

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Why Parents Establish Paternity: A Study of Unmarried Parents

Children born to unmarried parents do not have a legal father until their father establishes paternity, a process completed by most families in the hospital at the time of the child's birth. To better understand the factors influencing parents' paternity establishment decisions, CFRP collected survey data from 800 unmarried Texas mothers who had recently given birth. Results show that fathers' absence from the birth, lack of understanding about the legal benefits of paternity establishment, and doubts about the father's paternity all play a role in the failure to establish paternity. Those who do establish paternity cite both emotional and legal reasons, and are more likely to have learned about the process from medical professionals than from family or friends. These findings suggest that greater educational outreach during the prenatal period and strengthened training for birth registrars—the staff responsible for administering the paternity establishment process—may lead to higher and more accurate rates of in-hospital paternity establishment.

Voluntarily establishing paternity is one of the first opportunities for an unmarried father to demonstrate his commitment to his child. Not only does establishing paternity affirm a father's legal rights and responsibilities, but research links paternity establishment to higher levels of subsequent paternal involvement and support, as well as a host of positive child outcomes. Today, most unmarried fathers voluntarily establish paternity in the hospital when their child is born. In Texas, more than 70 percent of unmarried parents establish paternity by signing an Acknowledgment of Paternity (AOP) form in the hospital. Although voluntary paternity establishment rates have increased

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substantially in the past several decades as federal and state laws have worked to simplify the process, there is little research to help policymakers and practitioners understand why some parents choose to establish paternity whereas other parents do not. A better understanding of the reasoning behind a parents' paternity decisions can help inform policymaking around educational outreach, training, and the broader paternity establishment process.

To address these questions, CFRP collected survey data from over 800 unmarried Texas mothers who recently gave birth. Ideally, data from fathers would also inform this research brief, however too few fathers, particularly those who did not establish paternity, participated in the survey to provide valid information. Survey results indicate that overall, most parents sign the AOP in order to include the father's name on the birth certificate and ensure the child has a legal father. Parents who are living together are more likely to cite personal or emotional reasons for establishing paternity, whereas parents in no relationship are more apt to establish paternity out of concern for public benefits or child support. In the majority of the cases in which fathers do *not* establish paternity in the hospital, it is usually because the father "missed" the opportunity and was absent at the time birth registrars presented the AOP.

CFRP collected survey data from over 800 Texas mothers who recently gave birth outside of marriage.

Though many parents learn about paternity establishment from medical personnel during the pregnancy, a significant portion learn about paternity establishment for the first time only after they arrive at the hospital for the birth. For these parents, the birth registrar plays a crucial role, providing the first, and sometimes only, information about paternity establishment. Survey results indicate that parents who fail to sign the AOP are significantly more likely to feel their experience with the birth registrar was confusing and unhelpful than parents who sign the AOP. Policy efforts to strengthen training for birth registrars and increase educational outreach during the prenatal period may improve parents' experiences and enhance the efficacy of the paternity establishment process.

Benefits of Paternity Establishment

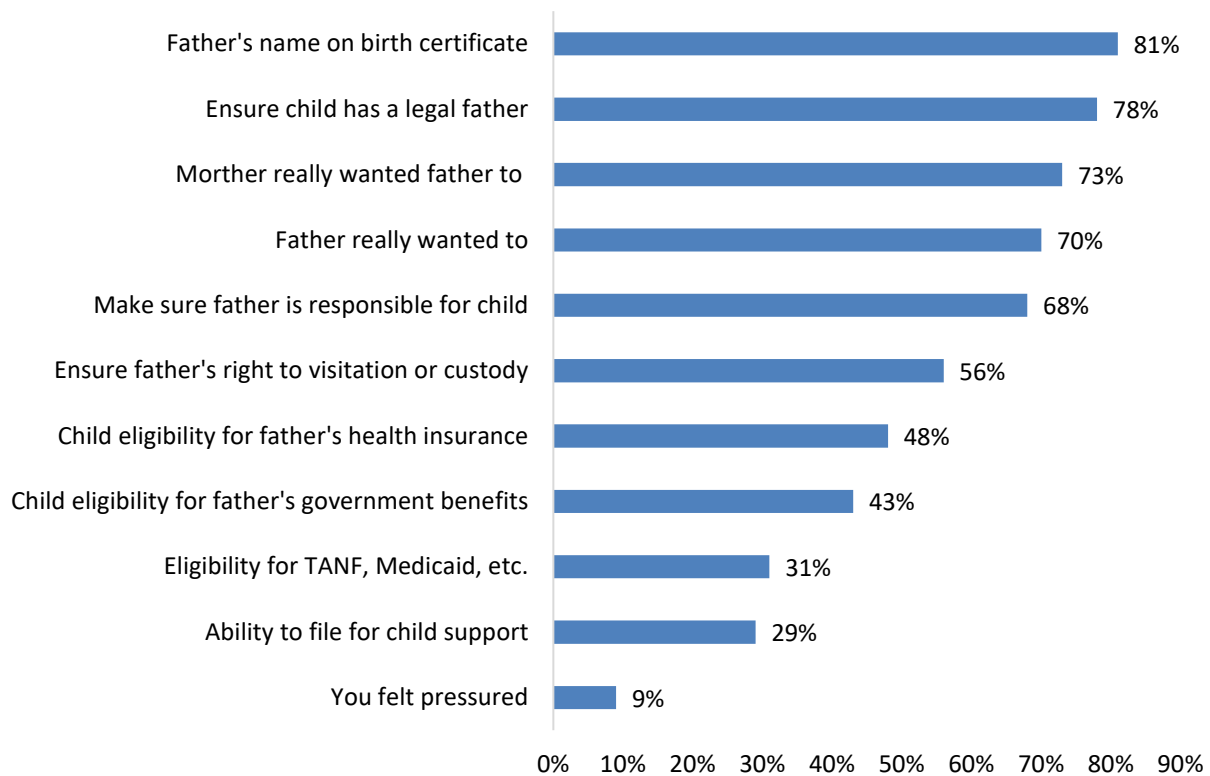
For many parents, establishing paternity is a deeply symbolic act, affirming the connection between father and child. For others, establishing paternity may be a legal decision, carrying important benefits and protections for the family. Several notable benefits of establishing paternity include:

- The right to include the fathers name on the birth certificate.
- Ensuring a child's eligibility for public and private benefits through the father, including health insurance, life insurance, social security, veteran's benefits, and inheritance.
- Allowing children access to the father's genetic history.
- Ensuring the ability to file for child support or establish visitation orders.

Mothers' Reasons for Establishing Paternity

When asked to select the reasons that motivated them to establish paternity, mothers were most likely to cite having the father's name on the birth certificate, followed closely by ensuring the child has a legal father (see Figure 1). Nearly as many mothers indicated that they or the father "really wanted" to establish paternity. Mothers were less likely to cite legal reasons for signing the AOP, such as visitation or custody rights, eligibility for public benefits, or the ability to file for child support; however, these reasons still motivate roughly 30 to 50 percent of paternity establishment decisions.

Figure 1: Mothers' Motivations for Establishing Paternity



Source: PES Mothers at 3 months, weighted

Note: Percentages add to over 100% due to respondents' ability to select more than one reason.

Additional investigation into the motivations for paternity establishment reveals that mothers' reasons for signing the AOP differ based on the status of the parental relationship.

- Mothers who are living with or dating the father are significantly more likely to cite symbolic and personal reasons for signing the AOP (i.e. having the father's name on the birth certificate or because the father "really wanted to") than mothers who have no relationship with the father.

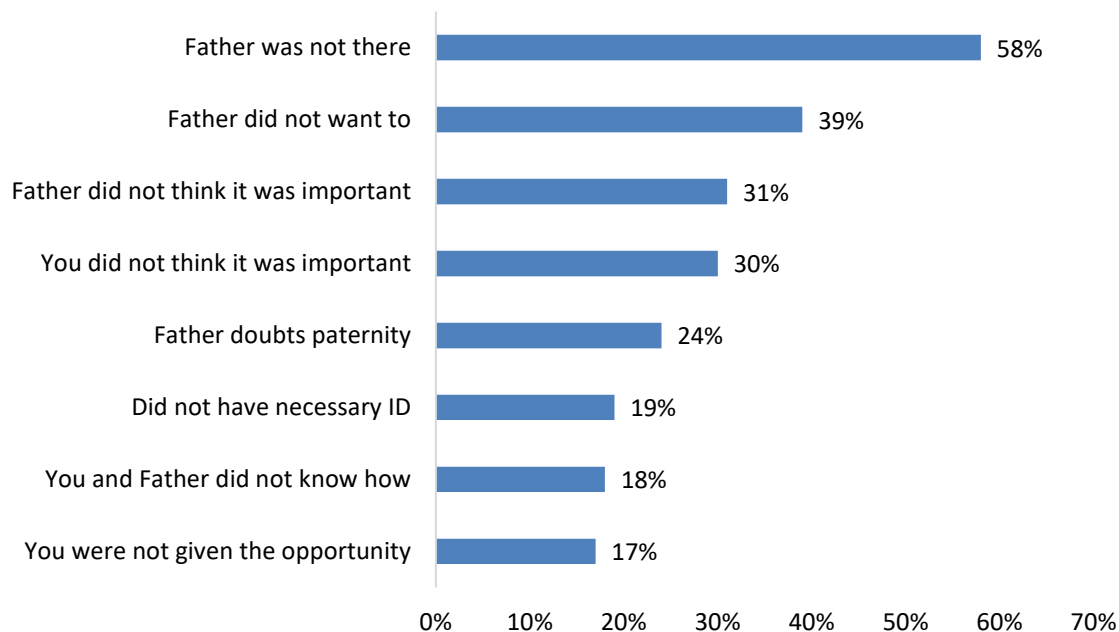
- Mothers who are dating the father are more likely to cite reasons that stress the father’s responsibility and connection to the child (i.e. ensuring legal fatherhood and a father’s right to visitation and custody) than mothers who are cohabiting or who have no relationship with the father.
- Mothers who have no relationship with the father are far more likely to cite legal reasons for signing the AOP (i.e. eligibility for TANF and Medicaid or the ability to file for child support) than mothers who are living with or dating the father.

Parents in strong relationships are more likely to establish paternity for emotional or symbolic reasons, while those in poor relationships often do so for legal reasons.

Mothers’ Reasons for NOT Establishing Paternity

As illustrated in Figure 2, nearly 6 in 10 mothers reported that they did not establish paternity because the father was not present when birth registrars offered them the opportunity. Importantly, fathers in no relationship with the mother are generally absent from the birth altogether, whereas fathers dating or living with the mother are typically present for the child’s birth, but miss their opportunity to connect with the birth registrar and sign the AOP. Roughly 4 in 10 mothers indicated that they did not sign the AOP because the father did not want to establish paternity, and another third of mothers indicated that either they or the father did not feel it was important.

Figure 2: Mothers’ Motivations for Not Establishing Paternity



Source: PES Mothers at 3 months, weighted

Note: Percentages add to over 100% due to respondents’ ability to select more than one reason.

Further examination reveals that parents in different relationship types often cite different reasons for *not* establishing paternity.

- Two-thirds of fathers in no relationship with the mother did not attend the birth, compared with 30 percent of dating fathers, and just 5 percent of those living with the mother.
- Mothers who are living with or dating the father are relatively more likely to cite logistical reasons for not signing the AOP (i.e. father was not there, lack of ID, did not know how, parents were not given opportunity) than mothers who have no relationship with the father.
- Mothers who have no relationship with the father are more likely to report that the father did not want to establish paternity or did not think it was important, than mothers who are living with or dating the father.
- Mothers who have no relationship with the father are more likely to doubt the paternity of the child, or report that the father doubts paternity, than mothers who are living with or dating the father.

In most cases where paternity was not established, the father was not present at the hospital to sign the AOP.

How Mothers Learned About Paternity Establishment

Mothers reported learning about paternity establishment during pregnancy primarily from medical personnel, however many did not receive information about paternity establishment until shortly after giving birth.

- Nearly half of mothers did not know prior to giving birth that the father had to establish paternity to become a legal parent of the child.
- Mothers who signed the AOP are relatively more likely to have learned about paternity establishment from medical personnel, whereas mothers who did not sign the AOP are relatively more likely to have learned about paternity establishment from friends or family.

When asked where they would like to learn about paternity establishment, most mothers listed medical personnel such as doctors or nurses. Mothers also commonly cited prenatal check-ups and classes as preferred sources for learning about paternity establishment.

Birth Registrars May Influence Rate of AOP Signing

For parents who are unfamiliar with paternity establishment prior to the birth of their child, the birth registrar plays a crucial role in providing information about the AOP process. Though the vast majority of mothers report a positive experience with the birth registrar, some mothers felt confused and unassisted by the interaction.

Mothers who did not sign the AOP are especially likely to express feelings of discontent with the birth registrar's ability to help them through the AOP process.

Compared to mothers who signed the AOP:

- Mothers who did not sign the AOP were *more than five times as likely* to say the birth registrar was not able to help them complete the AOP forms.
- Mothers who did not sign the AOP were *more than twice as likely* to say the birth registrar did not tell them that they could request a DNA test, did not spend enough time explaining and answering questions, and/or did not help them understand the AOP process.

A poor experience with the birth registrar can mean the difference between signing the AOP and not.

Conclusion

Paternity establishment affirms the legal and symbolic connection between a father and his child. For most parents, and especially those in good relationships, emotional and symbolic reasons appear to motivate the signing of the AOP. These parents want to establish paternity to include the father's name on the birth certificate because it feels important to them, suggesting the act of signing is more about what it *means* than what it *does*. In contrast, parents in strained relationships often cite legal reasons for signing the AOP, such as the ability to file for child support or access public assistance.

Interestingly, in the majority of the cases in which parents did *not* establish paternity it was not necessarily because one of the parents did not want to establish paternity or did not think it was important; rather it was that the father "missed" the opportunity by being absent from the birth. Most fathers who are dating or living with the mother attend the birth of their child; for the few who are not present during the birth registrar's visit, addressing logistical barriers and providing information on alternate ways to establish paternity may increase rates of AOP signing among fathers in this group. For fathers in no relationship with the mother, absence from the birth is common and may not be the only reason for non-signing.

From a policy perspective, it is also concerning that roughly half of parents were not aware of in-hospital paternity establishment prior to the birth. Many parents learn about paternity establishment for the first time in the delivery room, leaving the task of explaining the AOP to the birth registrar alone. For some parents, a poor experience with the birth registrar may mean the difference between signing the AOP and not. Training for birth registrars should stress the importance of explaining the AOP and its implications in plain language. In addition, increased outreach during the prenatal period—especially through prenatal checkups, birthing classes, and hospital maternity tours—could help inform parents about paternity establishment prior to arriving in the delivery room.

About CFRP's Paternity Studies

Paternity Establishment Study (PES) During a two-month period beginning in April 2013, CFRP conducted a longitudinal birth cohort study of approximately 800 mothers and 300 fathers in Texas who had a nonmarital birth in January 2013. CFRP developed the PES study to understand who establishes paternity and why, and how paternity establishment is associated with parental relationship quality and a father's involvement and support of his children.

Checking-in with AOP Signers (CAS) During a three-month period beginning in January 2013, CFRP collected information from approximately 600 mothers and 100 fathers in Texas who had a child in June 2009 and signed the in-hospital Acknowledgement of Paternity (AOP). CFRP developed the CAS study to understand how AOP signing is associated with parental relationship quality, father involvement, and father support three years after birth.

This research brief is part of a series exploring the dynamics of nonmarital parenting. For other briefs in this series, as well as our full report on these topics, please visit <http://childandfamilyresearch.utexas.edu>.

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.