

Parental involvement of unwed PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT OF U

Modern fatherhood is a paradox of competing images. While the importance of fathers to children and the unique value of the father's role in family life is increasingly recognised, the number of fathers who no longer live with their children is also escalating.

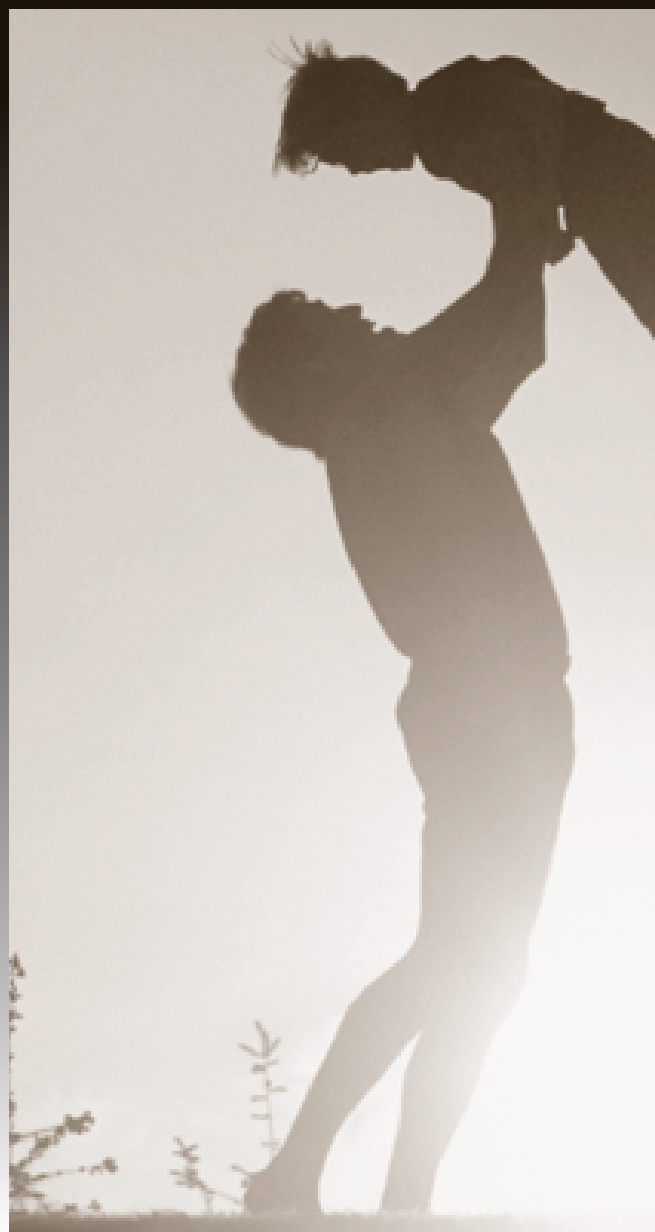
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Over the last 30 years Australia has seen a dramatic rise in the number of one-parent families. The majority of these families are formed through divorce or marital separation, but marriage and child bearing have also become increasingly independent from each other. While the proportion is still modest by American standards, Australian ex-nuptial births rose from 6 per cent in 1963 to nearly 29 per cent in 1998 (ABS 1999). The trend is continuing upward.

While the proportion of unwed teenage mothers has declined in recent years, the total number of women bearing ex-nuptial children has risen sharply. More than half of the 70,600 Australian ex-nuptial births in 1998 were to women in the 20–30 age group, and 15 per cent were to teenage mothers (de Vaus and Wolcott 1997; ABS 1998).

It is estimated that half of Australian ex-nuptial births are to women in de facto relationships (McDonald 1995). However, research also indicates that cohabiting relationships where children are present are more likely to end than are marriages where children are present (Kaplan, Lancaster et al. 1998). That only 7 per cent of children in couple families live with de facto parents, whereas around 30 per cent of sole parents are never married mothers, would seem to corroborate this assumption (ABS 1997; FACS 1998).

Overseas, the difficulties faced by unmarried mothers, and the disadvantages faced by ex-nuptial children, have long been the subject of research and social policy initiatives. Research in the United States has consistently found that children from single-mother families are more likely to be poor, have problems in school, and to leave school early (Seltzer 1991).



However, the prime focus of such research and consequent social policy has been on unmarried mothers. The *fathers* of ex-nuptial children have been an all but invisible group in a social policy or research sense. This is noteworthy because while the causes of unwed pregnancies are complex, research indicates that the antecedents of such pregnancies have as much to do with the attitudes and situations of men as with the circumstances of women (Lerman and Ooms 1993). Consequently, policy makers in the America and Britain have in recent years begun to re-examine unwed child bearing in a manner that incorporates fathers. This shift of focus appears to have been driven largely by the realisation that the economic and social involvement of unmarried fathers can mitigate some of the negative effects of unmarried parenting on their children.

Yet American and British studies also indicate that rates of parental involvement by unmarried

UNWED NON-RESIDENT FATHERS



fathers are significantly lower than those of other non-resident fathers (Seltzer 1991). According to the research, unwed paternity is not randomly distributed, with unwed fathers being likely to live in areas of high unemployment, to come from families who have experienced financial hardship, to have a low educational background and poor labour market prospects, and to possess a limited sense of personal responsibility (Kiernan 1997; Marsiglio 1995).

Australian situation

Despite the interest overseas, Australian empirical knowledge on unmarried fathers and their level of parental involvement is virtually non-existent. Yet, this group is sizeable and growing. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures (ABS 1992) show that 19 per cent of men with non-resident children have never been married, and that a further 9 per cent of currently married non-resident fathers have not

previously been divorced. Extrapolation of these figures indicates that at least 25 per cent of these non-resident fathers are the fathers of ex-nuptial children. Further, while Australia is socially similar in many respects to other western countries, it cannot be assumed that research findings from overseas are translatable or relevant to Australia. There are several reasons for this.

First, Australia has significantly different paternity acknowledgment patterns. Nearly 85 per cent of Australian ex-nuptial fathers acknowledged paternity in 1997. Although rates were lower for indigenous (64 per cent) and teenage ex-nuptial (76 per cent) births, the overall rate is notably higher than that in the United States (average of 50 per cent across states) or the United Kingdom (67 per cent) (de Vaus and Wolcott 1997; Kiernan 1997; McLanahan and Sandfleur 1994).

Second, Australian social policies in areas such as child support and sole-parent income support are substantially different from those in other western countries and contribute to a singularly Australian set of social conditions and circumstances.

Third, the focus of much overseas research is poor black urban populations, a group whose social circumstances and history do not have a direct Australian equivalent.

And fourth, American and British studies concentrate on teenage fathers. Given Australian data indicating that most ex-nuptial births are to women aged over 20 years, this focus appears unsuited in the Australian situation (de Vaus and Wolcott 1997).

Therefore, while Australian unwed fathers are more likely to acknowledge the paternity of their children than American and British ex-nuptial fathers, it is not certain whether they also differ in their level of parental involvement.

Australian data sources

Most overseas research on unwed fathering uses longitudinal national survey data such as the National Survey of Families and Households (United States) and the National Child Development Study (United Kingdom). As yet there is no comparable Australian equivalent of these resources, and this lack is a major obstacle to gaining an Australian perspective on ex-nuptial fathering. While the Australian Bureau of Statistics included questions related to non-resident parenting for the first time in their 1997 survey of Australian families, these questions were limited in scope, and the dataset is not available to researchers for higher-level analysis.

However, although specific data on Australian ex-nuptial fathers are not currently available, it is possible to gain an impression of the parental

involvement of unwed non-resident fathers through a secondary analysis of existing survey data.

This research uses a combination of two Australian resources to examine a number of different dimensions of paternal involvement. The first is commissioned data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 1997), which uses information collected from resident mothers to analyse the level of formal and in-kind child support received, and the frequency of contact between children and their non-resident fathers. Second, data from the Australian Institute of Family Studies evaluation of the Child Support Scheme (AIFS 1990) are used to explore non-resident fathers' attitudes to child support, and the level of influence in their children's lives.

It should be noted that the Australian Institute of Family Studies dataset is ten years old and is not fully representative of Australian non-resident fathers, because all respondents were registered with the Child Support Agency and were thus likely to be over-representative of regular child support payers. As the authors of the original evaluation note, poor or non-payers are less likely than others to participate in surveys on child maintenance (Harrison et al. 1991). The fathers who do not acknowledge paternity are also unrepresented. Despite these shortcomings, the Institute's dataset is valuable in that the information comes from non-resident fathers themselves.

Table 1. Whether family received child support by marital status of resident mother

Marital Status	Receives child support %	Receives no child support %	Total ('000)
Formal Child Support			
Ever married	49	51	382.5
Never married	38	62	155.6
In-kind child support			
Ever married	34	66	382.5
Never married	28	72	155.6

Source: Commissioned unpublished data from ABS Family Characteristics Survey 1997.

Table 2. Child contact with non-resident father by marital status of resident mother

	Ever married %	Never married %	Total ('000)
Frequency of visits			
Daily	4	6	42.3
Once a week	20	25	212.0
Once a fortnight	17	11	148.6
Once a month	8	6	72.6
Once three months	9	5	82.6
Once six months	5	4	50.4
Once a year	6	4	51.2
Major shared care	2	2	25.4
Less than once a year or never	29	37	291.1
Contact by phone/letter			
Has contact	69	49	527.0
Does not have contact	31	51	286.8

Source: Commissioned unpublished data from ABS Family Characteristics Survey 1997.

Thus, this research analyses data from sources that differ in age, size and representativeness (with one collecting data from resident mothers and the other from non-resident fathers). No claims are made that the findings provide a definitive picture of the parental involvement of unwed fathers. Rather, given the lack of more reliable data sources, the purpose of the analysis is to use the data that do exist to provide an indication of the current Australian situation.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

ABS survey data

The Australian Bureau of Statistics survey (ABS 1997) collected information from resident mothers on the level of formal and informal child support they received, and the frequency of contact between the non-resident parent and their child. In this analysis, 'ever married' mothers are those resident mothers who have ever been in a registered marriage, and 'never married' are those resident mothers who have not.

The survey collected data on a per child basis from over 538,000 resident mothers of whom 71 per cent were ever married and 29 per cent were never married. For this analysis, tables were commissioned from the Australian Bureau of Statistics to examine child support and contact data in terms of the marital status of the resident mother.

Formal child support

A comparison of the rates of receipt of child support by ever and never married resident mothers shows clear differences. As indicated in Table 1, nearly half (49 per cent) of the ever married mothers reported receiving child support payments compared with 38 per cent of unwed mothers. This pattern was repeated in rates of receipt of in-kind child support. In-kind support refers to transfers such as payment of school fees, health insurance, mortgage repayments, and clothing. Around 34 per cent of ever-married mothers received in-kind child support compared with 28 per cent of never married resident mothers.

Contact with children

A comparison of the frequency of contact between children and their non-resident fathers also showed a distinct pattern. As indicated in Table 2, while the proportion of children who saw their non-resident fathers at least once a month was similar for both groups, children of never married mothers were less likely to ever see their fathers. Around 37 per cent of these children saw their father less than once a year or never, compared with 29 per cent of the children of ever-married resident mothers.

The ABS survey also asked resident mothers about other forms of contact between the non-resident fathers and their child. As shown in Table 2, while 69 per cent of the children of ever married mothers had phone or letter contact with their father, only 49 per cent of the children of never married resident mothers had such contact.

AIFS survey data

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS 1990) data sample contained responses from 1334 non-resident parents, of whom 89 per cent (1184) had been married to the other parent and 11 per cent (150) had not. The 22 non-resident mothers were excluded from the analysis. Among the unwed fathers, 65 per cent had previously lived in a de facto relationship with the mother of their child, and 35 per cent had never lived with their child's mother.

For the AIFS data analysis, 'unwed father' is defined as a man who has fathered a child to a woman with whom he has not been in a registered marriage. The term 'married fathers' refers to separated or divorced non-resident fathers who were previously in a registered marriage with the mother of their children.

Personal characteristics

While the AIFS data collected only limited personal details, a comparison shows that unwed fathers were younger than married fathers, with mean ages of 34 and 39 respectively, and significantly more likely than married fathers to be unemployed. Just over 20 per cent of unwed fathers were not in employment compared with 12 per cent of the married non-resident fathers. The groups were equally likely to live close to the home of the resident parent and, interestingly, both groups were as likely as each other to be married.

Attitudes to paying child support

The AIFS survey assessed non-resident fathers' attitudes to paying child support. In a multiple response question, fathers were asked to nominate whether they agreed with a set of 17 statements made by other parents who paid child maintenance through the Child Support Agency. For analysis purposes, these statements have been grouped into five major themes.

As Table 3 indicates, unwed and married fathers were largely similar across the first four themes. The lower percentage of unwed fathers agreeing to the proposition that the Child Support Scheme was unnecessary because they were paying before is likely due to the small proportion of unwed fathers paying any child maintenance prior to the introduction of the Child Support Scheme.

However, all the items relating to the fifth theme, 'obligation to pay child support', differed significantly between the groups. Unwed fathers were significantly more likely (55 per cent) than other fathers (39 per cent) to agree that they shouldn't have to pay because they had no say on how the money was spent. Unwed fathers were significantly more likely (35 per cent) than previously married fathers (19 per cent) to agree that they did not want to pay maintenance. They were likely to feel that they had no obligation to support their children (23 per cent) compared with the other fathers (6 per cent). And they were more likely (44 per cent) than other fathers (26 per cent) to agree that because they did not see their children they should not have to pay.

Further, although all unwed fathers were more likely than married fathers to agree to all four items,

those unwed fathers who had never lived with the mother of their child had even higher agreement levels across three of the items. Forty-two per cent of the never lived together fathers agreed that they had no obligation to support their children compared with 13 per cent of previously de facto fathers. Forty-five per cent of never lived together fathers agreed they did not want to pay maintenance compared with 30 per cent of previously de facto fathers. And 62 per cent of never lived together fathers compared with 34 per cent of previously de facto fathers agreed they should not have to pay because they did not see their children.

These findings indicate that unwed fathers, while holding similar attitudes to child support as married fathers on most issues, do not feel as strong a sense of personal obligation towards providing ongoing economic support for their children. Moreover, within the unwed non-resident fathers group, those who have never lived with the mother of their child are even less likely to feel such economic obligation.

Influence in child's life

The Australian Institute of Family Studies survey asked respondents how frequently they discussed nine child-related issues with the resident parent. Responses to these items were rated to produce scores of between 1 and 4, with 4 representing 'discuss often', 3 for 'discuss sometimes', 2 for 'discuss rarely', and 1 for 'discuss never'.

Table 3. Non-resident fathers' concerns about paying child support

	Unwed % Agree	Married % Agree	Total N
CSS benefits			
Scheme makes paying easier	24	22	296
It helps avoid conflict over money	32	32	423
Automatic payment makes it easier to budget	31	34	335
CSS problems			
Do not have enough income to pay	39	33	453
My new family makes a difference	24	24	323
Creates/increases problems over residency/contact	23	25	332
Privacy issues			
Interferes in private matters between parents	27	29	390
Do not want workplace involved	43	46	610
Scheme not necessary as paying regularly before	40**	52	678
The Scheme takes away my choice	49	49	659
Control of money			
Money is not spent sensibly	39	39	521
Other parent does not need the money	37	37	488
Money is not spent on the children	36	36	485
Obligation to pay			
Should not pay since have no say in how money is spent	55*	39	548
Do not want to pay maintenance	35*	19	275
Should not pay since I do not see the children	44*	26	376
Feel no obligation to support the children	23*	6	109

* Denotes statistically significant at p <.0001.

** Denotes statistically significant at p <.005.

Source: Evaluation of the Child Support Scheme (AIFS 1990).

Specifically, the non-resident fathers were asked the frequency of their discussions with the other parent concerning: the children's school or medical problems; the child's progress; child rearing problems; major decisions related to the children; the child's personal problems; child-related finances; daily decisions related to the child; how the child is coping with the separation; and whether the parent ever planned special events with the other parent.

To facilitate analysis, the nine topic items were combined to produce a single measure of the non-resident father's influence in the child's life.

These results are of concern, especially given the increasing recognition of the benefits of paternal participation in separated family situations. Studies consistently find that fathers' payment of child support improves not only children's standard of living, but also their health, educational attainments and general sense of wellbeing (Amato 1998).

Amato's (1998) meta-analysis of studies relating to non-resident fathering also found that other dimensions of parenting impact on children's wellbeing. In particular, the level of emotional bonding between father and child, and use by the father of an authoritative parenting style, were found to be positively related to schooling success and negatively related to problem behaviour. These dimensions are similar to this study's measure of parental influence. Amato concludes that current data suggest that non-resident fathers have the potential to contribute to their children's wellbeing in a manner comparable to that of resident fathers.

However, the evidence is not uncontested. Any paternal involvement is not necessarily a positive outcome for children. The father-child relationship cannot be viewed in isolation from other family dynamics, with child behaviour problems positively correlated with the level of inter-parental conflict (Amato 1993). Other research suggests the impact of paternal involvement on children's wellbeing is mediated by the mother's attitude to paternal participation and her ability to collaborate with the father, the father's skill in establishing a warm relationship with his offspring, and the child's needs (Furstenberg 1988). Mothers' 'gatekeeping' of fathers' contact with their children has also been raised as an issue, with many non-resident fathers feeling disenfranchised by the contact process (Marsiglio and Day 1998).

Why are unwed fathers less involved?

Analysis shows that Australian unwed fathers are likely to have lower levels of parental involvement, but the specific findings cannot discern the reasons for this lower rating. While Australian data are scarce, American studies have found that factors such as geographical mobility, repartnering of either parent, inability to establish workable arrangements with the mother, lack of contact, inadequate financial resources, and efforts to reduce psychological pain are cited by non-resident fathers as impediments to paternal involvement (Nord and Zill 1996). Perhaps these factors are even more of an impediment to unwed non-resident fathers than to other fathers.

Without targeted large-scale research, it is not possible to conclude how influential these factors are to the paternal involvement of Australian ex-nuptial fathers. However, the finding that the attitudes of unwed non-resident fathers reflect a significantly lower sense of obligation to provide ongoing financial support is of concern. This reduced sense of paternal obligation is likely also to be influential across the other dimensions of parental involvement, and be reflected in reduced paternal interest in maintaining ongoing contact or influence in his child's life.



The finding that the attitudes of unwed non-resident fathers reflect a significantly lower sense of obligation to provide ongoing financial support is of concern.

A comparison of the overall means of the unwed fathers and the previously married fathers yielded a significant difference between the two groups. Unwed fathers were less likely to discuss the child with the resident mother on any of the topic items. This finding suggests that unwed fathers have significantly less ongoing influence in their child's life than previously married non-resident fathers.

Parental involvement of unwed non-resident fathers

Parental involvement, especially as it applies to non-resident parents, is not a single-faceted concept, but one with a number of related but different dimensions. While there is as yet little consensus among social scientists of what constitutes non-resident parental involvement, the model developed by Seltzer (1991) provides a basic measure. Seltzer's model uses three rights and responsibilities to define the role. These are: economic support, measured by formal and informal child support paid; social involvement, measured by the frequency of contact between the parent and child; and authority, defined as the influence the non-resident parent has on the child's life.

Under these criteria, the findings of this analysis indicate that despite high rates of paternity acknowledgement, the level of parental involvement of Australian unwed non-resident fathers is significantly less than that of previously married non-resident fathers.

Importantly, this reduced level of involvement is valid across all three of the Seltzer's dimensions of non-resident parenting – economic support in the form of the payment of formal and informal child support, social involvement linked to the amount of contact between father and child, and authority which is defined as the level of paternal influence.

Ex-nuptial children receive less formal and in-kind child support from their non-resident fathers than nuptial children, and they are less likely to retain any form of ongoing contact with their fathers. The fathers of ex-nuptial children are also significantly less likely to remain influential in their children's lives.

Social policy implications

Overseas, unwed fathers' level of parental involvement is the subject of increasing research and social policy initiatives. Fuelled by welfare reform debates, as well as concern for fatherless children, the United States has introduced a number of fatherhood responsibility programs designed to give men the social and economic skills to be effective fathers regardless of their marital status or relationship to the mother of their child (Committee on Human Resources 1998). While no such social policy debate has yet occurred in Australia, government funding to projects such as 'Dads Unlimited' and 'New Beginnings' indicate Australian social policy interest in the area of non-resident fatherhood. Based on the findings from this analysis, the focus should be extended to include unwed non-resident fathers.

This is because being an unmarried and non-resident father does not necessarily also have to mean being an absent father. Although this research has focused on the relatively low level of parental involvement of unwed fathers, it should also be recognised that a substantial proportion of unwed fathers are indeed paying child support, seeing their children regularly, and being actively involved in their children's lives.

The reasons some fathers remain involved with their ex-nuptial children, despite the barriers and difficulties, and others do not, are poorly understood. While the concept of 'commitment to the child' has some validity, it does not explain why or how that commitment exists for some fathers but not for others.

Marsiglio (1995) finds that the commitment of many fathers to their children is contingent on their relationship with their mother. He advocates research into the processes that see men's father and romantic partner role identities entangled, arguing for a need to strengthen fathers' interest in their children irrespective of their relationship with the child's mother. That Australian unwed fathers appear to be less parentally involved should be of central concern to policy development.

Conclusion

This analysis does not claim to provide a definitive picture of Australian unwed non-resident fathering. Rather, it seeks to provide an indication of the Australian situation as a prelude and impetus for more specifically targeted research.

The lack of Australian data on unwed fathers restricts social policy analysis of the issue. While the present study provides an indication of the level of parental involvement of unwed fathers, other questions remain unanswered. For example, what are the social, cultural, personal and economic characteristics of Australian unwed fathers?

More importantly, in light of the findings on the importance of the role of fathers, what factors have an impact on unwed non-resident fathers' involvement with their children? And what are the impediments or facilitators to this involvement? In particular, what factors enhance both the desire of

fathers to remain positively involved and their capacity to do so? With non-marital childbirth being an increasing feature of the demographic environment, these questions warrant attention.

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