

The demography of people who do not know their fathers

Extended Abstract

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Abstract

Fathers' absence from their children varies greatly. Standardized surveys provide unambiguous documentation about only the most extreme form of paternal absenteeism, namely "father unknown". This level of father absence is rare, perhaps 1 to 2% in developed societies. The demography of such individuals – development; education and occupation; mating, marriage and separation; reproduction; health and mortality – can either be studied in case-control studies with great selectivity of cases, or in large cumulative general social surveys datasets. Seemingly only the German General Social Survey ALLBUS provides such information. Analyses show that such offspring do not differ in education or occupation from others, but are twice as likely to be single, less healthy and to have smaller families. They are also more likely to prefer to be single. They may even have higher mortality. Men are not more often, but are more severely affected by fathers' absence than are women.

Extended Abstract

Fathers' absence can take on many forms. Fathers may be physically present, but emotionally absent with only very little involvement in a child's life. Or, fathers may be physically absent. Today's laws concerning child custody and visitation make possible a wide variety of relations between non-cohabiting fathers and their children - from a father, who has been, willingly or unwillingly, almost deleted from the life of the child to a father who, despite living elsewhere, nevertheless continues to be present and very much involved in the life of the child.

Standardized social surveys document unambiguously only the most extreme form of paternal absenteeism, namely when the father is so completely absent that it is likely that the child has never seen him and knows close to nothing about him. This is indicated by respondents who report "father unknown", similar to the corresponding entry on a birth certificate. This extreme form of father absence, fortunately, as we shall see, is rare – perhaps just 1 to 2% in developed societies.

Little is known about social groups reporting relatively higher prevalence of father absence. To investigate differences in demographic characteristics of such groups – development; education and occupation; mating, marriage and separation; reproduction; health and mortality - we either can rely on case-control studies, with a completely unknown but certainly great selectivity of cases, or we can screen the largest representative datasets for case numbers sufficient for demographic analyses. These include the cumulative general social surveys such as: the Australian Survey on Social Attitudes (AuSSA); the British Social Attitudes Survey; in Germany, the General Social Survey (ALLBUS) or the Socio-Economic Panel SOEP; the Japanese General Social Survey (Gakujutsu-Frontier Suishinkyoten); in the US, the General Social Survey (GSS) or the Panel Study on Income Dynamics (PSID); and in Europe, large datasets like the European Household Panel (ECHP) and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). Even larger datasets of national micro-census surveys, however, usually avoid such threatening items where some subjects participating under a legal obligation may have to reveal that they – even as adults – know nothing about their fathers or, alternatively, that the category "father unknown" on their birth certificates is wrong or at least not up-to-date.

Given the considerable advancements in most societies concerning fathers' rights to visitation, information and custody after a separation of parents (even non marital parents), it is surprising that almost all general purpose surveys, which typically document family of origin, present family and household composition in great detail, contain no specific information on a respondent's father, especially in the context that he may be virtually or completely absent from a respondent's life. The usual reason for this is that, in father related items, interviewers either are instructed to liberally include father substitutes as valid responses, or that response categories explicitly do NOT distinguish between fathers and various kinds of father substitutes. Consider the following:

I.

The Australian Survey on Social Attitudes (AuSSA) in a question on present household composition collapses response categories to just one item: "father/step-father/father-in-law".

II.

The British Social Attitudes Survey asks:

Q153 Can I just check which, if any, of these types of relatives do you yourself have alive at the moment. Please include adoptive and step relatives.

PROBE: Which others? DO NOT INCLUDE FOSTER RELATIVES. CODE ALL THAT APPLY

Multicoded (Maximum of 8 codes)

- 1 FATHER
- 2 MOTHER
- 3 BROTHER
- 4 SISTER
- 5 SON
- 6 DAUGHTER
- 7 GRANDCHILD (DAUGHTER'S CHILD)
- 8 GRANDCHILD (SON'S CHILD)
- 9 NONE OF THESE
- 98 DON'T KNOW
- 99 REFUSAL

and

Q846 Please tell me where your father was born.

- 1 ENGLAND
- 2 SCOTLAND
- 3 WALES
- 4 NORTHERN IRELAND
- 5 REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
- 6 OTHER
- 7 DON'T KNOW

A very common question concerns the father's occupational position when the respondent was an adolescent.

III.

The Japanese GSS, for example, asks in Q38-1

"Which one of the categories best describes your father's job when you were about 15 years old?" with interviewer instruction: Allow the respondent to determine whether he/she is 1 (a) an executive or 5 (e) a self-employed person. Government employees should also reply to all questions in Q38)

- 1. EXECUTIVE OF A COMPANY OR A CORPORATION
- 2. REGULAR EMPLOYEE
- 3. TEMPORARY WORKER (DAILY WORKER, PART-TIME TEMPORARY WORKER, DOING PIECE WORK AT HOME)
- 4. SELFEMPLOYED
- 5. FAMILY WORKER

6. HE WAS NOT WORKING
7. **I DIDN'T HAVE A FATHER AT THAT TIME**
8. DON'T KNOW

IV.

The German GSS (ALLBUS) asks in F144:

"When you were fifteen what was the occupational status of your father?" – here the respondent was given a long list to choose from, with the residual categories

- FATHER WAS RETIRED;
- FATHER WAS UNEMPLOYED;
- FATHER WAS AWAY AT WAR/ AS POW;
- FATHER WAS NO LONGER ALIVE;
- **FATHER UNKNOWN,**
- DON'T KNOW,
- NO ANSWER,
- REFUSED.

V.

The GSOEP German Socioeconomic Panel asks for example in B023:

"Before age 16, was there a time of several months or more when your father had no job?"

[IWER: IF R MENTIONS NEVER LIVING WITH FATHER WHEN GROWING UP, CHOOSE CODE 7. IF R MENTIONS THAT FATHER NEVER WORKED OR WAS ALWAYS DISABLED, CHOOSE CODE 6.]

1. YES
2. NO
3. FATHER NEVER WORKED/ALWAYS DISABLED
4. NEVER LIVED WITH FATHER/FATHER WAS NOT ALIVE
5. .DON'T KNOW
6. REFUSAL

VI.

The US General Social Survey asks:

VAR PAOCC16 A. "What kind of work did your father (FATHER SUBSTITUTE) normally do while you were growing up? That is, what was his job called?" Here a list is given to choose from, with the collapsed residual categories:

NOT APPLICABLE, DON'T KNOW, NO ANSWER, AND DISABLED, ETC.

and

VAR: FAMDIF16 A. "IF NOT LIVING WITH BOTH OWN MOTHER AND FATHER: What happened?" And gives the categories:

1. ONE OR BOTH PARENTS DIED
2. PARENTS DIVORCED OR SEPARATED
3. FATHER ABSENT IN ARMED FORCES
4. ONE OR BOTH PARENTS IN INSTITUTION
5. OTHER (SPECIFY)
6. DON'T KNOW

7. NO ANSWER
8. NOT APPLICABLE

VII.

The Panel Study on Income Dynamics in the US asks:

KL2. "Now I have some questions about [your/your wife's/"WIFE's"/HEAD's] family and past experiences. Where was [your/her/his] father born?"

(TWO 25-CHARACTER VARS: KL2TOWN FOR TOWN/CITY AND KL2COUNTRY FOR FOREIGN COUNTRY;

ALSO ONE 2-DIGIT VARIABLE, KL2STATE FOR STATE IN US (USE TSTATE CODE, MINUS CODE 55))

With the explicit interviewer instruction:

"ACCEPT FATHER SUBSTITUTE"

VIII.

Neither the European Household Panel Study (EHP) nor the various International Social Survey Programme surveys contain any specific information.

The dearth of information about cases where the father is almost or completely absent from the child's life, is conspicuous, even curious in the case of the British Attitudes Survey, which in 2006 inquired extensively about respondents' attitudes concerning fathers' and mothers' rights and duties in separated and patchwork families.

Thus, it is only the German General Social Survey that explicitly allows respondents to state: "father unknown". In the cumulated ALLBUS database 1980-2006 – the said item was always applied - 701 out of 47947 respondents responded "father unknown". The proportion of such respondents is independent of survey year and birth year, and seeming is slightly higher in women (1.7% vs. 1.4%). Also, in both sexes, such subjects are about one year younger than others. Remarkably, the distribution of educational status and occupational position in neither sex differs from those of all other respondents.

We consider only respondents above age 35 who are either married (cohabitating or separate), divorced, or never married (no widows or widowers). We also include respondents who are neither cohabitating with their spouses nor are they widows or widowers, but have (not necessarily cohabitating) partners, in order to establish if a respondent is living in any kind of partnership. Neither item was included in an identical fashion in all waves of the survey. The distribution for this variable is as follows:

Table 2

	Men above age 35 indicating „father unknown“ (n=179)	All other men above age 35 (n=12678)	Women above age 35 indicating „father unknown“ (n=183)	All other women above age 35 (n=11197)
Single	15.1%	9.2%	21.9%	12.9%
Have Spouse or other established Partner (not necessarily cohabitating)	84.9%	90.8%	78.1%	87,1%

Men and women who do not know their father have a risk of remaining single that is twice as high as other respondents. The effect remains even after controlling for age. Such subjects are not divorced more often, which might be the result of a lower likelihood of marriage in the first place. It is then not surprising that such respondents have smaller families, if any.

Unfortunately only in 2004 was the subjective health of respondents documented. Because of the small number of subjects not knowing their fathers (16 males and 20 females), little can be said about health differentials, although the likelihood of such subjects indicating better than "good health" was less than one half of the expected proportion, a difference which in appropriate tests almost reached conventional significance levels.

Social isolation, as well as less than excellent health, comes with diminished participation rates in surveys. Worth noting is the lower age of subjects indicating "father unknown" (about one year). It was, in contrast, expected that in cohorts born 1943-1947, due to war, defeat, invading victorious armies with widespread rape and social anomy, the proportion of subjects not knowing their fathers would be higher than cohorts born later. The lower age of subjects, however, may be the effect of a faster decline in health with advancing age and perhaps even a higher mortality among subjects with that characteristic.

The higher degree of social isolation of people not knowing their fathers is reflected in attitudes as well. A frequently – but not in all waves - asked question is "Do you think one needs a family to be really happy, or do you think that one can be just as happy living on one's own?" with the response categories "Needs a family", "Just as happy as on one's own", "Happier on one's own", "Undecided", or "No answer". Since for the latter two residual categories, no difference could be observed, we disregard such respondents. Then we obtain the following distribution of stated attitudes by knowledge of father and sex.

	Men indicating "father unknown" (n=150)	All other men (n=12005)	Women indicating "father unknown" (n=209)	All other women (n=13120)
"Needs a family"	64.9%	80.3%	71.4%	78.0%
"Just as happy as on one's own"	26.9%	18.0%	23.8%	20.4%
"Happier on one's own"	8.2%	1.7%	4.8%	1.6%

Men who do not know their father are five times, and women are three times as likely to state "Happier on one's own". They are also likelier to state "Just as happy as on one's own". Differences are significant.

The final version of the paper will include multivariate analyses, as well as additional marriage- and family-related variables.

Such findings, which are most probably applicable to other rich countries, are relevant for demographic analysis as well as for social policy. If we can better explain how the most extreme form of father absence affects peoples' lives, we may better understand more common forms of father absence, such as when parents simply split up and the father lives elsewhere, but maintains contact with child. The goal of this paper is to investigate which relevant features may be confounders and which may be truly the effect of paternal absenteeism.