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Negotiating 'earning' and 'caring' through the COVID-19 crisis: change and continuities in the parenting and employment trajectories of young fathers

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Briefing Paper Context

In this briefing paper series, we draw upon data generated with seventeen young fathers (aged between 15 and 30 years old) who participated in the Following Young Fathers Further research study, funded by UKRI (2020-2024). In policy terms, young fathers are defined as those who have their first child or experience a first pregnancy when aged 25 and under. The age range of our sample reflects that some of the young fathers we interviewed were participating in research for the sixth time because they had been involved in a linked study called Following Young Fathers (2012-2015, Neale et al. 2015).

The data we present were generated for wave 1 of our extended qualitative longitudinal study. As part of this short series, we present emergent findings of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on the parenting journeys and support needs of young fathers.

In our companion paper, we consider the implications and effects of the pandemic on their wider family relationships and experiences of isolation during the lockdown. Our forthcoming paper will focus on how support services fared and adapted in their remit to support young fathers. In this briefing paper we examine the implications and effects of the pandemic and lockdown for the earning and caring trajectories of young fathers.

Key Findings

- The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown in March 2020 produced major shifts in employment and family arrangements. For young fathers and their families, many of whom were already living on a low-income and experiencing hardship, these changes had wide reaching consequences, producing both opportunities and challenges,
- The young fathers we interviewed were at different points in their parenting journeys and were therefore impacted by the pandemic in different ways. Those who became a father for the first time or were adjusting to life with a new baby had different experiences to those with school age children,
- Restrictions placed on the young men and wider female family members during the birth of their children in hospital were a particular source of challenge for them and their partners,
- Whether a young father was resident with their child or non-resident had varying implications for contact and involvement with children,
- For resident young fathers, confinement to the home provided valued space and time to bond with a child. For non-resident dads, lockdown exacerbated and heightened contact issues with mothers and grandmothers playing a role in either 'gate opening' (enabling access) or 'gate closing' (restricting access),
- The older fathers who had relatively stable employment were somewhat protected from the worst excesses of the pandemic. For those who were furloughed and already in precarious employment, their employment trajectories became even less stable.



Introduction

In this briefing paper we explore the earning and caring experiences and trajectories of a cohort of seventeen young fathers. We examine continuities and change in their work and family arrangements, the impacts of these changes on their parenting trajectories and personal relationships, and the extent to which these experiences differ for young fathers who are resident and non-resident. The balance of earning and caring has always been negotiated and shared by parents to varying degrees (Neale and Davies, 2015), but never more rapidly than under the renewed socio-economic conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown. As a secondary effect of the lockdown as a major public health intervention, the pandemic has had significant gendered effects, forcing widespread change and renegotiations in the employment and caring circumstances of both men and women.

While the effects of the pandemic have fallen disproportionately on women (Young Women's Trust/ Women's Budget Group 2020), it is also clear that pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities associated with age, race and class have been exacerbated (Power et al. 2020). As a relatively under-researched population, we sought to examine the immediate impacts of the pandemic on the parenting journeys of young fathers in some depth. For young men who are just starting out on their parenting journeys, and indeed for those whose children are now school age, the pandemic and lockdown has produced both new opportunities and challenges.

Across the seventeen cases we were able to trace a spectrum of experiences linked to their transitions and trajectories through early fatherhood. Even in this relatively small sample, two young fathers became parents for the first time, four of the young fathers had pre-school age children and the remainder had school age children. Our findings are therefore organised around the impacts of the pandemic and the March 2020 lockdown for young men who were in the early transition into fatherhood and for those who were already well established in their parenting journeys and were navigating a new set of requirements for their school-age children.

The impact of COVID-19 on the entry into fatherhood

The entry into parenthood at a young age is a major transition that involves the development of new identities and adjustment to new responsibilities (Neale and Davies, 2016). Becoming a parent in the pandemic and under a new set of socio-economic circumstances introduced an additional set of challenges.

Some of the negative impacts of the pandemic on fathers and families have been foregrounded by recent research. The gendered implications of the imposition of hospital restrictions on fathers' access during the pandemic for example have been much publicised and politicised (Fatherhood Institute, 2020). In some contexts, fathers have been unable to attend the birth of their child or antenatal appointments since the 'no partners until delivery' rule was introduced to prohibit the spread of the virus in medical spaces (Ruxton and Burrell, 2020). For new fathers, this raised fears about the possibility of missing the birth of a child and being unable to support their partner. This fear was not unfounded. Indeed, one of the young fathers we interviewed was not allowed to attend. The midwife called him and he watched the birth on a video call. The youngest of our participants spoke of his experience of not being allowed to stay in the hospital overnight once his baby had been born:

I was a bit upset at the hospital, the only thing about the lockdown happening and stuff that that's bothered a bit is I couldn't stay overnight with her [...] I wanted to stay overnight. Me girlfriend had, you know, she'd just given birth, she wasn't, she needed support... (Bradley, aged 15)

A striking aspect of Bradley's account was also that wider family members were also excluded. His partner had expressed her intention to have her aunt present at the birth for support but this was prohibited because of the pandemic. Female family members like grandmothers and aunts are often present at births to support young mothers, especially in families from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Neale and Lau Clayton, 2015). In these two examples, the choices of young mothers were greatly restricted; one had no birthing partner at all and the other was forced to choose. Bradley was the only family member who could be present but only for a limited period.

For one young dad, the prospect of becoming a father again in the context of the pandemic was also the source of significant worry. Anxieties about the birth being in hospital were further compounded by their financial situation, which had worsened because of the lockdown:

I'm stuck at the minute, I'm not gonna lie cause obviously she's due again in October 2020 and she's going to the hospital. And obviously we can't get a bus if she's gone into labour and we cannae really get a taxi. So obviously I've gotta call them but because we're not, because a' quarantine we're having to spend more money on like electric bills and food and that. We're not left with enough money to pay for me insurance on the car or anything like that really. So we are in a sticky spot there cause obviously if we don't get the insurance then I can't take her to the hospital. So everything's been changed when it's come to payments, we don't get enough. It's not enough to last. Even before the quarantine it was still a bit tricky managing your money as it was especially since we're getting paid monthly cause we've gotta try and plan it all out for the month. (Liam, aged 21)

This mirrors recent data which highlights how the pandemic has made things increasingly worse for those already experiencing hardship or financially precarious circumstances (Fancourt et al. 2020; Power et al. 2020). The young dads we interviewed also predominantly reside in Northern regions of England. They were therefore doubly disadvantaged by living in predominantly disadvantaged areas in the North, which have also been disproportionately affected by coronavirus restrictions (Fancourt et al. 2020).

We learnt of positive changes as well. Despite his initial experience of the hospital, Bradley described becoming a father during lockdown as a relatively positive experience for him and his partner in their early parenting journeys:

It's been surprisingly good actually because we've had all this time to isolate in the house by ourselves. We've got to know her, like, we've had so much time with her, it's, like, it's actually turned out, I'm not gonna say good cause obviously everything that's happened with it, but it's, but us being isolated in the house, it's been good. (Bradley, aged 15)

The unexpected ability for the young fathers to spend quality time and bond with young children was reflected across the cases where the young fathers had babies and pre-school children. This was often facilitated by relational support. In Bradley's case, he lived with his mother who was also supporting him financially. As we note later in this paper, however, the ability to spend more time with children was not universally experienced, especially for the older fathers. This was dependent on factors such as relationship quality with the mother of the child, work hours and (in)flexibility, and residence status.

Fathering through lockdown: time to 'be there'

Eleven of our participants had been parents for several years prior to the pandemic. These young men had school age children, which required a variety of adaptations.

Based on Office for National Statistics data, the Fatherhood Institute (2020) reports that men's childcare increased up to 58% during the first lockdown. Indeed, as Bradley's case exemplifies, the additional time afforded by the lockdown for parenting meant that many of the young dads were able to spend more time with their children and fulfil their expressed intentions to 'be there' for them. Craig, for example raised the chance to spend more time with his children as a positive aspect of lockdown, whilst Trevor (aged 23) said that the best thing about the pandemic was "obviously the time I've been able to spend wi' ma daughter cause I ain't had that for, for a while, for a good while".

For seven of our participants however, the lockdown had resulted in restricted access to their children and reduced time spent with them. For some, access was impacted because of rules regarding isolation, the need to quarantine (one father contracted the virus for example) or because relatives were shielding. For other young fathers the complexities caused by the social distancing rules, or fears concerning contracting the virus, negatively impacted and could in some cases be a way of gatekeeping access to children. Prior to the first lockdown in March 2020, Jock's son had been staying overnight every other weekend. The mother of his son, who was living with her own mother and whose household had a positive case, reduced his access, citing concerns about the possibility of infection. This extended long beyond the two-week isolation period however:

"...that changed when the pandemic started and we went into lockdown. Mum wasn't comfortable with him mixing households.....So it, that were quite difficult. I mean I went down to see him but I wasn't able to right spend quality time with him. She, she, mum was a bit hesitant about me like going into theirs and spending time with him there. So we'd like social distance on like the park near their house which was a bit rubbish but, you know, I know the Government said that children could stay with like their other parents but she wasn't keen on the idea. And I was, you know, we had a bit of a argument about it. But, you know, it's one a' those things" (Jock, aged 30)

This situation continued for about six weeks until the mother of his child decided to allow overnight stays again. Young fathers often face barriers to spending time with their children because of gatekeeping from the maternal family (Lau Clayton, 2015); for Jock this was further exacerbated by the pandemic.

However, the pandemic also created a situation whereby some fathers had the 'gate opened' meaning they were able to spend more time with their children. Fathers who were furloughed had more time available to them and some of the mothers welcomed an increase in shared care, particularly as schools were closed. This was especially apparent in the interviews with non-resident fathers who were able to renegotiate time with children and child maintenance payments (see also the 'Employment and Finances' section).

'Being there' through home schooling

The March lockdown resulted in the prolonged and widespread closure of schools although vulnerable children and the children of key workers were exempted and still able to attend. For many parents, there was an expectation that they home-school. Families therefore had a crucial role to play in educating their children. According to Jæger and Blaabæk (2020) parents were required to provide material resources like computers and space to access homework, offer academic and motivational support, and provide access to additional resources like books and online learning. Analysis of Understanding Society data suggests that home-schooling during the pandemic produced educational loss for most children but that it was much more pronounced for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Pensiero et al., 2020).

For the young men we interviewed, home-schooling presented new opportunities and challenges. There were differing levels of engagement or uptake and access to reliable technology was problematic for some. This was especially the case for the young dads who were unemployed or living on a low-income, as Adam explains:

[the laptop's] not great. It's terrible to be honest w' you, it takes like five minutes to load up the, load up the first page [...] It's no good, it's no good for him. It's no good for us either 'cause we're sat there for like forty-five minutes pulling our hair out trying to get on to the correct thing for him. Like turns out it's not the right thing so it's another twenty minutes [...] That's, that's kinda why we stopped doing it because we was, me and [my wife] was arguing about what it, how to do it and she was putting her input into it when I was trying to do it with him. And I was doing it when she was trying to figure it out. And it caused arguments [...] it's a very, very old laptop but we can't afford a newer model computer that's gonna run more efficiently – (Adam, aged 26)

Trevor on the other hand spoke with great zeal about taking on the role of home-educator for his daughter during lockdown after teachers had raised with him that she had previously been struggling educationally:



[...] I went, 'over quarantine when you're down here, you're gonna be reading a bit more, you're gonna be writing a bit more, you're gonna be doing this a bit more', cause she were falling behind apparently [...] it got to the point where I got a projector...and yeah I ended up doing like slides and stuff on ma work computer. [...] I turned into t' teacher for a little bit, it were quite fun. (Trevor aged 23)

The context here is important – Trevor was on furlough which provided him with the time to do this, he had access to resources, was comfortable with the required technology, and with one child under his care his attention was relatively undivided.

Not all the young fathers got involved in home-schooling, however. As a non-resident father Martin reflects that he preferred to make the time for play and considered his ex-partner more capable:

...it was good when I was like living with her but now I don't, I don't learn her because I don't really get like a lot a' time with her. So the time I do I just like playing and stuff like that [...] her mam does a really good job of learning her and that though (Martin, aged 21)

Despite increased childcare by fathers, evidence demonstrates that there was a gendered distribution of childcare within households during lockdown with mothers spending more time on childcare and developmental activities with their children than fathers (Office for National Statistics, 2020). For the young fathers in this study, engagement in home schooling and other forms of childcare was therefore determined by a complex mix of factors including residence or non-residence with their child, whether they and/or their partners were furloughed or working from home, access to appropriate technology, and gendered assumptions associated with parenting.

The impact of the pandemic on employment and finances

The ability to provide financially for children has always been a pressing concern for young fathers. Not only are practices of 'caring' and 'earning' intertwined and central aspects of fathering identities but being a financial provider is intimately bound up with ideals relating to good fatherhood and male identity (Neale and Davies, 2016; Ruxton and Burrell, 2020). Even prior to the pandemic, the education and employment trajectories of young fathers were varied and forged against a backdrop of precarious employment and reduced entitlements to benefits. Under the new conditions of the pandemic, the juggle of work and family responsibilities became notably more challenging for these young families.

The employment trajectories of the fathers with older children were generally more stable. At the time of interview, six had secure employment, two of whom were working from home (Dominic and Jake). Four had been furloughed and in the case of Manuell, this resulted in unemployment when the business closed completely. Some of the young men who were furloughed described strategies to make up for loss of income. One young dad took on extra shifts at his second job and another participant spoke openly about taking on 'cash in hand' jobs to meet basic needs.

The pandemic also exacerbated the challenges of identifying secure work. Those that had lost jobs or were already in the process of looking for work described delays and reduced contact with job centres and advisors:

Well my work advisor didn't want us to do anything because of coronavirus. So there's been pretty much no contact between us. Like now and then they'll message just to be like, 'is everything okay?'. And then now and then I'll ask if there's any like job listings or anything [...] but other than that there's not really much contact. They don't make you go on like the courses or anything right now because there's a corona virus (Cole, aged 19)

Changes in paid employment because of the lockdown also impacted on how gendered divisions of labour within households were organised. Those employed in particularly precarious forms of employment struggled to find the right balance between managing childcare, doing enough hours to maintain employment and sustaining household finances. Here Raymond describes the juggle of managing work and childcare with his partner, both of whom had zero-hour employment contracts:

So I was supposed to start work at 5 today. So I can no longer do that so I've had to give [partner] my shift. And then whatever she gets taxed she's gonna have to pay me, me my shift in cash kinda thing....either way there's no winning. I can't win with this at all kinda thing. And then when I work she's gonna have to be home. I'm gonna have to cancel one of my shifts in the week and she's gonna have to cancel two of hers

and give them away. So...there's nothing really we can do. And this whole furlough business stops on the 31st of October 2020 which doesn't help...it's just when like we have to give up our shift at the end of the week only because like this whole COVID thing, we're not getting paid for it at all. Do you know what I mean? We give that up, our hours get reduced. And then we're below contracted hours and then we're in trouble kind of thing....as much as we try we have to take each day at a time. We can't, we just can't do it kind of thing (Raymond, aged 26)

Negotiations around child maintenance were also pertinent to non-resident fathers. The complexities involved in the relationship between fathers' contact time with their children and the payment of child maintenance have been noted elsewhere (Natalier and Hewitt, 2010; Tarrant and Hughes, 2019). These literatures demonstrate how child maintenance systems, in their requirement for the redistribution of finances across households from a secondary carer to a primary carer, often serve to reinforce gendered inequalities between men and women by positioning men as economic providers and women as caregivers. Changes in contact time with children linked to the lockdown from March 2020 meant that some fathers could spend more time with their children albeit with varying implications for child maintenance payments:

So before lockdown it was a strict Friday night until Sunday night [...] that's been like a routine set in place since forever pretty much. So that's just the norm. And then once I hit, once it hit quarantine I ended up getting furloughed, I think, back end of March. And I remember saying to her mum, 'well I'm only on 80% a' my wage and I've got my bills and my rent and everything, covering all my additional credits and stuff'. I went, 'are you alright to take a break until I get back on and I'll add on more'. You know on the maintenance that I send her. And she said, 'yeah that's fine. Obviously we'll just, we'll work it out'. So we ended up working it out and that's why I've had her more over the period of time which has been nice as well to be honest (Trevor, aged 23)

[mother of child] sort of forced me having him less with the intention of sort of getting a bit more money out of me from a monthly basis really... we always had an informal arrangement which worked for us in terms of child maintenance, but then she started going down the formal route and cut down the time I had to nearly half to a couple of days, so I sort of instigated legal proceedings....so for the March lockdown, still wasn't in a great place, but with everything that happened, I think it gave his mum a little bit of perspective really as well, so I've been able to get back to a similar amount of time I've had him, which is in essence over a 14-day period of about five nights, six nights (Dominic, age 30)

In both cases the first lockdown enabled these young fathers to negotiate more time with their children. Trevor explains that his ex-partner was responsive and the positive nature of their interpersonal relationship meant that they were able to come to a verbal agreement about re-balancing childcare and finances. Without the opportunity to reduce child maintenance payments, the situation may have been much more problematic, especially for young men in more constrained financial positions. Like Dominic, several of the non-resident dads referred to keeping the mothers of their children 'on side' to sustain and in some cases increase contact time.

Recommendations and conclusions

- The findings we present in this briefing paper demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic and first lockdown engendered major changes in the organisation of work and family life for young fathers and their families.
- Those with young babies were forced to adjust to their new identities and bond with their babies against a backdrop of major social upheaval. Despite notable challenges linked to the exclusion of fathers from overnight stays at hospitals, the young fathers valued the additional time they were afforded to spend quality time with children.
- These findings lend significant weight to the value of introducing affordable and accessible paternal leave for all fathers in the longer term so that they and their families can benefit from their involvement, as well as more home working and shorter hours to enable flexibility for care sharing.
- The impacts of the upheaval fell disproportionately on these young fathers and their families. The majority of young fathers were already living in contexts of socio-economic disadvantage linked to the increasingly precarious education and employment landscape of the UK. The pandemic produced additional barriers and challenges for those already living in poverty and hardship, impacting sharply on family finances.
- While the older dads in the sample had relatively secure employment trajectories, for those younger men who were only just embarking on their parenting journeys the loss of work or need to balance work and care within couples was a significant source of distress, requiring a huge amount of negotiation, management and entrepreneurialism in some cases to help them get by.
- These findings demonstrate the vital need for the establishment of a caring economy and the introduction of stable incomes, especially in contexts of crisis, so that there is always a safety net for young families.

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