

Understanding the Role of Fathers in Child Welfare Reunification: A Secondary Data Analysis

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Background

Children with engaged fathers show decreased behavioral problems and increased social/relational functioning and educational outcomes.¹ Many children are not living with their fathers at the time of protective custody. Once placed in foster care, these children are at risk of experiencing even less contact with their fathers.³ Very little research has been conducted examining the association between fathers' engagement and children's well-being in child welfare populations.⁴ The limited work that has been done found that children with highly involved non-resident fathers were discharged from foster care more quickly, compared to children whose fathers were absent or minimally involved.⁵ This student research team wished to better understand the role fathers' experiences and characteristics play in the reunification process.

Research Questions

Holland: Are mothers who are cohabitating with the child's father more likely to reunify than other mothers? Does this vary with the presence of domestic violence in the home?

Camarena: Does father's use of ordered reunification services affect mother's likelihood of reunification? Does this vary by whether parents are cohabitating or not?

Bejarano: Do Latino and Caucasian fathers differ in their rates of cohabitation, service use, and reunification? Does the relationship between service use and reunification vary by ethnicity?

Methods

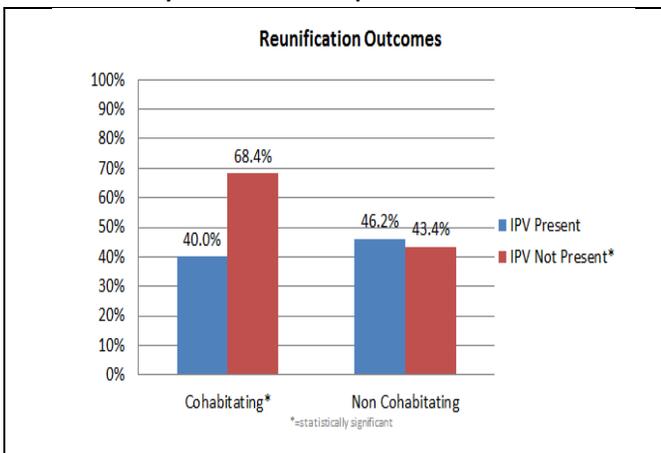
We conducted a secondary analysis of a dataset from a previous study conducted by the faculty lead. That study examined 225 parents of a random sample of children entering care in Santa Clara county in 2004. Parents' characteristics, services and outcomes were tracked through 2007. Each student used a subset of the observations from the larger original dataset. For her study examining cohabitation and reunification, Holland used a subset composed of mothers only (n=137). For her study examining fathers' service use and mothers' reunification, Camarena used a subset composed of mothers whose children's fathers were either cohabitating with the mother, or known to the agency and receiving reunification services (n=81). For his study on Latino and Caucasian fathers, Bejarano used a subset composed of fathers only (n=88). Bivariate and multivariate analyses were used to answer the research questions.

Findings

Holland study on cohabitation, domestic violence and reunification

- Cohabitation was associated with a greater likelihood of reunification when IPV was not present.
- Cohabitation was not associated with reunification when IPV was present.
- In a multivariate analysis controlling for ethnicity, incarceration, and drug use, odds of reunification were reduced (marginally statistically significant) for those with IPV and cohabitating compared to those with no IPV who were not cohabitating.
- Other variables in the multivariate model associated with a lowered likelihood of reunification were incarceration and drug use.

Reunification by cohabitation and presence of IPV



Multivariate Logistic Regression

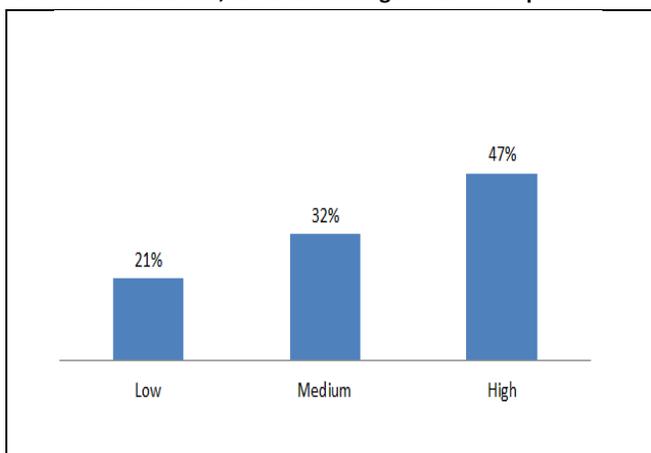
Variable	Odds Ratio	P-value
Black Ethnicity	1.345	.717
Hispanic Ethnicity	1.694	.218
Other	.941	.929
No IPV and Cohabiting	1.765	.209
IPV and Not Cohabiting	.980	.960
IPV and Cohabiting	.438	.084
Incarcerated	.318	.022*
Using Drugs	.356	.010*

* = p<.05

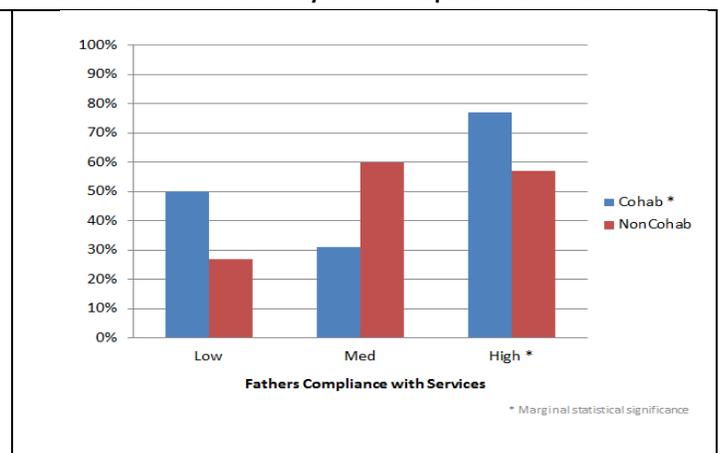
Camarena study on fathers' service use, cohabitation and reunification

- Fathers' service use was positively associated with mothers' reunification when parents were cohabitating.
- Fathers' service use was not associated with mothers' reunification when parents were not cohabitating (though the reunification rate was higher when fathers were partially or fully compliant than when they were not compliant).

% of fathers with low, medium and high service compliance



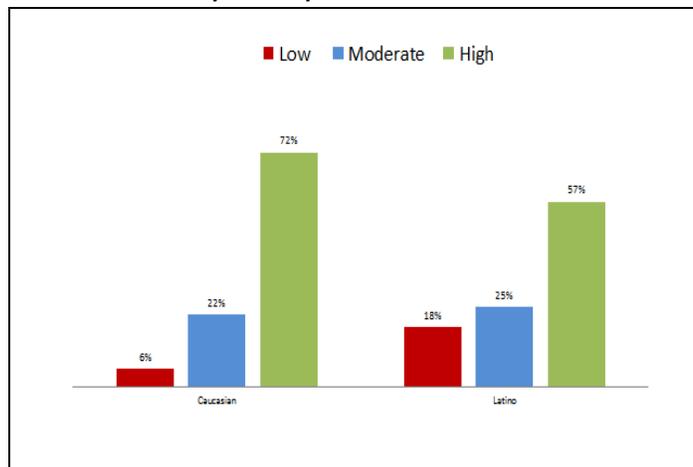
Mothers' reunification rates by father compliance and cohabitation



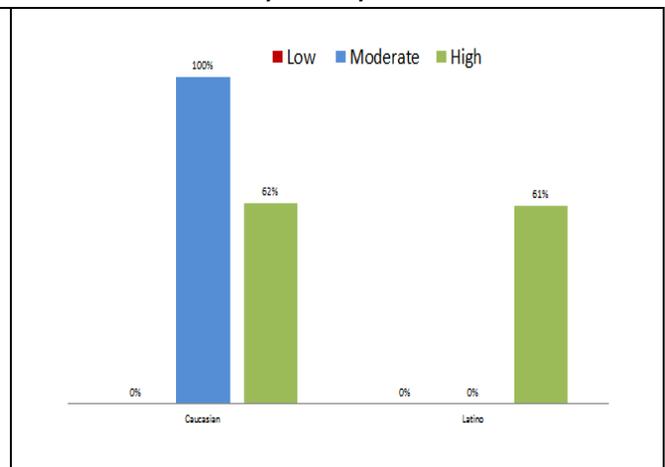
Bejarano study on difference between Latino and Caucasian fathers' service use, cohabitation and reunification

- Latino fathers were slightly younger, and had slightly lower reunification and cohabitation rates than Caucasian fathers.
- Latino fathers were three times more likely to have low rates of service utilization than Caucasian fathers (18% vs. 6%) and 15% less likely to have high rates of service utilization.
- The relationship between service use and reunification differed for Latino and Caucasian fathers. Caucasian fathers were fairly likely to reunify if their participation in services is perceived as moderate to high (100% to 62%, reunified, respectively). Latino fathers had to participate at a level perceived by social workers as high to have a chance at reunification – *no* Latino fathers with low or moderate levels of service participation reunified.

Fathers' service use by ethnicity



Fathers' reunification rate by ethnicity and service use



Implications for Practice and Policy

- Increasing fathers' participation in services is important, particularly when parents are cohabitating.
- The increased likelihood of reunification for cohabitating mothers suggests they have an increased level of support compared to single mothers. Additional resources and supports may be needed to assist single mothers in reunification.
- Improved strategies by the department are needed to increase participation by Latino fathers in services
- In assessing fathers' participation, social workers must be aware of cultural differences in what "participation" looks like, as well as their own biases towards age, race, etc.

Further Research

- Further research should explore factors that contribute to different rates of reunification for cohabiting and non-cohabiting families when domestic violence is not present. Is the higher rate due to higher income in two-parent families? Greater social support? Worker preference for two parent homes? Understanding what contributes to the higher rate can help identify what additional supports might be helpful for single parents to better facilitate their reunification efforts.
- Random sample case reviews may help to determine whether fathers of different ethnicities who utilize services at equal levels have equal opportunities to reunify.

References

1. Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg , 2007
2. United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2009
3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2006
4. English, Brummel, & Martens, 2009
5. Malm & Zielewski, 2009

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