Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

Poverty Research and Policy Podcast

Lenna Nepomnyaschy on the Role of Fathers in Reducing Inequalities in Child Outcomes

January 2019 podcast episode transcript

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Chancellor Hello and thanks for listening to the Poverty Research and Policy podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor. This is our January 2019 podcast episode and we're going to be hearing from Lenna Nepomnyaschy, who's an associate professor at the Rutgers School of Social Work. She'll be talking about the role of fathers in reducing inequalities in child outcomes. And the work she'll be talking about is from a study supported by the WT Grant Foundation that she's doing with Dan Miller of Boston University, Maureen Waller of Cornell, and Alison Dwyer Emory who's a postdoc at Rutgers. I was able to talk with Professor Nepomnyaschy when she visited IRP in October and when we started talking, I asked her why she's interested in questions about father involvement and how it matters for kids.

Nepomnyaschy Most of my research has focused on the role of fathers in low income families and single mother families primarily. I'm very interested in why it is that kids in single mother families and kids in low-income families do worse than kids not in those settings. And so I've always wanted to understand what it is that fathers can do to ameliorate some of the problems and whatever is going on in those families, so whether it's money, which I believe money plays a huge role in child development, or whether it's something else, and I'm, over these years that I've been doing this work, I feel that these things are so tied up together—father's provision of child support or money and their connection with the kid and ability to be involved when the parents' relationship is over or is hostile or whatever, and to the degree that fathers can do those things and be involved, I think that can contribute a lot to child wellbeing. So the motivation for the paper is trying to understand the role fathers and of course, this question of whether these gaps can be closed. And we think about mothers as kind of the primary drivers of child wellbeing, but I think it's a really interesting question about whether fathers can also improve child outcomes.

Chancellor As we think about how fathers might matter when it comes to addressing gaps or inequalities in child outcomes, Nepomnyaschy says it's important to consider how fathers themselves are doing and how that might affect their capacity to be involved in their children's lives.

Nepomnyaschy The social and economic contexts changes over the last 40 years that have tremendously hurt men at the lower end of the educational scale. So low skilled men, we know that wages for those men have not grown and actually have decreased by about a third. There's different estimates, but potentially up to a third less than they used to be forty years ago. Other groups of men are doing better, but that particular group of men is actually doing much worse. Incarceration has tremendously increased, we know this, and we know that men with low levels of education are particularly affected. And the changes in the economy, the fact that you can't really survive anymore without a higher education. Those jobs are gone and those are the men that are particularly being affected by these changes. And so all of that affects fathers' ability to be involved with their children for these fathers who are low skilled. Lower wages prevents them from being able to support their families. It also contributes to lower rates of marriage —probably—I mean we assume that that's probably true. If marrying a man who has less income than he had a few years ago, that's not a benefit. So there might be something there, so when men aren't with women then children are raised alone and again they have less contact with children.

Chancellor Nepomnyaschy says a lot of the previous work on father involvement has either taken a point-in-time approach or has looked at relatively small samples of mostly middle class families who may have had a very different set of experiences than those of lower SES or socioeconomic status families. Because of this, in their study, they elected to use the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing dataset, which is a survey of kids born in urban areas in the late 1990s.

Nepomnyaschy It oversamples children born to unmarried parents so it is a more disadvantaged sample overall but it is representative of births in those large cities at that time. And the way we limited our sample was we needed to look at father involvement over a ten year period because we wanted to measure involvement kind of over the child's life. We had to limit the sample to fathers who were either resident over that ten year period, or nonresident over that ten year period. And we're looking at kid outcomes, child outcomes, adolescent outcomes, really, when they're 15 years old. And so, again, we're looking at outcomes at 15 years and then looking back for ten years, measuring fathers' involvement over that whole period.

Chancellor And Nepomnyaschy says she and her colleagues' approach in their study was to ask a 'what if' question—what if low-income or low SES fathers were involved at higher rates—could that reduce inequalities in child outcomes?

Nepomnyaschy That's the setup for the paper and so the first step is to establish that there is an association of involvement with outcomes, which we do, and I think we do it in a more powerful way than other papers because we measure involvement kind of over the life of the child, so not just "did fathers spend time with the kids last week?" or "did they provide money in the past year?" We were trying to create this measure of kind of everything that fathers have done for their children over the last ten years. And we look at resident fathers and nonresident fathers separately because they're just so different that putting them together just doesn't make a lot of sense.

Chancellor So, once they established that there was indeed an association between father involvement and child outcomes generally, they next looked at whether involvement among low-SES fathers also mattered. And Nepomnyaschy says they weren't quite sure what they would find.

Nepomnyaschy I think you could imagine— what about issues of domestic violence, what about issues of child maltreatment, what about issues of substance abuse? All of those things are more likely to be found among low SES fathers and so maybe their involvement because of all those traits that they might may be bad for kids. So that was one way to think about it, but the other way to think about it is actually maybe, it's good for kids. Maybe it's better than the effect of involvement for higher SES fathers because children in higher SES families have so many other advantages—well educated mothers, good neighborhoods, high income, so maybe father involvement is not that important. So that was an open question and we tested it and we actually found no difference in the effects of involvement on child outcomes between high and low SES families.

Chancellor But, the high SES fathers had more involvement, so from there, Nepomnyaschy and her colleagues wanted to think about what levels of father involvement it would actually take to reduce gaps in child outcomes between high and low SES families.

Nepomnyaschy What if fathers in low SES families were as involved as fathers in high SES families or even higher? What if we just let them be super, super involved. And so we did these simulation models where we substitute in the involvement of a high SES father into the low SES father's involvement equation, so to speak. And then looked at fathers who were very involved. And so that's what we did and I think it's a novel approach. And we find that it actually does reduce some of these gaps in child outcomes and for some of them we completely reduce the gaps.

Chancellor And as she mentioned, their analyses looked at all resident fathers separately from all nonresident fathers.

Nepomnyaschy As we would expect, when we look and we compare the resident and nonresident samples, of course children with nonresident fathers are disadvantaged on every indicator compared to the resident father families. Nonetheless, even within, when we look within those samples, there's a lot of variation in child outcomes, in father involvement, in all other sorts of variables within the resident sample and nonresident sample by SES. So, children in high SES resident father families do better than children in low SES resident father families and same with for nonresidents. And there's a lot of variation in income across those groups. So, these analyses allow us to really look at these differences within the resident and nonresident father sample. I think that an innovation or contribution is that often people just compare resident versus nonresident and that wasn't the goal here. The goal was really to understand differences by SES and obviously SES is tied to residence versus nonresidence, but we really wanted to look separately within those two samples to really get a sense of whether father involvement, given your residential status, right? We're not interested in saying, oh sure, residence is good so let's make all fathers live with their children. We understand that that is not the role of policymakers. But we are interested in whether father involvement through money and through fathers' time with children and how all of those things work together, whether those things can improve child outcomes and close gaps.

Chancellor So, with that, I asked Nepomnyaschy what their takeaways were and how they might help us better understand how father involvement matters for children's outcomes.

Nepomnyaschy One of the big takeaways from this study, which I think is complicated, particularly for the nonresident father families, is that we find that child support, provision of cash child support, is actually much less predictive of child outcomes and does much less to close the gaps than does fathers' provision of in kind support, which is noncash things that fathers provide for their children. And their social involvement, which is doing things with kids, going out with them, reading with them, spending time with them. And I think what I want to be careful with in terms of the implications of the study is that I don't think that the takeaway should be that money doesn't matter. Because that's not the case. What we think is going on is that, first of all, all of these things are incredibly correlated. So, when fathers come and visit their children, they bring things to their children and they contribute in all sorts of ways. And what we talked about in the beginning, about these social contexts and economic changes that have happened in terms of incarceration and low wages and the disappearance of the types of jobs that fathers with low skills used to be able to support families, all of these things contribute to father involvement, not just whether they pay support or not, but whether they're able to be involved with their families. And we think addressing those kinds of disparities in terms of wages, in terms of barriers to return from incarceration. I think one thing I didn't mention is that in this sample, particularly in the nonresident father sample, something like—I'm not sure of the exact number—something like 60% of these dads by the time these kids are 15 have had incarceration experience. Which is in line with other data. So that has tremendous implications for whether fathers are involved with children. And so when these fathers come back into the communities, their ability to find jobs, their ability to see their children is hampered tremendously. And all of those things then contribute to their lower levels of involvement in every way.

Chancellor Nepomnyaschy says that, as a next step, she and her co-investigators will be collecting policy data from states to look at how policies that that aren't necessarily aimed at fathers might have implications for fathers' wellbeing.

So, things like the minimum wage, unemployment policies, EITC, the earned income tax credit. Some states and local areas allow single men or single parents to receive the EITC. Things like barriers when you come back from incarceration. There's whether you can live in various places, whether you can apply for student loans. How easy it is to access criminal records. We believe that all of those things should maybe make a difference. So we are collecting all of those—some of those variables across states. Also, we are looking at child support arrears as well. Policies around child support arrears, because we believe that those have a very large impact also on fathers in these data. Much of those arrears doesn't go to families, it actually goes to the state to recoup public assistance costs that

Nepomnyaschy, continued: the mother might have used. So those policies should matter, so that's our next steps is collecting all those data and analyzing how those policies are related to fathers involvement.

Chancellor: Thanks to Lenna Nepomnyaschy for taking the time to talk about this research with us. This podcast was supported as part of a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation but its contents don't necessarily represent the opinions or policies of that Office, any other agency of the Federal government, or the Institute for Research on Poverty. To catch new episodes of the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast, you can subscribe on Apple Podcasts or Stitcher or your favorite podcast app. You can find all of our past episodes on the Institute for Research on Poverty website. Thanks for listening.

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