DURHAM - Kathryn Edin has spent her career studying single mothers, but now she is committed to telling the other side of the story.

"Social science has only told half the story," said Edin, a professor of public policy and management at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. "All of our study has focused on single moms with no mention of single fathers except when it comes to getting child support from them."

Edin and her colleagues conducted interviews of 165 non-custodial black, white and Hispanic fathers who conceived a child out of wedlock in nine low-income neighborhoods in Camden, Pa. She revealed their study results Jan. 14 to a crowd of scholars and community leaders packed into the Rhodes conference room in the Terry Institute of Public Policy on Duke's West Campus.

Camden is "one of America's poorest cities" and "arguably one of the most violent," she said, which propelled more men into having babies out of wedlock. She said crime became so bad at one point that "people were saying to put down the guns and pick up the babies."

A multiracial group conducted interviews for the study, along with Edin who moved into a Camden neighborhood to get firsthand knowledge of the area.


Willie Ratchford, director of a community relations committee, traveled from Charlotte with several other committee members to hear Edin's speech. "We came here to get as much information as we can to bring back to our community," he said.

The statistics paint a grim picture. Currently, about 70 percent of black babies are born out of wedlock compared to 33 percent nationally. In 2000 the number of black families headed by single parents was more than twice the percentage for white families and 75 percent higher than Hispanic families. Still, the rise in black single fathers has been smaller among blacks than whites and Hispanics.

"We're often afraid to talk about it," Ratchford said. "Whites won't talk about it because of fear of being perceived as racist. Blacks won't talk about it because of the 'dirty laundry syndrome.' It is what it is, and we need to talk about it to begin to fix it."

In her study, Edin found that while some black fathers just want to prove their manhood or be a sperm donor, that is not the case for the majority. "There are fathers who fit the stereotype, but, for the most part, fathers eagerly embrace it," she said.
She used a line from one of the participants interviewed in the study, Andre Green, who said that while he was afraid to share his enthusiasm, he was "happy on the inside" to become a father, as an example of how many of the fathers felt. She added that they like Green saw having a baby as "an unadulterated good" despite being young (he was only in high school), and having an unstable relationship with the mother. Green said in the interview: "People would say it was a mistake, but it was no mistake to me."

However, Edin found that this involvement tends to fade over time. "It's not that fathers don't care, it's about what gets in the way," she said. "If having a child is one of the only sources of meaning and identity for disadvantaged youth in the transition to adulthood, they'll have children well before they are economically prepared to support them. And in the context of fragile romantic relationships, this almost dooms them to fail."


Although Edin focused on Philadelphia for the discussion, the three scholars also conducted studies in Charleston, S.C., and Austin and San Antonio, Texas. They found that only 20 percent of the fathers were still involved by the time the child reached age 15.

"When the father is involved, it helps the child out and it's good for the family," said Barbara Turrentine-Bowe, a parent educator with the Alamance Partnership for Children based in Burlington. "I'm glad to see that our society is beginning to realize that fathers count too."

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