

“Fathers Unequal: Men as Partners and Parents in an Era of Rapid Family Change”

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The major changes in U.S. family demography are by now well-known, including a delay/decline in marriage, a rise in cohabitation, persistently high levels of divorce, and a rise in nonmarital childbearing (Cherlin, 2010). Taken together, these patterns suggest that marriage has been profoundly de-linked from childbearing and childrearing and that many children will grow up spending at least part of their childhood living away from both biological parents. However, these patterns have not unfolded equally across socioeconomic groups: highly-educated individuals are more likely to marry (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001) and less likely to divorce (Martin, 2006) than their less-educated counterparts—and increasingly so, and the gap by education in nonmarital childbearing is growing as well (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004). For children, these patterns portend a growing gap in family experiences by SES, or what McLanahan (2004) described as “diverging destinies.”

While the rising inequality in U.S. family life and its implications has received growing attention in the scholarly and popular press (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Murray, 2012; PEW, 2010; Western, Bloome, & Percheski, 2008), less well understood is the fact that these family changes have had profoundly different implications for women versus men—mothers versus fathers. Although the fraction of single parents that are single fathers has increased, mothers today remain much more likely to be awarded custody and to live with their children after union dissolution. For mothers, therefore, the implications of rising family instability are that they typically continue to live with their children but are more likely to rear their children without a co-resident partner at all or with a new partner who is not biologically related to (all of) their children. For fathers, however, growing family instability means they are less likely to be living with (all of) their children, and they are more likely to be parenting their biological children from afar (and perhaps helping rear children of new partners to whom they are not biologically related). Therefore, trends in family demography since the mid/late 20th century suggest that at the aggregate level, a) men’s involvement in family life over the life course has likely diminished, and b) there is likely growing divergence in family roles by SES. Men with high education are more likely to experience (a greater share of) their adult life course rearing their biological children within the ‘package deal,’ where partner and parental roles are circumscribed by marriage (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Townsend, 2002). By contrast, less-educated men are more likely to live away from (at least some of) their biological children and to experience complex paternal roles, including non-resident fatherhood to their biological children and co-resident fatherhood to children of their new partners to whom they are not related (Edin & Nelson, 2013).

There is a large and increasingly nuanced literature about the nature and consequences of contemporary fathers’ involvement with children, including studies focused on both more advantaged fathers and less advantaged fathers (Lamb, 2010; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Waller, 2009). Yet, there has been limited empirical attention to the broader consequences of changing family demography for men’s family involvement over the life course, and the extent to which

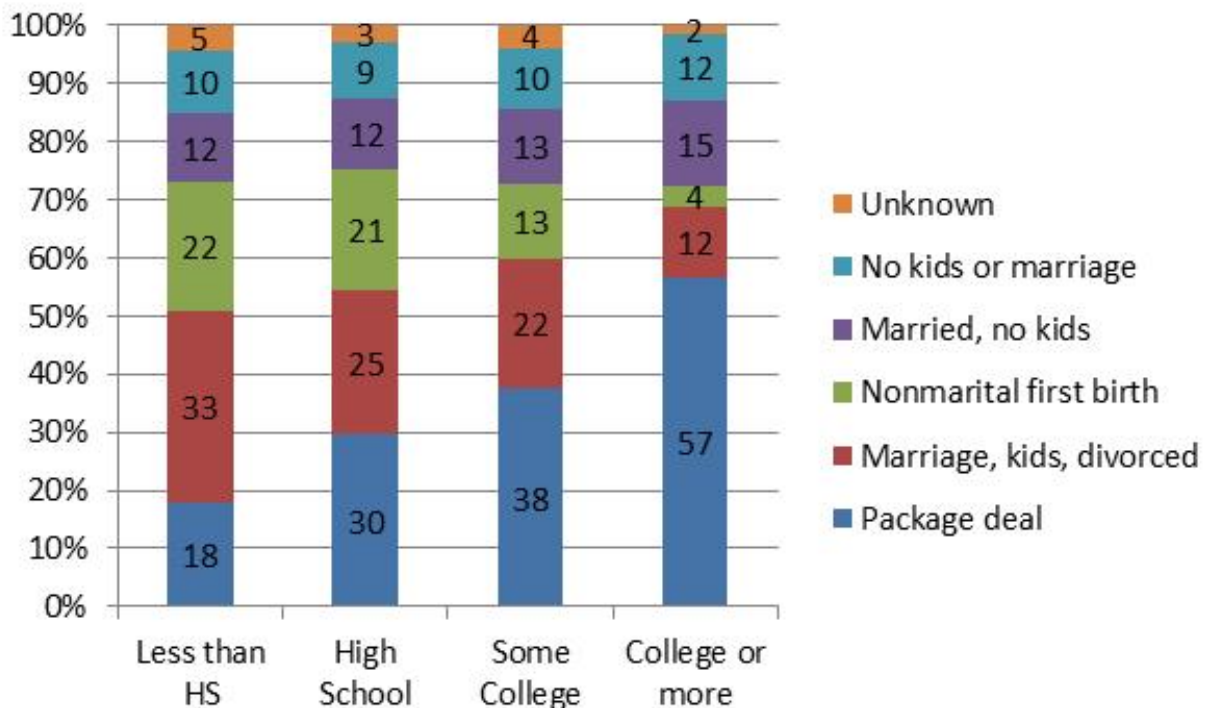
men's experiences may be diverging by socioeconomic status, at the aggregate level. A key exception concerns the work of David Eggebeen and colleagues; using Current Population Survey data for 1965-1995, Eggebeen (2002) found that men spent less time living with (their own) biological children in 1995 than they did 30 years ago, but that this was more true for those with less education; Eggebeen and Uhlenberg (1985) had similar findings using earlier data for 1960-1980. Given that families have continued to change, it is likely that we have seen even further changes in fathers' roles since the mid-1990s, including a growing educational gradient.

In this paper, I present new evidence about fathers' roles with children and rising inequality in fatherhood that has emerged over the last half century, drawing on two major U.S. data sets. First, I evaluate the aggregate trend in men's living within the so-called 'package deal' (married with their own children) using data from the Current Population Survey from 1976 through 2010. Second, I examine growing inequality in fathers' roles by first examining the trend in CPS data by men's education and then pooling the CPS years and examining the significance of the time trend in multivariate models. Then, I use data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to summarize men's cumulative life course experience with children by education and to estimate models predicting life course pathways as a function of education and other confounding factors. The latter will allow me to distinguish the extent to which education predicts family experiences via economic resources, attitudes and values, or other factors (that can be measured in the data).

Preliminary results using CPS data suggest that the overall fraction of fathers currently living with their own children has declined from 44% in 1976 to 28% in 2010. Also, while declines have been observed for all education groups, there has been notable divergence by fathers' education. In 1976, 47-48% of men with either a high school or a college degree were living with their own children; by 2010, only 24% of men with a high school education were doing so compared to 35% of men with a college degree. Also, as shown in Figure 1, the NLSY79 cohort reflects notably diverging family life course experiences by education: fully 57% of men who obtained a college degree reared their children within the 'package deal' (living with own children within marriage), compared to only 18% of those with less than a high school degree.

Overall, these results suggest that men's involvement in family life and living with children has declined over time. This circumstance likely has important implications for children, mothers, and fathers themselves, and it points to an increase in inequality between men and women and between those at the high versus low end of the socioeconomic spectrum.

Figure 1. Family Life Course of NLSY79 Men, by Education (through ages 43-50)



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