

Report No. 2

# **THEORISING THE SOCIAL 'PROBLEMS' AND SOCIAL 'ENGAGEMENT' FRAMEWORKS**

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## KEY POINTS

- Young fathers are a heterogeneous population who face a diverse set of challenges in establishing and sustaining a role as an engaged parent.
- Evidence about their parenting journeys and support needs is interpreted in different ways. Two key theoretical orientations can be found in existing research literature to explain these experiences: a *social problems framework*, which all too readily translates into a negative *social deficit perspective*; and a *social engagement framework*, that acknowledges the shifting ideological commitments of young fathers towards caring and engaged fatherhood.
- Both perspectives produce very different insights into the lives of young fathers yet have significance in influencing practice and policy responses.
- Where the *social problems* framework contributes to the wider exclusion of young fathers from service support, a *social engagement* framework might be more usefully mobilised by multi-agency professionals as a basis for a father-inclusive approach that is based on knowledge and understanding and is built on a culture of care and compassion.



# INTRODUCTION

To provide context to the Following Young Fathers Further study ([www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk)) and its findings, we provide a brief overview of existing knowledge about young fathers to date. This is based on a literature review developed for a forthcoming book: Neale, B. and Tarrant, A. (in press, 2024) *The Dynamics of Young Fatherhood: Understanding the Parenting Journeys and Support Needs of Young Fathers*, Bristol: Policy Press.

We also include in this, an overview of the key findings from the Following Young Fathers study, which was the baseline research study from which Following Young Fathers Further developed. The findings from this study confirm that it is important to both recognise and address the myriad challenges and problems faced by young fathers. By doing so, we are better equipped to create the conditions that empower young fathers and others to address and navigate their parental journeys and fulfil their expressed intentions for remaining engaged in their children's lives.

Significantly, however, it is important to recognise how knowledge about young fathers may be interpreted in different ways. Review of existing literature and evidence indicates there are two dominant theoretical frameworks that have shaped how young fathers are seen and understood by society (see Figure 2.1). The orthodox yet problematic view is premised on ideas that young fathers present a risk, that they are uninterested in their children, unwilling to engage as proactive citizens, and incapable of fulfilling their responsibilities as parents; what we refer to as the *social problems/deficit framework*. An alternative emerging narrative, the *social engagement framework*, identifies the capacity of young fathers to 'be there' for their children despite the many challenges they may navigate. It is this view that we argue is the more productive for supporting the identification and leverage of the strengths, capabilities, and distinctive experiences of young fathers and for promoting their participation in advocacy for father-inclusive practice and societies.

**FIGURE 2.1: KEY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN YOUNG FATHERHOOD RESEARCH**

**SOCIAL PROBLEMS/DEFICIT**

- Predominantly associated with the 'problem' focus, which frames responses and interpretations of teenage and young pregnancy and parenthood,
- Underscores a risk profile comprising the antecedent and longer-term factors that increase the likelihood of early parenthood and continued disadvantage,
- Contributes to and reinforces the stigmatisation of young fatherhood; sustains and sustained by stereotypes of 'feckless', absent and uncaring fathers.

**SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT**

- Recognises the challenges young fathers face as shaped and influenced by prevailing socio-economic and structural conditions,
- Develops a more nuanced perspective of young fatherhood associated with alternative theories including shifts towards engaged and involved fatherhood,
- Challenges orthodox and deficit views of young fatherhood through a focus on their capabilities and contributions to their family life.

In Report 8, we introduce a new, alternative framework, the *social participation framework*, which captures the capacity of young fathers to engage in social change and transformation through advocacy, mentorship and peer research.



# SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND DEFICIT PERSPECTIVES OF YOUNG FATHERS: THE ORTHODOX VIEW

Since the 1980s, attention to the antecedent risk factors and consequences of young fatherhood has dominated existing scholarship and knowledge about young fathers. These have come to underpin and reinforce *social problems/deficit* perspectives of young fatherhood and have since become the orthodox societal, practice and policy view. Much of the evidence base to this point has been built from systematic reviews of research on young fatherhood, with little research conducted with young fathers specifically.

Nevertheless, it has been possible to piece together an initial picture about the experiences of young men who become fathers both prior to becoming a father and beyond. A clear risk profile (Enderstein and Boonzaier, 2015) has emerged, for example, comprising key factors or antecedents in young fathers' childhood biographies that are thought to be indicative of the increased likelihood of fathering early. These include: growing up in small, fragmented family networks, frequent house moves, periods spent in care or in prison, experiences of neglect or abuse and/or street and neighbourhood violence, and parental separation and divorce (Glikman, 2004; Lemay et al. 2010; Berger and Langton, 2011; Lewin et al. 2015; Pirog et al. 2018; SmithBattle et al. 2019; Kiselica, forthcoming).

Biographies of disadvantage and complex childhood histories are often considered to extend beyond the transition to fatherhood and are therefore a common feature of the longer-term trajectories of young fathers. Becoming a father at a young age can interrupt educational pursuits, for example, with implications for longer-term career prospects. For young men who are still in education or struggling to secure employment in a context of youth labour precarity, acute financial pressures often impinge on their ability to meet the financial demands of parenting and the needs of their children. The absence of generous social security

and welfare systems, combined with youth unemployment and insufficient incomes push many young fathers to rely on their own families or the families of their co-parent for necessities including food and housing (e.g. Uengwongsapat et al, 2020). Yet dependency on parents is not always an option and where it is, may create relational challenges within and across generations, including with partners/co-parents and with parents (Neale and Lau Clayton, 2014; Neale and Tarrant, 2024).

The complexities of young fatherhood mean that young fathers often feel overwhelmed by their new responsibilities and the uncertainties associated with a lack of experience and knowledge about caring for a child. Feelings of inadequacy or lack of confidence may also be compounded by stigma and the judgments of others, who may assume them to be incapable or lacking a commitment to their parental responsibilities.

While it is important to keep these kinds of challenges in the frame, there is the dual risk here; first, that the over-emphasis on the risk factors associated with young fatherhood tips into a deficit view of young fathers that creates the impression of their invisibility or absence, and second, that a problem-based focus obscures the capabilities and contributions of young fathers. Where researchers, practitioners, the public, practitioners, and policymakers may be oriented to a social problem or social deficit understanding, they are more likely to write them off as 'feckless', irresponsible, uncaring and 'hard-to-reach'. This certainly appears to be the case in the current UK welfare and policy context, where negative pervasive assumptions about young fathers often readily translate into practices of surveillance or sidelining by practitioners in professional settings, including maternity, child, and family support services (Neale and Davies, 2015).







## SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Encouragingly, a strong counter narrative to the rather pejorative findings evidenced by the social problems framework is emerging, underpinned by more recent qualitative studies that focus on the lived experiences of young fathers. These are representative of a '*social engagement*' framework (Neale and Tarrant, 2024) that from a methodological perspective, gives weight to young fathers' own accounts of fatherhood.

This evidence confirms that like many fathers, contemporary young fathers express a distinct commitment to be there for their children (Lau Clayton, 2016), a perspective that has become more apparent in research that is based on the experience of young fathers and engages with men and masculinities theories as an alternative to the teenage pregnancy framing (e.g. Bhana and Nkani, 2014; Enderstein and Boonzaeir, 2016). Young fathers' commitments to their children and the more nuanced family engagement-based framing reflects broader patterns and cultural shifts towards engaged fatherhood (Miller, 2010); a form of nurturing, involved fatherhood that sits alongside continued commitments among men to breadwinning and economic provisioning.

Existing international scholarship about young fatherhood confirms that young fathers navigate a unique and complex set of experiences and challenges when they transition to parenthood at an early age. However, as they adjust to juggling their own identities and interests, with newly acquired caregiving responsibilities, they adapt and undergo a transformative journey that demands maturity, commitment, and adaptation.

Young fathers often adjust well to fatherhood, seeing it as an accomplishment, a source of pride and responsibility and an opportunity to give and receive love (Arai, 2009; Ayoola et al., 2010; Elkington, 2017; SmithBattle et al., 2019). Parenting can also be an important impetus for young men to seek to secure education, training, and employment (Duncan, 2007) and to re-establish life goals in an otherwise disrupted life course (see also Sriyasak et al., 2016; Uengwongsapat et al., 2020). Others have described the transition to fatherhood as a reason to reject earlier riskier behaviours in favour of deriving new meaning and purpose through fatherhood (Buston et al. 2012). In sum, young fatherhood is often an opportunity for young men, rather than a catastrophe (Duncan, 2007).





In presenting a more nuanced and balanced view, the social engagement perspective is built on a body of evidence that confirms that young fathers matter and they respond when supported in their efforts as parents and included as beneficiaries of services (Neale and Davies, 2015ab; Neale, 2016).

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### ***Following Young Fathers: a dynamic view of young fathers' social engagement***

Many of these findings accord with those of the Following Young Fathers study ([www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk)), our baseline study. Using qualitative longitudinal methods, Following Young Fathers (FYF) revealed a great deal of dynamism and diversity across the parenting journeys of young fathers and in relation to their personal and familial circumstances. The study also develops a strong counter narrative to the social problems/deficit perspective, by exploring the complexities and challenges young fathers navigate and most often overcome, in context of the wider social, practice and policy systems through which they invest in their responsibilities as parents.

The findings highlight the importance of the character and quality of their interpersonal relationships, and family practices with children, co-partners, and wider family members. Where interpersonal relationships with the mothers of their children and wider family members are positive and supportive, young fathers are more likely to sustain their relationships with their children over time. Where relationships are, or become, more conflictual, young fathers experience a heightened risk of exclusion from family and from their engagements with their children.

These micro-sphere dynamics occur in context of wider structural opportunities and constraints, or an exosystem (e.g. Kiselica and Deslaurier, 2022), such that the way they navigate their education, employment and training trajectories, housing provision and engagements with services are all influenced by, and influence, their parenting status and relationships. These represent the 'shaky ground' (SmithBattle et al. 2019) on which young fathers navigate their parenting journeys. Furthermore, public policy contexts do little to ameliorate the challenges of establishing a family at a young age (Kiselica and Kiselica, 2014).



The social engagement framework incorporates and balances these structural elements alongside evidence from young fathers themselves that they recognise the stigma they face and yet nevertheless seek to 'be there' for their children as engaged fathers even through times of significant hardship and challenge (see Neale and Tarrant, 2024; Davies, 2016). Indeed, we have certainly observed this during the global COVID-19 pandemic and beyond (Tarrant et al. 2022).

Not only did FYF uncover new insights about the otherwise invisible, 'hidden' lives of these young men, but it also addressed an observed lack of engagement among young fathers with professional support services. The study demonstrates that young fathers experience systematic exclusion in and from support contexts and are often marginalised in professional settings, despite expressing a clear desire to be treated and seen as beneficiaries of services (Davies, 2016).

Effective engagement with young fathers nationally is currently siloed and predominantly the preserve of specialist services, within the broader support landscape (Tarrant and Neale, 2017). While these services are few and far between, they are producing valuable evidence about 'what works, what matters and how things can work better' (Neale, 2021ab) across the wider welfare and support ecosystem in advocating for father-inclusive practice.

It is these findings that prompted the longer-term vision of the Following Young Fathers Further (FYFF) study, its methodological design, and the innovations it has engendered. Indeed, we have taken the theme of father-inclusion forwards through the FYFF study, to increase the engagement of fathers in the research process, to extend knowledge and understanding of their lives and support needs, and to innovate in this space, with and for young fathers.

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## CONCLUSION

For the purposes of this report, we have outlined two major theoretical frameworks developed by Neale and Tarrant (2024), which explain how societal views about young fathers have been formulated and might be reframed and considered. Both the social problem/deficit and engagement perspectives produce very different insights into the lives of young fathers yet have significance in influencing practice and policy responses. The alternative, social engagement understanding of young fathers, which holds in balance both the joys and challenges of young fatherhood oppose the conventional 'wisdoms' about young fathers that have fed into policy and public perceptions (Neale and Tarrant, 2024). It is possible that these have become so entrenched that challenging the orthodoxy may be deemed too difficult and risky. However, the empirically driven processes that we have refined through the Following Young Fathers Further research programme to ensure the promotion and advocacy of father-inclusion suggest otherwise (Tarrant, 2023); that through mechanisms of participation, co-production and investments in the capabilities and strengths of young fathers, societies are less likely to turn their backs and counter the inherent risk of 'failing our fathers' (Mincy et al. 2015).

Details of the outputs from the Following Young Fathers study and links to briefing papers and publications are available on the study website ([www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk)). For a more cohesive account of these findings and the dynamics and complexities of young fathers' parenting journeys and support needs, we encourage you to access and cite, The Dynamics of Young Fatherhood text when published in 2024.









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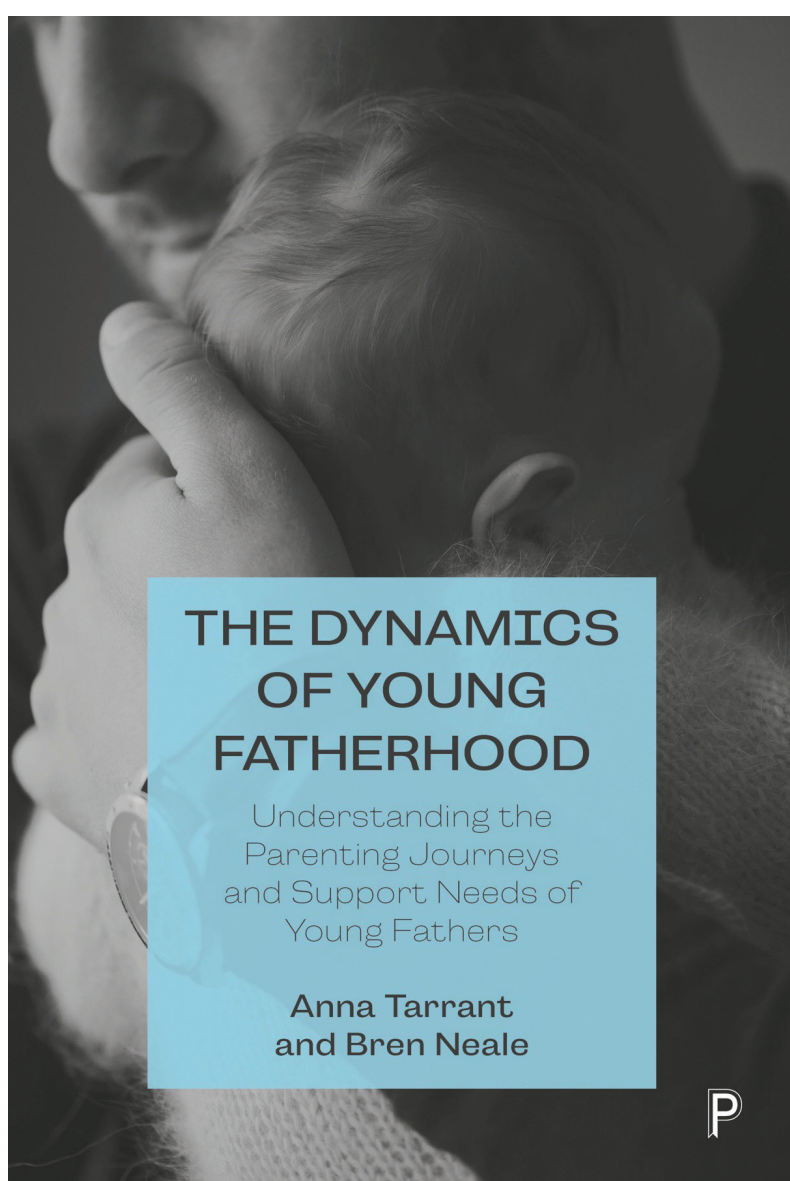
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