

# RESEARCH BRIEFING

## COUNTING FATHERS IN: UNDERSTANDING MEN'S EXPERIENCES OF THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM



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## Why is this study important?

This study of men's experiences of the child protection system was prompted because of the widespread concern that professionals in child protection still struggle to engage men. Failure to engage with fathers can result in poor assessments that fail to reflect or respond to the balance of risks and resources men may present, potentially endangering children and excluding men. Although there is a growing literature on the barriers to father engagement, this problem has mostly been concerned with service delivery, and investigated from the viewpoint of professionals. The few studies that include men's perspectives have focused on men's retrospective criticisms of child protection agencies rather than attempting to understand how men negotiate the day-to-day challenges of their encounter with the child protection system.

## Aim of the study

The research aims to improve policy and social work practice by addressing the knowledge gap about men's experiences of the child protection system.

Key objectives were:

1. To understand how men's experiences of child protection unfold over time.
2. To understand, retrospectively, the extent and nature of men's involvement in child protection cases

The first objective involved a prospective year-long study of 35 fathers and father figures of children with a newly made child protection plan. The second involved a retrospective analysis of local authority case files for 150 children with a child protection plan from three local authorities, capturing more variation than is possible in a qualitative sample.

## How was the study conducted?

Two complementary approaches were used in the research design and the project had three strands.

- The central innovative aspect of the project was the **qualitative longitudinal (QL) study** of men's experiences of child protection processes, involving in depth interviews and ongoing contacts with 35 participating men over 12 months. A small group of six mothers were also interviewed to offer a comparative view of the child protection process.

- The QL study was contextualized by quantitative data about men's involvement from the **analysis of 150 child protection case files** (50 per authority), in the three participating local authorities.

- Six **focus groups** (two per authority) were held with social workers and managers in each local authority to test overall findings and gain a professional perspective on the barriers and facilitators of working with men in child protection.

**The qualitative longitudinal study:** an innovative QL methodology was used to design a prospective study of men's experiences of child protection over a 12-month period. This involved 'walking alongside' participants through their lived experiences, in real time.

The 12-month QL study consisted of in-depth interviews and approximately monthly phone contacts with 35 participating men (roughly 10 per local authority), to capture their experiences of the child protection process and relationships with social workers. It involved looking back, at men's histories, fathering experiences and any past encounters with welfare agencies, and accompanying them forward, into the current encounter with child protection and its impact on their lives.

Data were examined cross-sectionally for each of the four three month waves of time, using thematic analysis. We also compiled detailed longitudinal case studies for each participant examining his step-by-step progress including interactions, feelings, and actions as they unfolded. These analyses were then compared and later integrated to identify and explain key findings.

**The case file analysis:** case recording for 50 children from each authority was studied, retrospectively, from the making of the child protection plan, until 12 months later. Cases were selected consecutively in each authority starting from 1 January 2014.

Information was collected using a specially prepared file schedule, tracking demographic data about fathers, their characteristics or background factors and contact with children. Men's participation in child protection or other meetings was also tracked. Qualitative examples of inclusive practice and/or barriers to inclusive practice with men were also noted for each case.

Data were coded and analysed to produce descriptive statistics about the nature and pattern of men's involvement in the child protection process and any follow up services. Qualitative data provided case studies and a broad evaluation of inclusive practice with men. The sample of 150 cases offered a point of comparison with the QL sample.

## Key findings

This research challenges assumptions that men in child protection cases do not stay involved in children's lives and always, or only, pose a risk of harm to their child. Most men wanted to be part of their child's life and presented as a combination of risks and resources for their children.

**Our findings highlight the need for a 'both-and' approach.** Social workers need to work with both mothers and fathers, and effective engagement with men has to involve both authoritative and empathic interaction, to hold men accountable, and directly value their parenting on its own terms.

**Findings from the case file analysis:** Men were present in children's lives but information about them was patchy. There were 139 fathers or father figures connected to the 150 children and all children had at least one man involved in their lives. The men that social workers most often engaged with were birth fathers who lived with the child. Attempts to include men showed varying degrees of persistence and it was rare to see specific services offered to men. Overall, the profile of the 139 men bears comparison with the smaller sample of 35 men in the QL study.

### Findings from the Qualitative Longitudinal study: Fathers' lives

- Well over half of the 35 men reported a significant illness, disability or other impairment. A number of men lived with chronic physical health conditions and others reported mental health challenges including depression, anxiety, instances of self-harm and panic attacks.

- Over half of the fathers were also living economically precarious lives with diminishing access to benefits, insecure work and increasing debt. The majority (22) of men in our sample were living in some form of social housing or had temporary accommodation. Only a minority (5) owned their home.

- There were often complex networks of relationships surrounding fathers and their children. This meant that men were continually balancing demands to maintain their income, meet the needs of their children, and negotiate with partners and ex-partners.

- Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) influenced the possibility of some fathers having an active role in their child's care. Men's stated disapproval of domestic violence was near universal. A minority of men (4) admitted committing such violence. Five fathers claimed that they had suffered DVA from their partners and others said that the abuse had been mutual. In three cases, contested DVA

allegations delayed the eventual placement of children with fathers.

### Time and timing in child protection practice - whose time is it anyway?

- Different, or clashing, perceptions of time between men and social workers often undermined men's confidence in the child protection process.

- Fathers experienced social work time as both 'rushed and slow'. Official timeframes could undervalue fathers' lived experience and the pressures on their time.

- The timing of when, and how social workers sought men's perspective, or included him in an assessment had significant consequences for the direction of the case and the relationship between social workers and men.

### Fathers' perceptions of unfairness in the child protection system

- Many of the men perceived gender difference as a form of unfair treatment. There were three particular examples of this; firstly in the ways in which men's emotions (particularly anger) were interpreted, secondly in the handling of the child protection enquiry and allegations about domestic abuse or harm to children and thirdly, the ways in which men's parenting was recognised and evaluated.

- The perception of unfair treatment in these contexts was supported by the focus group discussions with social workers and managers.

### Gatekeeping and working relationships with men

- Social workers and managers generated, or could act on 'gate-opening' and 'gate-closing' opportunities for men's involvement as fathers. Factors that helped gate opening included early direct contact, the capacity of social workers to 'tolerate' men's emotions, and be flexible and reliable.

- A combination of organisational and attitudinal factors contributed to the gatekeeping mechanisms for men in child protection, including deeply rooted cultural expectations about gender and parenting.

- The quality of the working relationship with the social worker was central. The majority of men wanted a relationship with their social worker. Barriers to relationship building included men and social workers mirroring a sceptical view of each other, with each describing the other as 'hard to reach', evasive or defensive.

## **Key implications for policy and practice**

### **Building a full picture of men's lives as fathers**

- To assess the balance of resource and risk of harm a man may present, social workers should seek the fullest picture possible of the background, relationship dynamics, wellbeing, and current circumstances of the child's father/father figure.
- Men's parenting should be explored, in detail and on its own terms. Many fathers are engaged in fathering activity that may be unseen by professionals. Whilst such activity may not necessarily be considered constructive, it is likely that most fathers are doing something. In this way assumptions about father 'absence' can and should be challenged
- Men's needs and capacities as parents must also be explicitly considered and resourced. Without this fathers' roles and responsibilities are likely to be overlooked, and mothers may continue to be held solely responsible for the care and safety of children.

### **Working relationships with fathers: pursuing active rather than passive involvement**

- The value of investing time in making direct contact with men from the outset should not be underestimated. This is particularly significant for non-resident fathers, and can be a mechanism for demonstrating even-handedness and recognition from the start.
- Persistence needs to be expected at an organisational level, and workers need support in implementing this. Achieving some means of hearing a man's story should be seen as necessary rather than as an optional or unmanageable set of tasks.
- Multiple changes of worker undermine the potential for relationship building. Where men experienced consistency, they tended to have both the opportunity and receptiveness to building trust with the social worker. Where men felt aggrieved, changes of worker added fuel to the fire.
- More flexible, creative ways of working with men are needed. This should go beyond the recognised issues over timing and location of formal meetings, and could include varying methods and/or frequency of communication, more open discussion of the process; management of men's expectations and responding to men's particular circumstances.

### **Organisational and strategic support for improving practice**

- The inclusion of fathers, from the outset, needs to be a routine organisational and cultural expectation. Persistence is needed at the social worker level and time should be allowed and invested at policy and organisational level to facilitate this.
- Tackling structural and cultural barriers to fathers' involvement includes challenging deep rooted assumptions about gender and parenting, where the father-child relationship is seen as secondary. Workers need confidence that managers will support them in this, and managers need to challenge risk-averse, procedurally driven culture and practice. These actions should be considered part of local authorities' duties under the Equality Act 2010.

## **Strengths and limitations of the study**

### **Strengths**

'Counting Fathers In' offers unique insights into men's perspectives and an analysis of child protection practice as it unfolds over time. The retention rate for the QL study was high and the research relationships developed were constructive. Some participants have continued to work with us on further impact-related work from this project.

### **Limitations**

The sample of men in the QL study is not ethnically diverse, nor does it include very young fathers. It also under-represents men not invited, or not attending, the initial child protection conference. Our findings may therefore reflect the experiences of more 'involved' fathers. However, this may mean that the barriers to engagement we identified are likely to be even greater for men missing from the initial conference.

### **FIND OUT MORE**

**FULL REPORT LINK :** <https://www.uea.ac.uk/centre-research-child-family/child-protection-and-family-support/current-projects/-counting-fathers-in->

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