

# Nonresidential Father Involvement Among Low-Income Men

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In 2004, roughly 21% of all U.S. children lived primarily with their mothers and had fathers living elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Of these residential mother families:

- 26% lived below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL).<sup>2</sup>
- 62% had annual household incomes under \$30,000.<sup>3</sup>
- Approximately 30% were never-married, 46% were divorced or separated, and 22% were remarried.<sup>2</sup>

**Nonresidential fathers' involvement with children is related to their financial contributions and frequency of contact with their children.**<sup>4,5</sup>

### Frequency of contact with children:

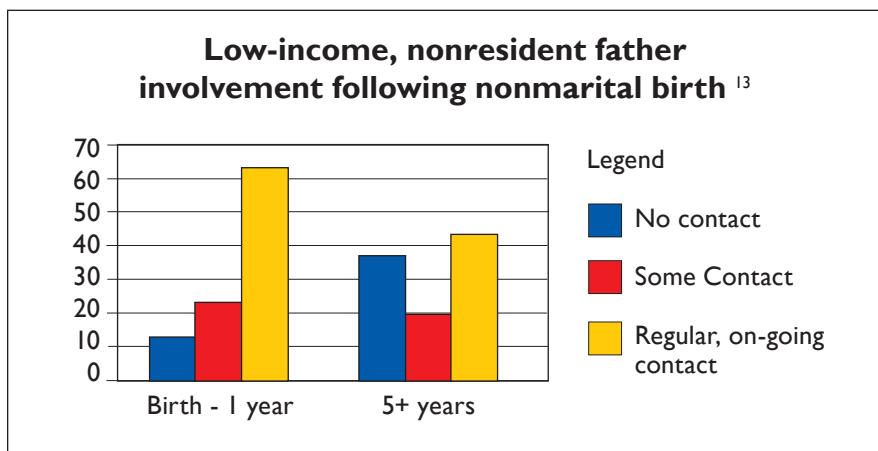
- Although frequency of contact with nonresidential children may decrease over time, the majority of low-income, nonresidential fathers maintain some contact.<sup>8</sup>
- Low-income, nonresidential fathers often struggle to maintain employment and stable housing. Many fathers may distance themselves from children out of frustration and shame related to their inability to provide for children.<sup>20</sup>

### Financial support of children:

- About 58% of residential mothers with household

incomes below the FPL have formal, legal child support agreements with their children's fathers.<sup>2</sup>

- Roughly 1/3 of these mothers receive no child support payments, 1/3 receive partial payments, and 1/3 receive full payment.
- Most low-income, nonresidential fathers do not pay formal child support, possibly because many are not able.<sup>1,6</sup>
  - Compared to residential fathers of the same age, nonresidential fathers are more likely to be unemployed and earn lower wages.<sup>7</sup>
  - According to residential mothers, formal support may not be established if mothers do not feel it is important to make support legal, if the fathers provide what they can when they can, or if the fathers can not afford to pay.<sup>2</sup>



- The most common types of informal financial support from low-income, non-residential fathers are (in decreasing order of prevalence):<sup>2, 10</sup>
  - birthday/holiday gifts.
  - items such as clothes, diapers, and shoes.
  - food or groceries.
  - medical expenses.
  - child care assistance.

**Low-income, nonresidential fathers may reframe paternal roles.** Since low-income fathers may be challenged to financially provide for children, involved fathers may reframe what it means to be a father.

- Involved low-income, nonresidential fathers often cite the biological link between fathers and children as a reason to stay connected.<sup>9, 10</sup>
- Low-income fathers see financial involvement as necessary, but because they face monetary challenges, they expand the model of fatherhood to include more than being a breadwinner and financial provider.
  - Low-income mothers and fathers both identify being emotionally involved as a primary component of paternal responsibility. This involvement includes spending time with children and providing guidance and nurturance.<sup>10</sup>

- Fathers are expected by mothers to provide support for their children, but the definition of support may vary with fathers' abilities and may be informal (outside of the child support system) and non-monetary (e.g., childcare).<sup>10, 11, 12</sup>

**Factors contributing to low-income, nonresidential father involvement.**

- **The mother-father relationship:**
- Low-income, nonresidential fathers in romantic relationships with their children's mothers provide more financially and experience higher levels of contact and engagement with children than fathers who are not romantically involved.
- Fathers who are friends with their children's mothers are more involved than are fathers with little or no relationship with their children's mother.<sup>18</sup>
- Residential mothers may restrict access to children but are less likely to do so when cooperative co-parenting exists between parents and there is less conflict over:<sup>15</sup>
  - How to raise children.<sup>14</sup>
  - The amount fathers' see and how they interact with children.<sup>21</sup>
  - Fathers' financial contributions.<sup>13</sup>

- Fathers' employment and substance abuse.<sup>16</sup>

- **Employment** provides low-income, nonresidential fathers with needed financial stability to provide formal and informal support.<sup>16, 17</sup>
- The stability (e.g., housing, living necessities) fathers receive from regular employment also positively affects their daily decisions to visit children.<sup>20</sup>
- Although low-income parents may be less likely than higher-income parents to emphasize fathers' roles as economic providers, nonresidential fathers' regular employment may affect feelings related to father involvement.
- Employed fathers are less likely to be depressed than are fathers experiencing unemployment or underemployment, and feel more competent as fathers.<sup>11, 12</sup>
- Mothers are more likely to view low-income, nonresidential fathers as responsible and less likely to restrict access to children when fathers maintain regular employment.<sup>14, 20</sup>
- **Proximity to children** allows fathers to be more accessible to children.
- Low-income, nonresidential fathers living in the same state as children, visit and correspond with children more frequently and may contribute more formal and informal financial assistance.<sup>20</sup>

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