

## Father Childbearing Intentions: Comparing Mother-Proxy vs. Father Self-Reports

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**Overview:** This paper examines father childbearing intentions and how the picture that emerges of father childbearing intentions differs depending on whether father self-reports or mother-proxy reports of father intentions are used. More specifically, using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) this paper will explore how father childbearing intentions vary by source of report across relationship type and within relationship type by race/ethnicity. In addition, we will examine the factors that are associated with mother's accuracy in reports of father's childbearing intentions, and how mother's accuracy varies across relationship type and within relationship type by race/ethnicity.

**Background and significance:** Historically there has been a dearth of information on father childbearing intentions, and, more generally, males' fertility behaviors. Moreover, much of the data on father's childbearing intentions are based on mother's perceptions/reports. Yet, we know little about the extent to which mothers can accurately report on father's childbearing intentions.

Understanding the data quality of father's childbearing intentions is important for several reasons. First, information on the data quality of mother's reports of father intentions will help guide decisions made by survey and family researchers about how and from whom to collect data on father childbearing intentions and, more generally, male reproductive behaviors. If mother's reports have a high level of accuracy, costs in collecting father's intentions can be minimized since mother's are typically the respondents in surveys of family well-being and reproductive health, are easier to locate, and have higher rates of participation than men. On the other hand, if mother's reports are inaccurate this would suggest that data collected directly from men are appropriate. Second, the importance of accurately measuring men's childbearing intentions is underscored by a growing body of research that suggests that male fertility desires are important determinants of couples' fertility behavior (Thomson 1997) that father's intentions may have an affect on infant health and later father involvement (Bronte-Tinkew, et al 2007; Brown & Eisenberg 1995). Although the research is clearer on the effects of mother's childbearing intentions, the findings are consistent or suggest that father childbearing intentions are also likely to be associated with parent and couple outcomes including economic support of children, as well as union formation and stability (Brien, & Willis 1997; Bachrach & Sonenstein, 1998). Third, the inclusion of father's intentions will help to improve our understanding and modeling of the relationship dynamics and circumstances under which children are born.

*Variations by relationship type and race/ethnicity:* The relationship context under which pregnancies occur is strongly associated with childbearing intentions. In 2001, three-quarters of pregnancies among unmarried women and 70% of pregnancies among cohabiting women were unintended by mothers compared with roughly one-quarter among married women (Finer & Henshaw 2006). Relationship context is also likely to be associated with the accuracy of mother's reports of father's childbearing intentions. For example, married women who are more likely to be in longer, more stable relationships compared with women who are cohabiting or outside of a residential union may be better reporters of father's intentions. While more and more couples are forgoing parenthood, childrearing remains a common characteristic of marriages. Additionally, given day-to-day contact and the long-term perspective of marriages, married couples may be more likely to discuss when and whether to have children than their counterparts in cohabiting or non-residential unions. On the other hand, if cohabiting and nonresidential unions are perceived as being less stable or secure, couples may need to have explicit discussions around birth control and having children. Likewise, cohabiting women and those outside of a residential union may be accurate reporters of male's childbearing intentions if they presume (given the less secure and stable nature of their relationship) that the pregnancy was unintended by fathers. As such, we make the following hypotheses:

H1: The accuracy of mother's reports of father's childbearing intentions will vary relationship status.

H2: Married mothers of father's childbearing intentions are more likely to be accurate than those of cohabiting women or women in nonresidential unions.

The childbearing intentions of women and men also known to vary greatly by race/ethnicity. Across racial/ethnic groups, Hispanic and black women have higher rates of unintended births than white women (Finer & Henshaw 2006). Black men are more likely to report the birth was unintended than white men while Hispanic men do not significantly differ from white men in their likelihood of reporting an unintended birth (Bronte-Tinkew, et al. 2007). Recent research has suggested that the distinct racial/ethnic and union status patterns in childbearing intentions are indicative of variations in the meaning of cohabitation across racial/ethnic groups (Manning 1993, 2001; Manning & Landale 1996; Musick 2005). While cohabitation increases the likelihood of pregnancy among all women, Manning (2001) and Musick (2005) find that cohabiting Hispanic women are both more likely to give birth and to have a planned or intended pregnancy than white cohabiting women. In contrast, whereas black women are more likely than their white counterparts to conceive in a cohabiting union they are no more likely to have an intended birth than their white counterparts (Manning 2001). Additionally, compared to white women, Hispanic and black<sup>1</sup> women are more likely to remain cohabiting following a pregnancy. Together these findings suggest that cohabitation may be viewed by minority, in particular Hispanic, women, and (possibly) men, as either an alternative family form to marriage and/or an appropriate setting for family formation and child rearing. These findings are consistent with research documenting a long and well-established established history and high prevalence rates of common law marriage or consensual unions in Latin America. Based on past research we hypothesize that the:

H3: The accuracy of mother's reports of father's childbearing intentions will vary by race/ethnicity both within and across union type.

H4: Among cohabitators, Hispanic mothers are more likely to have accurate reports of father's intentions.

**Data:** This study is based on data from the 9-month wave of the ECLS-B. The ECLS-B offers a unique opportunity to examine the context (i.e., marital, cohabiting or neither) and circumstances (intendedness) of births across racial and ethnic groups. The ECLS-B is designed to follow focal children born in 2001 and their biological parents over time, and provide information on the relationship between biological parents, including interviews with residential fathers and nonresidential fathers, who are in contact with the mother or child. (It is important to note that while the ECLS-B includes non-residential fathers, the non-resident fathers included in the study may not be representative of the broader non-resident father population. Non-resident fathers were only included in the study if they were in contact with the child or the child's mother.) The ECLS-B is nationally representative with a large sample of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, and includes multiple measures of intendedness, including whether the pregnancy was wanted or mistimed. Moreover, it is one of the few data sets to collect data on childbearing intentions from *both* parents, as well as partner's perceptions of other parent's childbearing intentions. Thus, father childbearing intentions can be constructed using mother proxy-reports (mother's perception) of father intentions and using father's own reports of their intentions. Comparisons between father self-reports and mother-proxy reports can also be made to examine the degree to which mothers accurately report father's intentions, how this varies by relationship type and within relationship by race/ethnicity and to examine the factors associated with mothers accuracy in reporting father intentions. The sample for this study is drawn from 10,105 children who resided with their biological or adoptive mother, whose biological mother responded to the parent questionnaire, and who had valid sample weights. The analytic sample for most of the study consists of 6,054 children for whom data on father childbearing intentions are available from both mothers and fathers.

*Childbearing intentions:* Reports of father’s childbearing intentions were drawn from two items, one measuring whether the pregnancy was perceived by mothers or reported by fathers as intended and a second item assessing pregnancy timing. These measures were collected from both father’s directly and from mothers. For the purposes of this study, a pregnancy will be considered *wanted* if the father reported or was perceived by the mother as having wanted the baby when they discovered they were pregnant. A birth will be considered *mistimed* if the mother became pregnant sooner than the mother perceived the father wanted or the father reported having wanted. Mother’s who perceived and fathers who reported not wanting a(nother) baby when the mother became pregnant are coded as having had an *unwanted* pregnancy. Also coded as having an unwanted pregnancy were those respondents who reported being unsure about wanting a(nother) baby and in a follow-up question (“It is sometimes difficult to recall things but, just before that pregnancy began, would you say you/father probably wanted a(nother) baby at some point or probably not?”) responded “probably no” or “didn’t care”.

*Accuracy:* Two variables indicating whether mothers are accurate in reporting father’s intentions were created. The first indicates whether the mother accurately reported whether the pregnancy was intended or unintended by the father (2-level accuracy). The second variable provides a more detailed measure of accuracy and indicates whether the mother accurately reported whether the pregnancy was wanted, unwanted or mistimed by the father. Tables 1 and 2 provide depict the coding of these variables.

**Table 1: Depiction of 2-Level Mother Accuracy in Reporting Father Childbearing Intentions**

Mother-Proxy Reports of Father's Childbearing Intentions	Father's Self-Report of Childbearing Intentions	
	Intended	Unintended
Intended	1	0
Unintended	0	1

**Table 2: Depiction of 3-Level Mother Accuracy in Reporting Father Childbearing Intentions**

Mother-Proxy Reports of Father's Childbearing Intentions	Father's Self-Report of Childbearing Intentions		
	Wanted	Unwanted	Mistimed
Wanted	1	0	0
Unwanted	0	1	0
Mistimed	0	0	1

*Relationship Status:* Relationship status at conception was defined in relation to the child’s biological father and consists of three categories, married (n=4,109), cohabiting (n=1,143), and neither married nor cohabiting (n=802). We constructed this measure by comparing mother reports of marital and cohabitation history (including dates of union formation) with child’s date of birth and gestational length as reported in the birth certificates.<sup>1</sup>

**Analysis:** The analysis for this study will proceed in three steps. In the first step, we present father childbearing intentions based on mother-proxy and father self-reports for all children in the sample for which data on father’s childbearing intentions are available from either mothers or fathers or both. The goal of this stage of the analysis is to construct a portrait of father’s childbearing intentions and to examine how this portrait differs depending on whether mother-proxy or father self-reports are used. The

<sup>1</sup> In 623 cases where the gestational age was less than 28 weeks or greater than 42 weeks, we substituted nine months for gestational age. Few births are viable at less than 28 weeks or allowed to proceed past 42 weeks (Halamek 2003; Moore& Persaud 1998).

second and third stage of the analyses is limited to cases in which mother-proxy and father self-reports of father's childbearing intentions are available from both parents. In the second stage, we conduct bivariate analysis of mother's accuracy in reporting father's childbearing intentions. We examine the degree of mother accuracy using the 2-level variable indicating whether a mother correctly reported that the father intended or did not intend the pregnancy and the 3-level variables which indicates whether the mother correctly reported the pregnancy was wanted, unwanted, or considered mistimed by the father (described above). In the third stage, we conduct multivariate analysis using logistic (2-level accuracy variable) and multinomial (3 level accuracy variable) regressions to examine the factors associated with mothers accurately reporting father's intentions. Critical independent variables of interest will include: relationship status at conception, mother and father race/ethnicity, relationship quality and communication, age at birth, family composition while growing up, education and work status, and nativity status. In the next section we present the preliminary results for the first and second stages of the analyses. Future analyses will include multivariate analyses for stage 3 and analyses for both stage 2 and 3 will be conducted separately for each relationship type.

**Preliminary Findings:** Table 1 summarizes the results for the first stage of the analysis, which presents father's childbearing intentions by source of report by relationship status and within relationship status by race/ethnicity. Comparing the top panel which presents mother's perceptions of father's intentions and the bottom panel which presents father's self reports, we see that, in general, mothers overestimate the extent to which pregnancies are intended by fathers, and underestimate the extent to which pregnancies are unintended. For example, based on mother-proxy reports 66% of pregnancies among whites are intended by fathers compared with 60% using father self-reports. Differences in mother-proxy and father self-reports of father childbearing intentions are most pronounced when we consider mistimed and unwanted pregnancies. Specifically, the percent of pregnancies that are unwanted by fathers is almost double when we use father self- vs. mother proxy- reports. With few exceptions, these patterns hold across relationship type and across and within relationship type for most racial/ethnic groups. Differences between mother-proxy and father self-reports appear to be less pronounced among those who were neither married nor cohabiting at the time of conception. Additionally, mother-proxy reports among cohabiting Hispanics and Asians are fairly similar. Indeed, the patterns that are observed in father childbearing intentions using mother-proxy reports for cohabiting Asians are almost identical to those observed using father self-reports. Among cohabiting Hispanics, 56% of mothers report that the father intended the pregnancy compared with 53% of fathers; similar percentages of cohabiting Hispanic mothers and fathers report that the pregnancy was unintended by fathers. Interesting, while Hispanics cohabiting mothers appear to be accurate in reporting whether the pregnancy was intended or unintended by fathers they appear to underestimate the extent to which pregnancies were unwanted by father and overestimate the extent to which they were mistimed.

Table 2 presents the bivariate results examining mother's accuracy in reporting father's childbearing intentions by relationship status at conception and race/ethnicity. Using the two level accuracy variable, we find that 70% of mothers who reported that the pregnancy was intended by fathers and 75% who reported the pregnancy was unintended by fathers accurately reported father's intentions. When we use the 3-level accuracy variable, we see that among mothers who reported that father did not intend the pregnancy just under half were accurate in their perception of their partner's intentions suggesting that while mothers may know whether fathers intended or do not intend the pregnancy they are less able to accurately report whether the pregnancy was unwanted or mistimed by fathers. The results also indicate racial/ethnic differences in mother's accuracy in reporting father's intentions. White mothers are more likely to accurately report father intentions than women from other racial/ethnic groups using either the 2 or 3-level accuracy variable. Last, the results also indicate differences by relationship status are better captured using a three level variable that indicates whether mothers accurately reported whether the pregnancy was wanted, mistimed, or unwanted by fathers.

The preliminary results presented here indicate that while many mothers can accurately report on father's childbearing intentions, relying solely on mother's reports will underestimate the extent to which pregnancies are unintended and unwanted by men. Moreover, the use of mother's childbearing intentions is especially called into question among African-American's (under half of black mothers accurately reported father's intentions based on the level accuracy variables) and among those who are not married (see table 2).

## References

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Table 1. Mother-proxy and father-self reports of father's childbearing intentions by race/ethnicity within relationship type (ECLS-B baseline data)

	Total					Married					Cohabiting					Neither				
	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other
<b>Mother report</b>																				
n	4,345	1,488	1,551	1,034	644	3,022	359	733	887	247	736	404	446	74	242	587	725	372	73	155
<i>Report of father wantedness</i>																				
Intended	65.9%	44.8%	61.1%	68.8%	53.0%	78.0%	60.0%	72.0%	76.1%	68.6%	43.5%	46.7%	55.6%	35.3%	48.3%	27.9%	36.0%	45.5%	31.2%	26.2%
Unintended	34.1%	55.2%	38.9%	31.2%	47.0%	22.0%	40.0%	28.0%	24.0%	31.5%	56.5%	53.4%	44.4%	64.7%	51.7%	72.1%	64.0%	54.5%	68.8%	73.8%
Mistimed	22.2%	26.0%	24.5%	19.6%	26.8%	15.4%	23.4%	18.5%	15.2%	19.0%	40.4%	29.2%	29.0%	43.0%	31.8%	36.4%	25.5%	31.0%	40.4%	35.9%
Unwanted	11.9%	29.2%	14.5%	11.6%	20.3%	6.6%	16.6%	9.6%	8.8%	12.5%	16.1%	24.1%	15.3%	21.6%	20.0%	35.7%	38.5%	23.5%	28.4%	37.9%
<b>Father self-report</b>																				
n	3,268	702	925	780	393	2,504	231	503	693	181	482	206	267	47	150	282	265	155	40	62
Intended	59.6%	32.7%	53.0%	50.0%	40.3%	68.7%	45.1%	58.7%	55.0%	56.0%	37.0%	33.5%	53.3%	38.7%	26.7%	26.0%	21.9%	34.7%	10.4%	10.5%
Unintended	40.4%	67.3%	47.0%	50.1%	59.7%	31.4%	54.9%	41.3%	45.0%	44.0%	63.0%	66.6%	46.7%	61.3%	73.3%	74.0%	78.1%	65.3%	89.6%	89.5%
Mistimed	20.2%	23.5%	21.0%	16.8%	34.8%	14.7%	16.9%	20.7%	11.2%	26.2%	36.1%	23.4%	18.5%	40.4%	44.3%	36.9%	29.1%	26.3%	51.2%	46.4%
Unwanted	20.3%	43.8%	26.1%	33.3%	24.9%	16.7%	38.0%	20.7%	33.9%	17.8%	26.9%	43.1%	28.2%	20.9%	29.0%	37.1%	49.1%	39.1%	38.3%	43.1%

**Table 2. Mother's accuracy in reporting father's childbearing intentions**

	Total Accurate (%)		2-level Accurate (%)			2-Level Accurate (%)					3-level Accurate (%)			3-Level Accurate (%)					
	2-level	3-level	Married	Cohabiting	Neither	Non-Hispanic White	Hispanic Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other	Married	Cohabiting	Neither	Non-Hispanic White	Hispanic Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other	
<b>Mom's report of father wantedness</b>																			
Intended	69.8%	69.8%	74.5%	59.7%	47.6%	75.3%	48.5%	65.5%	58.8%	60.2%	74.5%	59.7%	47.6%	75.3%	48.5%	65.5%	58.8%	60.2%	
Unintended	74.8%	48.3%	66.1%	77.2%	87.1%	73.8%	82.3%	69.9%	69.8%	85.9%	45.5%	47.6%	53.9%	49.5%	51.1%	42.6%	46.7%	49.9%	
Mistimed	71.3%	44.5%	62.4%	74.8%	83.5%	70.2%	76.5%	68.9%	70.2%	84.9%	41.9%	45.4%	48.4%	47.2%	38.0%	40.7%	43.8%	50.3%	
Unwanted	81.5%	55.5%	73.5%	82.5%	92.4%	82.5%	88.8%	71.7%	69.2%	87.7%	52.7%	52.6%	62.4%	55.0%	65.9%	46.1%	52.2%	49.3%	
<b>Mom's race/ethnicity</b>																			
White	74.8%	67.0%	75.6%	70.9%	75.5%	--	--	--	--	--	71.4%	55.4%	52.3%	--	--	--	--	--	
Black	65.9%	49.9%	58.8%	67.2%	70.7%	--	--	--	--	--	50.2%	49.9%	49.5%	--	--	--	--	--	
Hispanic	67.0%	57.3%	67.4%	66.3%	67.1%	--	--	--	--	--	61.5%	53.7%	50.9%	--	--	--	--	--	
Asian	62.3%	55.0%	60.4%	72.3%	72.0%	--	--	--	--	--	53.8%	55.9%	66.4%	--	--	--	--	--	
Other	71.2%	55.8%	71.7%	67.1%	79.0%	--	--	--	--	--	61.9%	44.3%	58.8%	--	--	--	--	--	
<b>Relationship type at conception</b>																			
Married	72.4%	67.5%	--	--	--	75.6%	58.8%	67.4%	60.4%	71.7%	--	--	--	71.4%	50.2%	61.5%	53.8%	61.9%	
Cohabiting	71.9%	53.4%	--	--	--	70.9%	67.2%	66.3%	72.3%	67.1%	--	--	--	55.4%	49.9%	53.7%	55.9%	44.3%	
Neither	71.6%	51.5%	--	--	--	75.5%	70.7%	67.1%	72.0%	79.0%	--	--	--	52.3%	49.5%	50.9%	66.4%	58.8%	
<b>N=</b>	6,054	6,054	4,109	1,143	802	3,263	700	921	779	391	4,109	1,143	802	3,263	700	921	779	391	