



INSTITUTE *for*
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Disadvantaged Men as Fathers

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Carlson, Marcia J. and Berger, Lawrence M. (2012). "What Kids Get from Parents: Packages of Parental Involvement across Complex Family Forms." Manuscript, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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Opinions are mine alone

Outline

- I. What fathers “do” for children
- II. Theoretical perspectives on father involvement by biology, marriage, and co-residence
- III. The role of social selection
- IV. Disadvantaged fathers’ involvement with children
- V. Limitations of existing research
- VI. Conclusions and implications for policy and research

I. What fathers “do” for children

- Both the family forms that children commonly experience and norms/expectations re: the social role of father have changed over time
- Increased diversity in family forms means many children are exposed to multiple types of father figures
- Children born to disadvantaged parents (vis-à-vis income/employment, education, minority status) are particularly likely to experience nonresident and social fathers as well as family structure transitions
- Father (figure) involvement—by resident and nonresident fathers, as well as resident social fathers—is generally thought to benefit children

I. What fathers “do” (continued)

- Economic contributions
- Involvement in childrearing
 - Engagement
 - has been the focus of most existing research
 - Accessibility
 - Responsibility
 - Indirect investments (supporting mothers)
- Disadvantaged men may have less capacity to invest in each area
- Most research has been on quantity rather than quality
- My focus today is on involvement in childrearing rather than economic contributions

II. How Might Biology, Marriage, and Co-Residence Influence Father Involvement?

- Though focused on different aspects of family relationships, sociological, economic, and evolutionary theories suggest 3 common hypotheses such that, all else equal:
 1. biological fathers will invest more in children than social fathers
 2. married fathers will invest more than unmarried fathers
 3. resident fathers will invest more than nonresident fathers
- These hypotheses do not discount that social selection (discussed below) is likely to play a significant role with regard to both family structure and variation in investment in children
 - Disadvantaged fathers are disproportionately likely to be social, cohabiting, and nonresident, as opposed to biological, married, and resident; they also have fewer economic resources (by definition); each of these factors suggests less investment

Hypothesis 1: Biological fathers will invest more than social fathers

- Sociological perspectives focus on institutionalization of family types vis-à-vis the influence of biological ties, co-residence, and marriage on fathers' investments in children
 - biological fathers have greater legal and normative obligations to children
- Evolutionary perspectives explicitly focus only on biology
 - interest in genetic survival and therefore children's success, coupled with high costs of parental investment, leads to greater investment in biological than social children
- Economic perspectives encompass biology, marriage, and co-residence
 - greater altruism, expectations of future returns to investments, and perceived endowments of biological children relative to social children

Hypothesis 2: Married fathers will invest more than unmarried fathers

- Sociological perspectives
 - legal and public aspects of marriage create institutional strength and associated obligations such that (resident) married biological and social fathers will invest more than their cohabiting counterparts
- Evolutionary perspectives do not explicitly address marriage
 - plausible, though, that marriage implies greater confidence of paternity and/or greater willingness of father to make long-term investments in children
- Economic perspectives
 - marriage may constitute formal commitment to a family (not just to a spouse) and thus be associated with greater altruism and higher expectations for future returns

Hypothesis 3: Resident fathers will invest more than nonresident fathers

- Sociological perspectives
 - few legally enforceable obligations for nonresident fathers, other than child support
 - greater normative expectations for involvement than in the past, but still not clearly defined/prescribed
- Economic perspectives
 - co-residence implies greater access to father's income and sharing of "quality of life"; public goods; economies of scale
 - lower costs of investing for resident than nonresident fathers; fewer barriers and smaller transaction costs
 - resident fathers have a better ability to monitor their investments
 - resident fathers may have greater expectations of future returns as well as more economic altruism

III. The Role of Social Selection

- The timing and context in which men enter into biological and/or social fatherhood tends to vary by pre-existing level of (dis)advantage in ways that may also influence investment in children
- Disadvantaged men are disproportionately likely to become a father at a young age, to be unmarried, and to break-up with their child(ren)'s mother, as well as to become a social father
- Young, disadvantaged, and unmarried fathers experience greater levels of health/mental health problems, incarceration, and multi-partner fertility than other fathers
- They also tend to have children with disadvantaged women

III. Social Selection (continued)

- The characteristics of disadvantaged fathers imply relatively limited capacity/ability to invest in children financially
- These same characteristics are associated with lower levels of father involvement (quantity and quality of activities) with children
- For non-resident fathers, involvement and financial investments (child support) are positively correlated
- Adjusting for selection factors accounts for a considerable portion, though not all, of the associations between father type and father involvement
- Differential selection into fertility and family formation patterns by socioeconomic status has implications for intergenerational transmission of inequality

Marital status and multi-partnered fertility of men age 25-44 by age at birth of first child (NSFG 2002)

	Father by 25	Father after 25
Married at birth of first child	.52	.83
Cohabiting at birth of first child	.33	.12
Single at birth of first child	.14	.05
Has children with multiple partners	.29	.05
White	.29	.34
Black	.48	.25
Hispanic	.51	.25

Age at birth of first child for men age 25-44 by educational attainment and income-to-poverty ratio (2002 NSFG)

	Father by 25	Father after 25
Education: less than high school	0.54	0.25
Education: high school	0.48	0.27
Education: some college	0.37	0.27
Education: college degree or more	0.10	0.42
Inc.-to-pov. ratio: < 50%	0.53	0.25
Inc.-to-pov. ratio: ≥ 50 to <100%	0.56	0.24
Inc.-to-pov. ratio: ≥ 100 to <150%	0.49	0.31
Inc.-to-pov. ratio: ≥ 150 to <200%	0.51	0.27
Inc.-to-pov. ratio: $\geq 200\%$	0.27	0.33

IV. What Do We Know About Disadvantaged Fathers' Involvement With Children?

- Positive antecedents of involvement: human capital, experiences with own father/male role models, identification with fathering role, relationship quality (with mother and other relatives)
- Negative antecedents of involvement: psychosocial problems, incarceration, maternal and paternal re-partnering and subsequent fertility, gatekeeping, child health/disability, unstable living arrangements
- Net of these factors, there is additional variation by biological, marital, and co-resident status

Resident biological/social father involvement

- Most resident (bio and soc) fathers spend considerable time with and engage in activities with children regularly
 - Less so than mothers; also more play/sports/leisure oriented vs. cognitively stimulating, monitoring, disciplining, “rule setting”
- Married co-resident biological fathers tend to be more involved than all other father types; also most advantaged
- Most prior work suggests greater quantity and quality of involvement by married biological than married social fathers
 - more activities; greater warmth/positive feelings and supportiveness; more monitoring and controlling behaviors
- Married biological fathers more involved than cohabiting biological fathers; also engage in more spanking
- Less consistent patterns of differences between cohabiting biological and cohabiting social fathers

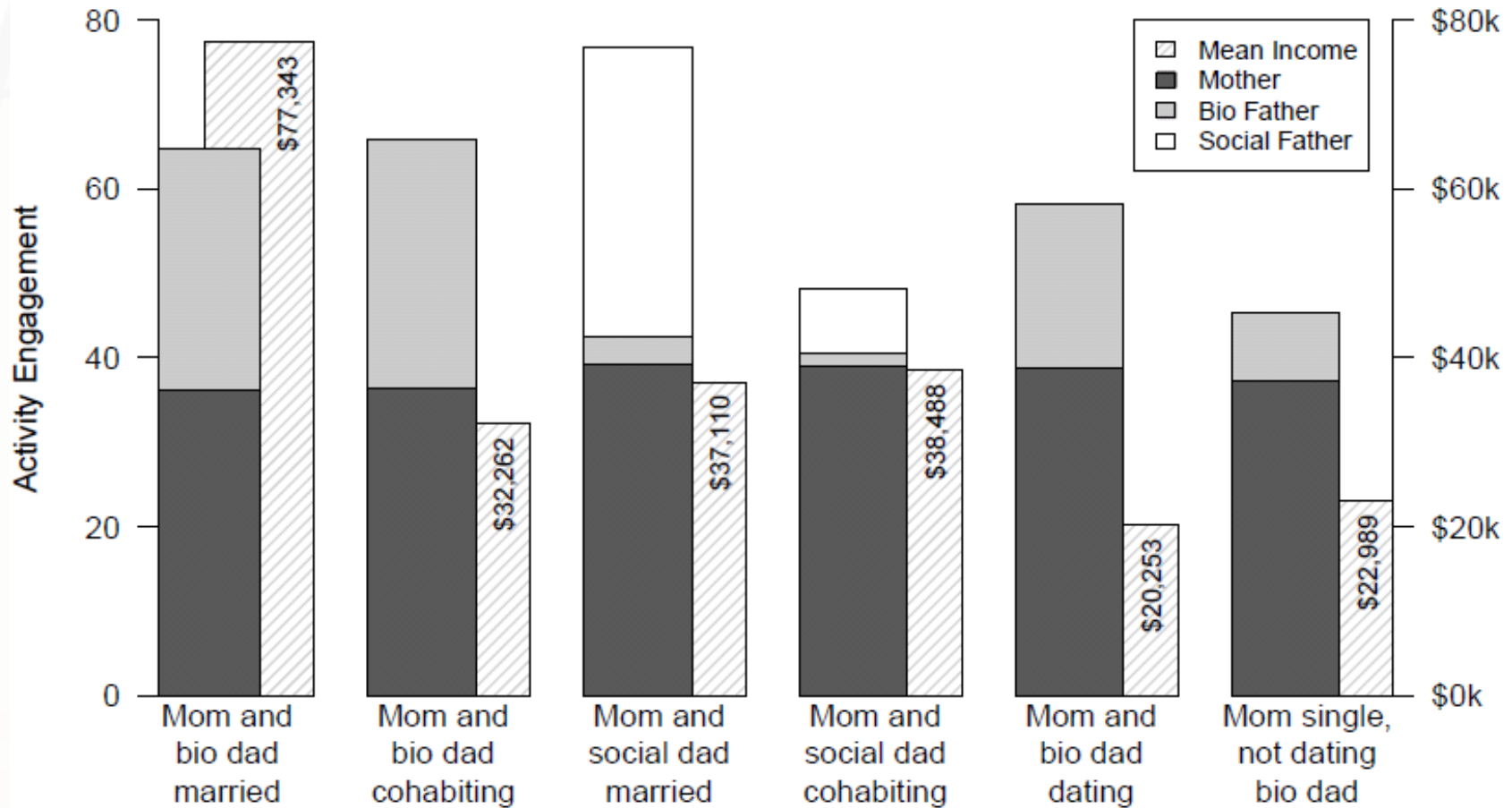
Disadvantaged resident biological/social father involvement

- Recent work using Fragile Families data, a relatively disadvantaged sample, suggests equal or higher levels of involvement by married social fathers compared to married biological fathers
 - activity engagement, co-parenting/shared responsibility for parenting
 - less frequent spanking
- Not necessarily the case for cohabiting social fathers
- May suggest that differences between (married) biological and social fathers are smaller among disadvantaged families and/or that disadvantaged mothers who re-partner (particularly into marriage) do so with men they perceive to be investing in their children

Non-resident, non-incarcerated biological father involvement

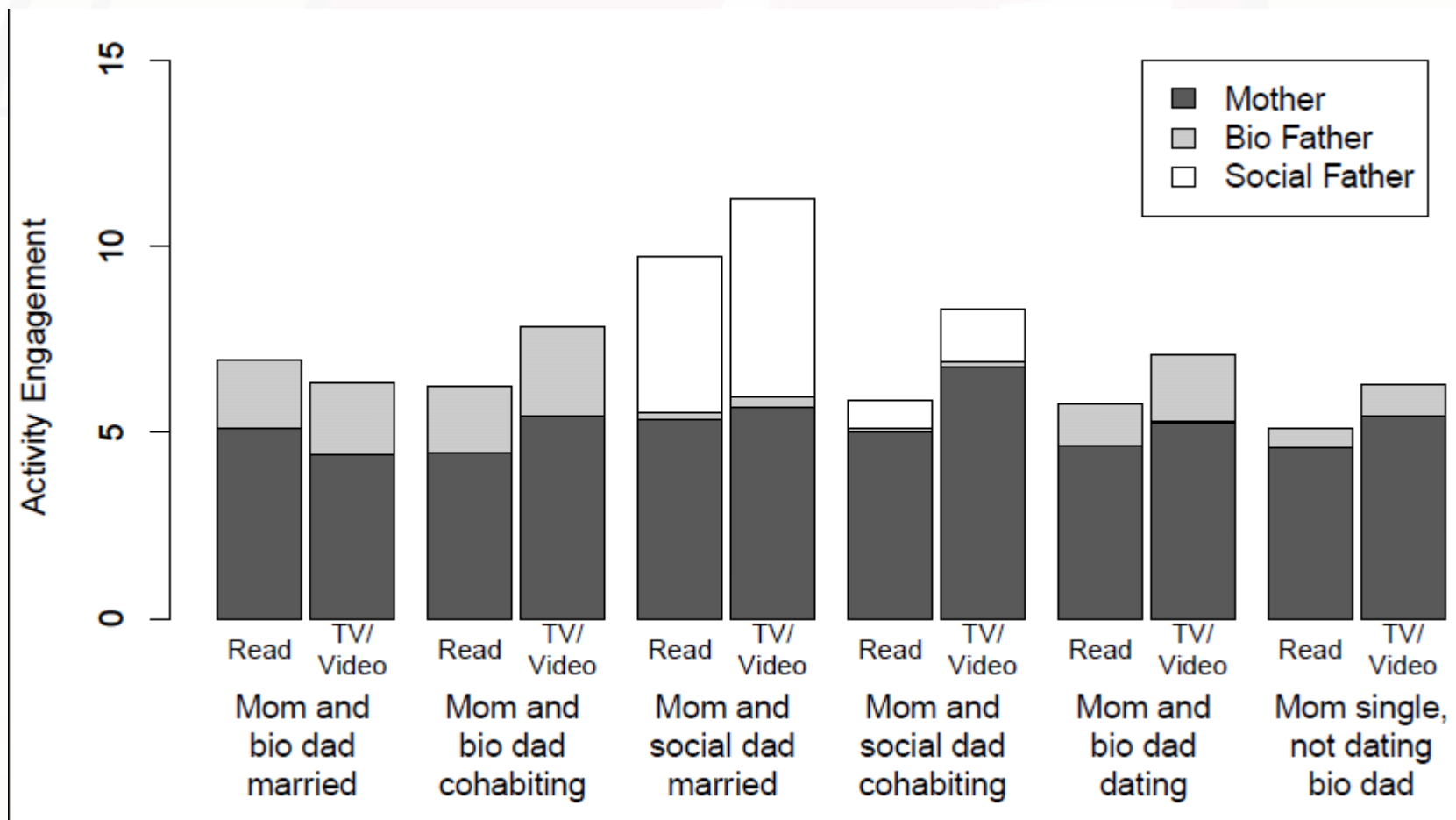
- Roughly 60% of children have some contact with their non-resident father in a given year; 40% do not
 - those with contact average 69 days/year
- Considerable variation in both levels and change over time
- Relatively similar involvement levels among never married and divorced fathers (though slightly less for the former)
 - Younger and less advantaged fathers are generally less involved
- Contact tends to decrease over time and with maternal or paternal re-partnering or new-partner fertility
- Involvement tends to be packaged with formal or informal, cash or in-kind support
- Activities tend to be more recreational than instrumental

Activity Engagement and Income by Family Type at Age 5 (Fragile Families Data)



Source: Carlson & Berger, 2012

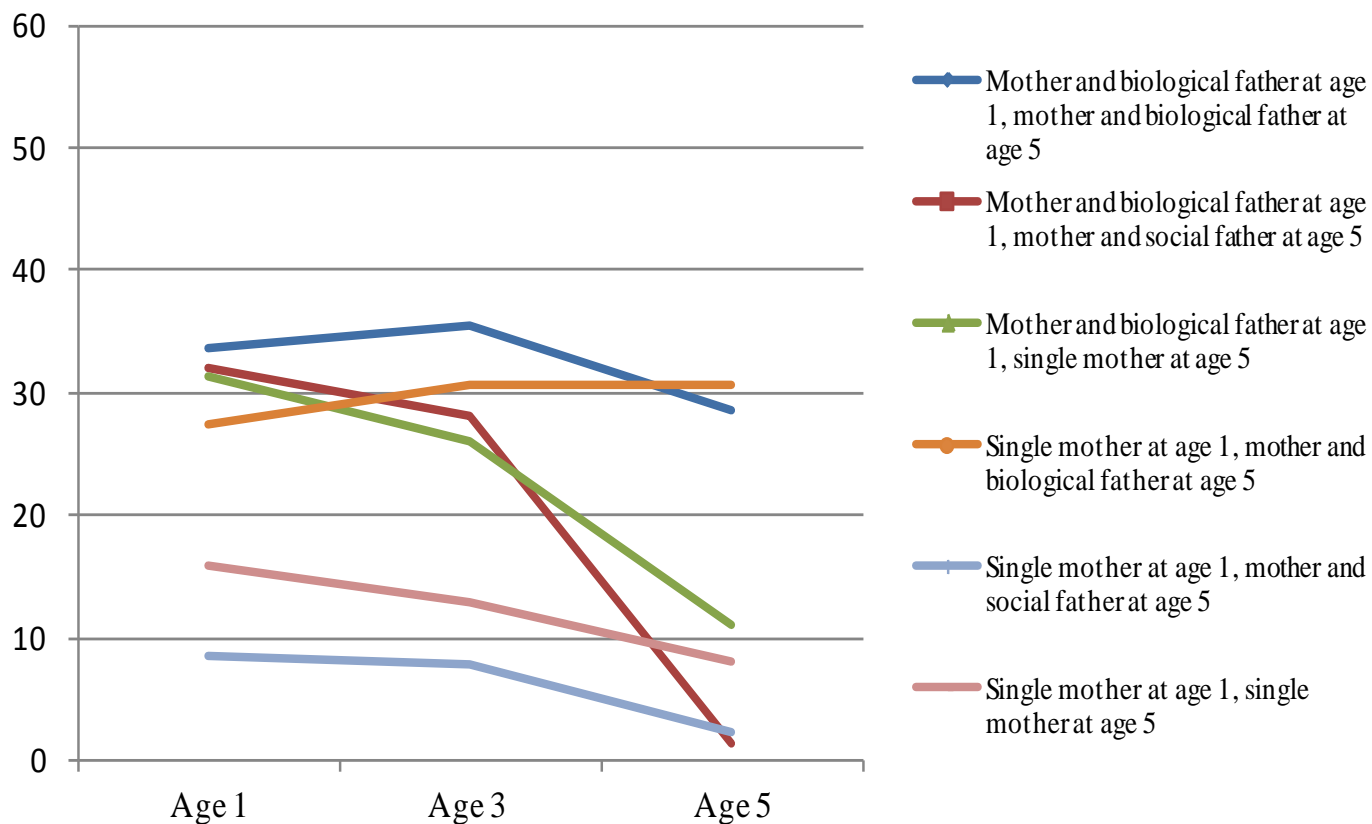
Reading and TV/Video Watching by Family Type at Age 5 (Fragile Families Data)



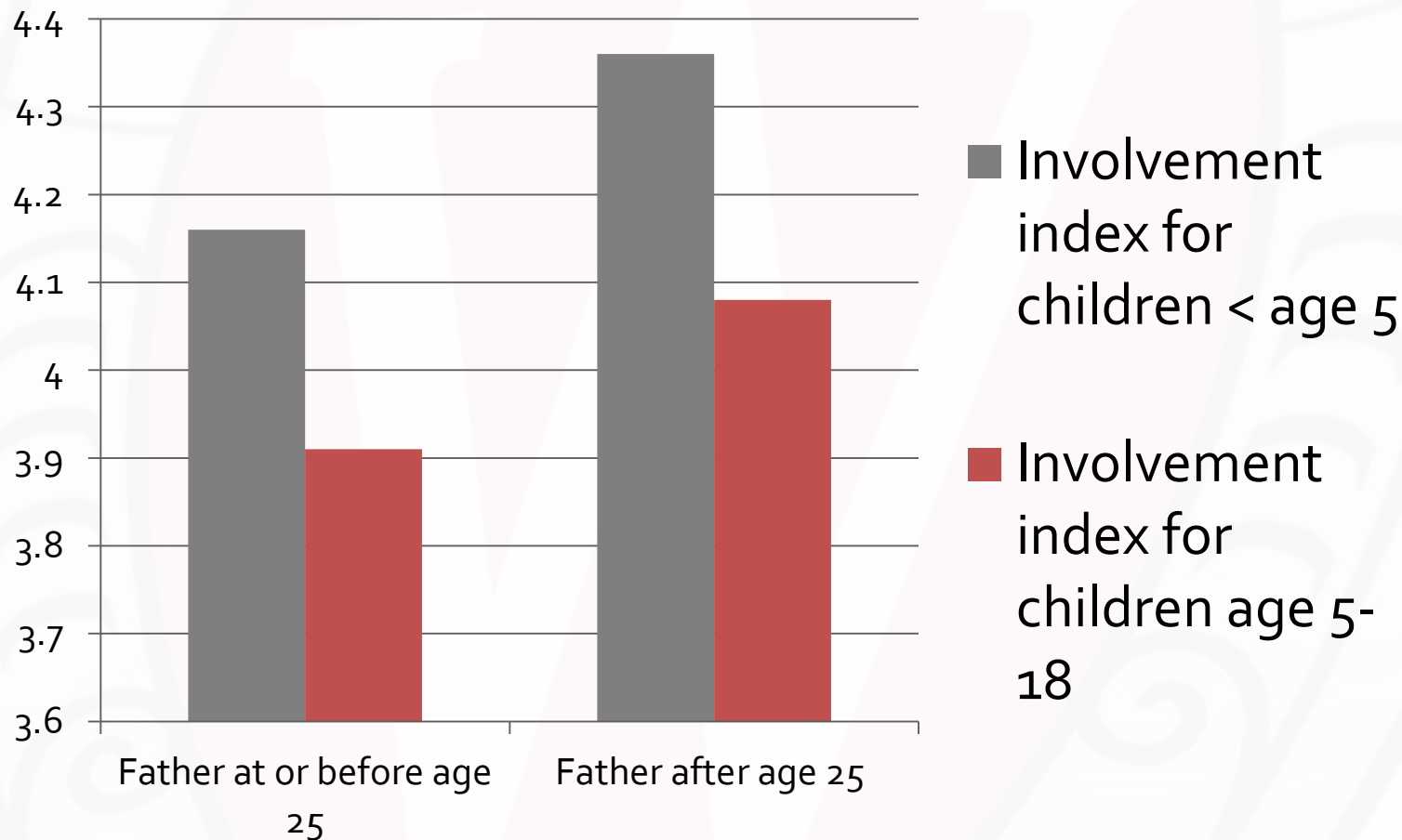
Source: Carlson & Berger, 2012

Change in Biological Father Activity Engagement Ages 1, 3 and 5 by Family Type (Fragile Families Data)

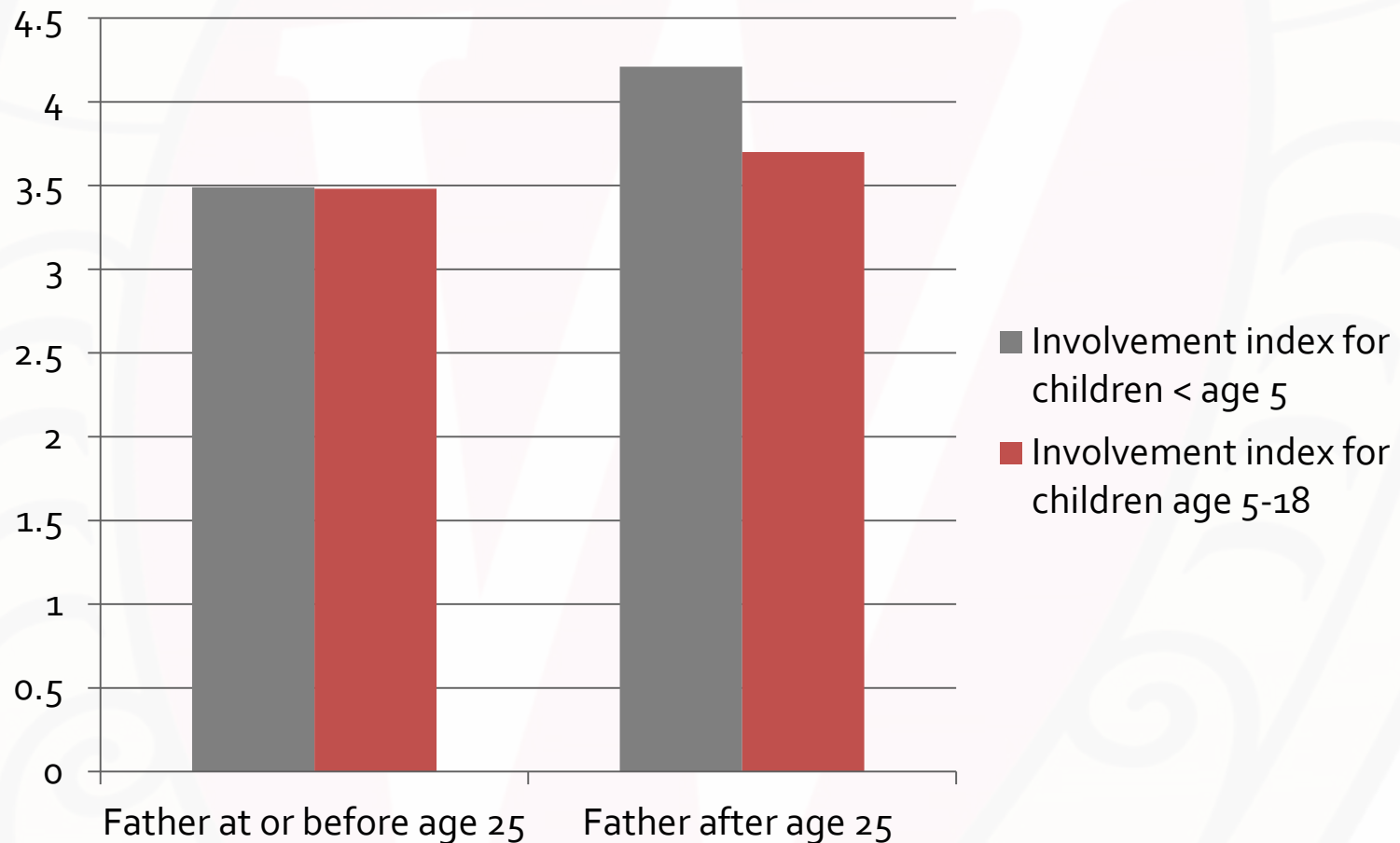
Biological Father Activity Engagement



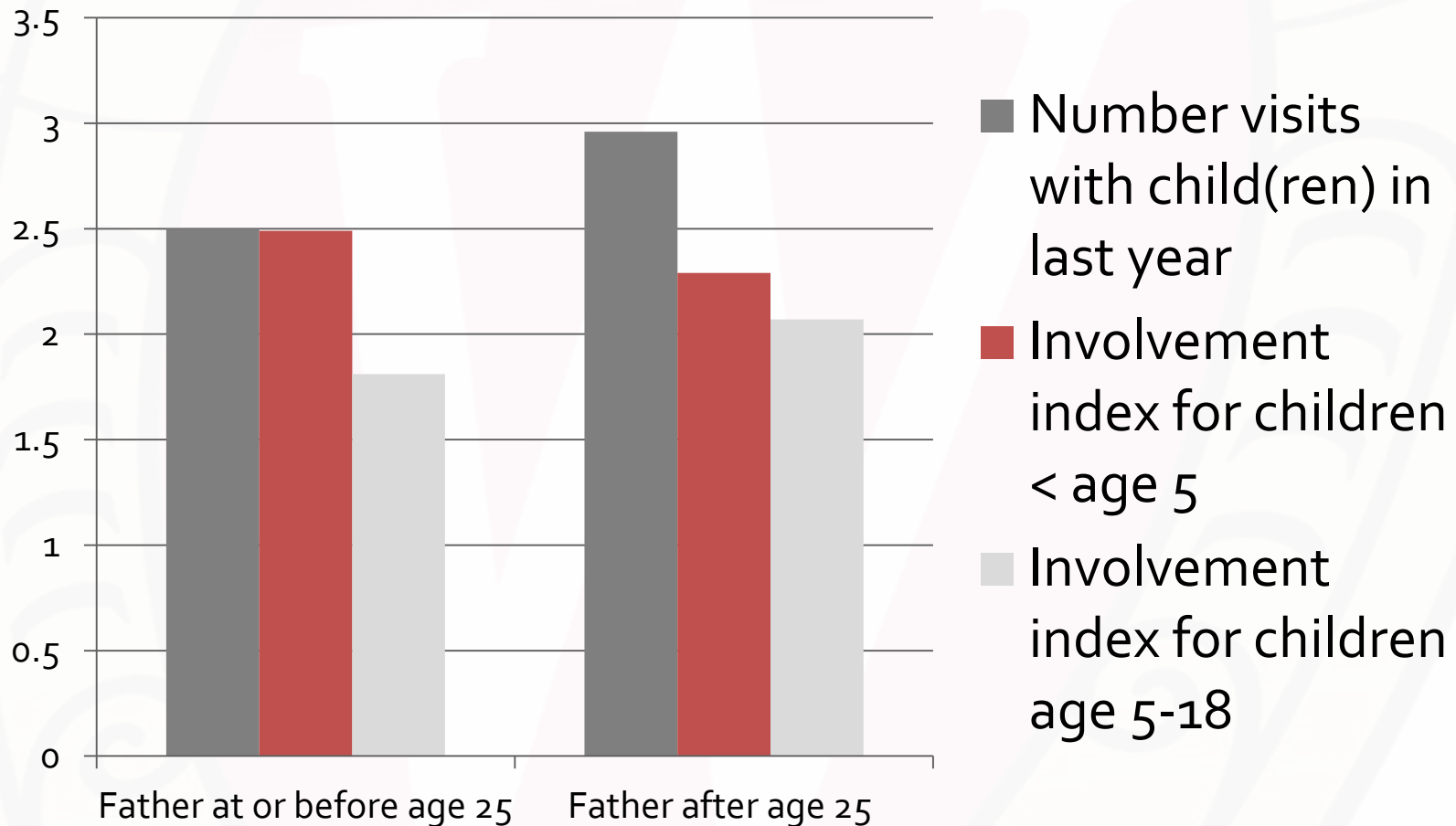
Resident biological father involvement by age at birth of first child (NSFG 2002)



Resident social father involvement by current age (NSFG 2002)



Non-incarcerated, non-resident biological father involvement by age at birth of first child (NSFG 2002)



Non-resident, incarcerated biological father involvement

- Important subset of disadvantaged fathers about whose ongoing involvement with children we know little
 - 2.3% of all children; black children 7.5x more likely than white children; relatively long absences (4-9 years; state and federal custody)
- Father has little control over contact
 - maternal gatekeeping and relationship may be important
 - visitation may have considerable economic costs; distance is a strong predictor of contact; most contact by mail
- 30-40% report weekly contact (phone, mail, visits) and an additional 23% monthly contact
 - 22% no contact during current period of incarceration
 - ~60% no visits

V. Limitations of existing research

- Disadvantaged fathers systematically missing from surveys
- Families/father roles more fluid than often acknowledged
- Need better measures of father involvement
- Difficulty (impossibility) of identifying causal effects
- Limited attention to:
 - whether involvement is always good
 - effects on men's wellbeing
 - single-father families
 - quality of interactions with incarcerated fathers
 - “full package” of parenting children receive

VI. Conclusions and Implications (continued)

- Selection into type and timing of fertility/family formation has implications for intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality
 - Married biological fathers are both more advantaged and more involved than are unmarried and social fathers
 - Potentially less social capital/less efficient transfer of human capital in other family types
- Resident biological-social father gap in involvement may be less pronounced among disadvantaged families
 - Social fathers as a potential resource in disadvantaged families; appropriate target for fatherhood initiatives

VI. Conclusions and Implications

- Policy/programs should address family complexity and promote healthy relationships/involvement among all actors
 - unrealistic to focus on current couple and joint child(ren)
 - multiple fathers and “father” roles at a given time and over time
 - encourage instrumental not just recreational involvement(?)
- For nonresident fathers, policy should
 - consider circumstances under which nonresident father involvement should (should not?) be encouraged
 - recognize that employment, child support, and father involvement are interrelated; e.g., National Child Support Non-Custodial Parent Employment Demonstration Project
- Involvement among incarcerated men is relevant to a large proportion of disadvantaged fathers
 - Programs to support involvement via videoconferencing, etc.