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# YOUNG BREAD WINNER FATHERS?

**Journeys  
Through  
Education,  
Employment  
and Training**

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**Following Young Fathers**  
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# YOUNG BREADWINNER FATHERS? JOURNEYS THROUGH EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

One of the pressing concerns facing young fathers is their ability to provide material and financial support for their children. For those who lack educational skills and qualifications as a spring board into employment or a career path, the challenges are all the greater.

The current UK climate of insecure youth labour markets and reduced benefit entitlements for young people serves to compound these difficulties (MacDonald and Marsh 2005; France 2008; Neale 2015).

In this briefing paper we explore the values and experiences of a sample of 31 young fathers as they seek to become young 'breadwinners' for their children. Aged between 14 and 24 at the point of entry into fatherhood, our study tracked them over a two to four year period<sup>2</sup>.

In the light of a widely reported correlation between young parenthood and social deprivation (Neale 2015), we sought to explore the factors that lead to upward or downward trajectories for these young men over time. A particular concern was the place of early parenthood in these processes, and whether it could, in any sense, be said to 'cause' social deprivation.

## FINDINGS

### THE BREADWINNER ROLE

In line with existing evidence (Miller 2011), the young fathers in this study uniformly held to the values of both 'earning' and 'caring' as core attributes of fatherhood. Indeed, the provider role was seen as a 'given': a 'taken for granted' part of their emerging adult status and identity, and one that is inextricably bound up with being 'close' to a child:

"I was only 18, so it was ... a shock, like I said, it forced me to grow up, to take responsibility ... to go and look for work. ... [A good dad is] one that listens, always there, no matter what. And teach you things ... bed-time stories ... spending time. It's not just about buying them clothes, buying them this and that. It's – it runs a lot deeper than that. It's having that bond. ... [Their mum] is ... unemployed. ... Obviously, things like new jumpers for school ... we'll go out and get them. Yeah, I think me working full time ... it can be the difference for her. ... I think it's important to provide - not just financially, but in all the other areas" (Kevin, semi-skilled, employed, aged 24, wave 1).

The young men often spoke starkly about the imperative to fulfil their

provider role:

"I want any job that's possible, cos if I didn't have money, that'd mean I'm a bad dad 'cos I'm not making a living or anything" (Jackson, low skilled, aged 16, unemployed, wave 2).

"[I'm on] benefits money - you haven't earned it, so I haven't provided. ... Getting up in [the] morning and grafting all day, and then coming home ... that's providing. I'd much rather be in a job, earning" (Jax, low skilled, aged 18, unemployed, wave 2).

"I wouldn't change Sylvie [daughter] for the world, but maybe I wish I would have waited until I had a job ... and a little bit more money. ... You need a job just to pay your bills. ... But things happen don't they?" (Andrew, low skilled, aged 16, unemployed, wave 1).

For the semi and low-skilled young men, however, employment and financial security could be remote goals. Those of school age lacked funds for basics such as milk, nappies and bus fares to visit their children. They relied heavily on their parents in the short term, saving pocket money and other handouts for essentials and,

## KEY FINDINGS

- Earning and caring are intertwined aspects of fatherhood; providing financially and materially for a child remains a strong and defining feature of young fatherhood.

- A breadwinner role can provide a source of meaning and fulfillment in young fathers' lives, an important credential and marker of their commitment to their child, and a motivation to improve their life chances; it can therefore benefit the young men, the mothers and their children.

- Whether young fathers pursue a short term strategy to earn,

or a longer term strategy to build a trade or career, in the current employment and benefits environment young breadwinning involves sustained hard work and determination, often involving a triple shift of earning, learning and caring.

- Young fathers may be constrained in pursuing a provider role by their youth and lack of education, employment and training (EET) skills and opportunities. Those from low income families may have few material or financial resources to contribute and may lack the capacity to develop a stable EET

pathway over time.

- Disadvantaged young fathers need comprehensive and sustained professional support, that acknowledges, nurtures and facilitates their efforts to to develop their EET skills and experience

- Our evidence refutes the commonly held view that early parenthood 'causes' social deprivation, showing instead that the fortunes of these young men are shaped through pre-existing socio-economic circumstances.



in some cases, resorting to risky or criminal activity to fulfil their provider role:

"It was hard at first, cos that's when you have to buy everything – a cot and clothes and all that lot. And when I were at school I were selling cigarettes ... and more [laughs wryly] and that's how I made me money to pay for everything. ... I've got basically no money. I'm trying to do good in me life and all that. It's a lot of pressure on me. ... I [can't] take the kids out, nice places. ... You want the best for your kids. You want 'em in nice clothes. ... I'm struggling to put decent food on the table. ... If you ain't got money, I mean you can love your child and that, can't you ... now't can beat that love. ... But I mean ... when it comes to feeding and stuff ... if you can't do that, then your f\*\*ked basically"  
(Callum, low skilled, aged 19, unemployed, waves 2 and 3).

Such experiences can create a disjuncture between young fathers' values and aspirations around providing, and what they can achieve in practice. This, in itself, is detrimental to their well being and their social identities and reputations.

### SKILLED, SEMI-SKILLED AND LOW-SKILLED TRAJECTORIES

The 31 young men fell into three broad groups in terms of their education, employment and training (EET) skills, qualifications and experience. These groupings are not static: over time, individuals were striving to move up a level or prevent a slippage down to the level below. Below we chart these upward and downward transitions over time. Our reporting relates to the position of the young men at the close of our fieldwork and the journeys undertaken to arrive at these positions.

#### 'SKILLED' TRAJECTORIES

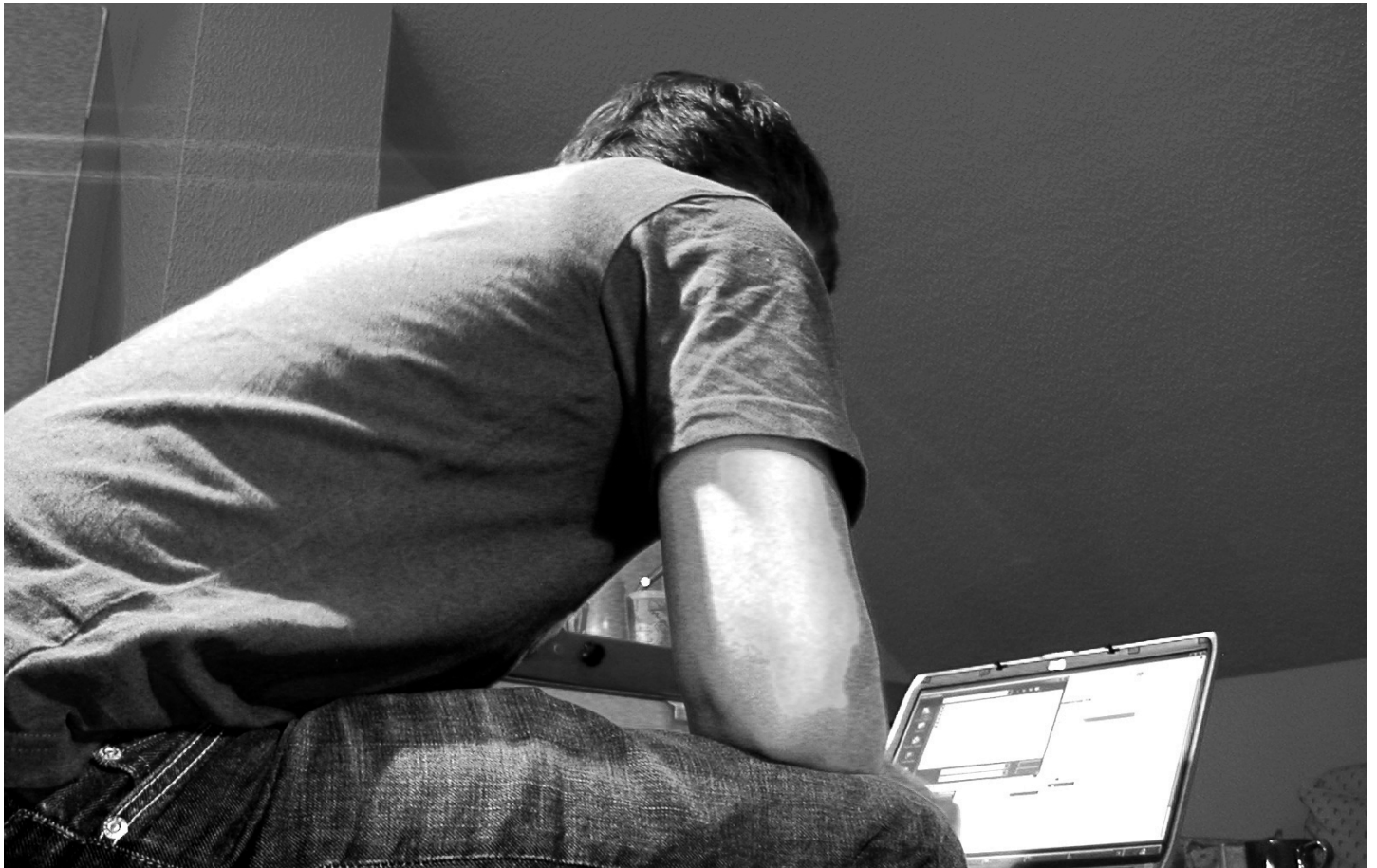
Six middle-income young men in the study were at university during the course of this study. 2 had entered parenthood in their early twenties and 3 during their mid to late teens. Ben, for example, was 18 and in his first year of university when his child was conceived. He considered giving up his degree to find work, but with parental support, decided against this. He adopted a longer term strategy to build a career, and like many of the young men, his child provided an additional, strong motivation:

"I'm really pleased I [continued] ... rather than dropping out of Uni and in a substandard job. It felt like ... you know, the most logical course of action ... and ... in line with the plan I'd had ... And then hopefully get a decent job. ... I find it ... difficult ...

because on the one hand I don't have the money to provide, but ... I really do want to be able to provide. ... But it's worth a short period of ... struggling through it for potentially quite a comfortable existence after university. ... And it would be, ultimately it would be better for [my daughter]"  
(Ben, skilled, aged 18, full time student, wave 1).

Dominic's entry into parenthood at the age of 16 disrupted his aspirations to go to university. He completed his GCSEs and started 6th form college, which he combined with part-time, semi-skilled office work to support his child. However, the 'triple shift' of earning, learning and caring eventually disrupted his studies. At the first interview he had dropped out of college and moved to full-time semi skilled work. It took Dominic four years to get back on track; by the close of the study he was combining caring with part-time work and part-time study for a degree:

"I'm not best pleased I'm in this job ... I'm purely there just to, just to take money out, cause of financial constraints. ... I have to get some sort of income when it comes to a child. ... Before this happened, you know, I'd, I'd had aspirations of what I wanted to do ... But I feel quite trapped at the moment, I'm quite aimless"  
(Dominic, semi-skilled, aged 18, full time employee, wave 2).





“Going down to part-time [work] from full time’s a massive shift. ... I’ve got a direction, it gives me motivation. ... I work evenings so I have the full days to commit to Uni. ... it’s very tiring ’cause I’m up at eight... and then it’s a case of I’m working till ten at night. ... It’s all building towards, hopefully, a career path in future. ... I’m genuinely a lot more happy”

(Dominic, skilled, aged 21, part time student/part time employee, wave 4).

### ‘SEMI-SKILLED’ TRAJECTORIES

Eleven fathers were in this group, 8 of whom were school age fathers. 6 were from middle-income and 5 from low-income families. Iman, for example, had an academic identity and aspired to a longer term strategic pathway through 6th form college and university, which would take him into the skilled category over time:

“It’s given me that drive and determination. ... Although I did have my aspirations. ... But it’s made me... you know, it’s made it concrete. ... I’ve explained the bigger picture - you know, I said to [the mum], ‘I could just get a job now, you know ... stop my studying and just, you know, any money I give it to the twins. But then what is that benefiting the kids? That’s just money for now. ... It’s not putting nothing in place for them kids”

(Iman, semi skilled, aged 16, wave 1).

Kevin, in contrast, gave up his college training at the age of 18 to find paid work and after a protracted search found steady work in a warehouse. At the time of his interviews with us he was studying for a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) in warehousing, which would enable him to apply for promotion or a higher paid position:

“... To come out of college, no real grades from school, not even completed a year of college, I was worried ... who would employ me? ... I had four cleaning jobs and I just worked and worked and worked and provided. It was hard, yeah [laughs] ... looking back maybe I could have stayed at college and got a few years under me ...”  
(Kevin, semi-skilled, aged 24, full time employee, wave 1).

Like Kevin, most of the semi-skilled group were following shorter term EET trajectories driven by an imperative to earn. They were attempting to accrue skills and qualifications through a piece meal mix of study, training, and low paid, insecure employment – often with more than one part-time job at a time. Finding a job was simply not enough; there was ongoing pressure to secure better work in a precarious training and job market.

The perseverance of these young men

through this relentless and protracted process was striking; their accounts revealed the sheer hard work needed to secure, sustain and consolidate a semi-skilled, breadwinner role.

### ‘LOW-SKILLED’ TRAJECTORIES

Fourteen young men, all from low income families, fell into this category at the close of our study. Nine were school age fathers. They had accrued negligible qualifications, skills or experience upon which to build an EET trajectory.

Their chances to compete for work in the labour market were slim and their journeys through school and post school training were chequered, with higher drop out rates for both.

In ten cases, with histories of deprived childhoods and few resources available through their families, financial circumstances were often precarious, necessitating a ‘hand to mouth’ existence. While their breadwinner aspirations remained strong, the gap between aspirations and achievements was most clearly evident within this group:

“It’s just really hard to find something permanent ... because I didn’t, I didn’t finish my studies well and I didn’t do no apprenticeship courses. ... I’ve worked ... a couple of times but it’s just because it’s always been temporary. So around these times ... they always lay me off. So it’s - I’m always looking again and looking again,



until I find something again and I just start right over again” (Marcel, low-skilled, aged 19, long term unemployed, wave 1).

This group did not progress up the skills ladder during the study; there was a greater likelihood of downward trajectories. This occurred for Andrew, one of the youngest fathers, who suffered multiple deprivations during childhood, and had struggled to engage with school and post school training.

By his last interview he had been unemployed and in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) for some years. He also disclosed his difficulties with reading and writing – problems that had shaped and constrained his

life.

Finding work was a remote dream, although he tried on a daily basis and saw this as vital to maintain his relationship with his daughter. He was demoralised because his JSA had recently been sanctioned; he had missed a letter informing him of an appointment that he needed to attend.

The increased conditionality of benefits, and the threat or application of sanctions could further destabilise these fragile lives and lead to mental and physical health problems:

“If I got a job, it would change my life. ... I wouldn't mind being a builder or something. But, like I say, I can't read any communications.

... I've handed [my CV] in at Pound Land ... the market, fish shops - as daft as it seems, everywhere. ... If I got an interview I think I'd be happy. ... I am going backwards on myself. ... I just look and look and look and never get anywhere. ... Me money's been ... stopped ... for about three week now. It's a big thing when you don't have any money. ... I can't travel to get anywhere. ... I've asked me mum but she said 'no' she hasn't got it. If I don't get any money or anything from anywhere, I'm going to be probably homeless. ... I feel like crying. It's really, really hard” (Andrew, low-skilled, aged 21, long term unemployed, wave 5).

## POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Our findings testify to the sheer hard work and commitment shown by young fathers in pursuing a provider role. For disadvantaged young fathers, the paucity of employment opportunities and benefits provision, the sanctions regime and the lack of tailored support to secure a viable EET pathway could lead to downward trajectories over time.

These findings point to the need for policy and practice responses that more effectively support the education, training and employment efforts of young fathers, including sustained support over time where needed.

Early entry into parenthood can affect, disrupt, stabilize or enhance existing life plans and life chances. But the diverging EET trajectories of

these young fathers were forged prior to the arrival of their children.

For many young fathers early entry into parenthood and the acquisition of a breadwinner role can be a source of meaning, motivation and fulfilment in life. But where young fathers are not able to realize these aspirations, it is pre-existing social disadvantage, not parenthood per se, that is the root cause (Kiernan 2002).



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## NOTES

1. The findings in this briefing paper are reported in full in Neale, B. and Davies, L. (2015 in press) 'Becoming a Young Breadwinner' The Education, Employment and Training Trajectories of Young Fathers', *Social Policy and Society* Themed section on Young Fatherhood.
2. The methodology is reported in full in Neale, B., Lau Clayton, C., Davies, L. and Ladlow, L. (2015) *Researching the Lives of Young Fathers: The Following Young Fathers Study and Dataset. Briefing paper no 8*. Available on the project website: [www.followingyoungfathers.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.followingyoungfathers.leeds.ac.uk)
3. The Following Young Fathers research team: Professor Bren Neale, Dr. Carmen Lau Clayton, Dr. Laura Davies, Linzi Ladlow, and Dr. Ruth Patrick. For further information about this briefing paper contact Professor Bren Neale (School of Sociology & Social Policy, University of Leeds, [b.neale@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:b.neale@leeds.ac.uk))
4. Acknowledgments: The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Grant no. ES/J022993/1. We are grateful to the young fathers and practitioners for their valuable contributions to this study.
5. The Following Young Fathers Briefing Paper Series: edited by Carmen Lau Clayton and Bren Neale; designed and produced by Jamie Knipe. The full series is available on the project website: [www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk)



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