Do In-Hospital Paternity Programs Reach Future IV-D Clients?

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In-hospital paternity programs have been filed for more than 172,000 non-marital children—just about two of every three children born outside of marriage in Maryland.

Studies comparing the characteristics of paternity acknowledgment signers and non-signers have generally shown that an affidavit is more likely to be completed if the child’s mother or father is Caucasian, older, has at least a high school education, and is employed (Mincy, et al., 2005; Ovwigho, Srivastava, & Born, 2002; Pearson & Thoennes, 1995; Turner, 2001). In-hospital paternity acknowledgments are less likely to be signed if mothers or fathers have children by other partners, the father has been incarcerated, or the mother receives TANF benefits (Mincy et al., 2005).

These data raise the possibility that in-hospital paternity acknowledgment programs may be more effective at reaching certain segments of the non-marital population. Specifically, it appears from available data that children with a paternity acknowledgment may be less likely to become known to public agencies, such as child support, cash assistance or other forms of income support.

Maryland’s Paternity Acknowledgment Study

This study uses data on 16,473 children born outside of marriage in Maryland in calendar year 2000 and for whom a valid in-hospital voluntary paternity acknowledgment form was filed with the Division of Vital Records.
With information on these youngsters as our starting point, data from other computerized management information systems was examined to address two critical questions:

1. How many children for whom a paternity acknowledgment is completed become known to the public child support system within five years of birth?
2. How many children for whom a paternity acknowledgment is completed become known to public assistance programs within five years of birth?

In order to answer these questions, it was first necessary to determine if a child in the paternity acknowledgment sample was known to the overall Department of Human Resources (DHR) information management system. The paternity affidavit forms from which the sample was identified contain the full name and date of birth for each child. This information was matched to the same fields in DHR’s information system. Because this first round of matching would miss any children for whom there was a slightly different name spelling or a date of birth data entry error in either the affidavit database or the DHR system “partial matches” of the remaining cases were examined individually to determine if it was the correct study child. Finally, manual searches using both the child’s and the mother’s information were conducted for all remaining children. Through this multi-step matching process, more than eight of every ten (86.7%) children in the acknowledgment sample were found in the DHR system.

Findings

**How many children become known to the public child support system?**

Comparing information for children in the paternity acknowledgment sample with data from Maryland’s child support enforcement information system, we find that, within five years of birth, over one-half of the sample (56.5%) became known to the public child support system. For most children, entrance into the public child support system occurs early in life. One-third (33.4%) of all children with affidavits and three-fifths (59.2%) of those who eventually become known to child support enter the system before their first birthday. Eight out of ten children (80.7%) who became known to the child support system in their first five years of life entered the caseload before their second birthday.

These findings confirm that there is significant overlap between the population of non-marital children affected by the paternity acknowledgment program and the population served by Maryland’s public child support program. In addition, our data on the timing of child support entries indicate that most children become known to child support shortly after birth. For these children in particular, child support agencies may be able to effectively leverage information from the paternity acknowledgment form to establish a child support order and to engage the non-custodial parent in supporting his child.

**How many children become known to the welfare system within five years of birth?**

Our second research question concerns the extent to which children born outside of marriage and for whom a paternity acknowledgment form is completed enter the public welfare system within five years of birth. We consider whether children have ever been included in an application for Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA, Maryland’s TANF program), Food Stamps (FS), Medical Assistance (MA), or the Maryland’s Children’s Health Insurance (M-CHIP) programs. We also examine if they were determined eligible for these programs.

Figure 1 displays the results of our analyses. Consistent with earlier research, we find that children born outside of marriage, even those whose paternity is acknowledged, have a relatively high rate of entry into the welfare system. We find that 78.8% of the children in our sample become known to at least one public welfare program within five years of their birth. Specifically, one in four children in the paternity affidavit sample becomes known to the TCA program within five years of birth (24.3%). For other programs, the rate of entry is even higher—38.2% enter some form of Medical Assistance, 44.8% enter Food Stamps and seven out of ten children...
(70%) are part of an M-CHIP application. The majority of children become known to welfare programs quite early in their lives. Three-fifths (62%) of those who become known to the Food Stamp and Medical Assistance programs and two-thirds of those who become known to the TCA program enter prior to their first birthday. Early entries into the M-CHIP program are even more common. The majority of M-CHIP applications occur within one month of birth, with 84.4% of children entering before the end of their first year of life.

Figure 1 also shows that the majority of children for which application to public programs are made are found eligible: TCA 23.9% of all children; 32.4% Medical Assistance; 44.8% Food Stamps; and 62.8% M-CHIP. The vast majority of youngsters for which application is made are eventually apply are found eligible within their first year of life, with more than half of the children entering one of these programs between four and six months after their birth.

In addition to finding substantial overlap between non-marital children with a paternity acknowledgment and the public child support program, the findings of research question two indicate that during their first five years of life, almost eight out of ten children with a paternity acknowledgement will become known to at least one public welfare program. Also similar to the findings of research question one, the majority of children will enter these programs within six months of their birth.

**Conclusions**

This study has explored the critical topic of paternity establishment for children born outside of marriage. That more than half of children for whom a paternity affidavit is completed become known to the child support system within five years of birth suggests the paternity acknowledgment program is reaching at least a significant minority of the child support program’s “at risk” population.

Consistent with earlier research, we find that children born outside of marriage, even those whose paternity is acknowledged, have a fairly high rate of entry into the welfare system. Thus, as a group, children born outside of marriage remain at high risk for poverty and, further, a significant number of them will have application made for and be found eligible for some type of means-tested benefits within their first year of life. Having the father complete an in-hospital voluntary paternity acknowledgment and having the child support agency aware that the affidavit has been signed is especially critical for these children’s economic well-being, particularly in terms of potential child support receipt.

Without question, however, these findings also make it clear that voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs are not only relevant to the state’s child support program, but also to its cash assistance, Food Stamp, Medical Assistance and Children’s Health Insurance program. Study results suggest that cross-program discussions of the paternity program could be beneficial in understanding potential interactions and identifying steps that could be taken to better promote and utilize the paternity program within each respective program.

Taken as a whole, the results of this study indicate that the paternity acknowledgment program is reaching a significant proportion of the population at risk of coming into contact with the public welfare and child support systems. Prompt access to and action on in-hospital paternity acknowledgments by child support staff is potentially one of the most cost-effective program enhancement strategies available in these fiscally difficult times (Crowley, 2001). To the extent that early paternity establishment leads to earlier child support orders and payments, the fiscal impact of a well-run paternity acknowledgment program could extend to other programs as well as benefiting the children whom child support agencies serve.

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**References**


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(Footnotes)

1States may elect a IV-D standard, whereby paternity must be established for 90% of all children in the child support caseload, or the universal standard whereby paternity must be established for 90% of all non-marital children born in the previous year.