

# FATHERHOOD INSTITUTE

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## **The dad-shaped 'hole' – and opportunity – in data about UK children**

*New reports call for research to better include fathers*

[The Fatherhood Institute](#) is calling for the UK's research funding bodies, researchers and government statisticians to rethink how they collect and use data about families – to ensure their work captures key information about fathers and their impacts.

In two landmark reports published today, the Fatherhood Institute exposes opportunities and gaps in how evidence about UK fathers and their adolescent children is collected and analysed. The reports, funded by the [Nuffield Foundation](#), find a huge opportunity for researchers in the wealth of father-data collected in the UK's internationally renowned longitudinal studies, but also show that research used to help shape public policy often ignores fathers, despite their overwhelming presence and influence in children's lives.

### **Opportunities include:**

- Analysis of the most up-to-date data about fathers during children's adolescence, from *Growing Up in Scotland*, the Millennium Cohort Study and *Understanding Society*
- Incorporating data already collected about father-child relationships, and fathers' characteristics, attitudes and parenting behaviours, when studying key topics like adolescent educational outcomes and mental health, and the impacts of parental separation
- Upcoming datasets like the Early Life Cohort and the DfE's new child cohort studies, which have set out to collect more extensive data about fathers including those living separately.

### **Problems include:**

- Major studies that track children and families over time failing to gather sufficient data from and about fathers, especially when they do not live with their children full-time
- The lack of a standard set of definitions of fathers and father-figures in official statistics about children and families
- Researchers using 'parents' to describe studies and analysis which are about mothers only
- Researchers labelling fathers living separately as 'absent' or 'non-resident' fathers, despite a high proportion of them being very involved in their children's lives

- Insufficient budgets to support researchers' effective fieldwork engagement with more than one parent, within and across households.

Our first report<sup>1</sup> highlights research gaps and recommendations; the second<sup>2</sup> takes a 'deep dive' into six UK longitudinal studies and sets out a range of opportunities for more father-inclusive research. This is an in-depth resource for longitudinal studies, their funders, and researchers carrying out secondary analyses of these datasets. It sets out what father-data is collected in each of these studies, proposes how study design can improve father-data, and maps opportunities for future analysis. It will be valuable for researchers in the fields of adolescent and youth studies (including crime), child development, family studies, educational studies, public health, biosocial research, and social mobility/economic studies.

The six longitudinal datasets reviewed are: the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), the first *Growing Up in Scotland* birth cohort study (GUS), the first and second Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England (LSYPE) studies (*Next Steps* and *Our Future*) and *Understanding Society* (the UK Household Longitudinal Study).

Rebecca Goldman, lead author of the reports, said: "This valuable data about fathers in the UK's longitudinal studies needs to be incorporated into a wide range of research to update our evidence base about fathers' impacts on children and to catch up with changing gender roles and family types."

Dr Emily Tanner, Programme Head at the Nuffield Foundation said: "The UK's longitudinal datasets are a rich resource, providing the foundation for evidence on child development and educational outcomes. This new research demonstrates that the picture is incomplete unless fathers are included in datasets and analysis."

For further information and/or to arrange interviews, contact Head of Impact & Communications Dr Jeremy Davies [j.davies@fatherhoodinstitute.org](mailto:j.davies@fatherhoodinstitute.org).

## Notes to editors

### 1. Our recommendations for future research are:

#### Data collection

- Equivalent data should be collected about 'father-factors' and 'mother-factors' in quantitative studies of influences on children during adolescence and young adulthood. The 'father-data' should include father characteristics, fathering 'status' (birth, 'step', adoptive or foster; co-

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<sup>1</sup> [The kids are alright: Adolescents and their fathers in the UK. Research Gaps and Recommendations](#) – which draws on our earlier report, [The kids are alright: Adolescents and their fathers in the UK. Research review](#) (published in November 2023) and the second report published today, [The kids are alright: Adolescents and their fathers in the UK. A review of six large-scale UK longitudinal datasets](#).

<sup>2</sup> [The kids are alright: Adolescents and their fathers in the UK - a review of six large-scale UK longitudinal datasets](#).

resident for all or most of the time, or Own Household Father), father involvement, fathering style, father-child relationships and co-parenting.

- In child cohort studies, father-factor-data should be collected throughout childhood and adolescence, since earlier father characteristics, fathering and father-child relationships influence later child outcomes.
- Both co-resident fathers and Own Household Fathers ('OHFs' - fathers who do not live with their children full-time) should be included in research studies of adolescents and younger children. Involved OHFs should be asked a similar range of questions about father involvement, fathering, father-child relationships and co-parenting as asked of co-resident fathers.
- Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies providing data for research about families and children should incorporate from the outset those resources and fieldwork practices that will be likely to achieve high engagement from fathers as research participants. In longitudinal studies, this includes continued participation from parents (usually fathers) who leave a child's main household during the study.
- The Office for National Statistics (ONS) should have a standard set of definitions of fathers and father-figures for statistics about children and families, which could also be used by public services and government departments. In producing official statistics, ONS and government departments should collect and report data both about fathers cohabiting for all or most of the time with their children, and fathers living full-time or part-time in another household, differentiating between these categories of fathers where appropriate, especially in comparisons with mothers.
- Qualitative studies should be carried out to investigate the mechanisms and processes in families which underlie the statistical associations found between father-factors and adolescent outcomes. This would inform policy and practice to support fathering and father-child relationships and mitigate risk factors.

### **Research analysis and reporting**

- Research publications about children and their families should give evidence specific to fathers and to mothers, rather than for 'parents' as a single category in order to explore similarities and differences in relation to situation or gender. Using the term 'parent' as a euphemism or synonym for mother excludes consideration of father-factors and may 'mask' the absence of fathers from the sample. When children/young people are asked to provide information about, for example, their relationship with their 'parents' they may find responding difficult, as they are likely to have different experiences of each parent.
- Analyses of the impacts of family structures and parental separation should not explicitly or implicitly conceptualise or label Own Household Fathers as 'non-resident' or 'absent' or even 'separated'<sup>3</sup>. They should incorporate into analysis the data collected about OHFs' involvement in their children's lives, including part-time co-residence.

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<sup>3</sup> Some OHFs have never lived with their child and the child's birth mother together at the same address; and a proportion of these fathers were never in an ongoing romantic relationship with the birth mother. This does not necessarily mean they are not involved in their children's lives.

- Quantitative researchers and research funders in the fields of fatherhood, families and adolescence should investigate the rich data available in the UK's large-scale longitudinal studies for developing the evidence base about fathers and adolescents, as documented in [\*The kids are alright: Adolescents and their fathers in the UK - a review of data in six UK longitudinal studies.\*](#)

**2. The Fatherhood Institute offers a range of services to the research community, including longitudinal studies, secondary analysis projects and research reviews. Find out more on [our website.](#)**