



# Fathers' Time with Children

## Income and Residential Differences

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In recent decades, there has been an increase in cognitive achievement gaps between children from low-income and higher-income families. Changes in the parenting practices of fathers may be partly responsible. The major difference in parenting practices among fathers is one of residence—whether they live with their children—rather than income. Previous research has conflated these two dimensions, often focusing on low-income fathers who do not live with their children and higher-income fathers who do while ignoring fathers who do not fit into either category. Using data from the 2011–13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth, we attempt to rectify this issue by examining differences in parenting practices across a more complete range of incomes and residential statuses.

## Introduction

The gap in cognitive achievement between children from higher-income families and low-income families has increased substantially since 1970, even as racial/ethnic differences have declined and differences by parental education have remained steady (Reardon 2011). These differences are apparent in measures of young children's capacity to do well in school (encompassing attention, behavior, mental health, and achievement) and do not narrow as children grow up (Duncan and Magnuson 2011). It is concerning that low-income children are doing so badly in light of the high percentage of children who live in poverty in the United States (DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 2015). This

is particularly problematic because a large percentage of our young people are disadvantaged in school in a society where education is the most important determinant of adult success.

Evidence suggests that changes over time for both higher-income and low-income children may be responsible for the increasing correlation between parental income and children's performance in school as well as the larger gap in achievement between these groups. This includes changes in fathering practices.

Higher-income families have increased their level of investment in their children (Duncan and Murnane 2011). Higher-income parents are more likely than others (and more likely than higher-income families in the past) to spend money on enrichment, such as a home computer, music lessons, and private schools (Kaushal, Magnuson, and Waldfogel 2011). Moreover, highly educated parents today invest more of their own time in child care activities than parents in earlier decades (Ramey and Ramey 2010). Of particular note is the increased propensity for married men to be involved with their children (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004).

While fathers' attention and involvement increased among higher-income families, children in low-income families saw greater disadvantages, such as having a nonresidential father (McLanahan 2004). Evidence suggests that because residential fathers are more likely to be involved with their children than in previous decades, father absence may be more of a detriment to children than it used to be, especially for boys (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013; Hout and Janus 2011).

In the 1960s, poor and affluent children alike typically lived with both of their parents, and their mothers did most of the day-to-day tasks of parenting (Cherlin 2011). Now, affluent children, already materially advantaged, are also much more likely than poor children to live with both of their parents. Poor children today are more likely to live apart from their fathers than poor children in the past just as the costs of nonresidential fatherhood may have increased. Putnam (2015) documents differences in coresidential fatherhood and parental involvement by income and paints a vivid ethnographic portrait of the differences in human and social capital available to children in different income groups.

That poverty, nonresidential fatherhood, and level of investment in children are correlated does not mean that they completely coincide. Despite this, research and public policy designed to increase the resources available to low-income children from their fathers have focused on nonresidential fatherhood among low-income men.<sup>1</sup> Such a focus obscures that many low-income men live with their children. Moreover, it neglects that nonresidential fatherhood occurs among higher-income families. Finally, this approach overlooks how some nonresidential fathers—including low-income fathers—are involved with their children.

Considering the possibility that changes in fathering might underlie the increasing gap in academic achievement by income, we examine fathering in various dimensions. We assume that positive fathering is related to child well-being. We do not examine child well-being directly because datasets that focus on child well-being, such as the Early Childhood Longitudinal Studies, usually lack good data on nonresidential fathers because the surveyors have to rely on the mother or the child to find the father, and strained relationships often make these connections difficult. We focus on a dataset with men as

the unit of analysis, which minimizes the bias that mothers and children will block the participation of some fathers. Of course, samples of men have biases, too; men often fail to report children with whom they do not have a relationship.

In this brief, we examine coresidence with children and fathering practices. We are interested in whether fathering behavior varies by income level and residence status. Because many low-income parents live together without being married, we focus on coresidence with the child, rather than the relationship of the father to the mother.

## Public Policy about Fathers

Much of the policy response to the increasing number of single-parent families concerns financial child support from nonresidential parents (mostly fathers). Over the past three decades, there has been an increase in the stringency of child support enforcement (Huang and Han 2012; Pirog and Ziol-Guest 2006). This increased enforcement is associated with an increase in child support payments (Case, Lin, and McLanahan 2003; Huang and Han 2012). Despite this success, increased stringency has not substantially increased child support receipt among low-income, never-married mothers (Grall 2013; Sorensen and Hill 2004). One important reason for this is that the fathers of children with low-income mothers are usually low-income men who cannot afford child support (Cancian and Meyer 2004).

These research findings have caused a steady increase in public policy and scholarly attention to strengthening the ability of nonresidential, low-income fathers to support their children financially and otherwise. This focus has uncovered consistent findings across studies. Low-income, nonresidential fathers are eager to be involved in their children's lives, but they struggle to do so for several reasons. Some face barriers to employment, including criminal records, low education, and mental health challenges. These barriers make providing financial support for their children difficult. Both they and the mothers of their children often have complex families. Conflict with their children's mothers over failure to provide support and conflicting obligations to children from different partnerships often leads to maternal gatekeeping that keeps fathers from involvement with their children (Cancian et al. 2011; Edin and Nelson 2013; Martinson and Nightingale 2008; Meyer and Cancian 2012; Waller 2002).

The Administration on Children and Families' Responsible Fatherhood initiative is one response to the needs of children and fathers who live apart. This initiative's goals go beyond increasing child support from low-income fathers who live apart from their children and directly addresses fathering more broadly.

This initiative's goal is to help men become responsible, committed, and involved fathers. The following principles guide the Responsible Fatherhood initiative: (1) all fathers can be important contributors to the well-being of their children; (2) parents are partners in raising their children, even when they do not live in the same household; (3) the roles fathers play in families are diverse and related to cultural and community norms; (4) men should receive the education and support necessary to prepare them for the responsibility of parenthood; and (5) government can encourage and promote father involvement through its programs and through its own workforce policies. (USHHS 2008, 41)

Responsible Fatherhood programs can conduct healthy marriage and relationship education programs, activities to increase fathers' economic stability, and activities to promote responsible parenting. The focus of the latter includes education about parenting practices, child development, and workforce development.<sup>2</sup> Men who participate in these programs report a high level of interest in the parenting education components (Martinson and Nightingale 2008).

The Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration also supports fathers and children who live apart. This program aims "to provide enhanced child support, employment, parenting, and case management services to noncustodial parents who are having difficulty meeting their child support obligations" (Paulsell et al. 2015). Program participants report satisfaction with the parenting education component (Paulsell et al. 2015).

Public policy about fathers has broadened to include an emphasis on the nonfinancial aspects of fathering. Research about fathers has developed alongside fathers' involvement with their children.

## Research about Fathers

Concurrent with this evolution in policy to include a focus on fathering among low-income, nonresidential parents are two developments in the research literature. First, scholars have focused on the role of fathers and father involvement in children's lives (Lamb 2010). Most studies find that father involvement is associated with better outcomes for children (Carlson and McLanahan 2010; Lamb and Lewis 2010). Second, the image of a low-income father has evolved from that of a nonresidential "deadbeat dad" to a man who is usually romantically involved with his child's mother at the time of the child's birth and who often, around the time of the birth, exhibits a substantial amount of involvement with the child (McLanahan 2011). This finding underscores that not all low-income fathers are nonresidential or are residential for all of their children's lives. The assumption that low-income fathers are "deadbeats" is simplistic and paints over substantial variability in involvement and residential status during a child's development.

The literature on fathering among low-income men remains fragmented, focusing only on a subset of fathers. Most research has been driven by concerns about the well-being of children in single-mother families and, to a lesser extent, by concerns for low-income, nonresidential fathers. Many studies are done on convenience samples, rather than samples from which we can generalize. From the scholarly literature on fathering, we have learned a good deal about married, residential fathers. Research and program evaluations have been informative about low-income, nonresidential fathers.

There is little information on fathering among low-income men who live with their children and higher-income men who do not. In this brief, we redress this gap by creating a portrait of residential and nonresidential low-income fathers and comparing it with one of residential and nonresidential fathers from more affluent households.

We address three research questions:

- How does the prevalence of fatherhood and multiple-partner fertility vary by income?
- How do fathers' contributions to child support and contact vary by income?
- How do fathers' parenting practices vary by income and residential status?<sup>3</sup>

## Data

The data come from the 2011–13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), administered by the National Center for Health Statistics approximately every five years. In the most recent survey, which we used for this analysis, male and female respondents answered questions about their families; their behavior and attitudes toward various aspects of sexual activity, marriage, fertility, and family life; and factors that influence these outcomes, such as fathering behavior and father-child coresidence. All tabulations used appropriate weights and adjustments for the NSFG's complex survey design.

## Sample

We used three samples for the analyses. Group 1 is the sample of all male respondents to the NSFG (unweighted  $n = 4,815$ ). Group 2 is the sample of all biological and adoptive fathers (unweighted  $n = 1,799$ ). Group 3 is the sample of fathers who responded to questions about fathering with regard to a focal child. Group 3 consists of men who have a residential (unweighted  $n = 1,287$ ) or nonresidential (unweighted  $n = 350$ ) child under age 19. Fathers who had both a residential and nonresidential child answered both sets of questions.

## Stratifying Variables

In this study, a *residential child* is a child who lives in the same household as the father, whereas a *nonresidential child* lives in a different household. Residential and nonresidential children analyzed in these tables include both biological and adopted children. They are either the biological children of the father surveyed or have been adopted by that father. The NSFG asked men about residential focal children who were not biological or adopted children, but we do not include these children in our analyses.

We divided men and fathers into two groups: those whose household's income fell below 200 percent of the federal poverty level the year the person was interviewed (i.e., 2011, 2012, or 2013) and those whose household had income at or above 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

## Outcome Variables: Father Involvement

We examine the living arrangements of fathers with respect to their children, multiple-partner fertility, and levels of contact with children and child support for nonresidential fathers.

Our other outcomes are parenting practices. The two oldest and most prominent themes in the literature about parenting practices are the negative consequences of harsh discipline (Gershoff 2002) and the positive consequences of the “authoritative” parenting style. *Authoritative parenting* is characterized by high levels of behavioral control and high levels of warmth (Baumrind 1967; Maccoby and Martin 1983). This positive parenting style is in contrast to authoritarian (high control and low warmth), permissive (low control and high warmth), and neglectful (low control and low warmth) styles.<sup>4</sup>

This two-dimensional vision of parenting may be simplistic. Pleck (2010) proposed a new model of fathering to better integrate the literature on paternal involvement with the larger literature on parenting. In this reconceptualization, paternal involvement has five components:

- **Positive engagement** consists of activities that fathers engage in with their children (e.g., playing games and talking things over).
- **Warmth** or **responsiveness** harks back to the more general parenting literature.
- **Control** also recalls the more general parenting literature.
- **Indirect care** “refers to activities undertaken for the child but not involving interactions with the child *with the exception of providing economic support*” (Pleck 2010, 65; emphasis in the original). An example of indirect care is making arrangements for child care, but indirect care also refers to promoting the child’s social life, such as coaching sports.
- **Process responsibility** refers to initiating arrangements to meet a child’s needs rather than waiting for a request or instructions on what to do (e.g., remembering to make a dentist appointment, as opposed to making the appointment after being asked).

We do not have indicators of all five of these components of paternal involvement; the questions about fathering on the NSFG referred to Lamb and Pleck’s original conception that conflated indirect care and process responsibility into one category of responsibility (Lamb 2010; Pleck 2010).

In the NSFG, the father involvement items are distinct for children under age 5 and children ages 5 through 18, as is customary. The fathering measures were only asked of nonresidential fathers who had seen their children in the past four weeks.

Our measures of paternal engagement are summarized in table 1. We have measures of positive engagement, warmth, and responsibility.

TABLE 1

**Fathering Measures**

Children under age 5	Children ages 5 to 18
<b>Positive engagement</b>	
Took child on an outing at least once a week	Took child on an outing at least once a week
Ate evening meal at least once a week	Ate evening meal at least once a week
Played games with child at least once a week	Helped child with homework at least once a week
Read to child at least once a week	
<b>Warmth</b>	
Showed physical affection several times a week or more	Showed physical affection several times a week or more
Praised child several times a week or more	Praised child several times a week or more
<b>Responsibility</b>	
Took child to appointments at least once in four weeks	Took child to appointments at least once in four weeks
Gave child a bath at least once a week	Took child to activities at least once in four weeks
Diapering and toileting at least once a week	Knows everything or most things about child's friends
Put child to bed at least once a week	

## Results

Our first result comes from examining group 1 (i.e., all male respondents to the NSFG). The prevalence of fatherhood is about 45 percent among men ages 15 to 49 (table 2). This does not vary by income status. Both low-income and higher-income fathers have about two children. We include the prevalence of men living with children of whom they are neither a biological or adoptive father (i.e., *social children*). The prevalence of social fatherhood is somewhat higher among low-income men.

TABLE 2

**Men's Fatherhood Experiences by Current Poverty Status**

*From the National Survey of Family Growth, 2011–13*

	Percentage of respondents who have ever had a biological or adopted child	Mean of biological or adopted children among biological or adopted fathers <sup>d</sup>	Percentage of respondents who have ever had a social child <sup>e</sup>
<b>Total<sup>a</sup></b>	43.9	2.1	19.8
<200% FPL <sup>b</sup>	44.4	2.3	23.0
≥200% FPL <sup>c</sup>	43.5	2.0	17.4

**Notes:** FPL = federal poverty level. Total N counts number of respondents in the survey. Men surveyed ranged in age from 15 to 49.

<sup>a</sup>Unweighted N = 4,815.

<sup>b</sup>Unweighted n = 2,267.

<sup>c</sup>Unweighted n = 2,548.

<sup>d</sup>Unweighted n = 1,799.

<sup>e</sup>A nonbiological or nonadoptive child with whom the father lives.

Next, we examine group 2, which is the sample of all biological and adoptive fathers in the NSFG. Most fathers live with all of their children (figure 1), and this holds for fathers across the income spectrum. Seventy-seven percent of low-income fathers and 84 percent of higher-income fathers live with at least one of their children. But a larger percentage of low-income fathers (16 percent) live with only some of their children than higher-income fathers (9 percent). This is because while almost a quarter of low-income fathers have had a child with more than one partner, only 14 percent of higher-income fathers exhibit multiple-partner fertility (figure 2).

Using data from the sample of fathers who reported on a focal child (group 3), we tabulated information about financial support and contact (figures 3 and 4). Most fathers pay child support, but the differences between low-income and higher-income fathers are stark. A quarter of low-income, nonresidential fathers report providing no money toward their focal nonresidential child, while fewer than 10 percent of higher-income men are in this category. Among fathers who pay child support, higher-income men are more likely to pay support regularly (89 percent versus 60 percent).

Higher-income men are more likely than their low-income counterparts to have visited their focal child at least once in the last four weeks; just over half of low-income men have not seen their child in the last four weeks, while only just over a third of the higher-income men are in this category.

In program evaluations and ethnographic studies, low-income men report that complex families are a barrier to having regular contact with their nonresidential children. Some men report placing a priority on the children they live with for providing what scarce resources they have. Multiple-partner fertility is more common among low-income men and may be one reason low-income fathers report lower levels of contact with their nonresidential focal child than higher-income fathers.

We find no evidence that family complexity contributes to an income inequity regarding levels of contact between nonresidential fathers and their children. When we divide nonresidential fathers into those who live with none of their children and those who live with some,<sup>5</sup> the percentage of low-income men who report seeing their child in the last four weeks is almost exactly the same in both groups (figure 5). In contrast, a larger percentage (70 percent) of higher-income nonresidential fathers who live with none of their children have seen their child in the last four weeks than those who live with some of their children (43 percent).<sup>6</sup> The percentage of higher-income men who live with some of their children who saw their nonresidential child in the last four weeks is lower than that of low-income men who live with some of their children. Family complexity appears to interfere with father-child contact more among higher-income, nonresidential fathers than their low-income counterparts.

Turning to parenting, we examine the indicators of engagement, warmth and responsibility for fathers of focal children younger than age 5 (figure 6). These data also come from group 3, the sample of fathers who answered questions about a focal child. For all men, eating evening meals and playing games together were the most common types of engagement. Unsurprisingly, residential fathers are more engaged than nonresidential fathers. The differences between residential and nonresidential fathers are larger than the differences by income. The exception is reading to children: low-income,



nonresidential men are less likely to read to their children weekly or more than higher-income, nonresidential men.

Nonresidential fathers are less warm than residential fathers, although warmth is high in all four groups we examined (figure 6.B). There are no differences by income level in warmth within either of the residential groups.

All men are somewhat more likely to help with diapering and toileting and with putting children to bed than to take children to an appointment or to give them a bath (figure 6.C). There are few differences by income level among residential fathers. The differences by income are somewhat larger among nonresidential fathers—low-income men are less responsible than higher-income men—but these differences are not as large as those by residential status.

Results for fathers' engagement and warmth for children ages 15 to 18 are similar to the results for children under age 5—that is, big differences by residential status and small differences by income level (figure 7). Just as low-income, nonresidential fathers were less likely than their higher-income counterparts to read to young children, low-income nonresidential fathers are less likely than higher-income, nonresidential fathers to help with homework. Differences in responsibility by income level are small among residential fathers and larger by income level among nonresidential fathers.

## Discussion

This brief puts the behavior of low-income, nonresidential fathers in context by comparing them with low-income men who live with their children and higher-income men who do not. The major difference in parenting practices among fathers is along the dimension of residence, not income. This is not to say there are no differences by income in fathering more generally. Low-income men are much less likely to have seen their nonresidential children in the last four weeks and are less likely to provide financial support. There are few differences between low-income fathers who have had recent contact with their children and their more affluent peers in parenting practices. There are virtually no differences by income in the parenting behavior of residential fathers, a group neglected in previous research.

Low-income, nonresidential fathers are less likely than higher-income, nonresidential fathers to read to young children and help older children with homework. These parenting practices have been associated with achievement in school. Responsible fatherhood programs should focus on the importance of these practices when conducting parenting classes among low-income, nonresidential fathers and identifying ways to improve their engagement around these activities.

That only half of low-income, nonresidential fathers have seen their child in the last four weeks is concerning, given the importance that contact and father involvement has for children's developmental outcomes. (The same is true of the finding that only two-thirds of higher-income, nonresidential fathers have had recent contact with their children.) Our results are not consistent with the idea that part of the lack of father-child contact among low-income, nonresidential fathers is because of family complexity.

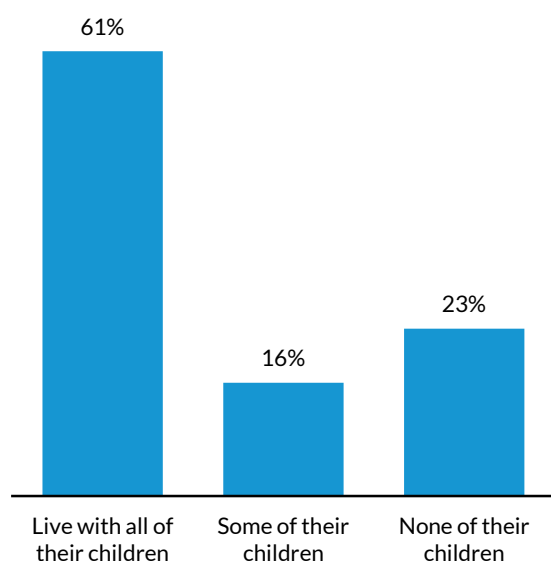
Higher-income fathers have lower levels of family complexity, but that complexity appears to interfere with father-child contact more among higher-income fathers.

Our findings both confirm and contradict Putnam's (2015) portrait of current US children, that more affluent children receive high investments of money and time from their parents, including fathers, but poor children often suffer from father absence. Low-income, nonresidential fathers are less likely to have frequent contact with their children than their higher-income counterparts. Our results also make clear, however, that a third of higher-income, nonresidential fathers do not have regular contact with their children either. Further, we find that family complexity, while more common among families of low-income fathers, has a much greater impact among higher-income fathers. Most importantly, our findings indicate that fathering behavior among fathers who have contact with their children does not vary by income among residential fathers and varies little among nonresidential fathers. When formulating public policy, we must remember that many poor children do have relationships with their fathers and those relationships do not appear to vary as much by income as by residential status in terms of fathering practices. With this in mind, we can develop more effective and supportive policies.

## Figures

FIGURE 1.A

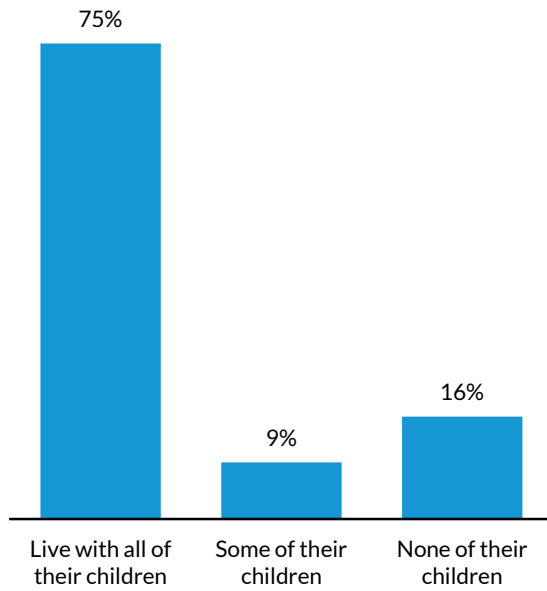
### Residential Status of Low-Income Fathers



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011–13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 1.B

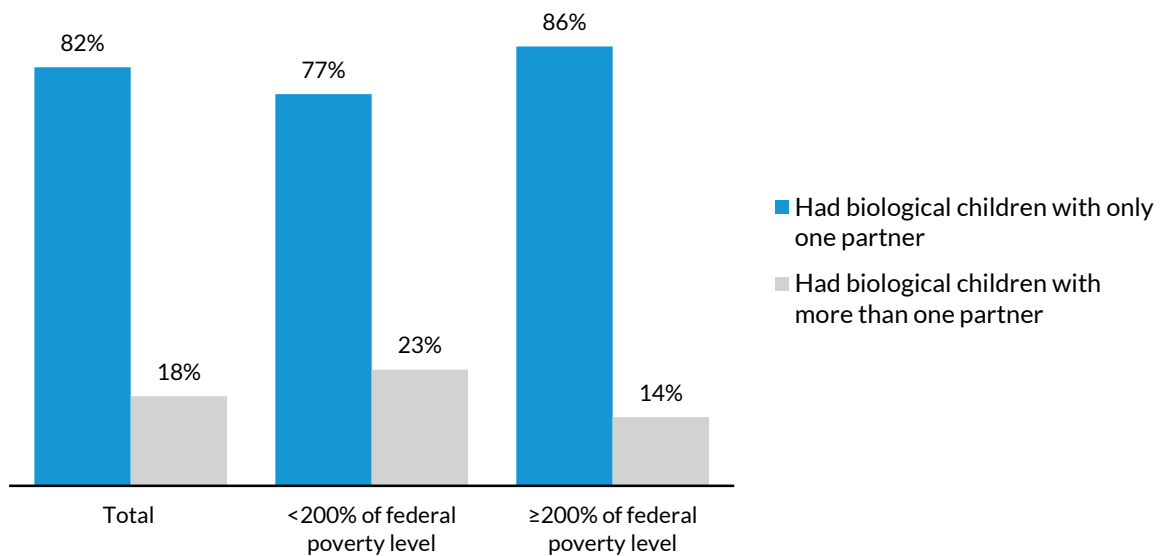
Residential Status of Higher-Income Fathers



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011-13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 2

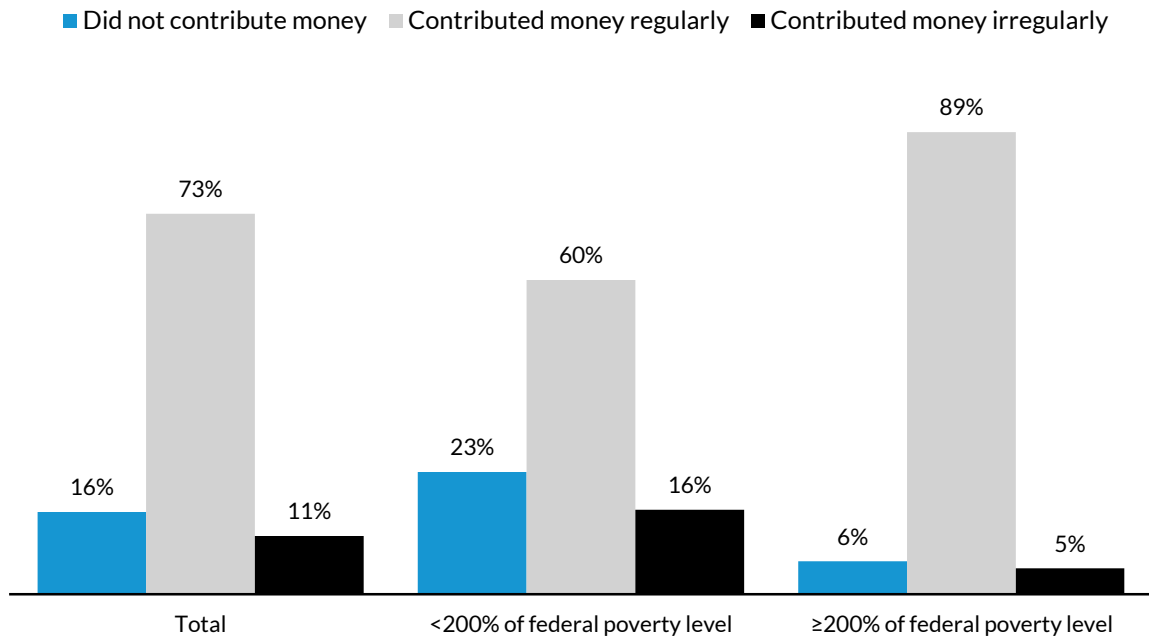
Multiple Partner Fertility of Fathers by Household Income Status



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011-13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 3

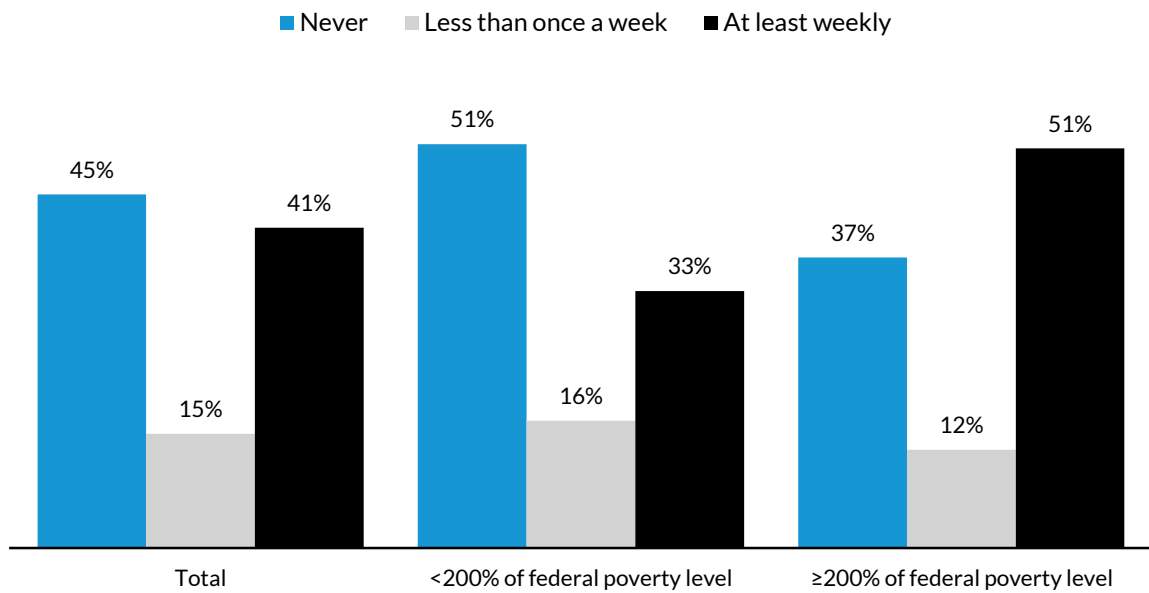
Child Support Paid by Father's Household Income Status



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011-13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 4

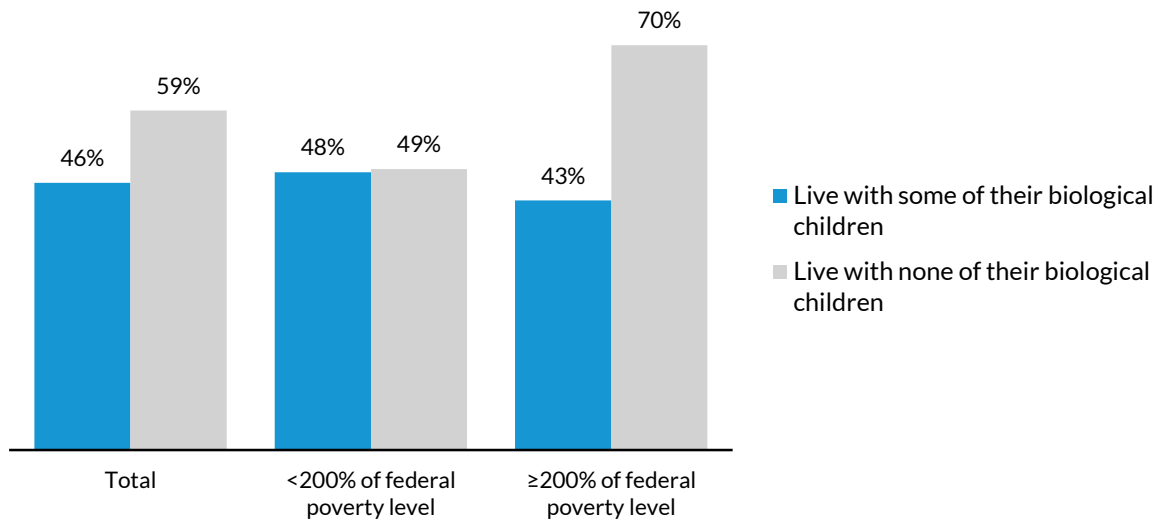
Child Contact by Father's Household Income Status



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011-13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 5

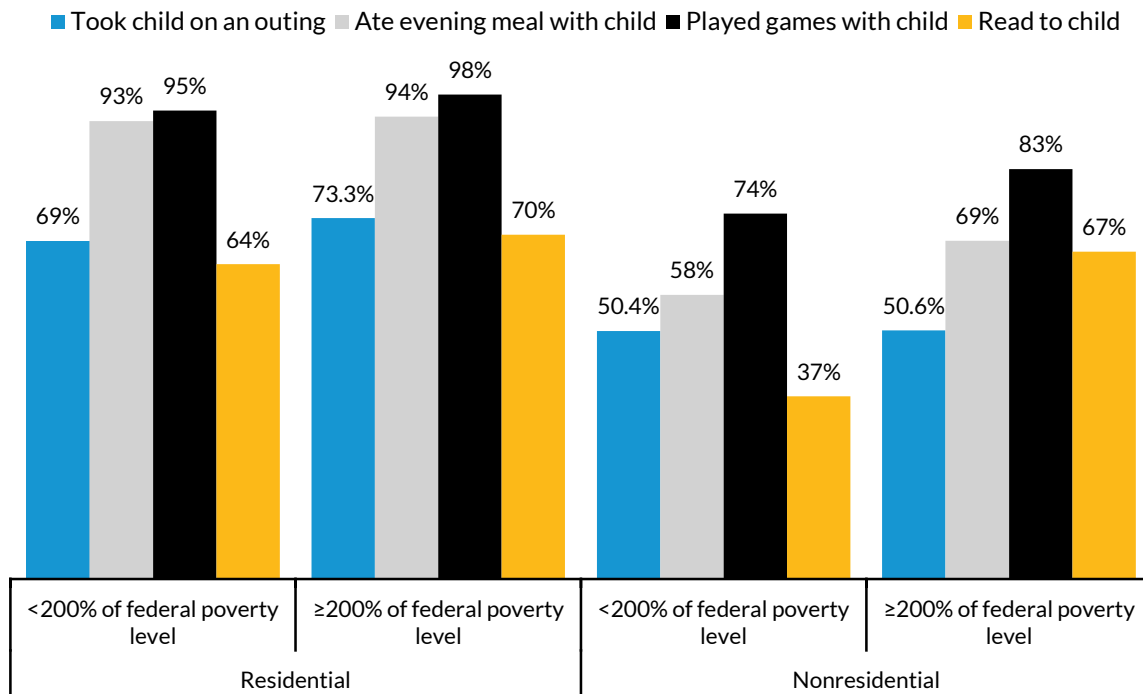
Contact in Past Four Weeks with All Children by Father's Residence and Household Income Status



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011-13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 6.A

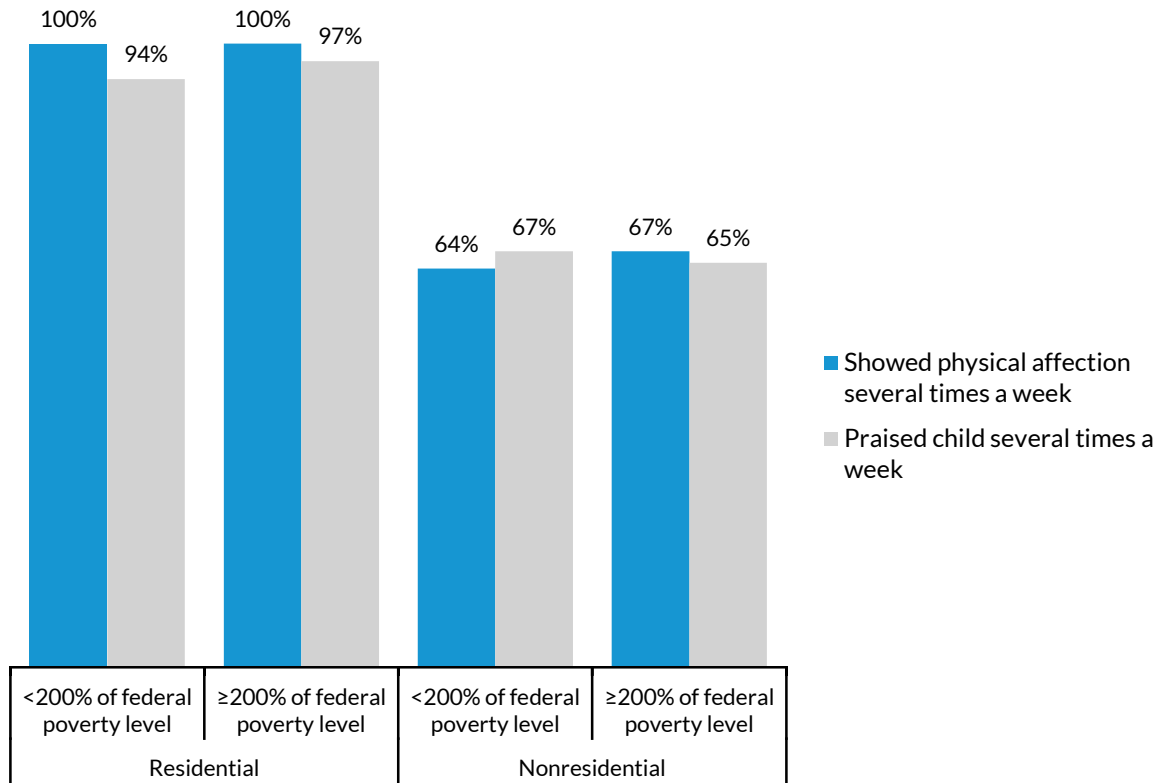
Weekly Engagement with Child under Age 5 by Father's Household Income and Residential Status



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011-13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 6.B

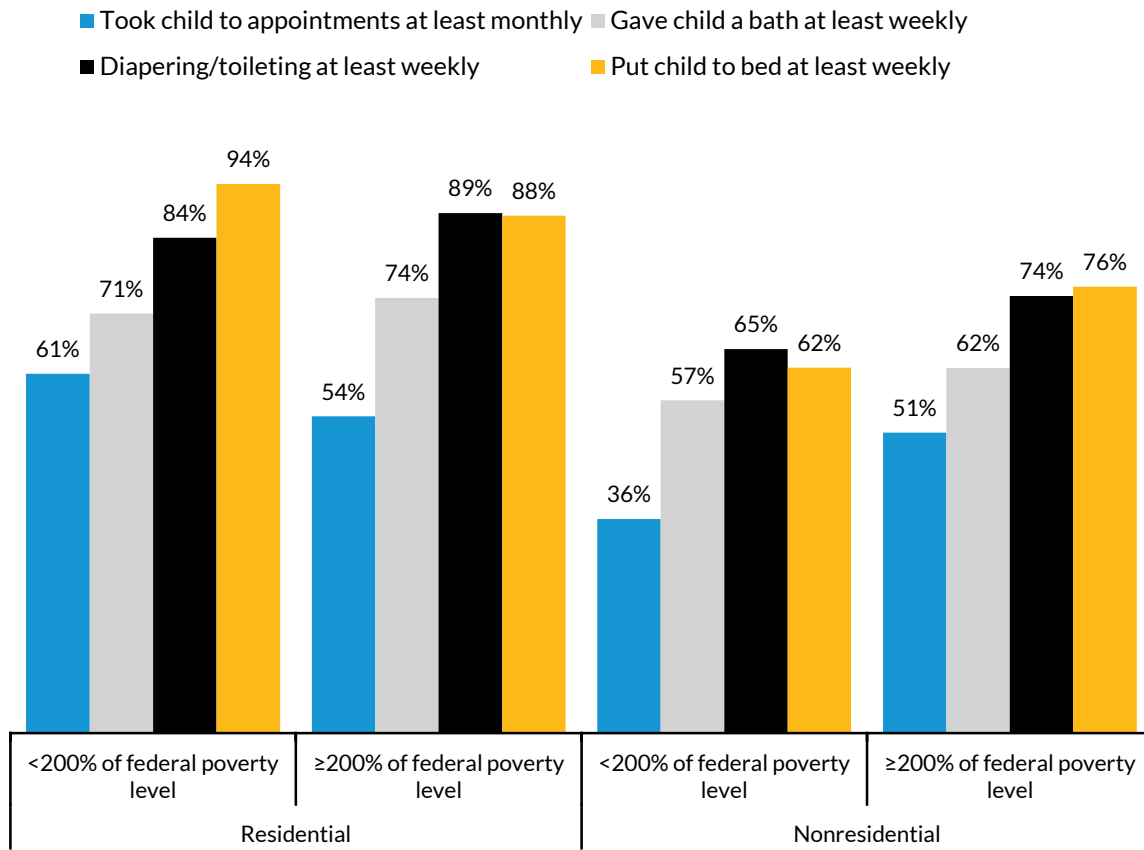
Warmth with Child under Age 5 by Father's Household Income and Residential Status



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011–13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 6.C

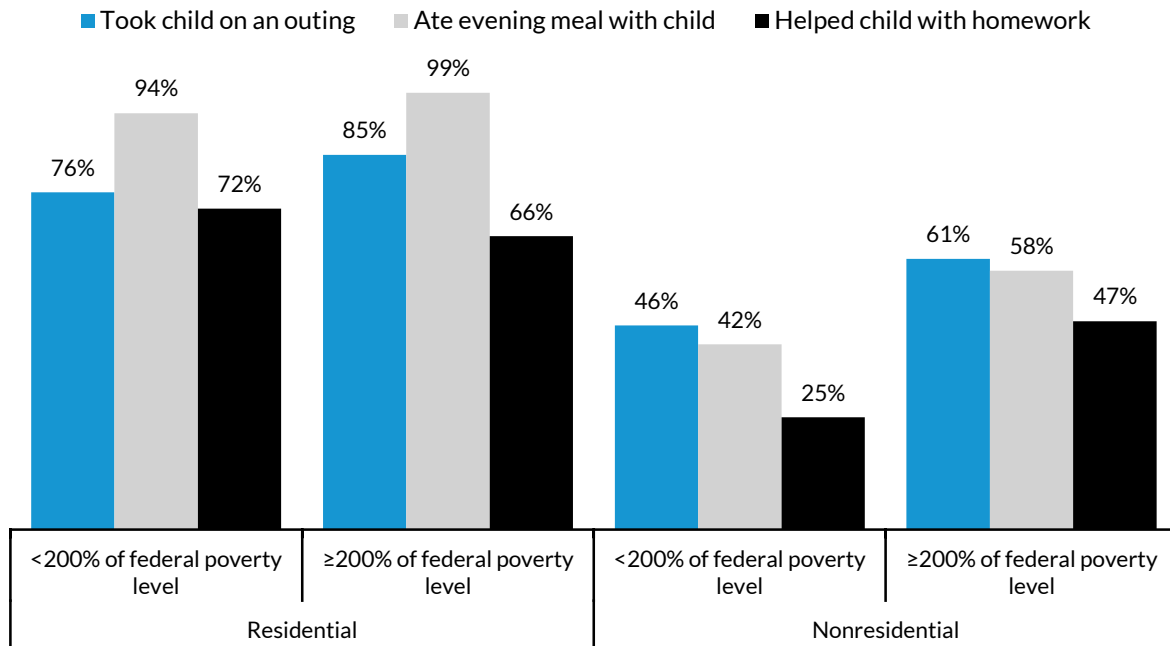
Responsibility with Child under Age 5 by Father's Household Income and Residential Status



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011-13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 7.A

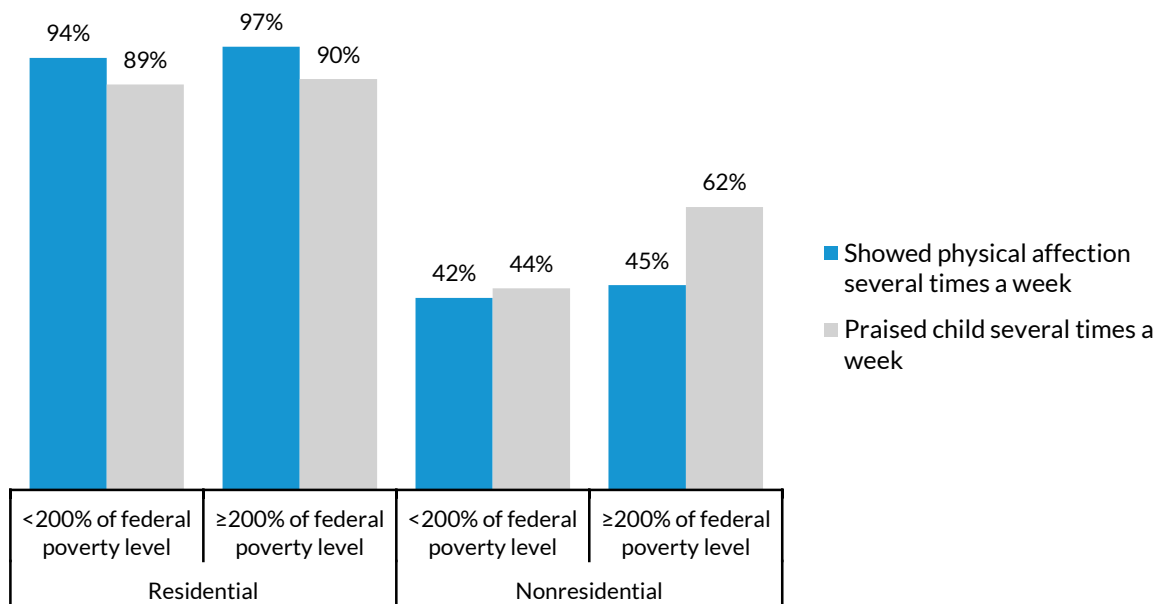
Weekly Engagement with Child Ages 5 to 18 by Father's Household Income and Residential Status



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011–13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.

FIGURE 7.B

Warmth with Child Ages 5 to 18 by Father's Household Income and Residential Status

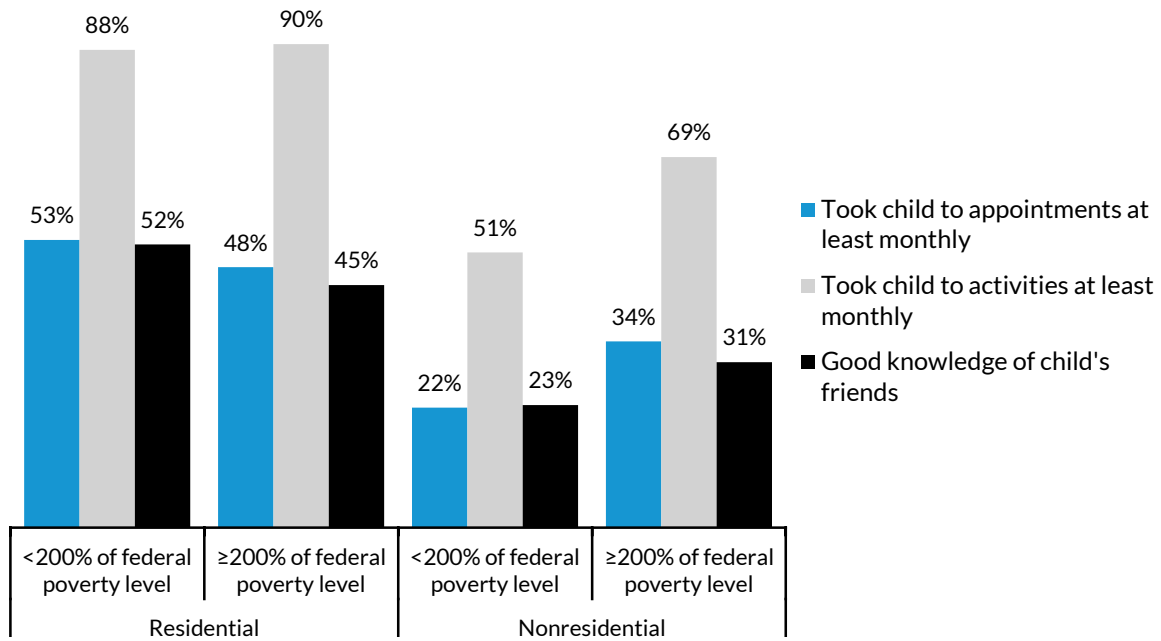


Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011–13 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.



FIGURE 7.C

Responsibility with Child Ages 5 to 18 by Father's Household Income and Residential Status



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2011-2013 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth.

## Notes

1. Researchers have also focused to a lesser extent on documenting increased paternal involvement over time among residential fathers.
2. "Responsible Fatherhood," US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, accessed September 10, 2016, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage/responsible-fatherhood>.
3. We use *residential status* as a shorthand for "residence with child or not" for ease of expression.
4. That harsh discipline is bad for children and authoritative parenting is best for children have been challenged on the grounds that they are culturally specific to white, middle class families and that families from different ethnic backgrounds and different socioeconomic circumstances enact successful parenting in different ways. These differences are because of cultural preference and necessity because of the dangerous circumstances in which some children live. Scholars argue that African Americans (Whaley 2000) and Asian Americans (Choi et al. 2013) exhibit parenting patterns that differ from authoritative and that include harsh discipline practices, and their children do not suffer.
5. We also examined the differences by multiple-partner fertility and got similar results, although they are less dramatic.
6. That contact questions were only asked about focal children makes this contrast more complex than it appears. Low-income fathers might be more likely than higher-income fathers to have children in more than two households, and this is responsible for the finding.

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