

Leeds Trinity University and Daddilife – Written evidence (PSC0037)

YOUNG FATHERHOOD AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SERVICES IN ADDRESSING CHILD VULNERABILITY

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Summary

Contained in the following submission are key relevant findings from the 'New Pathways for Young Fathers' study, a Research England funded project investigating the lived experience of British young fathers in 2020 led by Leeds Trinity University and undertaken in collaboration with Daddilife and Leeds City Council. This submission outlines different examples of vulnerabilities experienced by young fathers (defined as fathering a child aged 25 or under) and shows that professional support can be extremely beneficial for young fathers and their families in addressing and overcoming different aspects of vulnerability. Despite challenges arising from past and present circumstances, young fathers are known to be highly aspirational and demonstrate great commitment to their children and their children's well-being. However, being a marginalised and forgotten group, the availability of appropriate service provision for young fathers is limited and under-funded. In response to the needs of young fathers and their children, and based on our research findings, several policy and practice recommendations have been made in order to consider their needs, support the betterment of their futures, and help avoid negative outcomes.

Findings:

1. Vulnerabilities

- Young fathers provided multiple different examples of family vulnerability and/or risks of being vulnerable themselves.
- Several young fathers (those under 18 and over) expressed that they grew up with adverse circumstances. This included parental drug and alcohol use, parents who were incarcerated, parental long-term unemployment, parental death, and experiences of social inequalities.
- A small number of young fathers described a 'chaotic' upbringing, which led to instances of social care involvement or intervention (short and long term).
- A minority of young fathers were care leavers and had experienced difficulties with foster carers and/or biological families.

- Some young fathers described living in areas of deprivation and had concerns for their child's welfare and safety (e.g., living in areas where drug problems and criminality were prevalent).
- Some young fathers and their children had limited access to digital technologies.
- For a small number of young fathers, their children were at risk of being taken into care or care proceedings were already in place.
- Some young fathers reported that they had special educational needs and/or their children had been diagnosed with additional learning needs.
- Young fathers reported poor mental or physical health.

2. Being 'Good' Fathers

"A dad should just be there regardless. A dad just needs to be there in the child's life consistently. I always tell my kids, like, when I'm not around, or if you're ever by yourself and start thinking about stuff, just know that I always love you. And if you need to ask me anything, ask me. Don't hesitate, and stuff like that. I always tell my kids from a young age, and I drill it into their heads constantly." (Tarrell, aged 30)

- Despite some of the challenging experiences encountered, young fathers were highly motivated to be 'good fathers' and they reflected upon, and learnt from, their own childhoods.
- Most fathers were influenced by their own upbringing in terms of how they approached the fatherhood role specifically. Some wanted to do things differently compared to their own fathers, whilst others wanted to be present in a way that their fathers were not for them.
- The pregnancy and birth itself were described as a significant moment for young fathers and a 'turning point'.
- Many fathers expressed that they had made positive changes to their way of life because of becoming a father. This included thinking about the future and being a good role model.
- Regardless of differences in upbringing and backgrounds, all young fathers felt that it was important to be the financial provider, and this was integral to their identity as a father.
- Beyond the breadwinner model, all young fathers also felt that it was important to 'be there' for their children. They understood the value of their role and they wanted to help with all aspects of their child's life, ranging from the day-to-day care, providing learning experiences for the children, through to keeping them safe and looking out for their long-term interests.
- The fathers described close relationships with their children and felt that their children benefited from their involvement and input.
- For young fathers who had separated from the child's mother, there were often difficulties with child contact arrangements. These fathers were actively seeking to address such issues.

- Despite different relationship statuses with the child's mother, young fathers wished to work in partnership with the mother wherever possible.

3. Difficulties Concerning Education, Employment and Training

"I think for anyone who's a young father, whether they've come out of education now, looking for work, or whether they're looking into further education, I think that support is needed. There's a lot of career support needed and the financial element. There's definitely that kind of team needed. There should be something there." (Tommy, aged 31)

- Young fathers are more likely to experience disadvantage in the labour market due to their age, inexperience, lack of qualifications and/or training.
- Many young fathers struggled to find work and the jobs which are available to them are often those associated with low wages and temporary contracts.
- Fathers exhibited strong breadwinner ideals which came from their upbringing, their own values, societal expectations, and cultural norms. However, despite the young fathers' intentions and best efforts, the ability to be the breadwinner was often met with challenges.
- Many fathers spoke about experiencing difficulties in finding work. Often due to a lack of qualifications/work experience and an increasingly competitive job market.
- Job centres were regarded as unhelpful and unreliable for different reasons.
- Agencies were often utilised by young fathers to gain short term contracts quickly. However, these roles did not provide long-term security and agency work was problematic in terms of employee rights/entitlements for those on temporary contracts.
- For *employed young fathers*, several found it difficult to balance out their work and family life, particularly if they were expected to work long hours or were asked to work nights. Some of these 'less desirable' jobs, were not acquired by choice, but were the only jobs the young fathers were able to secure.
- Some employers were deemed as unsupportive and had the same expectations of workers with children as they did of workers without children.
- Once becoming a parent, a small number of young fathers expressed a more positive view of *post-compulsory education*, in terms of career advancement and increasing earning potential.
- For those who had returned to higher education as a mature student, they felt that education allowed self-development opportunities and life-long learning which was not fully appreciated when younger.
- Young fathers described a delicate juggling act when it came to studying and caring for children, especially if part-time employment was undertaken by young men too.

- Despite the interest in returning to education for some, many young fathers did not know how to go about this or cited financial difficulties as a real or potential barrier (either in terms of course fees, and/or loss of earnings if currently working).

4. Health and Well-Being

"My brain doesn't stop. I have anxiety and depression, like, I've got severe anxiety problems, so my brain does not stop worrying about everything." (Adam, aged 26)

- Serious mental health issues were commonly cited by young fathers.
- For some, they had experienced anxieties and depression for long periods of time and in some cases, this could increase the risk of suicidal thoughts.
- All the fathers highlighted feelings of frustration, anxiety, and anger at some point in their lives - particularly when they were unable to find work, education or training routes despite their best intentions and efforts.
- Where applicable, mental health and wellbeing could be negatively affected by the worries and stresses associated with social care assessments, leading to increased family vulnerability.
- Sometimes difficulties with the mother of the child could lead to restricted access to children, which created upset and angst for young fathers.
- Young fathers who were actively seeking to address child contact issues through mediation services, solicitors, or the courts, described this as a difficult and complex process, partly due to the lack of knowledge around fathers' rights and the negative financial implications.
- Several young fathers noted the use of alcohol and drugs (past and present) and the problems with addiction, had influenced mental health problems.
- Some young fathers had no informal support networks to rely on, whilst others were hesitant to speak to friends and family due to feelings of embarrassment or they thought that people 'would not understand' their situation.
- Several young fathers spoke of personal coping strategies which they had to implement because of little support being available. The effectiveness of these strategies varied.

5. Professional Support

"I felt like the professionals were just more focused on the fact that she's pregnant, and I'm stood there in my school uniform. You know, it just made me feel a bit awkward at times. It was just a case of like they were smiling at her but then looking at me and not smiling. When they were looking at her, they were speaking to her in a comforting way and then when I tried saying something it just got brushed off. I feel like there could be more understanding." (Robert, aged 19)

- Young fathers described positive and negative experiences when interacting with professionals from different services.
- For a small number of young fathers, they received valuable professional support which they commended and, in some cases, saw as 'life changing'.
- However, for most young fathers, they felt that some professionals did not acknowledge or value their role as a father.
- Several fathers felt ignored by certain professionals and that services were too mother-centric, often at the expense of the father.
- Reaching out for support was difficult for some young men. Often embarrassment, fear of the unknown, or perceived loss of pride were cited as the main reasons for not talking to professionals or accessing help.
- The dominant image and stereotype of young men as 'feckless fathers', was a preventative barrier in seeking help for some. Furthermore, the perceived stigma of being a young father can be compounded when their child is in care and placed under supervision orders.

Policy and Practice Recommendations:

6. Policy

- Statistics on young fathers are limited. There is a need to identify and include data about young fathers when supporting young parents, so that they are not ignored or forgotten about, particularly given their vulnerable and marginalised status.
- Acknowledging the role of young fathers better and recognising the ways in which they can positively contribute to family life needs to be reflected in the language of policy and practice documents and other relevant debates. We also need to recognise the diversity that exists amongst young fathers and their circumstances.
- Many young fathers are unsure of their parenting rights and what this means in practice. Young fathers would welcome clearer advice, especially if there are problematic relationships with the mother of the child or maternal family.
- Many young fathers do not know who they can turn to in times of need in relation to professional advice or if they are eligible for support. Increasing awareness of what support is available at a national and local level would benefit many young fathers.
- Despite a number of policy measures being in place for health support services and education and employment pathways, these are not well understood by young fathers or well utilised as a result.
- Young fatherhood is often defined as under the age of 25 and dedicated support for young fathers is restricted by age as a result. Many young fathers would benefit from professional support at different stages of their lives including past their mid-twenties.

7. Practice

- Professional support can make a significant difference to the lives of young fathers and meeting the needs of vulnerable families. However, in many areas, generic and specialised provision that is targeted towards young parents or young fathers has been reduced or no longer in operation.
- Support groups which are specifically focused on young fathers can be very useful. The opportunity for young fathers to come together to connect and support each other, is considered to be extremely beneficial according to the young men.
- Young fathers can be excellent peer mentors to other young fathers.
- Counter to the 'feckless father' notion, which is often attributed to younger fathers, the young men we spoke to were highly aspirational and wanted to do their best for their children and 'be there'. Professionals need to be aware of such outlooks when supporting young fathers.
- It is important to challenge and change the negative perceptions of young fathers if we are to reach out to them effectively and provide adequate support.
- Young fathers may feel reluctant to ask for help or know how to ask for this help.
- Young fathers feel that the availability of a confidential support line would be valuable, particularly for those who are reluctant to seek out professional help in person.
- Be aware that young fathers are often under multiple strains and pressures which may make them more susceptible to mental health problems.
- Building positive relationships with young fathers, being observant and giving young men sufficient time to speak and share their experiences is important.
- Some young fathers may have limited or no contact with their children for varied reasons. Sensitivity of such issues is therefore required.
- Young fathers want support with the development of core and soft skill sets when engaging with service providers and professionals (e.g., EET pathways, budgeting, personal relationships, health, and well-being).

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