



National Center on Fathers and Families

BRIEF

NCOFF Briefs provide summaries of literature reviews, research reports, and working papers published by NCOFF and of emerging practice- and policy-focused issues in the field. This Brief, Methodological and Theoretical Issues in Studying Nonresident Fathers, written by Nora Cate Schaeffer, Judith Seltzer, and Jennifer Dykema of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is one in a series of NCOFF's working papers designed to expand work in understudied areas. Copies of commissioned papers or other NCOFF publications are available from NCOFF in paper form or on diskette.

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Methodological and Theoretical Issues in Studying Nonresident Fathers: A Selective Review

Key Findings

- Much of what we know about the situation of separated families is based on survey reports from mothers, which is problematic. Both sets of parents are needed to describe their own opinions and behaviors adequately and to understand the circumstances of children in the families.
- The principal methodological issues in studying separated families are those that arise in designing and implementing a sample and those that arise in the process of measurement.
- In order to identify parents from separated families, household-based surveys use “screening” questions that are subject to response error and may frequently fail to identify male respondents as noncustodial parents.
- Studies using court records have low response rates for samples of separated families, particularly among fathers, matched samples of mothers and fathers, and nonmarital families. Low participation rates are likely to affect household samples as well.
- The research studies and reports reviewed suggest that survey nonparticipants often differ from survey respondents on important variables including the amount of child support owed and paid.
- Differential levels of survey nonparticipation fundamentally affect our understanding of fathers and mothers in separated families. Further, what we observe about response error is “nested within” nonparticipation error, and conclusions about relative levels of measurement error for mothers and fathers are affected by the different levels and structures of nonparticipation for the two groups.
- In addition to problems raised by nonparticipation, studies reviewed suggest that for some variables, such as the amount of child support paid, response error may be greater for fathers than for mothers.

Recommendations for Research

- Studies that include both mothers and fathers as respondents should be conducted in order to obtain an adequate description of the situation of all parents in separated families.
- Researchers should develop methods to improve response rates among parents in separated families. This would include finding better ways to screen for noncustodial parents in household-based surveys.
- Research using social-information-processing models to study response errors suggests ways to improve the accuracy of answers provided by mothers and fathers and should continue to be investigated.
- There are a number of important advantages and disadvantages to using household samples versus court-based samples. Researchers must carefully balance the desire to obtain a nationally representative sample against the desire to obtain a matched sample or to use court records to validate survey responses.

Recommendations for Practice

- Programs should attempt to get more information from participating parents about non-participating parents.
- Programs for fathers could benefit by involving mothers, and programs for mothers could benefit by involving fathers. In such cases, programs increase the opportunities to collect information about both parents.

Recommendations for Policy

- Policymakers need to think creatively about how they develop and implement policies around child support, visitation, custody, and other situations in which tensions between mothers and fathers may be exacerbated.
- Policymakers should include in federal and state support initiatives an attempt to get information about the characteristics of non-participating mothers and fathers.

Methodological and Theoretical Issues in Studying Nonresident Fathers: A Selective Review

This review examines issues raised by using survey data to study contemporary families in a way that includes fathers as well as mothers. Changes in the structure of the family over recent decades have resulted in new challenges for researchers attempting to describe the problems faced by those families. When parents live apart from their children, more than one household must be described in order to describe a single family. The sample survey is frequently used to describe separated families because of its capacity to provide estimates of characteristics of the population.

This paper reviews issues raised in using either mothers or fathers — or both — to study separated families. Many researchers rely solely on reports about family life provided by mothers. Although problems raised by studying mothers' reports might go unremarked when the families under study are intact, the potential problems become obvious when the families are separated. For example, even when mothers and fathers report about the same event, such as the amount of child support paid, their reports often differ.

The principal methodological issues in studying separated families are those that arise in designing and implementing a sample and those that arise in the process of measurement. With respect to obtaining an appropriate sample, two central concerns are selecting an appropriate sample frame (e.g., a list of members of the universe from which the sample will be drawn) and obtaining high levels of participation from all groups in the sample (i.e., whites and blacks, divorced and nonmarital families). The most important issue in measurement is the relative or absolute accuracy of the reports of fathers and mothers.

This paper focuses on important studies that illustrate the methodological issues in studying separated families. Two types of surveys are represented in this research: (1) household samples and (2) state or county samples in which cases are selected from court records.

Sampling and Participation: Errors of Nonobservation

Errors of nonobservation associated with surveys can arise at two points: (1) the selection of the sampling frame and (2) obtaining participation from selected respondents.

Sample Frame Issues, Coverage Bias, Identifying Noncustodial Fathers

The main types of sample frames used to study separated families are probability samples of households and samples from lists of separated families that have been to court. Each type offers different strengths and weaknesses.

Samples of households are advantageous in that they can include both families that have been to court and families that have not, including those in which the parents never married (nonmarital families). They also typically include cases for much larger geographic areas and those that originated under different policy regimes in different states and in proportions that reflect the composition of the population of separated families as a whole. Among their disadvantages, household samples must be very large to support detailed analyses of subgroups. Matched pairs of parents can be included in household samples only by augmenting the original sample, usually by asking respondents to identify and help locate a former spouse or partner. Finally, the information used to determine parental status for sampling or analysis is subject to response error.

Using a list of court cases as a sample frame has different advantages. There are no costs associated with "screening" to determine if the household contains a resident or nonresident parent. Matched pairs of parents from divorced and nonmarital families can be easily sampled. Information contained in the court records can be used to locate parents and

to evaluate the “representativeness” of the achieved sample and the quality of responses to survey questions. The main disadvantage is that court-based samples are usually not representative of the population and typically have limited geographic variability. They also tend to be limited in terms of both the policy regime they fall under and the length of time the family has been separated. Further, while a sample of divorce cases obtained through the courts is likely to be representative, families in which the parents never married are more highly selected than a sample of nonmarital families obtained using a household frame. Finally, court-based samples are subject to errors in the management and upkeep of the records.

It is difficult to identify eligible parents using household samples. This is typically done with “screening” or “filter” questions that ask whether an adult in the household has a child who has a parent who lives somewhere else (when screening for resident parents) or whether an adult in the household has a child who lives elsewhere (when screening for nonresident parents). Depending on the survey design, the screening questions may be asked of a household informant for every adult in the household, or the questions may be asked of or about a selected adult. Screening questions are subject to response error, and the causes and extent of response error may be different for resident and nonresident parents and for divorced and nonmarital families. Results from several empirical studies demonstrate that screening questions typically are less likely to identify respondents as noncustodial parents than they are to identify custodial parents. Furthermore, the questions needed to establish eligibility for the survey may appear more sensitive to a respondent in a telephone survey than to a respondent in a face-to-face survey.

Nonparticipants and Nonparticipation Bias

Household and court-based samples are subject to nonparticipation bias. Nonparticipation bias in estimates of means and proportions is a function of the proportion of the selected sample that did not respond and the difference between participants and nonparticipants. Even a relatively high participation rate can result in substantial nonparticipation bias if those who do not participate are very different from those who do.

Court records offer an independent source of information about selected study participants and provide an opportunity for evaluating the impact of nonparticipation on survey estimates. A number of studies have low response rates for samples of separated families. Results suggest that participation rates are higher for mothers than fathers and raise the possibility that nonparticipation bias will be greater for samples of fathers than for samples of mothers (and greatest for samples of matched couples). Although response rates from court-based samples are difficult to compare with those of household samples it seems likely that there are important similarities between nonparticipating parents in both types of samples. Parents who refuse to participate in a household sample may be similar to those who refuse in a court-based sample, and parents who are difficult to contact in a household sample may be difficult to locate in a court-based sample.

Just as the sources of nonparticipation are varied, so may be nonparticipants. Those who refuse are likely to be different from those who are difficult to locate. In a comparison of survey respondents to those who refused to participate or could not be located, researchers found that divorced mothers who refuse to participate in the interview received more child support than those who were easy to locate and interview, and these groups received more support than those who were not located. For divorced fathers, those who were not located paid less support than those who refused to participate or were located. A comparison of bias in reports about amounts of child support owed and paid suggests that nonparticipation bias is greater in reports about support paid. This is potentially significant in analyses that use the payment of child support as a dependent variable—both paying child support and the amount paid appear to be associated with survey participation, and more so for fathers than for mothers. Other research demonstrates that factors predicting the probability that a father will be located differ somewhat from the factors predicting the probability that a located father will participate.

The Accuracy of Reports: Errors of Observation

Several types of reporting issues are of concern in studying parents in separated families. First, there is the accuracy of mothers’ and fathers’ reports about common events, such as the payment of child support. Second is the quality of one parent’s reports about characteristics of the other, such as education and employment status. Third is the issue of the comparability of mothers’ and fathers’ evaluations or judgments about their situation, for example, their views of the fairness of the award. Our review of the accuracy of reports is concerned only with the first of these issues, and we consider reports about two different topics: child support transfers and contact between nonresident parents and their children.

Parents’ Reports about Child Support and Contact

A discussion of reporting errors by fathers and mothers can focus either on the relative contribution of response errors to the total error in survey estimates, or on the relative accuracy of matched mothers and fathers who are, in principle, reporting about the same amounts. The first approach accepts that screening issues and participation rates may differ for fathers and mothers in actual samples and estimates the net contribution of reporting errors to total survey error. The second approach asks whether, among those who are interviewed, fathers or mothers are, on average, more accurate reporters. Matched samples of mothers and fathers are needed to address this question, but these samples are subject to high levels of nonresponse.

Using the first approach, some research finds that the response bias component of survey bias is smaller for mothers than fathers. While a comparison of studies using matched samples of mothers and fathers yields inconsistent results, differences in the mean amount of child support owed and paid, as reported by custodial and noncustodial parents,

are often small. Several studies show that reports about support owed are more consistent between mothers and fathers than reports about support paid. On average, the mean annual child support payment reported by mothers is typically lower than that reported by fathers. However, comparisons of self-reports with court records suggests that both mothers and fathers overreport the amount of child support paid, and overreports are larger for fathers than for mothers. This suggests that something affects responses about support paid differently for mothers and fathers that does not affect reports about support owed. The most likely explanations for the differences in reporting error are that nonresident fathers know about money they pay to support their children that resident mothers do not know about or that nonresident parents report paying more child support than they do, or both.

Research on contact between nonresident parents and their children demonstrates that fathers report spending more time with their children when reporting for themselves than when mothers report for fathers.

Factors Affecting Response Errors

In social-information-processing models of the response process, reporting errors are seen as originating at several different stages in the response process: comprehension of the question, retrieval of the answer, judgement about the adequacy of the answer, and reporting. The theory underlying the analyses of these data is that response errors increase as the reported phenomenon becomes more complex. In the case of child support payments the theory predicts that response errors are a function of the processes that make payment patterns simple (such as no payments at all or very regular payments that are always for the amount owed) or complex (irregular payments or varying amounts). Recent studies that apply these models to response errors in reports about child support are highlighted and results consistent with the predictions are presented.

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NCOFF BRIEF: STUDYING NONRESIDENT FATHERS

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