

DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

A peer-reviewed, open-access journal of population sciences

DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

VOLUME 30, ARTICLE 31, PAGES 899–910

PUBLISHED 21 MARCH 2014

<http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol30/31/>

DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2014.30.31

Descriptive Finding

She said, he said: Comparing mothers' and fathers' reports on the non-resident father's contact with his children

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She said, he said: Comparing mothers' and fathers' reports on the non-resident father's contact with his children

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Analyses of contact frequency between non-resident fathers and children have often been based on samples of non-resident fathers or resident mothers only. It is well established that non-resident fathers tend to report more contact than the resident mothers do, but it is less clear if it matters which parent we ask, when the aim is to explore predictors of father-child contact.

OBJECTIVE

We wish to add to the literature on predictors of father-child contact, especially if it matters whether we rely on the resident mothers' or the non-resident fathers' answers.

METHODS

Analyzing a high-quality Norwegian survey from 2004 of ex-couple-parents living apart, we ran separate OLS regressions estimating the predictors of number of contact days and nights, based on the mothers' and the fathers' answers, respectively.

RESULTS

Father-child contact is largely associated with the same independent variables, whether we use the non-resident fathers' or the resident mothers' answers, but some differences do appear. We observe more significant associations between father-child contact days and the independent variables based on the resident mothers' than the non-resident fathers' reporting. The mother's educational attainment and whether the father has children with more former partners have significant effects in the subsample of resident mothers, but not in the subsample of non-resident fathers.

CONCLUSIONS

Future surveys should collect information from both parents. Using information from one parent only should be a last resort, if more adequate data cannot be obtained.

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1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that non-resident fathers tend to depict themselves as more actively involved with their children than the resident mothers do (for instance Seltzer and Brandreth 1994). Hence, analyses using data from non-resident fathers generally show more father-child contact than those using data from resident mothers. However, it is less clear whether or not it matters which parent we ask when the aim is to explore the predictors of high or low father-child contact. While some analyses suggest different results in studies based on the non-resident fathers' and the resident mothers' answers (for instance Coley and Morris 2002; Mikelson 2008) others identify the same predictors, regardless of which parent one asks (Seltzer and Brandreth 1994).

Since few studies include information from both non-resident and resident parents, and analyses are often based on information from one of the partners only, it is important to assess if it actually does matter which partner we ask when the aim is to identify factors that promote or hinder father-child contact.

In this paper we compare results based on the answers from the non-resident father and the resident mother in a Norwegian survey from 2004 of parents living apart, with register data added. We use a sub-sample of previously married or cohabiting couples of resident and non-resident parents who both report on the non-resident father's contact with their common children, and look at two measures of contact frequency, namely, the number of contact days and the number of overnight stays per month. We include only control variables taken from register data, in order to eliminate any differences in results that may stem from divergent reporting on control variables.

If the answers of mothers and fathers provide the same predictors of father-child contact, we may have greater trust in studies based on information from one partner only. Otherwise, reports from both parents should be strongly advised in future studies.

2. Data and measurement

We use data from the survey *Contact arrangements and child maintenance 2004*, conducted by Statistics Norway on commission from the Ministry of Children and Gender Equality. The population consisted of parents with children below 18 years of age on 31st December 2004, with both parents residing in Norway, and only one parent registered living with the child. The sample consisted of two parts: (1) parents who lived with the child(ren), but not with the other parent (resident parents), and (2) parents neither residing with the child(ren) nor with the other parent (non-resident parents). Each non-resident parent had one or more children with a resident parent in the sample, and vice versa. The registered address of the child was used to distinguish between the

two groups of parents. Data were collected by telephone interviews in November and December 2004, but with a postal follow-up in early February 2005 and register data added. The youngest child in the relationship was selected as the focal child.

The net sample comprised 2,692 parents. The overall response rate was 75 percent; 79 and 71 percent of the resident and the non-resident parents, respectively. The survey is documented in Skaare and Fodnesbergene (2005), see also Kitterød and Lyngstad (2013).

The analysis sample included those parents whose focal child was registered as living with the mother, those parents who had ever lived together, either formally married or in a consensual union, and who both responded in the survey (760 couples). 32 observations with missing data on either nights or days of contact between the non-resident father and his child were omitted, which left us with an analysis sample comprising 728 “ex-couples” with resident mothers and non-resident fathers.

2.1 Dependent variables

The non-resident father and the resident mother were asked the following questions: “Did you/the father spend time with *name of child* in October 2013?”

- Yes
- No

How many days did you/the father spend with *name of child* in October? *Half a day should be counted as a whole day.*

- Number of days

Did you also spend some nights together in October?

- Yes
- No

How many nights was this?

- Number of nights”

The number of monthly contact nights/days the father spent with the focal child in October 2004, as reported by the non-resident father himself and the resident mother, are the dependent variables in the OLS regressions.

2.2 Independent variables

We include independent variables that are often used in research on contact patterns between non-resident fathers and children (for instance Cooksey and Craig 1998;

Manning, Stewart and Smock 2003; Skevik 2006). They show the parents' socioeconomic resources, the characteristics of their common children, and whether or not the parents had children with more than one former partner. All are based on register information linked to the survey data. The same independent variables are included in models based on the non-resident fathers' reports and those based on the resident mothers' reports:

- *The resident mother's and the non-resident father's disposable (net) income.* This includes earned income, pensions, social security benefits, and capital income. We use income quintiles in the analysis. The quintile limits differ for the mothers and the fathers since fathers usually have higher incomes.

- *The resident mother's and the non-resident father's educational attainment.* We distinguish between (1) High school or less, (2) University 1-4 years and (3) University 5 years or more.

- *Number of common children.*

- *Age of the focal child.*

- *Sex of the focal child.*

- *Number of each partner's previous relationships that included children.*

- *Whether information from both parents was given in 2004 or not.* Control variable. In cases where one of the parents was interviewed in November or December 2004 and the other in February 2005, as part of a follow-up procedure, discrepancies between the partners' answers may be due to this time lag.

3. Results

The non-resident fathers reported both more contact days and contact nights than did the resident mothers (Table 1). Regarding both nights and days, the non-resident fathers reported an average of approximately 40 percent more contact than the resident mothers did (Kitterød and Lyngstad 2013:16).

Table 1: Number of monthly visitation nights and days with non-resident father, as reported by the non-resident father and the resident mother

Reported by father	Reported by mother					All
	Nights					
Nights	0	1-4	5-8	9-12	13+	All
0	16	0	1	0	-	17
1-4	2	2	2	1	-	6
5-8	4	7	18	4	0	33
9-12	1	3	13	11	1	28
12+	1	1	2	3	8	15
All	25	13	35	18	9	100

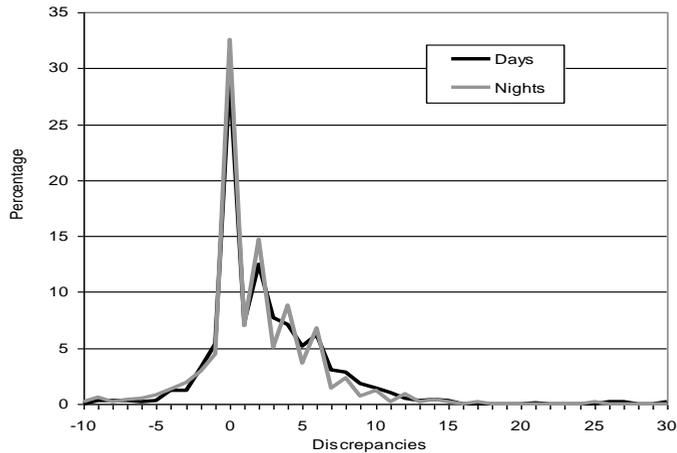
Reported by father	Reported by mother					All
	Days					
Days	0	1-4	5-8	9-12	13+	All
0	13	1	0	-	-	14
1-4	2	1	1	0	-	5
5-8	3	6	14	2	0	25
9-12	1	4	12	17	1	34
12+	1	0	4	8	9	22
All	19	13	31	27	10	100

Note: Cross tabulation. N=728. Percentage of grand total

When calculating the discrepancies between the two partners' reports, we find that while the father reports most contact in a significant proportion of couples, there are also couples in which the mother reports more father-child contact than the father himself does. A great number of couples report approximately the same amount of father child-contact, both when counting overnight stays and contact days (Figure 1).

In a little less than one third of the former couples, there was total agreement between fathers and mothers on the number of nights and days the father spent with the child. In more than two out of five cases, the discrepancy was no more than 1 night or day, and in around three out of five cases, the discrepancy was no more than 2 nights or days. On the average, the discrepancy between the number of nights reported by the father and the mother was 1.9, whereas the discrepancy in reported days was 2.5. In around 35 per cent of the cases, the discrepancy was less than 10 per cent of the average number of nights or days reported by the father and the mother, in 48 per cent it was less than 25 per cent of that average (figures not shown).

Figure 1: Distribution of discrepancies between the number of monthly visitation nights and days with non-resident father, as reported by the non-resident father and the resident mother (father minus mother)



Note: N=728. Percentage

3.1 Regression results

Multivariate regressions on the number of nights the non-resident father spends with his child reveal almost the same results irrespective of which parent's reporting we use (Table 2). According to both models, fathers with high incomes have more contact nights than fathers with low incomes, fathers with two children have more contact nights than those with only one child, the number of contact nights decreases with the age of the child, and fathers who have children with more than one former partner have less contact nights than fathers who have children with only one former partner (the child's mother). The explained variance is also fairly similar in the two models ($R^2=0.15$ and 0.17).

Table 2: Results from ordinary least squares regression of the number of monthly visitation nights and days with non-resident father. Fathers' and mothers' reports

	Reported nights		Reported days	
	Fathers' reports	Mothers' reports	Fathers' reports	Mothers' reports
Intercept	8.58**	6.54**	11.07**	7.67**
Mother's net income (ref=3. quintile, 233 000–265 999 NOK)				
1. quintile (less than 193 000 NOK)	-.87	-.28	-.82	-.30
2. quintile (193 000 – 232 999 NOK)	.69	.07	.2	.06
4. quintile (266 000 – 298 999 NOK)	.08	-.47	-.08	-.15
5. quintile (299 000 NOK +)	-.05	-.65	-.28	-.69
Father's net income (ref=3. quintile, 228 000–266 999 NOK)				
1. quintile (less than 174 000 NOK)	-1.78**	-1.54**	-1.63**	-1.79**
2. quintile (174 000 – 227 999 NOK)	-.50	-.29	-.81	-.20
4. quintile (267 000 – 333 999 NOK)	.90	.99*	.60	.94*
5. quintile (334 000 NOK +)	1.47**	1.20**	1.26**	1.26**
Mother's education (ref=high school or below)				
University 1-4 years	.62	.78**	.31	.57
University 5 years +	2.04*	3.14**	1.45	2.72**
Father's education (ref=high school or below)				
University 1-4 years	.48	.60	-.31	.34
University 5 years +	-.11	-.34	.60	-.41
Number of children in relationship (ref=one child)				
Two children	1.04**	1.39**	1.04**	1.52**
Three children +	-.47	.08	-.77	.05
Age of focal child (ref=0-5 years)				
6 – 9 years	-.86	-.65	-1.52**	-.79
10 – 14 years	-1.89**	-2.26**	-2.62**	-2.45**
15 – 17 years	-3.57**	-3.24**	-3.98**	-3.53**
Sex of focal child (ref=girl)				
Boy	-.60*	-.15	-.46	-.08
Mother has children with more than one former partner (ref=no)				
Yes	.34	.03	-.38	.07
Father has children with more than one former partner (ref=no)				
Yes	-1.32**	-1.44**	-1.01	-1.64**
Whether both parents was interviewed in 2004 or not (ref=yes)				
	-1.39*	-1.29*	-1.06	-.68
R ²	.15	.17	.11	.18

Note: Regression coefficients (Significance levels: **=5 percent, *=0.10 per cent). N=728

As for the mother's education, we find slightly different results in models based on the fathers' and the mothers' reporting. Based on the mothers' reporting, the non-resident fathers spend an average of three more nights per month when the mother has a long university education than when she has only a high-school education, and 0.78 more nights when she has a short university education, compared to when she has high-school education. Both differences are statistically significant at the 5 per cent level. Based on the non-resident fathers' reporting, they spend on the average two more nights with children when the mother has a long university education than when she has only a high school education, and the coefficient is statistically significant at the 10 per cent level only. There is no significant effect of the mother having a short university education. As for the sex of the child, we find a marginally significant (10-percent level) association with visitation frequency based on the fathers' reports, so that fathers spend somewhat less time with boys than with girls. This association is not discernible in the analysis based on the mothers' reports, although the coefficient has the same sign.

Even though the analysis based on the non-resident fathers' reports on the number of contact nights by and large yields similar results to that based on resident mothers' reports, researchers would draw slightly different conclusions regarding associations with the mother's education and the sex of the child, from a survey comprising non-resident fathers only, and a survey comprising resident mothers only.

Results from the multivariate regressions of number of contact days between non-resident fathers and children are also reported in Table 2. Both models convey positive associations between the father's incomes, the age of the child, and the number of children on the one hand, and the number of contact days on the other. According to the mothers' reports, there is also a significant correlation (5-percent level) between the mother's education and the number of visiting days, but the analysis based on the father's reports reveals no significant correlation between the mother's education and contact frequency, even though the coefficients have the same signs. Moreover, the model based on the mothers' reports also shows that fathers who have children with more than one former partner have less daytime contact with the focal child than other non-resident fathers (5 percent level significance). This association is not discernible in the model based on the non-resident fathers' reporting. The model based on the mothers' reporting has somewhat higher explained variance ($R^2=0.18$) than the one based on the fathers' reporting ($R^2=0.11$).

Hence, when it comes to the number of contact days between non-resident fathers and children, researchers would draw somewhat different conclusions regarding the effect of some independent variables in an analysis based on a sample of resident mothers and an analysis based on a sample of non-resident fathers. The effect of the fathers' income, of the number of children, and of the focal child's age would be visible in both samples. However, a researcher using a sample of resident mothers would

conclude that the mother's education and whether or not the father has children with previous partners are important predictors for the number of father-child contact days. A researcher using a sample of non-resident fathers would hold that the same variables do not impact father-child contact frequency.

4. Discussion

With increasing divorce rates, there is a great need for research on the childcare arrangements among parents living apart. Since data with information from both the non-resident and the resident parent has often been unavailable, analyses are sometimes based on information from only one of the parents.

It is well established that non-resident parents tend to depict themselves as more actively involved with their children than resident parents depict them to be. However, earlier research is inconclusive as to whether or not analyses based on non-resident fathers' answers identify different predictors of father-child contact than those based on resident mothers' reports (cf. section 1). Previous analyses often use samples that either cannot be generalized to the whole population (Coley and Morris 2002; Hernandez and Coley 2007), are not based on samples of *pairs* of parents (Seltzer and Brandreth 1994), or include both parents living apart and parents living together (Coley and Morris 2002; Hernandez and Coley 2007; Mikelson 2008).

Our study, based on representative survey-data of ex-couples, shows that it actually does matter which parent we ask when the aim is to identify predictors of contact frequency between non-resident fathers and children, at least when it comes to the effect of the resident mother's education.

The fact that we find a positive effect from the mother's education on father-child contact in models based on the mother's, but not the father's, reporting, may be due to a *social-desirability bias* in the highly educated mothers' answers. Since highly educated women are often more in favour of gender equality than the less educated, they may be more prone to over-report father-child contact (Smith, Gager, and Morgan 1998; Kamo 2000).

The resident mother's knowledge of the father's behaviour may also be an important factor regarding disagreements between parents' reporting of father-child visitation (Kamo 2000). Assuming that the mother is better informed about the child's overnight stays, we expect less discrepancy between the parents' reporting on overnight stays than daytime contact. Our data actually does suggest such a pattern.

The fact that the discrepancy between the parents' answers is only +/- two nights/days in the majority of cases may indicate that *failure to remember single visits* is at play. This may particularly be the case for fathers with children with more than one

ex-partner, since they may mix up the visits of children from different relationships. The negative effects in Table 2 of having more former partners support this assumption.

However, by and large our analyses reveal fairly similar results irrespective of on which parent we rely. Moreover, the discrepancies between the parents' reports are not distributed in a very systematic way. When we regress the discrepancy between the parents' reporting (days/nights reported by the father minus those reported by the mother), none of our independent variables are significant at the 5 per cent level (results not shown).

Alternative explanations for the discrepancies between the parents' answers could be found by including independent variables based on interview information in the analysis, such as conflicts between the parents, or by undertaking qualitative interviews.

We argue that analyses based on both parents' answers do provide a more accurate picture of the amount of father-child-contact than analyses of one of the parent's reporting only. However, data from both parents are not always available. One might also get better data by improving the questionnaire: for example, by introducing some type of diary, such as the residential calendar developed by Sodermans, Matthijs, and Swicegood (2013).

5. Acknowledgements

This paper was presented at the international seminar of the Committee on Family Research (International Sociological Association) that Family and Population Studies (www.soc.kuleuven.be/fapos) organised on 12-14 September 2012 at K.U. Leuven, Belgium. We thank the participants, and our colleagues, for constructive comments.

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