

Building a picture of fathers in the family justice system in England

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The invisibility of dads who lose access to their children because of concerns about child neglect or their ability to provide safe care comes under the spotlight in new research.

A research partnership between the University of East Anglia and Lancaster University provides new evidence ('Up Against It': Understanding Fathers' Repeat Appearance in Local Authority Care Proceedings) about [fathers](#)' involvement in care and recurrent care proceedings in England.

A national conference today (Wednesday 24th March), co-hosted online by the two universities, will share key insights from this study, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, with policy and practice audiences.

The researchers analysed anonymised family court records for more than 73,000 fathers appearing in care proceedings between 2010/11 and 2017/18.

In addition, the researchers conducted a survey of fathers in 18 local authorities and captured rich life histories through in-depth, longitudinal interviewing.

As the family courts continue to struggle with very high volumes of care cases, this research complements existing research on birth mothers, by uncovering fathers' histories, their struggles with parenthood, but also what factors help fathers recover their parenting capacity.

Dads featured in 80% of care cases. While fewer in numbers than mothers, a proportion of dads had also appeared in repeat care proceedings.

Significant childhood adversity, early entry to parenthood and persistent economic hardship, were key issues for dads who experienced repeat involvement in care proceedings.

Mothers and fathers involved in care proceedings invoke very different public and professional responses, with fathers often viewed solely in terms of the risks they present to women and children.

However, the research team argue for a more nuanced analysis of fathers' risks and resources and an understanding that all dads are individuals. Whilst fathers should be held accountable for the safe care of children to the same degree as mothers, fathers also need validation and support for their parenting.

Fathers who took part in the research had all experienced considerable adversity in their own childhoods, and in both childhood and adulthood, they lacked appropriate support at key points in their lives (including during and after care proceedings) to enable or sustain change.

Although fathers are able to opt out of parenting in ways not so readily available to mothers, the report suggests services should avoid assuming that fathers are always optional or secondary parents. In fact, the majority of fathers (79%) appeared as couples in repeat care proceedings.

Fathers described deep and long-lasting emotional pain following the loss of their children and desire to play an ongoing parenting role.

The majority of fathers who participated in the interviews were actively

trying to make changes in their lives and in their roles as fathers.

But the resources and opportunities they had were scarce and fragile.

It was hard for dads to establish relationships of trust with social workers and other professionals. Without resources and support to manage emotions and relationships differently, couple conflict and its impact on parenting were key reasons why dads became stuck in a cycle of family court involvement.

Although there is much to be learnt from existing services for mothers, the team argue that service adaptations are sorely needed to engage fathers which focus on emotional regulation, resolution of loss and support for fatherhood as a mechanism for change and accountability.

Members of the research team from both Universities will be speaking at the event, including: Professor Marian Brandon, Dr. Georgia Philip (University of East Anglia) Dr. Yang Hu, Professor Karen Broadhurst and Dr. Lindsay Youansamouth (Lancaster University).

Dr. Georgia Philip, from the University of East Anglia, said: "We need a 'both-and' approach. Fathers involved in care proceedings are vulnerable; they may pose risks arising from their vulnerabilities, but they should also be seen as at-risk themselves."

Professor Karen Broadhurst, from Lancaster University, said: "Building on our research with birth mothers, this project delivers a wealth of completely new insights by throwing the spotlight on Dads. We now have a far more complete picture of mothers, fathers and couples in the family justice system, and what needs to change to prevent repeat involvement."

Rob Street, Director of Justice at the Nuffield Foundation, said:

"Understanding more about the people who feature in care proceedings is an important goal and especially so in cases where the same children or parents are repeatedly involved. This significant new study sheds much-needed light on a previously largely neglected group: fathers recurrently involved in care proceedings. The insights that the research provides on the characteristics and needs of these men will provide vital information for policy and practice in this area."

More information: 'Up Against It': Understanding Fathers' Repeat Appearance in Local Authority Care Proceedings. [DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.22410.18882/1](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.22410.18882/1)

Provided by Lancaster University

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