

CHILDREN'S CONTACT WITH ABSENT PARENTS

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Abstract

This paper investigates the frequency of contact between children and biological parents who are separated. Using data from a 1981 national survey, we describe the effects of living arrangements and other family characteristics on cross-household ties between children and parents. The study differentiates children living with one biological parent from those in households with neither biological parent present. We find that frequent contact occurs for two groups of children: those who have recently lived with their absent parent and those who do not live with substitute caretakers (step or adoptive parents). The data show few racial and ethnic group differences in patterns of parent-child contact. We interpret these results as evidence that U. S. children establish sequential relationships with their adult caretakers, and that they are unlikely to maintain ties with more than two parents or substitute parents at any time.

Most empirical knowledge about nuclear family life derives from studies of individuals who are related by blood or marriage who also live together. This confusion of family ties with co-residence especially characterizes our understanding of parent-child relationships. Yet parents do not always live with their children; and the adults who live with children are not always their parents. Observations of parent-child relationships across households are essential for evaluating the relative importance of social and biological ties in defining contemporary parenthood. Are children's ties to the adult(s) who live with and care for them (i.e., those who fulfill the duties attached to the social position of "parent") stronger than children's ties to those who live elsewhere but hold the "parent" position by virtue of biological processes?

Interest in family structure and cross-household ties between parents and children is motivated by the observed effects of these arrangements on children's economic and psychological well-being. [1] However, the degree to which household structure and composition determine children's access to resources (material and nonmaterial) can only be evaluated in light of knowledge about family relationships both within and across households. Family members have different obligations to each other than they do to nonfamily members. Relatives are expected to share more resources with each other than nonrelatives; parents are expected to invest more in their children than aunts and uncles invest in their nieces and nephews. Recognizing that differences in adults' obligations to children are based on the social meaning attached to biological relationships points to the

importance of investigating both familial ties and children's living arrangements.

Investigating the meaning of parenthood in the contemporary U. S. is particularly important at this historical juncture. Although the majority of children in the U. S. today still live with both of their biological parents, an increasing proportion have some other living arrangement. A little over two-thirds of children currently live with both of their biological parents (Glick, 1979). [2] Not only are children increasingly likely to live apart from a biological parent, but there is also significant racial and ethnic variation in children's experience of parental separation. Higher proportions of black and Hispanic than white children are separated from one or both biological parents (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1985a: Table 4). Little is known about the degree to which inter-household ties between parents and children compensate for these racial and ethnic differences in living arrangements.

In this paper we present a modest step toward defining the structure of parenthood in the U.S. We do this by describing children's living arrangements and the frequency of their contact with biological parents living elsewhere. [3] Using data from a recent national survey of children we explore sources of variation in parent-child ties across households. The paper broadens our understanding of parenthood by including children in households with neither biological parent as well as children in single parent households.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section we discuss factors that may influence children's contact with biological parents who live in other households. The third section describes the data and analytic strategy we employ. Results are presented in the fourth section, and we conclude by summarizing the findings and considering their implications for understanding parenthood.

Variation in Parent-Child Contact

Sources of variation in how frequently parents and children who live apart see each other can be divided into two broad categories. First, children's contact with biological parents in other households depends on the availability of potential caretakers within the household in which they live. The second set of factors affecting parent-child contact reflect the degree to which potential caretakers, both within the household and living elsewhere, are committed to the responsibilities of parenthood. In this section we consider several measures of availability and commitment as well as the effects of social status on children's contact with absent parents.

Availability

Availability of parent surrogates can be assessed, in part, by the presence in the household of adults who might nurture and support the children who live there. Parents and children are more likely to maintain cross-household ties if children do not have easy access to an alternative caretaker within their own household. Thus, the

presence of adults, particularly adults who are of the same sex as the children's nonresidential biological parent(s), is likely to diminish the amount of inter-household contact between children and their biological parents.

In addition, parents' and children's access to other relationships and activities might interfere with continued contact across households. The amount of time biological parents and children have been separated is a proxy for the number of opportunities they have had to encounter obstacles to continued contact. The longer their separation, the fewer common experiences they share and the more likely parents are to have remarried, had additional children, or moved to a new geographical region. Evidence from other studies of parent-child interaction suggests that parent-child contact diminishes dramatically in the year or two following separation (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Hetherington et al., 1982).

Children's age may also be a proxy for their access to opportunities that interfere with their contact with biological parents in other households. Children in school have more activities and peer relationships that draw their attention away from their relationship to biological parents living elsewhere. Adolescents who have employment opportunities as well as school responsibilities face even greater interruptions to steady contact with nonresidential biological parents. On the other hand, adolescents are more independent of their custodial parents and so may be more flexible in their ability to arrange meetings with biological parents living elsewhere. [4]

Commitment

Maintaining cross-household ties depends on the strength of commitment characterizing parents' and children's relationships as well as physical access and availability. Potential caretakers' investment in parental responsibilities is reflected, in part, by the formality with which their positions are defined. Marriage is one way in which parental obligations are defined (Malinowski, 1930). Parents of children born in marriage are likely to be more involved with their children than parents (or at least fathers) whose children were born outside of marriage because the decision to marry is itself a reflection of parental interest in childrearing. In a society in which sexual intercourse outside of marriage is widely accepted, a primary reason for marriage is as a way to legitimize children. Adults who are invested in becoming parents, therefore, are more likely to marry before having a child, and to maintain a relationship with their child even if the marriage does not last. Conversely, parents, at least fathers, of children born outside of marriage are less likely to be involved with children living apart from them.

Legal adoption is another indicator of commitment. The more formal the ties binding children to adults living with them, the more committed household adults are to parental rights and responsibilities. In addition, the existence of formal ties between children and adult household members makes it more difficult for biological parents living in another household to define their relationship and maintain contact with their children. Thus, children who live with step or adoptive parents are less likely to see their

biological parents in other households than children living with a biological parent who has not remarried.

Involvement in the role of parent differs for mothers and fathers. Because women are expected to be more involved than men in day to day childcare, particularly socio-emotional care giving, noncustodial mothers may have more frequent contact with their children than noncustodial biological fathers. Furstenberg et al.'s (1983) findings support this hypothesis, showing that absent mothers maintain more contact with their children than absent fathers do. Other studies suggest that parents have more contact with their same sex children living elsewhere than they do with children of the opposite sex (Hetherington et al., 1982; Hess and Camara, 1979). This may reflect identification or role modeling processes.

Socioeconomic Status and Race-Ethnicity

Both socioeconomic status and race-ethnic group membership are likely to affect the availability and commitment potential caretakers have to childrearing responsibilities. Noncustodial parents' socioeconomic status may affect their contact with children living elsewhere in several ways. First, better educated nonresidential parents might be more likely to conform to the dominant social expectation that parents and biological children should maintain close ties. In addition, higher status parents may be better able to incur the costs of seeing their children in other households. For example, more highly educated parents are better able to afford child support, and noncustodial parents who provide economic support for their absent

children also have more frequent contact with them (Chambers, 1979).

Finally, blacks, whites, and Hispanics may vary in the availability of substitute parents and in adults' commitment to parent-child relationships either because there are cultural differences in the values guiding their family behaviors or because of the frequently vast compositional differences among the groups. The cultural and compositional explanations differ in the hypotheses they imply about race and ethnic differences in contact between parents and children. If cultural differences are dominant, the expectation would be that minority families maintain more inter-household contact. Evidence from ethnographic research suggests that Hispanics' strong emphasis on the importance of family ties (Fitzpatrick, 1981; Alvarez et al., 1981) may make them more likely to maintain cross-household contact between parents and children than other race-ethnic groups. Similarly, there is evidence that blacks are more involved in an extended family network than are whites and that helping behavior, including the rearing of children, is shared more widely (Hofferth, 1984; Hill, 1977; Stack, 1974).

On the other hand, the lower socioeconomic status of blacks and Hispanics compared to whites suggests that there will be fewer cross-household ties between parents and children. Parents who have trouble providing economically for their children may feel awkward about performing other, noneconomic aspects of the parent role as well. Another compositional variable that differentiates among blacks, whites, and Hispanics is that nonwhites have higher rates of nonmarital births. As discussed above, fathers of children born

outside of marriage may be less committed to childrearing and therefore less likely to be involved with children living apart from them.

Summary of Hypotheses

Restricting attention to aspects of family structure and individual characteristics that are measured in our data, we hypothesize that children with substitute parents in the household (step or adoptive parents, other parent figures) and children born out-of-wedlock will have less contact with absent biological parents than children without parent substitutes and children born to married parents. The longer biological parents and children have been separated, the less contact they will have. Absent fathers will be less likely to maintain contact than absent mothers. Children in lower socioeconomic households will have less contact with absent parents than children from higher status households. In addition, we expect characteristics such as the child's age, sex, race, and Hispanic ethnicity to be related to contact although the direction of the relationship cannot be predicted.

Data and Plan of Analysis

In 1981, as part of a special supplement to the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), data were collected on various aspects of the health and well-being of a randomly selected child in each household. The resulting sample consists of over 15,000 children under age 18. In addition to the variety of health indicators, information was

collected on the child's current living arrangements, residence with biological parents, frequency of contact with absent biological parents, past and present school functioning, and selected socioeconomic indicators. We use data from this Child Health Supplement (CHS) in the present analysis. The tabular results we report are weighted to compensate for children's differential probabilities of sample selection depending on household size. [5]

The CHS data are particularly useful for investigating contact between children and their separated parents. First, the CHS data provide much more detailed information than is available in census data on the relationship of all household members to the sample child. This allows us to differentiate biological parents from step, adoptive, and foster parents. In addition, the inclusion of children in "father only" and "no-biological-parent" households enables a more comprehensive analysis of parent-child relationships in the U. S. than can be derived from studies restricted to children living with their mother. Finally, the CHS sample includes sufficient numbers of blacks and Hispanics to allow the exploration of racial and ethnic differences in parent-child ties across households controlling for group differences in socioeconomic status and marriage patterns.

There are some disadvantages to using the CHS data for studying children's living arrangements and contact with biological parents in other households. The most important of these is the exclusion from the sample of children who are living in households without any relatives or legally defined foster or adoptive parents. These children are a very small proportion of all children in the U.S., but

the probabilities of living in this type of household vary by race. Black children are more likely to be living apart from both biological parents and may be more likely than white children to live in households without any relatives or legally defined guardians. This means that the results we report may slightly underestimate the relative proportion of black children who live without either biological parent. (See the Appendix.)

The underlying phenomenon of interest, frequency of contact between children and their parent(s), might be thought of as a continuous variable. This variable, however, is measured ordinally in the CHS data. For situations in which the absent parent was known to be alive, an adult respondent (i.e., the child's other parent or primary caretaker) classified the amount of contact the child has with the absent biological parent into one of eight categories ranging from daily contact to no contact at all.

We investigate contact by collapsing the variable into two dichotomies. The first dichotomy differentiates children who see their absent parent at least once a week from those who see their parent less often (SEEMUCH). The second dichotomy distinguishes children who ever see their absent parent from those who have no parental contact (SEESOME). (See Figure 1 for a more precise description of the coding scheme.) Neither of the dichotomies is highly skewed. Approximately 20 percent of the sample see a parent at least weekly, and 50 percent never see their absent parent. Therefore we use ordinary least squares regression models in this analysis. [6]

The first section of the analysis presents data in tabular form describing children's living arrangements and contact with parents in other households. As we note above, the data presented in the first stage of the analysis are weighted, to take into account the smaller probability of sample selection for children in households with large numbers of children. The second section investigates the correlates of children's contact with parents using a multivariate framework. Results are presented separately for children living with one biological parent and those living with neither biological parent.

Results

Children's Living Arrangements, 1981

For each child in the CHS sample, the interviewer ascertained whether or not the child's biological mother and father resided in the household. If one or both biological parents were absent, the respondent was asked if the absent parent was currently alive. For children whose absent parents were known to be living, the interviewer asked how frequently the biological parent and child saw each other.

Because the survey explicitly asked about the presence or absence of the child's biological parents, we can divide the sample of children into those living with neither biological parent, those living with both biological parents, and those living with a single biological parent, mother or father. Table 1 shows that in 1981, approximately two-thirds of the sample children were living with both biological parents. [7] Also shown is the distribution across living

arrangements by race and Hispanic ethnicity. Children are classified as either Hispanic or non-Hispanic; the non-Hispanic group is further subdivided into racial categories. Table 1 indicates substantial racial and ethnic variation in children's living arrangements. Whereas 73 percent of white children lived with both biological parents in 1981, only 38 percent of black children lived in this type of household. Among children identified as Hispanic, 67 percent lived with both biological parents.

Race-ethnic differences also occur among children living with neither biological parent. The proportion of children living with neither biological parent was much higher among black than among white children. Over one-half of the white children but only 14 percent of black children in "no-biological-parent" households were living with two adoptive parents. As might be expected given our knowledge of adults' living arrangements, Hispanic children's experiences are more similar to white than black children's living arrangements.

Children's living arrangements reflect only a portion of their family experiences. Contact with parents outside the household may have important effects on children's well-being. Table 2 shows the amount of contact children have with their biological parents living in other households. The top panel of the table indicates that children in single parent households are considerably more likely to know that their absent parents are still alive than children in households with neither biological parent present. Between 72 and 82 percent of children in single parent households have living absent parents whereas only about half of children in households without

either parent know that their parents are still alive. Around 40 percent of the children with neither biological parent have been formally adopted. [8] Because formal adoption frequently occurs when children are very young, and the adoption process itself is designed to protect the anonymity of biological parents, it is not surprising that many respondents do not know if the biological parents are still alive.

Among children in single parent households, those living with their father are less likely than those living with their mother to have an absent parent who is still alive. This pattern reflects the judicial practice of awarding physical custody to children's biological mother rather than their biological father. Fathers often do not become primary caretakers unless their children's mother is no longer living.

The bottom panel of Table 2 shows the frequency of children's contact with their biological parents living elsewhere. These data show that a higher proportion of children in households with neither biological parent never have contact with their mothers or fathers than children living with one biological parent. Also, the proportion of children who never have contact with their absent parent is greater when the absent parent is the child's father than when the absent parent is the child's mother. This is true regardless of children's current living arrangements although the difference between contact with absent mothers and fathers is somewhat larger for children in single parent households than for children living with neither biological parent.

The pattern of children's contact with absent parents is similar to the pattern reported by Furstenberg et al. (1983) in so far as children are more likely to have some contact with absent mothers than with absent fathers. However, Furstenberg et al. (1983: Table 6) report that children are also much more likely to see an absent parent weekly if the absent parent is the mother. The CHS data indicate little difference among children with either an absent mother or an absent father. Among children in single parent households, 22.1 percent have seen their absent mother once a week or more often while 19.4 percent have seen their father this frequently. Using data from the National Survey of Children (NSC), Furstenberg et al. estimate 31.0 and 16.4 percent, for mothers and fathers, respectively. We suspect that the small number of children with an absent mother in the NSC study results in an unreliable estimate of contact as the difference that Furstenberg et al. report is not statistically significant. [9]

Sources of Variation in Parent-Child Contact

The next two tables show the results of investigations into the correlates of parent-child contact. Tables 3 and 4 report estimates from the OLS regressions of the contact dummy variables on a variety of child and family characteristics. Figure 1 defines the mnemonics used as variable names. Descriptive statistics are reported in Appendix Table B. We restrict the analysis to children whose absent parents are known to be alive and for whom the CHS respondent knew how frequently the parent and sample child saw each other.

The multivariate analysis uses unweighted observations. We do not use the sample weights because we are investigating relationships among variables rather than making population estimates. Note that the t-statistics reported in parentheses in Tables 3 and 4 assume simple random sampling. Because the CHS data were collected from a multistage cluster sample, the standard errors used in calculating the t-statistics underestimate the true standard errors. We are cautious, therefore, in interpreting the reported t-statistics. T-statistics of approximately 2, which under simple random sample assumptions would indicate statistical significance at the .01 level, are considered weak evidence of associations between variables. Stronger evidence is taken to be a t-statistic of 3 or 4 which indicates that even if standard errors were inflated by a factor of 1.5 to 2.0, inflation consistent with a relatively large design effect, the findings would be statistically significant at the .01 level.

Children Living with One Biological Parent

The results for the SEEMUCH regression in the first column of Table 3 show that only two factors clearly distinguish children who see an absent biological parent very often (i.e., at least weekly) from those who see a parent less frequently or not at all. Both the amount of time since children were separated from their parent and their custodial parent's marital status affect frequent contact between children and nonresidential parents. Children who began living apart from their biological parent within the last year are much more likely to see their parent than are children who have been separated from their parent for longer periods. In addition, children

whose custodial parent has remarried (i.e., children living with one biological parent and a step or adoptive parent) are less likely to maintain regular contact with their noncustodial parent than are children living with a biological parent who has not remarried.

The second column of Table 3 shows the results for the SEESOME dependent variable which distinguishes children who see their noncustodial parent at all from those who never see their other biological parent. These estimates suggest that in addition to the amount of time since separation and the presence of a stepparent, several other factors influence whether children have any cross-household contact with their absent parent. Children born outside of marriage are less likely to ever see their absent parent than children whose biological parents were married to each other. Also, children in a household where there is a parent figure (not a stepparent) of the same sex as the absent biological parent are less likely to see the absent parent than children who do not have a "replacement" parent.

There are three other sources of variation in children's contact with their parents living elsewhere according to the results in the SEESOME column. The first of these, whether the absent child's parent is the father or mother, is consistent with the sex difference observed in Table 2. Children are more likely to have some contact with their biological mother in another household than their biological father. The relationship, first observed in the bivariate association between sex of parent and frequency of contact, still holds when custodial parent's marital status and socioeconomic status

are taken into account. Note that although sex of absent parent differentiates children who never see their parents from children who sometimes see their parents, whether the absent parent is a father or mother does not affect weekly contact between parents and children.

In addition, Table 3 shows that girls are no more likely to see absent parents than are boys. Attempts to include an interaction of sex of child by sex of absent parent showed no difference in contact between same sex and opposite sex parent-child pairs.

The results for SEESOME also indicate a small positive association between educational attainment and the likelihood that a parent and child maintain contact after separation. Educational attainment is marginally significant in the SEEMUCH equation, as well. It must be kept in mind, however, that while education of household head is a reasonable indicator of the socioeconomic status of the child's current household, it is a rather weak proxy for educational attainment of the absent parent. Ideally, studies of parent-child relationships across households would measure directly both parents' educational attainment. [10]

Finally, the only coefficient for race or Hispanic ethnicity that approaches statistical significance in these regressions is the coefficient for Hispanic ethnicity in the SEESOME equation. The sign of the coefficient indicates that, other things equal, Hispanic children are less likely to see an absent parent. This pattern is not consistent with the hypothesis that the familistic Hispanic culture leads to more frequent parent-child contact across households.

In sum, there are only two predictors associated with children's weekly contact with parents living in other households, one a proxy for parental availability, the other a measure of commitment. Children who have recently shared a household with their absent biological parent (i.e., those whose separation occurred within the past year) have a greater likelihood of seeing their parents weekly than children who have been separated from their nonresidential parent for more than a year. The presence of a stepparent has the opposite effect on how frequently children see their noncustodial parent. The availability of a formally committed substitute parent within the household may increase the difficulties noncustodial biological parents face in trying to maintain ties across households, thus diminishing the frequency of absent parent-child contact. Our results suggest that this relatively simple picture of children's relationships with outside parents holds for black, white, and Hispanic children, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers. Nor do the results vary in a systematic way for children of different ages.

The task of differentiating children who never see their nonresidential parents from children who have some parental contact is somewhat more complex. Many of the characteristics we hypothesized would be related to children's contact with an absent parent do, in fact, identify children who sometimes see their parents. In addition to the sources of variation in weekly contact, whether the child was born out-of-wedlock, sex of the absent parent, and socioeconomic status determine if there is some contact between children and parents living elsewhere. The data also suggest that Hispanic children in

single parent families may be less likely to maintain cross-household ties with their biological parents.

Children Living with Neither Biological Parent

Table 4 reports the results for children who live with neither biological parent. The data show a pattern of correlates of contact similar to that for children living with one parent. Note that the variables in Table 4 reflect adjustments in model specifications which take into account differences between the circumstances of children in single and neither parent households. In addition, we excluded the OUTOFWED variable from these models because there were too many instances of missing data to construct a reliable indicator of whether the child was born in or out of marriage. Results are reported separately by sex of absent parent.

The only two variables which consistently affect children's contact with parents outside the household are TIMESEP and ADOPTED. As for children in single parent households, those living in neither parent households are more likely to see their parents if they resided with that parent sometime during the past year. This pattern holds for both versions of the dependent variable and describes contact with absent fathers and absent mothers. However, the TIMESEP coefficient for the SEESOME equation for mothers is probably not statistically significant given the complex sample design.

The data in Table 4 also indicate another consistent pattern. Children living with formal adoptive or foster parents have less contact with their absent parents than children in other "no-biological-parent" households. The less frequent contact between adopted children and their biological parents is consistent with predictions from the formal commitment hypothesis. Children with legally defined substitute parents in their households are less likely to need, desire, or have the opportunity to form ties with biological parents living elsewhere. Also, parents who live apart from their biological children face more barriers to continued contact if the children live in households with adoptive substitute parents.

There are some differences between the effects of socioeconomic status on contact with absent mothers and fathers. Higher socioeconomic status, as measured by educational attainment of the household head, decreases contact between children and absent mothers, but has no effect on contact between children and their fathers. The negative effect of education on contact between children and absent mothers is different from the pattern observed for children in single parent households.

We suspect that education of household head, as it is included in the models estimated for Table 4, captures something unique about adoptive families that goes beyond what is measured by the ADOPTED variable. Evidence supporting this interpretation comes from information on other aspects of adopted children's household socioeconomic status. If socioeconomic status is measured by family income and educational attainment of head, we find that children with

two adoptive parents live in higher status households than any other group, even children with two biological parents. (Data not shown).

In addition to the association between education and contact observed in the models for children's contact with absent mothers, Table 4 shows weak evidence of ethnic differences in children's contact with absent fathers. Hispanic children in households with neither parent see their biological fathers less frequently than non-Hispanic white children do. The coefficient measuring the difference between these groups is close to statistical significance given our conservative rule-of-thumb for the t-statistic.

To summarize, we find few characteristics that predict parental contact when a child lives with neither biological parent. The major distinction between children who do not maintain contact with biological parents and those who do is the formal replacement of biological bonds by the social bonds of adoption. Additionally, as with children living in single parent households, the child's likelihood of seeing an absent biological parent decreases with time separated.

Summary and Conclusions

The preceding analysis suggests two strong predictors of children's contact with absent parent(s). Children who live with legally or socially defined substitute parents have less contact with their biological parents in other households than children who do not live with step or adoptive parents. Beyond the availability of

substitute parents within the household, the only other major source of variation in parent-child contact is the amount of time that has passed since the child last lived with the biological parent. These findings hold for both children in single parent and "no-biological-parent" households and are consistent across alternate sample definitions and two specifications of a parental contact dependent variable.

The findings suggest that contemporary American society constrains children to two, or fewer, parents. Even children who live apart from biological parents, and know for certain that their absent parent is still alive, are unlikely to maintain ties with those parents when an alternative step, adoptive, or other adult caretaker is available within the child's own household. This finding about children's ties to nonresidential parents is consistent with interpretations of parents' current high rates of divorce and remarriage as a pattern that creates serial parenthood. The interpretation implies that noncustodial parents discard ties to their biological children with divorce, and the ties are replaced through remarriage. Children alternate between having one and two parents. Other evidence in support of the view that children tend to have only two or fewer parents at a time comes from studies showing that very small proportions of absent fathers share income with their children (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1985b). [11] And, few fathers maintain social ties to their children in other households (Furstenberg et al., 1983).

The CHS data do not support an alternative interpretation of high divorce and remarriage rates which argues that children acquire multiple parents (including some who share their household and some who do not) as adults change marriage partners. Although other researchers point to some families' ability to maintain parent-child relationships across households (e.g., Ahrons, 1979; Furstenberg and Nord, 1985), our analysis shows that most biological parents and children who are separated from each other face barriers to continued interaction.

Despite evidence that children are limited to no more than two parents, there are still many unanswered questions. For example, why does living with a socially defined substitute parent reduce the chance that children and biological parents living apart see each other? Future research should consider the relative power biological parents, substitute parents, and children have over the maintenance of biological parent-child ties across households. In addition, one would like to know more about the social and physical constraints affecting relationships between parents and children who live apart. Information about informal rules concerning the obligations biological parents have toward their children in other households as well as the physical distance separating parents and children would help fill the gaps in our understanding of parenthood in the U. S. today.

Figure 1: Definitions of Variables

Abbreviation	Description	Operationalization
SEEMUCH	Does child see the absent parent at least once a week?	1 = child has contact at least once a week; 0 otherwise
SEESOME	Does child ever see the absent biological parent?	1 = child has some contact; 0 otherwise
TIMESEP	Time since child last lived with biological parent	1 = last lived with parent during the past year; 0 otherwise
OUTOFWED	Was child born outside of marriage	1 = biological mother is never married or birth identified as out of wedlock; 0 otherwise
STEP-P	Child lives with an adoptive, foster, or stepparent of same sex as absent biological parent	1 = stepparent present; 0 otherwise
PARNTFIG	Child lives with an adult who is the same sex as absent biological parent; parent figure is not a step, adoptive or foster parent	1 = parent figure present; 0 otherwise
ADOPTED	Child lives with two adoptive or foster parents	1 = two adoptive parents or foster parents; 0 otherwise

Figure 1: Definitions of Variables (Continued)

Abbreviation	Description	Operationalization
AGE:		
AGE5	Child's age at observation (years)	AGE5: 1 = child is 5 years or younger; 0 otherwise
AGE11	Child's age at observation (years)	AGE11: 1 = child is between 6 and 11 years, inclusive; 0 otherwise
AGE14	Child's age at observation (years)	AGE14: 1 = child is between 12 and 14 years, inclusive; 0 otherwise
AGE17		Excluded category: child is between 15 and 17 years old, inclusive
SEX-CH	Child's sex	1 = child is a boy; 0 = girl
SEX-AP	Sex of absent biological parent	1 = absent parent is child's father; 0 = mother
EDUC	Years of school completed for head of child's household	
RACE-ETHNICITY:		
BLACK	Child's race-ethnic identification	1 = child is black and not Hispanic; 0 otherwise
HISPANIC	Child's race-ethnic identification	1 = child is Hispanic; 0 otherwise
WHITE		Excluded category: child is white and not Hispanic

Table 1: Living Arrangements of White, Black, and Hispanic Children, 1981 (Numbers in thousands)

	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
CHILD LIVES WITH:				
Total, < 18 years (#)	63,142	46,543	9,243	5,715
	(%)	100.0	100.0	100.0
Neither bio parent	4.0	3.7	6.4	2.2
(Two adoptive parents)	1.7	2.0	0.9	0.7
(Other)	2.3	1.7	5.5	1.5
Both bio parents	67.5	73.3	37.5	67.1
Bio mother only	18.3	12.4	46.4	23.4
Bio mother, step father	7.1	7.4	7.1	5.0
Bio father only	1.5	1.4	1.9	1.4
Bio father, step mother	1.6	1.8	0.7	0.9

SOURCE: 1981 Child Health Supplement to the National Health Interview Survey

NOTE: Children are first classified by Hispanic ethnicity. Non-Hispanic children are further subdivided into racial groups. Children of other race are included in total but data are not shown.

The category, "Neither bio parent," underestimates the total proportion of children living apart from both biological parents because the CHS excluded children in households without any relatives. This issue is addressed in the text.

Table 2: Vital Status and Frequency of Contact with Absent Parents by Children's Living Arrangements

Child Lives With:	Neither Biological Parent		One Biological Parent	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
Absent Parent Is:				
Biological Parent	2,541	2,541	1,625	16,068
Currently Alive?	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Yes	55.5	48.8	72.3	82.5
No	7.2	5.6	23.2	8.7
Unknown	37.4	45.6	4.5	8.8
Frequency of Contact				
With Absent Parent	1,408	1,240	1,393	13,252
Known To Be Living	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Everyday	6.5	5.7	2.4	3.4
Almost everyday	2.4	2.1	1.4	1.5
Several times week	8.9	5.1	6.2	5.9
Once a week	9.2	9.2	12.1	8.6
2-3 times month	5.2	3.6	14.7	10.2
Once a month	5.4	4.0	9.3	7.8
Less once month	21.5	18.4	30.0	24.4
Never	38.1	48.8	19.0	35.2
Don't know	2.8	3.1	4.9	3.0

NOTE: Numbers shown are weighted n's in thousands.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients (T-tests) for
Predicting Contact with Absent Parent
(Children Living with One Biological Parent)

	SEEMUCH	SEESOME
Intercept	0.140 (3.66)	0.623 (13.59)
AGE5	0.0484 (2.38)	-0.0586 (-2.41)
AGE11	0.00898 (0.48)	-0.0156 (-0.70)
AGE14	0.0248 (1.18)	0.0151 (0.60)
SEX-AP	-0.0332 (-1.50)	-0.0970 (-3.65)
SEX-CH	-0.00392 (-0.30)	0.00317 (0.21)
OUTOFWED	-0.0222 (-1.22)	-0.161 (-7.36)
TIMESEP	0.171 (9.87)	0.163 (7.85)
STEP-P	-0.120 (-7.71)	-0.160 (-8.60)
PARNTFIG	-0.0189 (-1.00)	-0.0665 (-2.95)
EDUC	0.00611 (2.73)	0.0159 (5.96)
BLACK	0.0210 (1.23)	-0.00489 (0.24)
HISPANIC	0.00673 (0.28)	-0.0822 (-2.86)
Adjusted R-Square	0.0582	0.0893
Unweighted Sample Size	3,550	3,550

Table 4: Regression Coefficients (T-tests) for
Predicting Contact with Absent Parents
(Children with Neither Biological Parent)

	Absent Mother		Absent Father	
	SEEMUCH	SEESOME	SEEMUCH	SEESOME
Intercept	0.427 (5.82)	0.855 (11.24)	0.337 (4.47)	0.633 (7.20)
AGE5	0.0360 (0.60)	-0.0704 (-1.13)	0.00929 (0.16)	-0.0949 (-1.39)
AGE11	0.0721 (1.30)	0.0147 (-0.26)	-0.0392 (-0.71)	-0.0644 (-1.00)
AGE14	-0.0649 (-1.01)	-0.0684 (-1.03)	-0.0857 (-1.29)	-0.0578 (-0.75)
SEX-CH	0.00477 (0.11)	0.199 (0.46)	-0.0239 (-0.57)	-0.0283 (-0.58)
TIMESEP	0.144 (2.79)	0.113 (2.12)	0.174 (2.82)	0.362 (5.02)
ADOPTED	-0.250 (-5.06)	-0.419 (-8.16)	-0.169 (-3.39)	-0.312 (-5.36)
EDUC	-0.0139 (-2.69)	-0.0153 (-2.87)	-0.00875 (-1.63)	-0.00559 (-0.89)
BLACK	0.0510 (1.02)	0.0657 (1.27)	0.0546 (1.12)	0.110 (1.93)
HISPANIC	-0.135 (-1.55)	0.0726 (0.81)	-0.110 (-1.14)	-0.273 (-2.44)
Adjusted R-Square	0.1490	0.2589	0.0810	0.2095
Unweighted Sample Size	389	389	340	340

Footnotes

1. To date, investigations into the consequences of family structure and living arrangements for children's welfare have focused primarily on differences between the social and economic environments of children in single and two parent households (Ross and Sawhill, 1975; Espenshade, 1979; McLanahan, 1985; Peterson and Zill, 1986), ignoring the circumstances of children living with neither parent.

2. Estimates of children's expected lifetime experience of parental separation are even more dramatic, indicating that 42 percent of white and 86 percent of black children are likely to spend at least some time in a single parent household (Bumpass, 1984). Hofferth's (1985) estimates are even more extreme and suggest that 70 percent of white children and 94 percent of black children will spend at least some time in a single parent household. See Bumpass (1985) for a critique of Hofferth's estimates. Norton and Glick (1986) provide a third set of projections with figures intermediate to those of Bumpass and Hofferth.

3. By focusing on frequency of face-to-face contact between children and their absent parent(s), we are setting aside such matters as how frequently adults and children who live together actually spend time together. Nor do we investigate contact between absent parents and children that occurs by telephone and letter. More importantly, we are unable to consider aspects of the content of parent-child ties, like the types of activities parents and children pursue together and the emotional quality of their relationships. But see Furstenberg

and Nord's (1985) recent paper on the dimensions of parent-child ties across households. The theoretical problem we address is clearly more complex than can be fully explored in one paper.

4. The child's age at separation from the absent parent may also affect the frequency of parent-child contact. For example, age at separation could be an indicator of the absent biological parent's previous investment in childrearing or for age-related child characteristics that facilitate (or hinder) the development of strong emotional ties between parents and children. It is impossible, however, to include age at separation in statistical models already incorporating child's current age and time since separation because the latter two variables form a linear combination of the child's age at separation. The models we consider include time since separation and child's current age because these variables are more closely related to issues of parental availability and access.

5. For a detailed description of the NHIS and CHS study designs, see Bloom (1982) and U.S., National Center for Health Statistics (1983).

6. Results from logistic regression models are essentially the same as the OLS estimates we report. The OLS results are presented because the interpretation of these estimates is likely to be familiar to most readers.

7. Note that the CHS estimate of the proportion of children living with two biological, step, or adoptive parents is close to the CPS estimate of 76 percent for March of the same year. (See Appendix Table A.)

8. Note that sample sizes are smaller for children in neither parent households and for those living with their father than the sample size for children living with their mother. As a result, percentage point estimates of children's contact are somewhat more precise for those in single parent households maintained by their mother.

9. Differences in question wording may also account for a small part of the discrepancy between the levels of contact reported in the NSC and those estimated from the CHS data. The NSC question asked about contact during a specific period (i.e., the past 12 months), while the CHS question did not include a time referent. Although this wording difference may account for discrepancies between NSC and CHS frequency distributions it would not account for Furstenberg et al.'s finding that mothers are much more likely to have weekly contact with children in other households than fathers are.

10. This paragraph calls attention to the exclusion of household or family income from the operationalization of socioeconomic status. We exclude household income from the regression models because it may include child support payments made by the absent parent. Child support payments are another indicators of cross-household parent-child contact as well as a measure of commitment to

childrearing. The CHS income data do not differentiate among sources of income. We, therefore, follow the conservative strategy of excluding income from the analysis to avoid treating parental contact as both an independent and dependent variable. Hofferth (1984) follows a similar strategy in her analysis of extended kin ties.

11. This generalization encompasses all noncustodial fathers whose biological children reside with their mother, whether or not the mothers have a court ordered child support award.

Appendix

Estimates from Current Population Survey (CPS) data indicate that bias introduced by Child Health Supplement (CHS) sample definitions results in only a slight underestimate of children in households without either biological parent. Appendix Table A shows estimates of living arrangements from the March CPS and the CHS data used in this analysis. CHS data were tabulated using definitions of race, Hispanic ethnicity, and living arrangements that conform to published March CPS tabulations.

Note that data from both the 1981 and 1984 March surveys are presented. Although the 1981 CPS shows children's living arrangements for the same time referent used in the CHS data, procedures used in the 1981 March CPS were likely to miss or underestimate the presence of mother-child subfamilies (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1985a: 8). As a consequence of the CPS procedures used in 1981, the CPS data for 1981 overestimate the proportion of children, particularly minority group children, living in households with neither parent. The 1984 March CPS procedures, however, were able to identify mother-child subfamilies more accurately than in previous March CPS operations. A comparison of the 1984 March CPS distribution with the CHS data shows very little difference between the estimates of black (5.7 vs. 4.9 percent, respectively) and Hispanic (2.9 vs. 1.5 percent, respectively) children living with neither parent.

Appendix Table A: Living Arrangements of Children, 1981:
CHS and CPS Comparisons

	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
CHILD HEALTH SUPPLEMENT				
Total in households (#)	63,142	51,941	9,456	5,715
(%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Living w/ both parents	77.8	83.4	46.3	73.6
Living w/ mother only	18.6	13.7	46.9	23.5
Living w/ father only	1.6	1.5	1.9	1.4
Living w/ neither parent	2.0	1.4	4.9	1.5
1981 CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY				
Total in households (#)	62,784	51,518	9,368	5,258
(%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Living w/ both parents	76.5	82.5	42.9	70.4
Living w/ mother only	18.2	13.8	43.5	23.1
Living w/ father only	1.9	1.8	2.5	2.5
Living w/ neither parent	3.4	1.9	11.1	4.1
1984 CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY				
Total in households (#)	62,074	50,577	9,360	5,616
(%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Living w/ both parents	75.0	81.1	41.1	70.3
Living w/ mother only	20.4	15.1	50.3	24.9
Living w/ father only	2.2	2.1	2.9	2.0
Living w/ neither parent	2.4	1.7	5.7	2.9

NOTE: Children of Hispanic ethnicity may be of any race.
CPS definition of living arrangements is used. That is,
parents may be biological, step, or adoptive.

SOURCE: Child Health Supplement (CHS) Public Use Tape and
U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1982. 'Marital Status and
Living Arrangements : March 1981.' Current Population
Reports, Series P-20, No. 372, Table 4; U.S. Bureau
of the Census, 1985. 'Marital Status and Living
Arrangements: March 1984.' Current Population Reports,
Series P-20, No. 399, Table 4.

Appendix Table B: Means (Standard Deviations) of Variables in Models Predicting Contact with Noncustodial Parent(s)

Variable	One Biological Parent	Neither Biological Parent	
		Absent Mother	Absent Father
SEEMUCH (1=Sees weekly) (0=Sees less/never)	0.194 (0.396)	0.265 (0.442)	0.197 (0.398)
SEESOME (1=Sees at all) (0=Never sees)	0.635 (0.481)	0.596 (0.491)	0.482 (0.500)
AGE5 (1=Child 0-5) (0=Other)	0.278 (0.448)	0.249 (0.433)	0.271 (0.445)
AGE11 (1=Child 6-11) (0=Other)	0.341 (0.474)	0.316 (0.466)	0.315 (0.465)
AGE14 (1=Child 12-14) (0=Other)	0.192 (0.394)	0.180 (0.384)	0.159 (0.366)
SEX-AP (1=Father absent) (0=Mother absent)	0.896 (0.306)		
SEX-CH (1=Male child) (0=Female child)	0.506 (0.500)	0.519 (0.500)	0.541 (0.499)
OUTOFWED (1=Out-of-wedlock birth; 0=Other)	0.208 (0.406)		
ADOPTED (1=Two adoptive parents; 0=otherwise)		0.326 (0.470)	0.291 (0.455)
TIMSESEP (1=Separated 1 year or less; 0=Other)	0.189 (0.392)	0.226 (0.419)	0.141 (0.349)
STEP-P (1=Stepparent) (0=Other)	0.295 (0.456)		
PARNTFIG (1=Other parent figure; 0=Other)	0.155 (0.362)		
EDUC (Years of school completed by head)	11.56 (3.03)	10.07 (4.32)	10.14 (4.21)
BLACK (1=NonHispanic Black) (0=otherwise)	0.237 (0.425)	0.262 (0.440)	0.279 (0.449)
HISPANIC (1=Hispanic) (0=otherwise)	0.086 (0.280)	0.064 (0.246)	0.053 (0.224)
Unweighted Sample Size	3,550	389	340

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