

Using Recall Calendars to Measure Fathers' Nights Spent With Children

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Overview

Recent decades have seen an increase in research on fatherhood involvement, especially among low-income, nonresidential fathers. However, this research has been limited by methodological issues. According to Coley and Morris (2002), "Researchers are struggling in their attempts to study the domain of father involvement with currently available data and methods, particularly with regard to low-income families and families in which the father does not reside with his children" (p. 982).

While a father's residency with his children is highly correlated with involvement, it does not capture the full range of variation in fathers' time spent with their children. Specifically, some nonresidential fathers appear to spend a number of nights in the same residence as their children. Coupling information about residency with a measure of nights spent with the child could better capture the reality of these family experiences. This

methodological brief examines the efficacy of using a recall calendar for assessing fathers' involvement and compares this data with information on residency status.

Background

While few large surveys even address fatherhood issues, "when surveys do ask such questions, the information collected is often sparse, focusing on basic, concrete constructs such as the father's presence in the household and financial contributions to the family budget" (Coley & Morris, 2002, p. 983). Researchers typically rely on a single survey question or interview prompt that asks the respondent to estimate time spent on certain activities. Questions soliciting a single estimate from fathers require a complex set of recollections, presenting a number of obstacles to accurately collecting data in this way (Robinson, 2002, p. 57). The recollections required of single questions soliciting an estimate of time spent with his children

(e.g., How many nights in the past 30 days have you spent in the same residence as your child?) can be so complex that they likely produce biased estimates.

Additionally, most data about father involvement is collected via the child's mother. This convention is often a result of convenience but there persists a belief that fathers' self-reports are consistently higher than mothers' reports of his involvement. (Wical & Doherty, 2005). Coley and Morris (2002) find that there is in fact a high correlation between fathers' and mothers' reporting, but that differences do emerge based on certain familial characteristics. Indeed, for their low-income sample, non-resident fathers and the mothers of their children show "higher levels of discrepancy between fathers' and mothers' reports of father involvement" than parents who co-reside (p. 995).

Despite these reported differences, little empirical evidence has shown fathers' self-reports to be less valid than those of mothers. The biased assumption that fathers' self-reports are less valid has led to a reliance on mother reports, but studies have shown that fathers' self-reports via time diaries are, in actuality, reliable sources of information. Wical and Doherty (2005) conclude that, "time diaries appear to be less susceptible to the influence of gender and social desirability and therefore appear to be a good method for measuring father involvement" (p. 89-90).

Some researchers of time use have tended to move towards collecting data via time diaries, in which respondents recall their activities for a specific period of time in a logbook. Time diaries break down the day into units of time, typically increments of 15 minutes, and ask the respondent to write in what activity she/he was doing at the specified time. This strategy breaks the recollection of time down into manageable units and captures the detailed behaviors of respondents (Robinson, 2002, p. 58). The present study examines the use of a modified time diary, in the form of a recall

calendar, to assess the number of nights children spent with their fathers in the past 30 days. One goal of this brief is to examine the correlation between fathers' reports of whether or not they reside with the child and numbers of nights in the past month the child has spent in the same residence with the father. The second goal is to assess differences in nights spent with children by children's age.

Methods

We utilized a convenience sample of 606 fathers drawn from six northeastern cities. 216 of these fathers were recruited from various fatherhood programs and another 390 fathers not enrolled in programs were recruited from a variety of locations in low-income neighborhoods, including but not limited to grocery stores, barber shops, substance use programs, and churches. All respondents completed an extensive interview about their experiences as fathers. Fathers' ages ranged from 18 to 72 with the average father being roughly 38 years old. The sample was disproportionately Black with 78% identifying as Black or African-American. 77% of fathers reported never having been married. There were no notable differences between program fathers and non-program fathers.

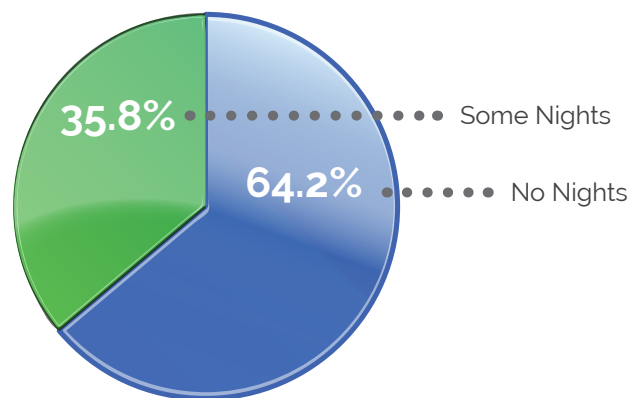


FIGURE 1

Children Spending Nights with Nonresidential Fathers During Past 30 Days (%) (n=866)

Fathers were asked to provide information about their four youngest children including their age, with whom they reside, and the name of the child's mother. Fathers were then asked to fill out a calendar indicating which specific dates, of the 30 days preceding the interview, the father had spent the night in the same residence as each child. This retrospective time diary allowed us to compile data for the total number of nights spent with each individual child and a composite of the total number of nights spent with any child. Valid responses were collected from 602 fathers out of the total sample of 606 respondents.

Findings

The fathers in our study provided information on a total of 1,274 children ranging in age from 0 to 45 years old ($M=11.26$ years). We focus here on the children 18 years old or younger ($n=1,042$; $M=8.18$ years). 83% ($n=866$) of these children were reported by their fathers as not living with him. Fathers' reports of residency and the number of nights spent in the same residence was highly correlated, but not perfectly ($r=0.71$). The number of nights spent by children in the same residence with their father ranged from 0 to 30 for both residential and nonresidential families. Children who were reported as residing with their father spent an average of approximately 23 nights ($SD=11.47$) in the same residence with him. Children who were reported as not residing with their fathers spent an average of approximately three nights ($SD=5.95$) in the same residence with him. **Figure 1** presents the proportion of children with nonresidential fathers who spent either no nights or some nights in the same residence as him. Overall, a majority of children with nonresidential fathers (64.20%) spent 0 nights with him in the past 30 days.

While clearly skewed towards spending no nights with their fathers, there is notable variation in the nights spent in the same residence with nonresidential fathers.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of children with nonresidential fathers by the number of nights

spent in the same residence as him. Of these children with nonresidential fathers, more than 18% spent more than 7 nights in the same residence as their fathers in the past 30 days.

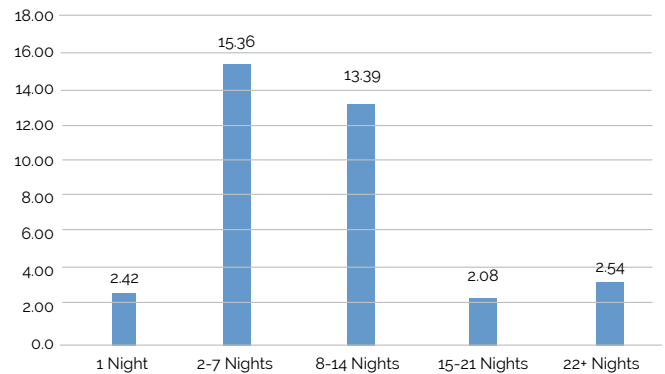


FIGURE 2

Number of Nights Spent with Nonresidential Fathers During Past 30 Days ($n=866$)

We also explored the relationship between a child's age and the number of nights he/she spent with a nonresidential father in the past 30 days. Children aged 0-2 years spent an average of 6.03 nights ($SD=7.45$), aged 3-5 years spent 3.67 ($SD=5.70$) nights, aged 6-11 years spent 2.86 nights ($SD=5.7$), and aged 12-18 years spent 1.58 nights ($SD=4.51$) in the past 30 days. As illustrated in **Figure 3**, nonresidential fathers were more likely to spend some nights with children during their infancy/toddler years (0-2 years). 36% of children aged 0-2 years with nonresidential fathers spent no nights with him. This portion increases drastically to nearly 60% of children aged 3-5 years and continues higher among older children.

Discussion

Given the variation in the number of nights children spend with their nonresidential fathers, it appears beneficial to couple information about residency status with more detailed data. The use of a recall calendar, a variation on a time diary approach, allows

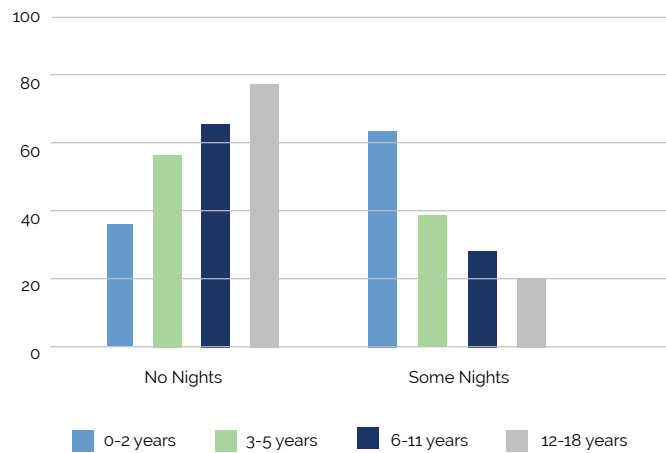


FIGURE 3

Percent of Children Spending Nights with Nonresidential Fathers by Age During Past 30 Days (n=866)

fathers to provide this specific information in a clear and accessible format. The decrease in nights spent in the same residence as a nonresidential father as children age was consistent with previous findings about diminishing fatherhood involvement (McLanahan, 2009).

There are some limitations to this approach. Juster (1985) notes that the validity of the time diary is affected when the respondent is asked to recall events from an extended period, especially when the events occurred

on a weekday (p. 83). While Juster only examined recall periods of four to seven days prior, our recall calendar extends a full 30 days past. However, Juster also notes that "memory decay" might be lessened in regards to the recall of "salient events" (p. 82). It is plausible that spending the night with your child would be a salient event, especially for nonresidential father, this limiting the amount of memory decay over the course of 30 days. Additionally, our data were collected over six months, with fathers recalling nights spent with their children from December to June. It is likely that there are seasonal differences in nights spent with children that are not captured in this discussion, as well as effects of changing mother/father relationship dynamics.

Implications for Researchers

Nonresidential fathers appear to spend a varied number of nights with their children suggesting a more complex relationship than can be captured in simple questions of residency status (e.g., Who do you live with all or most of the time?).

Recall calendars or time diaries provide a potentially effective method for collecting data on nights fathers spent in the same residence as their children.

References

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