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## **Non-Resident Fathers**

Poverty research has paid little attention to the situation of non-resident fathers. In fact, men in general have often been sidelined (Bennett and Daly 2014) with a tendency to study the relationship between gender and poverty through women's experiences. However, recent research findings which suggest significant shifts in the make-up of those living in poverty in the UK over the last decade (Fahmy 2014) and in particular changes to the nature of gendered poverty (Dermott and Pantazis 2014) make this an apposite moment to turn to the situation of non-resident fathers. Conversely, concerns with poverty and disadvantage have not been central to research on non-resident fatherhood. Nine percent of British households include a dependent child with a parent living outside the household amounting to a total of 3.3million children; the vast majority of non-resident parents are men (Wilson 2010). Poole et al. (2013) estimate that five percent of men in the UK aged 16-64 are the father to non-resident children, totalling 980,000 and that seventeen percent of fathers have non-resident children.<sup>1</sup> Work has tended to focus on the wellbeing of children, and legal and moral debates around the issue of contact between men and their non-resident children. This is a significant gap given that issues of finances have been raised in relation to the ability and willingness of men to pay child support (e.g. Natalier 2012). Lastly, while qualitative work has evocatively illustrated the ways in which family members living in different households support each other financially and negotiate feelings of obligation including across national boundaries (Batnitzky et al. 2012) and in periods of financial difficulty (Daly and Kelly 2015), quantitative research, based around data on individual households, has been less able to access these forms of transfer. Examining the circumstances of non-resident fathers helpfully foregrounds the issue of how we think about the relationships between family members across households when discussing living standards.

## Wellbeing and Breadwinning

Interest in non-resident fathers has tended to focus either on the wellbeing of children or on debates over the rights and responsibilities of men in terms of contact and financial support. The starting point

has often been a concern over whether father 'absence' has a detrimental impact on children. Research has attempted to distinguish whether there are any psychological consequences and, if so, whether they are long-lasting, if there are differences between the impact on girls and boys; and whether any impact is mediated by other factors such as the relationship between the parents, presence of step-parents and siblings, or other significant social relationships (e.g. Hawkins et al. 2007; McIntosh et al. 2010). The interest in outcomes for children has also led to identifying levels and types of contact between fathers and their non-resident children and examining what impacts on whether and how the father-child parental relationship is maintained (e.g. Cheadle et al. 2010; Kiernan 2006; Lader 2008; Poole et al. 2013). In other words, there has been a strong child-centred thread to the research questions posed.

Alongside this strand, within a predominantly qualitative research tradition, studies have provided evidence of men's subjective experience of non-residential parenthood. This has resulted in accounts of levels of contact, relationship negotiations with both children and ex-partners, and tension between ideas of entitlement and responsibility (e.g. Philip 2013; see also Wilson 2006 for an overview of some of this work). Accounts have also led to critiques of the association between 'non-resident' and 'absent' by instead illustrating the forms of communication and support that do exist and the barriers to greater involvement (e.g. Bradshaw et al. 1999; Reynolds 2009).

As across fatherhood research more generally, debates over the significance of breadwinning for the contemporary fathering role have been prominent. In relation to non-resident fathers this has largely taken the form of examining the different legal mechanisms and expectations that exist regarding its payment; how fathers themselves view the payment of child support and the basis on which child support should be required and the relationship between child support and forms of contact with non-resident children (e.g. Bradshaw et al. 1999; Cheadle et al. 2010; Natalier and Hewitt 2010). Of most relevance to the focus of this paper on poverty is that the financial support provided by non-resident

fathers has been recognised as a critical factor as to whether lone mothers and resident children live in poverty (Stock et al. 2014). However, outside of occasional references to housing costs (e.g. an Australian study by Natalier et al. 2008 focused on the housing outcomes for non-resident parents) there has been little evidence about non-resident fathers own financial circumstances.<sup>ii</sup>

### Gender, households and poverty

The feminisation of poverty thesis (Pearce 1978) has become a dominant concept for explaining the worldwide tendency for women to be poorer than men. As the increase in women's poverty has been linked to the growth of households headed by lone parents and single older women much of the attention of researchers has been on these two groups: this focus also exists within the UK. We know that the presence of children in households creates an additional financial burden so that families with children are more likely to be living in poverty than those without, and that the difficulties of managing caring responsibilities alongside financially rewarding paid work means that lone parents - the vast majority of whom are women - often struggle to make ends meet (see Culliney et al. 2014 for recent UK statistics). However, with attention focused largely on the poverty experienced by female headed households, the lack of attention to men's experience has now become a significant gap (Bennett and Daly 2014). This is not only a theoretical concern, as recent research in the UK suggests that some long-held assumptions about gender and poverty are unravelling. Dermott and Pantazis (2014) show that the nature of gendered poverty has changed over the last decade; while the financial situation of lone mothers has failed to get better, the position of older women has seen marked improvement, and solo-living men have emerged as a new poor group.

What we know specifically about non-residents fathers' economic position is limited.<sup>iii</sup> The profile of non-resident fathers by Poole et al. (2013) using the UK Understanding Society dataset notes that compared to fathers with resident children, non-resident fathers are more likely to have fewer qualifications, less likely to be in employment, less likely to be in professional or managerial positions,

and are less likely to be homeowners. While none of these are direct measures of economic disadvantage they can be read as offering proxy measures for lower incomes and therefore suggest that non-resident fathers may have lower standards of living. Dermott and Pantazis (2014) suggest that an emerging poor group of solo-living men in Britain includes some fathers who have dependent children living outside of their household. Without referencing empirical data directly and noting that there is relatively little evidence for the impact of relationship breakdown on poverty levels for non-resident fathers, Stock et al. support the idea that divorce or separation may be a risk factor for falling into poverty for those non-resident fathers who are already on low incomes (2014:29).

### Households and Families

Poverty studies tend to rely on the household as the unit of analysis and make comparisons between households. Feminist arguments have highlighted that this decision assumes that all resources in a household are pooled equally and, furthermore, that this assumption is incorrect (Bennett 2013): women, on the whole, face higher levels of deprivation and undertake more economising measures than their male partners (Cantillon and Nolan 1998; Dermott and Pantazis 2015). There is then some recognition of the inequitable allocation of resources that exist *within* households. It is also increasingly acknowledged that transfers between family members take place *across* households. Work on migration and remittances has long acknowledged the significance of remittances for the economic development of many countries and more recently the financial impact on migrants themselves (Batnitzky et al. 2012).<sup>iv</sup> We also know, from qualitative work, that poor households may rely to a large extent on family members who live elsewhere but also that the obligations to support other family may prove a strain on their own resources (Daly and Kelly 2015). 36% of the UK population say that receiving help from family or friends has had a big or very big impact on their material standard of living; 19% say giving help to family friends has had a big or very big impact (PSE UK team 2013). While these transfers may be viewed as exceptional in that they only occur in times of acute need, at particular points in the lifecycle (such as a wedding gift), or among particular ethnic groups

with a recent history of migration, the actuality may be rather different. Non-resident fathers, the majority of whom do provide financial support for dependent children (Poole et al. 2013), may represent another group for whom their household does not equate to the extent of their financial obligations.

### **Data and Sample**

This analysis draws on the Poverty and Social Exclusion survey conducted in 2012 which identified the number of people in the UK living in poverty. The PSE 2012 involved re-interviewing respondents from the 2010/11 Family Resources Survey (FRS) with fieldwork conducted between February and October 2012. In total 5193 households were included in the study, details of all household members were recorded, and all adult members of each household were asked to complete the survey. Non-resident fathers were identified through a question in which respondents were asked 'Do you have any children aged under 19 who live outside this household?'<sup>v</sup> On this basis 177 men were categorised as non-resident fathers; 54 men had both resident and non-resident children and 123 were non-resident fathers only. Most comparisons presented in this paper are between resident and non-resident fathers aged under 65 with a dependent child; they compare the 1328 men who are resident fathers only with the 177 non-resident fathers (who may also be resident fathers). At some points in the analysis differences within the category of non-resident fathers are examined. For the reasons outlined in the discussion about it was predicted that non-resident fathers would have higher levels of poverty and social exclusion than resident fathers.

A number of measures of poverty and deprivation are used in the analysis. Income poverty is measured as living in a household at or below 60 per cent of the national median equivalised income after housing costs. Deprivation is defined as not being able to afford goods or activities categorised by 50% or more of the population as necessities. This analysis uses both average deprivation scores and also the percentage of fathers in the population who lack multiple items (see Townsend 1979 for

more information on the consensual approach to poverty). 'Overall poverty' combines both deprivation and low income: individuals need to be experiencing high levels of deprivation *and* be on a low income to be categorised as living in poverty (see Gordon 2014 for more detail on how this measure is constructed and validated). In 2012, individuals were defined as living in overall poverty if they experienced three or more deprivations and were living in a household with an equivalised net income after housing costs of less than £304 per week. Subjective poverty was captured through a question on whether people feel they are living in poverty; respondents were asked whether they feel they are poor now, either 'always', 'sometimes' or 'never'. A question on 'historical poverty' asked individuals whether they had previous experience of living in poverty. Questions on economising behaviours captured a different element of living standards; respondents were asked whether they had cut back on a range of items or activities in order to keep living costs down in the last 12 months.<sup>vi</sup>

A separate set of questions were asked concerning social networks and support. These asked about the frequency of contact with friends and relatives, and the extent to which they felt they would receive practical and emotional support from family and friends in a range of circumstances. The four scenarios involving practical support were: you were ill in bed and needed help at home; you needed practical help around the home e.g. moving heavy furniture, DIY jobs; you needed someone to look after your home or possessions when away; you needed a lift somewhere in an emergency. The three involving emotional support were: you needed advice about an important change in your life, e.g. changing jobs, moving to another area; you were upset because of relationship problems or were feeling a bit depressed and needed someone to talk to; you had a serious personal crisis and needed someone to turn to for comfort and support. There were two additional questions on the impact that help received from family and friends had on their standard of living and, similarly, the impact of the help given to family and friends. Taken together, these variables provide insights into the extent of non-resident fathers' financial and social resources.

### Socio-Demographic Characteristics

The largest number of non-resident fathers are in the 35-44 age group (44%); the next largest group were the 32% aged 45-54; only 2% were under 25. There were a range of household living arrangements: a third of non-resident fathers were living alone as single adults (34%), a further 27% were living with another adult, and 33% with another adult and a child or children. Non-resident fathers were overwhelmingly white (94%), a larger percentage than for resident fathers (88%). However there were also higher numbers of non-resident fathers who identified as mixed (2%) than among resident only fathers (0.6%) and many fewer non-resident fathers who identified as Asian or Asian British Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi (1.7% compared to 7.4% of resident only fathers). Non-resident fathers tended to rate their general health as lower than resident fathers. 58% of non-resident fathers said that their health was good or very good and 16% said it was bad or very bad. In contrast 86.5% of resident fathers said their health was good or very good and only 2% said it was bad or very bad. These figures may be linked to the employment profile of non-resident fathers. Although the figures for fathers working in full-time employment are similar for non-resident and resident only fathers (68% and 70% respectively), a gap does emerge between those who are categorised as formally unemployed 10% of non-resident fathers compared to 7.5% of resident only fathers (although given the small number of cases the confidence levels are large and there is a not a significant difference between these two groups). Most notable however is the number of non-resident fathers who are permanently sick or disabled, 15% are inactive due to ill-health, compared to only 2% of resident only fathers. Non-resident fathers tend to have lower levels of educational qualifications than resident fathers. While 29% of resident fathers in the sample have a degree level of equivalent qualification this applies to only 18% of non-resident fathers; meanwhile 31% of resident fathers have GCSEs only or no formal qualifications compared to 42% of non-resident fathers.

### **Non-Resident Fathers' Standard of Living**



Using a range of measures of living standards and social participation, non-resident fathers are worse off than resident fathers. They have higher rates of poverty and deprivation, are less likely to have high levels of social support, and are more likely to say that gifts to and from family and friends have a major impact on their standard of living: however they do not have less frequent social contact with friends and family than other fathers.

### Poverty, Deprivation and Economising

Across all the measures of poverty, deprivation and economising, non-resident fathers had worse outcomes than resident only fathers (figure 1). Using the PSE poverty measure which combines low income with a lack of necessities into a single measure, 43% of non-resident fathers were poor compared to 25% of resident fathers. While the gap between the two is large (and statistically significant<sup>vii</sup>) it is also notable that both figures are high. Across the population as a whole the PSE data finds 22% of people as poor; the economic recession of 2008-2009 and subsequent government austerity measures have ensured a large increase in the percentage of the population categorised as poor over the last decade (Gordon et al. 2013). Other analysis has shown that household type also makes a difference as households with children are more likely to be poor than those without (Dermott and Pantazis 2014). Consistent with the finding on the overall measure of poverty, non-resident fathers are also significantly more likely to be categorised as poor than resident fathers using the most common based measure of poverty (< 60% median income) (40% of non-resident fathers compared to 26% of resident fathers). Non-resident fathers are also more deprived, reporting a lack of 4.4 items on average compared to 2.1 for resident only fathers. In line with this finding, non-resident fathers are more likely to be deprived or three or more items or activities classed as necessities (54% compared to 31%).

Non-resident fathers are also more likely to perceive themselves as poor; 63% of non-resident fathers said that they felt poor either sometimes or all of the time (with 26% saying that they did so all of the

time) and this compares to much smaller figures for resident fathers – 36% said that they felt poor sometimes or all of the time. It is notable that non-resident fathers are also twice as likely as other fathers to say that they have lived in poverty in the past (16% say ‘often’ or ‘mostly’ compared to 8% of resident fathers). This perhaps suggests that it is not only fatherhood status that is important in terms of these men’s likelihood of being poor but that there is some association between the prior experience of poverty and non-residential fatherhood. At least two potential reasons for this exist. The first is that financial stress causes relationship difficulties which may ultimately lead to separation. The second is that it may be poorer fathers who are more likely to end up as non-residential fathers post separation or divorce rather than in situations of equal care and shared co-residency arrangements.

On the eight measures of economising behaviours which refers to cutting back in the last year, non-resident fathers are more likely to say that they have economised on four or more of the eight possible items (58% compared to 42% of resident only fathers). In terms of the individual measures only two showed significant differences, cutting back on visits to the dentist and making contributions to pensions. Instead it is the smaller gaps which cumulatively make a difference in the general measure. Unsurprisingly, given the findings just outlined, non-resident fathers are also more likely to say that they are struggling with bills (44% say it is either a constant struggle to keep up or that they are behind compared to 26% of resident only fathers) and they have a larger number of debts (1.5 on average compared to 0.7).<sup>viii</sup>

Looking within the category of non-resident fathers has limited possibilities because of the small numbers once the group is broken down further. However, basic analyses were run to see if there were any notable differences in terms of poverty, deprivation and economising between those non-resident fathers living as a couple and those who are not (because we know that costs are reduced

when expenses are shared with another adult). However, these did not produce significant differences between the two groups.

Figure 1 about here

### Social Relationships and Support

There were no significant differences between non-resident and resident fathers with respect to the level of social contact they had with family and friends (figure 2). Nearly two-thirds of non-resident fathers said that they speak to family members at least once a week (80%), although 8% said they have contact less than once a month. Slightly fewer resident only fathers spoke to family members at least once a week (74%) but those with infrequent contact (less than once a month) was also 8%. The pattern is similar in relation to friends: the vast majority of 82% of non-resident fathers speak to friends at least once a week while only 7% have contact less than once a month; the figures for resident only fathers are 73% speaking to friends at least once a week and 5% have contact less than once a month.

In terms of their ability to draw on practical and emotional support when required a different pattern emerges, with non-resident fathers more likely to say that they lack one or more of the forms of support listed. The survey asked about a range of circumstances in which an individual might need practical or emotional support. 31% of non-resident fathers anticipated that they would have not much or no practical support (lacking in at least one category), and 26% anticipated that they would have little or no emotional support (lacking in at least one category). These figures suggest that a significant minority of non-resident fathers have limited access to social support and that this compares unfavourably with the situation of resident fathers; 17% of resident only fathers say that they would lack practical support if required and 16% that they would have limited or no access to emotional support. The largest gaps on individual measures emerged in relation to getting practical

help if they were will in bed, and receiving emotional support if they had a serious personal crisis and needed someone to turn to.

As with the measures of poverty, care also needs to be taken with looking at elements of social exclusion (social contact and social support) among non-resident fathers as the numbers are small and so statistical tests become less reliable and less likely to produce significant results due to large confidence intervals. However, bearing in mind this caveat and noting the that there was no significant difference between the two groups, it is nevertheless worth reporting the large percentage gap between non-resident fathers who were living as a couple and those who were not in terms of practical support. While 24% of non-resident fathers living as a couple anticipated that they would lack at least one form of practical support, this figure rose to 41% for those not living as a couple; perhaps as might be expected given that proximity may be important for some forms of practical aid.

The two questions on the impact of giving and receiving gifts from family and friends on fathers' standard of living produces a difference between non-resident and resident fathers with respect to the magnitude of the impact. When the response categories are collapsed into a binary variable - 'very, big, big or some impact' versus 'small or no impact' - then there are no significant differences. A substantial gap only emerges when comparing the percentage of respondents who replied that help had a 'very big' impact. In relation to the impact of help received from friends and family 22% of non-resident fathers said that this support had a very big impact on their living standards compared to 7% of resident only fathers. (Conversely, 39% of non-resident fathers and 43% of resident fathers said such help had little or no impact.) Interestingly, non-resident fathers were also much more likely to say that the help they gave to family or friends made a significant difference to their living standards; 11% said that these transfers had a 'very big impact' compared to only 2% of resident fathers. These findings may indicate either (or both) that non-resident fathers' more precarious financial situation means that transfers from friends of family members have a larger impact than for those fathers with

better access to material resources, and that non-resident fathers have more obligations to and dependency on those living in other households because of their living arrangements.

*Figure 2 about here*

## **Discussion**

The discussion of the findings focuses on three issues. First, a interpretation of the data suggesting that non-resident status is necessarily a causal influence on health, employment activity, and living standards is challenged. Second, the implications of the results for thinking about child maintenance payments is explored. Third, there is some reflection on how examining the circumstances of non-residents raises broader issues about how we think about and measure living standards across households.

Evidence that non-resident biological fatherhood is associated with negative outcomes for these men (such as a higher risk of health problems) has been used elsewhere as partial support for supporting a 'traditional' family based on marriage. For example, it has been argued that the separation and divorce which lead to the 'fatherless family' [sic] mean "poverty, emotional heartache, ill health, lost opportunities, and a lack of stability" (O'Neill 2002:14).<sup>ix</sup> It might be tempting to use the data presented in this article in this way. However, the antecedents and consequences of divorce and separation are difficult to disentangle. For example, while worse general health, and higher rates of employment inactivity due to ill health may be associated with the experience of becoming a non-resident father, there is also evidence that some measures of poorer health may be the precursors to the breakdown of a cohabiting relationship (Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010). And the profile of non-resident fathers presented here also provides some indication that it is not simply the status of being a non-resident father which is associated with a higher chance of living in poverty, but that such men are different in terms of their pre-existing socio-demographic profile than resident fathers, such as

having lower levels of educational qualifications. It would therefore be inappropriate to assume that co-residency would necessarily solve these men's relative lack of material resources and social support.

The article has focused on the resources of non-resident fathers as compared to resident fathers. However this descriptive analysis can also contribute to our understanding about the circumstances of lone mothers and, in particular, the role of child support payments for the alleviation of poverty in single parent households. Ensuring that non-resident fathers pay child support has been highlighted as an important mechanism for lifting children and lone mothers out of poverty – “establishing regular maintenance payments is a crucial factor in increasing the household income” (Stock et al. 2014, see also Bryson et al. 2012) – especially since receipt of child maintenance in the UK is low by international standards (JRF 2014). Yet, this analysis neglects to examine the situation of those who are, or should be, paying child support. While there tends to be a strong political emphasis on child poverty as a major social problem, rather poverty as a whole, it should be noted that making such payments may result in the non-resident father falling into, or further into, poverty. Aiming to move finances from one poor household to another will not be an effective mechanism for reducing overall economic hardship and so the suggestion that this should be a central element for policies focused on the eradication of poverty should not be taken for granted.<sup>x</sup>

The evidence is not that non-resident fathers have the same levels of poverty as lone mothers but that providing financial support across more than one household may be detrimental to non-residential fathers own standards of living. Perhaps more importantly, looking at fathers with non-resident children highlights the importance of relationship that involve financial responsibilities which exist outside of the household. This adds further weight to the argument made by authors such as Fran Bennett (2013) that accepting the household as the unit of analysis within poverty research presents both limits to our conceptual thinking and understandings of actual practices of support between

individuals and family members. This paper suggests that for non-resident fathers living in the recent period of economic uncertainty and welfare cuts, the combination of financial obligations to children living elsewhere alongside sustaining a household on their own means relatively high levels of poverty.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis presented in this paper provides an important additional element to our knowledge about non-resident fathers; the quality of their living standards and the nature and level of their social relationships and support. It provides significant new empirical data about the extent of poverty and social exclusion among a relatively under researched group. Beyond this, the analysis raises questions over the adequacy of suggesting that financial transfers across households can easily reduce the numbers of lone mothers living in poverty but also that looking beyond the confines of the individual household is important for capturing the realistic practices of familial social and financial support.

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<sup>i</sup> There are difficulties in measuring non-resident fatherhood: men's reports may tend to underestimate biological fathers who are non-resident either due to a lack of willingness to declare the existence of children or a lack of knowledge about their parental status (Rendall et al. 1999). The extent to which an increase in shared residency arrangements may impact on the numbers of men who say they have a non-resident child remains an open question. One (limited) study suggested that suggest between 9 and 17% of parents share childcare equally, or nearly equally, after separation (Peacey and Hunt 2008).

<sup>ii</sup> The report by The Tavistock Institute by Stock et al. (2014) does note that the payment of adequate levels of child support will rely on the availability of well paid jobs.

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<sup>iii</sup> An ongoing project based at the University of York is currently examining this topic, see Skinner and Yeung (2015) and the project website <https://www.york.ac.uk/spsw/research/poverty-non-resident-fathers/>

<sup>iv</sup> The World Bank (2006) estimates that migrants send \$220 billion to their families in their country of origin each year.

<sup>v</sup> A follow-up question asked with whom these children were living; fathers who said their children were living independently were excluded from the analysis.

<sup>vi</sup> Full details of the eight economising measures are available at [http://poverty.ac.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/PSE%20UK%20living%20standards%20questionnaire%20%282012%29%20with%20top%20level%20results\\_HHId%20%26%20Ind%20marked\\_2013.pdf](http://poverty.ac.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/PSE%20UK%20living%20standards%20questionnaire%20%282012%29%20with%20top%20level%20results_HHId%20%26%20Ind%20marked_2013.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> All of the results presented as differences in the paper are significant at the 0.05 level.

<sup>viii</sup> This is a measure of the number of debts rather than the amount owed.

<sup>ix</sup> Note however that these are rarely the central plank in right wing assertions about the value of marriage which tend to make claims firstly about the benefits to children and secondly minimising costs to the state.

<sup>x</sup> There are though other good reasons to argue that both parents should contribute to the upbringing of their children.