

Young Dads: Who They Are and Why Age Matters

Fathers can play an important role in children's lives. Involved fathers contribute economically, engage in child rearing, act as role models, and provide indirectly through supporting the mother. Young disadvantaged dads face challenges in all these areas.

Young fathers have lower than average levels of education and employment compared to men who didn't have children under age 25.

Only half of young dads are married at the birth of their first child. Unmarried fathers are younger and more disadvantaged than married fathers; they are less educated, less healthy, and less likely to be working.

They are also more likely to come from families of lower socioeconomic status, have more mental health problems, and are more likely to have been incarcerated.

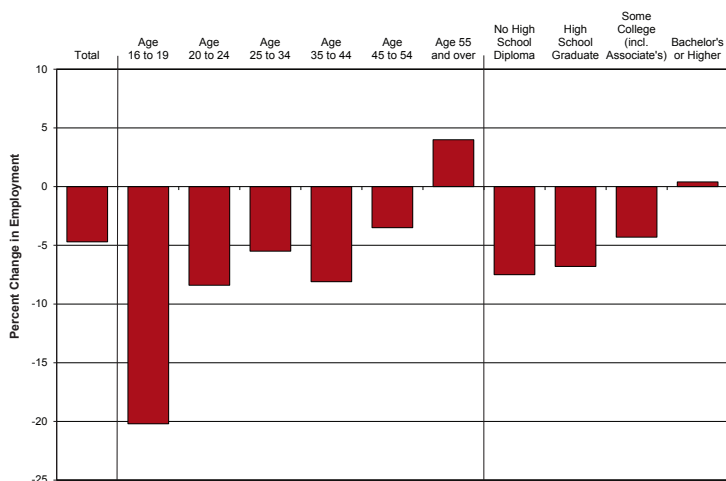
Black and Hispanic men are more likely than white men to become young fathers.

Young disadvantaged fathers have fewer resources and tend to invest less in children than older, more advantaged fathers. These investments include: spending time with children, being accessible to them, and taking an active role in raising them.

Young fathers also have fewer financial resources to invest in their children than older fathers.

Finally, the same characteristics that often lead to early fatherhood are also associated with less father involvement.

Employment Changes by Age Group and Education Level 2007–2009



Source: Engemann and Wall 2010.

Key Points

- About 72% of young men with a high school degree or less are fathers by age 30.
- Unemployment rates for young low-educated men—nearly 30 percent in 2009—are higher than they were in the Great Depression.
- Median earnings for young men fell by 19% between 1979 and 2008; only about 20% of low-educated men had regular full-time jobs in 2008.
- Over half the men fathering a child before age 25 are unmarried. Almost one-third of fathers under 25 have children with more than one partner.
- Many disadvantaged dads have children with multiple partners, further complicating child involvement, child support, and living arrangements.
- Children born to disadvantaged fathers are more likely to experience multiple father figures than children born to older, married, and more advantaged parents.

Why Being a Young Dad Is Often Hard

The labor market, incarceration, having children with multiple partners, and public policy are the main forces affecting young, low-educated dads and their ability to support their children.

Labor Market:

Factors like globalization, technology, and the outsourcing of jobs overseas have diminished the opportunities available to less-educated men.

Furthermore, the recent recession was especially hard on low-educated minorities. Over 30% of young black men (ages 16–24) were officially unemployed in 2010.

Incarceration:

In a recent cohort of men without a high school diploma, 28% of whites, 68% of blacks, and 20% of Hispanics can expect to serve at least a year in prison by age 30.

More than half of state prisoners and almost two-thirds of prisoners in federal penitentiaries in 2007 had children under the age of 18.

Incarceration limits the contact children have with their father. This problem disproportionately affects minorities and the children of disadvantaged fathers.

Having Children with Multiple Partners:

Almost 33% of young disadvantaged dads and 47% of young black fathers have children with multiple partners, which increases the challenges of being a father.

Public Policy:

Public policy regarding disadvantaged families is often more focused on mothers and children than on fathers.

“Most young disadvantaged men do not make the minimum amount needed to support a partner and one child on their own.”
—Timothy Smeeding

How Might Public Policy Help Young Fathers and Their Children?

Researchers suggest the following policies to help young disadvantaged dads and their children:

Proven strategies for **improving education and employment** include youth development and mentoring, career training, and an emphasis on finishing high school or obtaining a GED. Policy research suggests that programs should engage and reconnect youth.

Strengthening family relationships is another focus area. Improving parents' relationship with each other has shown to improve the overall well-being of the child.

Child Support is important since it can help children avoid or escape poverty. Evidence shows that policy should support fathers too, by providing the work support necessary to enable them to make contributions to their children. Child support complements rather than substitutes for father involvement.

Income support policies help young, low-educated fathers face declining wages and labor force opportunities. Policies like subsidized jobs in transitional job programs should help men receive public help that includes a work requirement.

Policy focused on re-entry into society after **incarceration** is also vital, since many fathers serve time; nearly all men that go to prison get released. Research suggests policy should focus on improving skills and education.

Workforce development, conditional cash transfer programs providing incentives for completing secondary education, and transitional jobs are examples of some proven ways to ease the transition from prison.

The Milwaukee Prison Project

An innovative policy aimed at temporarily reducing child support orders for incarcerated noncustodial parents, the Milwaukee Prison Project sought to improve their child support payment upon release. An IRP evaluation of the project came to the following overall conclusions:

- There is suggestive evidence of improvements in child support outcomes such as lower arrears at release and one year after release; greater likelihood of child support payments; and higher payment amounts. There is also evidence of lower post-incarceration child support orders.
- Findings are sensitive to the analytic approach. Additional research is needed to verify these findings and inform policy changes.

"These fathers appear to be caught in poverty traps as deeply as any single mother."

—David J. Pate, Jr.

In Their Own Words: Disadvantaged Dads from Milwaukee

David J. Pate, Jr., a professor at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, conducted numerous interviews for his research on disadvantaged fathers in Milwaukee. The men he interviewed were between the ages of 21 and 57 and most had children with more than one woman. What follows below are interview excerpts.

Many of the men interviewed were trying to become father figures to their children:

"You know, I don't even know who my dad is. And I wish that I wouldn't be like my dad. And that is the main reason why I am a man now and I take care of my kids."

Most men were actively seeking work to support their children, but finding success was infrequent:

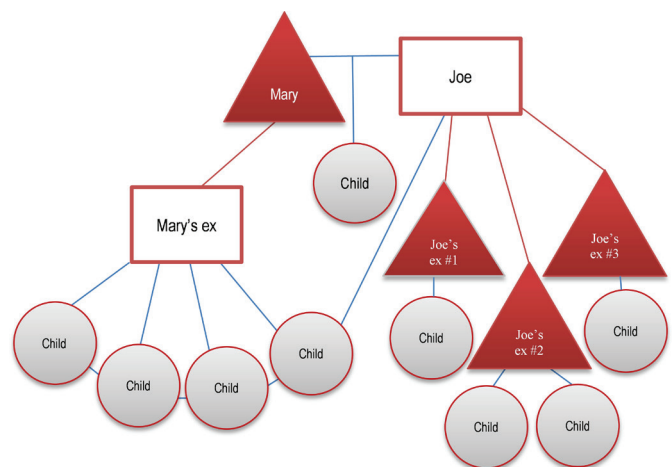
"They promise you that, you know, this job might be long-term. After 90 days you are supposed to be hired. But then the company can work you 89 days and say we don't need you. So then you into a job, get settled into it, think this is going to be it. Then boom. You back on the unemployment list waiting on another job."

Many men supported their children in non-financial ways when they couldn't pay child support:

"I don't pay (child support) all the time cause I don't have it all the time... That don't mean I ain't doing it... I watch her... when she (the mother) need me to watch her even though I help pay for day care, you know what I'm saying? I buy diapers, all that. Play with her, take her out."

These men are examples of disadvantaged fathers doing their best to be good parents despite the many economic and personal challenges they face.

One Low-Income Milwaukee Father's Complex Family Life



Source: Pate 2002.

Bottom Line: Fathers play an important role in children's lives. Young disadvantaged men are often stereotyped as poor dads that are uninvolved and unsupportive. However, many of them play meaningful roles in their children's lives, despite daunting challenges.

This fact sheet was prepared by Dan Simon.

For a list of the sources used for this brief and further reading, visit www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/factsheets.htm.

IRP-Morgridge Fact Sheet #4: Young Dads and Disadvantage Sources

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