's fifth birthday.

- In the years just before the men in our study became parents, married fathers worked more hours each week and were employed for more weeks of the year than the unmarried fathers. The differences were large. For example, married men worked 20 hours more per week than unmarried men who were living without a cohabiting partner.
- Married men worked much more than unmarried men in the year before their child's birth in part because married men tend to be older and better educated. Married men are also less likely to use drugs, be in poor health, or have a criminal record. But marriage also matters in its own right. Comparisons among men of the same age, education, and other social characteristics show that married men still work more than unmarried men, at least before they have a child.

- Having a baby changes work life for all men – but differently, depending on whether they are married. For married men, having a child does not lead to working additional hours, on average. But for unmarried men, having a baby goes hand-in-hand with working more hours each week and working more consistently throughout the year. These changes in unmarried men’s employment are big enough that by the time their first child turns five years old, unmarried men and married men with similar backgrounds are working almost the same number of hours per week.

How Public Policy Can Help Fathers Support Children

In various ways, public policies can help fathers in different situations do a more adequate job of supporting their children.

- By the time the first child celebrates her fifth birthday, fathers are working an average of 46 hours per week. Most mothers are working too, many of them full-time. Policies such as paid family and medical leave that help parents balance work and parental obligations can improve child and family wellbeing in the United States.
- Fathers who earn low wages often cannot adequately support families, even when they work more than 45 hours per week. Increases in the federal Earned Income Tax Credit and hikes in federal and state minimum-wage levels can help remedy this situation.
- Fathers with low levels of education or criminal records may need extra assistance to secure full-time, stable employment. Health problems or drug addictions may preclude stable employment. Income assistance, medical care, and treatment programs can help such struggling fathers – and also benefit their children.

Read more in Christine Percheski and Christopher Wildeman, “Becoming a Dad: Employment Trajectories of Married, Cohabiting, and Nonresident Fathers.” *Social Science Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (2008): 482-501.