

Spring 2020

Absentee Fathers' Intergenerational Impact on Developing Children

Neil Austin MA
University of Southern Maine

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/etd>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Austin, Neil MA, "Absentee Fathers' Intergenerational Impact on Developing Children" (2020). *All Theses & Dissertations*. 390.

<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/etd/390>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

ABSENTEE FATHERS' INTERGENERATIONAL IMPACT
ON DEVELOPING CHILDREN

A thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Leadership and Organizational Studies
University of Southern Maine

by

Neil Austin

2020

Abstract

This paper examines the crisis of single parent homes, specifically absentee fathers in America. It examines and attempts to explore how father-figure inclusion can mitigate the consequences experienced by the majority of children in absent father homes. Scholarly research to date indicates children of absentee fathers are susceptible to detrimental conditions including an increased likelihood of delinquent behavior, higher risk for teenage pregnancy, emotional instability and an increased propensity for substance abuse. Longitudinal effects can manifest as intergenerational absenteeism, arrested development, low wage employment, stunted education, recidivist incarceration and higher rates of suicide. The objective of this research is to extrapolate new knowledge about the phenomenon of absent fathers by reviewing, critiquing, and synthesizing existing literature as an offering to the body of scholarly work in hopes of reconceptualizing methods for intervention. This is accomplished through qualitative research design, utilizing integrative literature review methodology. Findings strongly suggest high rates of intergenerational father absenteeism through divorce, out of wedlock child bearing, incarceration and other issues leave children at a disadvantage in many areas, and if the rate of father absenteeism can be reduced it will also decrease rates of domestic violence, juvenile detention, unplanned pregnancies, teenaged substance abuse, and behavioral issues in school among other various social problems.

Keywords: Absent fathers, absentee father, absentee father and developing children.

Table of Contents

Title Page.....	i
Final Approval Form.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
Methodology.....	6
Researcher's Perspective.....	7
Findings and Discussion.....	9
Psychological Effects On Children.....	10
Failed Interventions.....	11
Extended Family Efforts.....	11
Social Remedies.....	12
Inadequate Systems.....	12
Substitutes.....	12
Conclusion.....	13
Limitations and Future Research.....	13
References.....	15

ABSENTEE FATHERS' INTERGENERATIONAL IMPACT
ON DEVELOPING CHILDREN

Introduction

Fathers play a significant role in the family dynamic, especially in the realm of influence on child development. Unfortunately, high rates of absenteeism through a divorce, out of wed-lock childbearing, incarceration or other issues, have negatively impacted the traditional nuclear family and left some children at a disadvantage in many areas including academic success, psychological health, and future occupational endeavors (Leath, 2017). Research has consistently revealed there are several dimensions of the father-child relationship that play a factor in the growth and development of children (Marsigilo, 2004). Though they may be culturally specific, these dimensions exist worldwide and cannot be dismissed. An absent father means absent opportunities for children globally. As such, political leaders, world health organizations, humanitarian entities, and altruistic operations world-wide would better serve their populations by paying homage and offering resources to reinforce the suffering father-child dynamic.

Literature Review

According to the 2015 United States Census Bureau, between 1960 and 2016, the percentage of children living in families with two parents decreased from 88 to 69; the percentage of children living with only their mother nearly tripled from 8 to 23 percent. In 2015, approximately 23 percent of American children under the age of 18 lived in mother-only families at any given time (US Census Bureau, 2010).

These statistics suggest almost one in four American households with children operate under conditions with a non-resident father which translates to approximately 19.7 million children. Factors contributing to this dynamic are deep and wide and do not necessarily indicate the father is not involved with the child, but rather the father does not physically live in the same household. Examples of non-resident fathers may include temporal circumstances in which the father is incarcerated or deployed with the military. Fixed examples also exist such as divorced fathers or fathers who never married. This paper will differentiate between non-resident fathers and absentee fathers, the latter operationally defined as those fathers having little to no intentional involvement with their children.

While non-resident fathers may not also necessarily be absentee fathers, empirical evidence reveals unmarried, non-resident biological fathers are at higher risk than almost any other group of men for low levels of involvement with their children (Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2004). Additionally, new fathers (non-resident or resident) who have difficulty with the transition to parenthood during the first year, may struggle to engage with their child which can manifest as diminished involvement later in the child's development (Fagan, Roy, Palkovitz & Farrie, 2009; Webber, 2018). This phenomenon

may explain the “non-participant” father identified by Pacholok & Gauthier (2010). The non-participant father is in residence with his child, but simultaneously has no involvement what-so-ever. These men tend to work long hours, have lower levels of education and hold on to the more traditional family/gender values where the mother is primarily responsible for childcare.

Regardless of etiology, father absenteeism has an undeniable negative impact on a child’s growth, development, and potentiality. The majority of research conducted in this domain began in the 1990s and cumulatively reveals a themed cluster of symptoms including an increased likelihood of delinquent behavior, higher risk for teenage pregnancy, poor academic achievement, emotional instability and an increased propensity for substance abuse (Leath, 2017; Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000; Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013). Examples supporting these risk factors are abounding.

In studying children of a deployed US Military parent, Cozza (2014), discusses elevated levels of sustained distress that manifests as behavioral and social-emotional problems. Swanson, Lee, Swanson & Tatum (2013), identify a decline in relationships with others, emotional difficulties, behavioral problems and poverty for children of incarcerated fathers. Leath (2017), cites data from the National Center for Fathering (2016), which suggest males who lack a father figure are “significantly more likely to engage in a number of risk-related behaviors such as petty crime, sexual assault, and dropping out of school.” And, in a paper submitted for a Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology, Allen (2016), explores the longitudinal effects of an abandoned son. This unfortunate man suffers a “damaged internal anima (an individual’s true inner self)”

which, for some, can result in degrees of arrested development... “keeping a man in the *son* stage of life, never merging into the responsibilities of fatherhood.”

As stated earlier, factors contributing to the condition of an absentee father are varied. Most commonly, these include lack of a legitimate means for securing a living wage, low levels of education, substance abuse, incarceration, compromised emotional or physical health, romantic relationships with someone other than the child’s mother, and unwanted pregnancies (Fagan, Roy, Palkovitz & Farrie, 2009; Barclay & Upton, 1999; Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004). These factors do not, in themselves, condemn a man to be an absentee father. However, he is at greater risk of assuming such an identity as one or more of these risk factors come into play. Adding to this confounding contingency is the unfortunate cyclic nature of the absent father that promotes itself like an intergenerational disease to the nuclear family.

The absent father crisis in America has drawn the attention of numerous research studies and spawned the emergence of a number of programs such as the National Center for Fathers and Families; the Center on Fathers, Families and Public Policy; the National Center for Fathering; the National Fatherhood Initiative; and the Fatherhood Project. The goal of these programs is to explore the factors associated with absentee fathers and address the residual consequences mainly through programing and policy change. Essentially these organizations have determined that effective programs must cultivate a culture of social capital integrating health care settings, schools, youth networks, and educational and vocational establishments (Cozza, 2014). Additionally, some research has revealed that absenteeism can be mitigated when fathers become involved with institutions in their children’s communities such as schools, churches, sports teams and

neighborhood organizations (Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000). In his work with incarcerated fathers, Swanson, et al. (2013), also discovered that being exposed to spiritual teachings can foster an awareness of the importance of familial provision and being an active father. This enlightenment can nurture a developmental pull on fathers to make constructive changes in life choices and trajectories for the sake of their children (Fagan, Roy, Palkovitz & Farrie, 2009).

Methodology

A qualitative integrated literature review is chosen for this topic as an efficient means to examine contemporary (circa 1970s to present) data related to the investigation of absentee fathers' impact on their developing children. Literature for this paper is primarily selected from the Academic Search Complete database using relevant key terms including, "absent father", "absentee father", and "absentee father and developing children". Journal articles are universally screened with a preliminary exercise of abstract review in an effort to exclude exceptional studies with too narrow a focus.

Effort is made to operationally define and distinguish "absent" father from other relational dynamics recognized as "non-custodial", "non-resident", "non-participant" and the like, however, these are briefly addressed. This focus is intentionally chosen to construct a theoretical framework in which a specific population of fathers is examined in hopes of identifying possible remedies for its extinction.

Although this research was conceived based on the absentee father crisis in America, this comprehensive literature review includes research conducted in other countries in an effort to better understand the phenomenon itself rather than limit the study of the subject within a national boundary. The intent of expanding research beyond American studies is to glean understanding from a global array of perspectives in hopes of engendering a greater breadth of insight and scrutiny.

During the preliminary review process, each abstract was screened against the following question: "Does the article potentially identify the absentee father as having an impact on his children's development and does it explore remedies to mitigate negative developmental outcomes?" After review, a total of 17 studies were chosen for inclusion in

the literature review. Full-text versions of the selected studies were then retrieved and examined.

The studies were analyzed and scrutinized for possible remedies to the negative impact absentee fathers have on their developing children. Limitations of this approach as applied to assimilation in America include the fact that remedies discussed are relative to the country/population sampled. As such, they conform to, and exist in, specific cultural norms and mores, governmental design, infrastructure and social prioritizing of the issue which may differ from that of America.

Regardless of the population sampled, the reviewed articles reveal emergent themes of father absenteeism internationally and cross-culturally. It is clear it is a global phenomenon with intergenerational implications. It is equally clear father absenteeism contributes to a wide array of negative factors related to the development of their children. It also appears the common response to mitigating these factors has been one of social policy reform specific to the view of the affected population.

Researcher's Perspective:

I selected this topic because, as a social worker with over twenty years of experience, I've witnessed the pervasive complications it has rendered for generations of families. I'm also involved with community youth and it's much too easy to see why kids (with absent fathers) generally act the way they do. And, the adults I know that are "broken", tend to cite a lack of healthy male guidance or mentorship growing up as somehow contributing to their current circumstances.

I believe if the "broken" adults are supported early on in life, maybe they wouldn't be in the unfortunate situation they're in today. In my role as a social worker

and community volunteer, I've resolved to focus supportive efforts on helping men build healthy relationships with their children as a generational stop gap. My thought is if a father can be "present" for his children it will decrease the likelihood the children will be at a disadvantage in life.

My extended foundational belief is if men fulfill their role as husbands and fathers then the institution of marriage will be stable. If marriages are stable then families will be well balanced. If families are balanced then communities will be highly functional. My hypothesis is if these concepts can be addressed, then the rate of paternal absenteeism can be reduced which will existentially benefit communities abroad. Anecdotally, I presume this will decrease rates of domestic violence, juvenile detention, unplanned pregnancies, teenaged substance abuse, and behavioral issues in school among other various social problems. Longitudinally, I am curious to discover statistics on the degree of education for children with involved vs. absent fathers along with levels of occupational income, divorce rates and overall physical and mental health.

Findings and Discussion

Scholarly literature reviewed in this study generally reflect upon the existence of absentee fathers as a broad sociological challenge that has no definitive answer. There is generalized acknowledgement the children of absentee fathers are vulnerable to experience an array of sufferings and researchers offer recommendations for policy change, programming, and funding to mitigate these risk factors, but the crisis perpetuates.

Limitations of contemporary studies on the matter include misdirected effort toward relieving the symptoms of absentee fathers - impacts on childhood welfare and development - rather than treating and eliminating the disease - the absentee father dilemma. This is much like having to continually sweep away cobwebs in the corner rather than simply getting rid of the spider. The relatively small sample of research studied for this paper reveals there is work to be done in this area. However, there emerged a commonality throughout the readings that may instigate a paradigm shift in the way this issue is considered.

The intergenerational component of absentee fathers permeated research reviewed. Regardless of the population group examined: incarcerated fathers, teen-aged fathers, those in ethnic minorities, fathers with low education, those in low socio-economic status, out of wedlock fathers, substance abusers, and fathers with mental health issues... every group showed evidence of an intergenerational influence. The absentee father as an entity of society may never be extinguished but if this intergenerational influence is addressed then the impact on developing children may be diminished.

Although indirectly addressed as a step in this direction, some researchers have identified building a child's social capital as a potential remedy. Social capital is understood to mean reinforcement of potential or existing meaningful relationships. Included in this realm are extended family, school environments, extra-curricular groups, and faith-based groups. Although the involvement of a father-figure (male role model) is promoted, it is not explicitly impressed as a necessary component of programs that promote building social capital.

Psychological Effects On Children:

In his thesis submitted for a Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology, Allen states, "Sons who are abandoned by their fathers often become moody, overcritical, and unable to form lasting and meaningful connections, especially with their loved ones" (Allen, 2016). As a psychologist, Allen postulates these sons experience feelings of abandonment or rejection that can often lead to the self-destructive consequences noted throughout this integrative literature review. If this is accurate, it lends itself to support the intergenerational component highlighted earlier which is empirically evident when considering children of incarcerated fathers among other absent father population groups.

In 2010, 2.7 million American children (1 in every 28) had an incarcerated parent and approximately 90% of them were fathers (Geller, 2013). Pragmatically speaking, this paternal absence undoubtedly impacted the child's access to material resources, paternal instruction, emotional stability, and perceptions and attitudes about familial roles and expectations. It is difficult to imagine these children were immune from the feelings of abandonment and rejection cited by Allen but it's easy to understand an inability to connect with loved ones later in life if they were not.

Across the board, there seems to be no adequate replacement for a father's presence in his children's life. As a whole, the global culture has at least recognized this as an issue and efforts have been made to attend to the gaps left behind by an absent father. However, there is something about a father-child bond that can't be manufactured or replicated. Evidence shows everything from social programming to family "fill-ins" falls short.

Failed Interventions:

For example, in 2004, in an effort to improve the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of students perceived to be "unruly" due to "absent" or "inadequate" fathers, schools in England and Wales instituted learning schemes to promote skills in these areas (Wood & Brownhill, 2016). Educators became "educarers", and the zeitgeist of the time was for schools to employ more men as a means of providing a stable male role model. This experiment ultimately lost support when results did not meet expectations and, ironically, popular consensus shifted to a more feminine-like nurturing approach vs. the strong willed, bravado strategy originally designed.

Extended Family Efforts:

Also, before depending on social interventions, when a father is absent frequently other family members may step in to assist. Oftentimes it is the grandparents that are called upon to raise the children. While this may be preferred over other options such as placement in foster care, children in this environment are not immune against succumbing to the pitfalls of an absent father. For instance, Pilkauskas and Dunifon conducted a study of 84 grandparents raising their grandchildren. They discovered these children, compared to children living in intact homes with similar socio-economic

resources, have lower cognitive scores specifically in the areas of language, literacy and math. Additionally, teachers reported these children were, “significantly less cooperative, displayed more oppositional behavior, had had higher levels of externalizing behaviors.” They were also twice as likely to repeat a grade (Pilkauskas & Dunifon, 2016).

Social Remedies:

Another genuine sociological venture includes offering varying genres of parental skill building support groups. These well-meaning programs may do well to educate the motivated father who is seeking healthy ways to connect with his children, such as teenaged fathers, but they will not reach the absent father who actively chooses not to be involved.

Inadequate Systems:

Taking another approach, efforts have also been made to at least address the material needs of children with absent fathers via the U.S. child welfare system in the form of support enforcement. Unfortunately, a disproportionate number of absent fathers already exist in low socio-economic standing and compliance is negligible (Arroyo, Zsembik & Peek, 2019). Confounding these efforts are additional obstacles including the lack of any income for incarcerated fathers, and the inability of state case management agencies to locate biological fathers to even start the process.

Substitutes:

Finally, an almost unrealistic consideration is the introduction of a step-father in substitutional fashion for mitigating some of the seemingly unavoidable and unfortunate consequences of an absent biological father, even if only to bolster economic posture (DeeLeeuw & Kalmijn, 2019). Introduction of a step-father is likely the most reasonable

inoculation for the absent father crisis but unfortunately, it is confounded by an innumerable amount of inter-personal and familial circumstances and it is virtually impossible to suggest it as an intentional intervention.

Conclusion

Recall from the beginning of this paper, in 2015, approximately 23 percent of American children under the age of 18 lived in mother-only families at any given time. That's almost one in four children who live without a father in the home. That's almost 20 million children nationwide that are vulnerable to risk factors that place them at a disadvantage in almost every aspect of growth and development. If these children succumb to any of these risk factors, they are likely to carry them into adulthood and expose their own children to similar circumstances.

The issue of absentee fathers is global, and the response from the American society has primarily been to put a band aid on it by implementing programs and policies to support and protect innocent children from the fall out as described in this paper. These interventions may provide some insulation against the full force of being abandoned, but research reveals they are ineffective in eradicating the issue.

Limitations and Future Research

Well-meaning organizations such as Big Brother – Big Sister, Watch D.O.G.S. (Dads of Great Students), Fatherhood.org, and the National Center for Fathering provide respite for children pining for that connection, that relationship that only a father can provide. But, sadly, this is as fruitful as chasing the wind except for the fact children in these programs may someday cognitively appreciate and apply the concepts of caring and kinship modeled by individuals serving in these organizations.

Moving forward, researchers would do well to examine methods, means and opportunities for disrupting the intergenerational influence of the absentee father. There is already considerable data that reflects how the dynamic of an absent father impacts various aspects of a developing child and how these undesirable attributes are passed on to the next generation. The objective now should be identifying how to eradicate them.

Perhaps a focus should be placed on impacting a cultural shift in the way America views the responsibility of fatherhood. The current paradigm lends money, resources, programming and policy toward caring for children of the fatherless rather than preventing fatherlessness itself. Future research should examine how to effect the way America evolves it's awareness, attitudes and expectations about the importance and responsibilities of fatherhood and from this information construct a longitudinal plan to reduce its occurrence.

References

- Allen, J. R. (2016). *Abandoning Oedipus: Exploration of absent fathering, abandoned sons, and the authentic self* (Order No. 10076213). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1779525525). Retrieved from <https://library.umaine.edu/auth/EZproxy/test/authej.asp?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1779525525?accountid=8120>
- Arroyo, J., Zsembik, B., Peek, C. W. (2019). Ain't nobody got time for dad? Racial-ethnic disproportionalities in child welfare casework practice with nonresident fathers. *Child abuse & Neglect*, 93, 182-196. doi:10.1016/2019.03.014
- Barclay, L., Lupton, D. (2001). The experiences of new fatherhood: A socio-cultural analysis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 29(4), 1013-1020. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2648.1999.00978
- Cozza, S. J. (2014). Supporting America's military children and families. *Applied Developmental Science*, 18(1); 1-4. doi:10.1080/10888691.2014.866399
- DeLeeuw, S. G., & Kalmijn, M. (2019). The inter-generational transmission of socioeconomic status in stepfamilies: What happens if two fathers are involved in the transmission process? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, doi:10.1111/jomf.12610
- Fagan, J., Palkovitz, R., & Roy, K., Farrie, D. (2009). Pathways to paternal engagement: Longitudinal effects of risk and resilience on nonresident fathers. *Developmental Psychology*, 45(5), 1389-1405. doi:10.1037/a0015210

- Geller, A. (2013). Paternal incarceration and father-child contact in fragile families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75(5), 1288-1303. doi:10.1111/jomf.12056
- Gunnoe, M. L., & Hetherington, E. M. (2004). Stepchildren's perceptions of noncustodial mothers and noncustodial fathers: Differences in socioemotional involvement and associations with adolescent adjustment problems. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18(4), 555-563. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.18.4.555
- Leath, S. (2017). Being better than my dad: A qualitative case study of one African American's father's journey with parenthood and intergenerational change. *Sage Journals*, 7(1), 1-11. doi:10.1177/2158244017697163
- Marsiglio, W., Amato, P., Day, R., & Lamb, M. (2004). Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(4), 1173-1191. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01173.x>
- Osofsky, J. D., & Chartrand, M. M. (2013). Military children from birth to five years. *The Future of Children*, 23(2). Retrieved from http://go.galegroup.com.ursus-proxy-1.ursus.maine.edu/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=maine_usm&id=GALE%7CA349721082&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon#
- Pacholok, S., & Gauthier, A. (2010). Non-Participant fathers in time-use studies: Uninvolved or data artifact? *Social Indicators Research*, 96(2), 249-266. doi:10.1007/s11205-009-9475-0
- Pilkaukas, N. V., & Dunifon, R. E. (2016). Understanding grand-families: Characteristics of grandparents, nonresident parents, and children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78(3), 623-633. doi:10.1111/jomf.12291

- Saltzman, J.A., MUSAAD, S., Bost, Kelly, K., McBride, B.A., Fies, B.H. (2019). Associations between father availability, mealtime distractions and routines, and maternal feeding responsiveness: An observational study. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 33(4), 465-475. doi:10.1037/fam0000519
- Swanson, C., Lee, C., & Sansone, F. (2013). Incarcerated fathers and their children: Perceptions of barriers to their relationships. *The Prison Journal*, 93(4), 453-474. doi:10.1177/0032885513501024
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2016). *Poverty Thresholds 2016*. Retrieved August 3, 2019, from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html>
- Webber, J. B. (2018). Being there (or not): Teen dads, gendered age, and negotiating the absent father discourse. *Men and Masculinities*, 1, 1-23. doi:10.1177/1097184X17747082
- Wood, P., & Brownhill, S. (2016). 'Absent fathers', and children's social and emotional learning: An exploration of the perceptions of 'positive male role models' in the primary school sector. *Gender and Education*, 30(2), 172-186. doi:10.1080/09540253.2016.1187264

FINAL APPROVAL FORM

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

May _____, 2020

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Neil A. Austin, entitled Absentee Fathers' Intergenerational Impact on Developing Children, be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Leadership Studies.



Advisor



5/15/2020

Second Reader

Accepted



Chair, Leadership Studies Department