

THE VOLUNTARY PATERNITY ACKNOWLEDGMENT PROGRAM: TRENDS OVER TIME

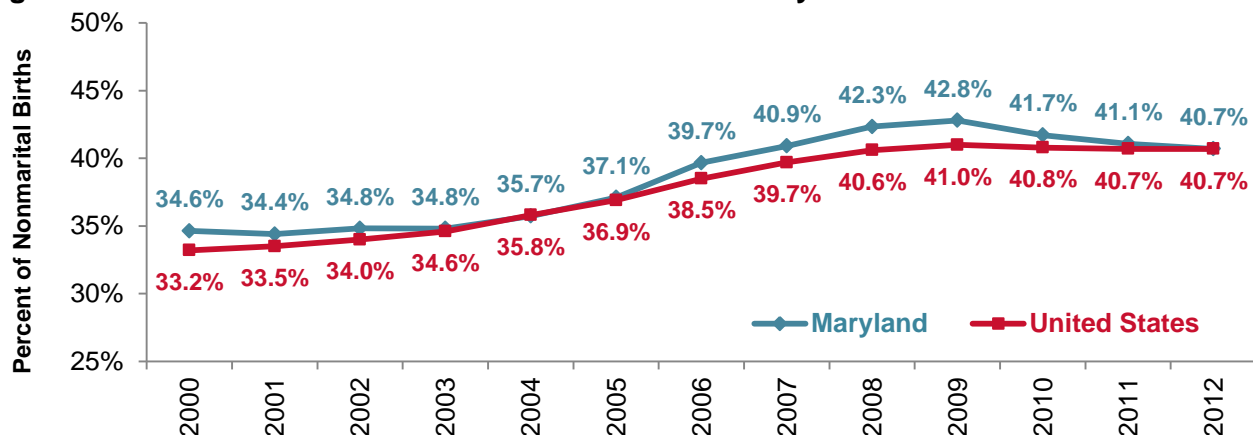
Lauren A. Hall & Letitia Logan Passarella

Paternity establishment, the legal determination of fatherhood, was one area of emphasis for key legislation during the early 1990s.¹ This was a response to public policy and public health concerns about the rising number of single-parent households (Ventura, 2009). These concerns were well founded, given that single-parent families experience higher poverty rates and that the economic security of children is a primary concern for states (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). In 1990, the nonmarital birth rate was 44 per 1,000 women and remained relatively stable through the end of the decade (Ventura, Curtin, & Abma, 2012). During the 2000s, however, the nonmarital birthrate rose substantially, reaching a peak of 52 per 1,000 women in 2007.

As shown in Figure 1, there was a national increase in nonmarital births at the beginning of the decade through 2009. Since 2009, the national nonmarital birthrate has declined slightly. Maryland experienced a similar pattern of nonmarital births, beginning in 2000 with nonmarital births representing 34.6% of all births. The percent of nonmarital births increased each year thereafter, surpassing the national percentage in 2006. Nonmarital births in Maryland reached a high of 42.8% in 2009. Mirroring national trends, Maryland has experienced recent, though modest, declines in the nonmarital birthrate over the past few years and converged with the national percentage of about 41% in 2012.

¹ The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 (OBRA, P.L. 103-66) required that states establish procedures for unmarried fathers to voluntarily acknowledge paternity. Following this mandate, the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) required states to meet a 90% threshold for paternity establishment.

Figure 1. Percent of Nonmarital Births for the U.S. and Maryland: 2000 to 2012



Note: Maryland data retrieved from Maryland's Vital Statistics reports: <http://dhmh.maryland.gov/vsa/SitePages/reports.aspx>. U.S. data retrieved from the National Center for Health Statistics' births report: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr62/nvsr62_01.pdf & http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr63/nvsr63_02.pdf.

Considering the rise in nonmarital births, public policy encouraging paternity establishment appeared necessary. Not only is paternity establishment the right of children born to unmarried parents, but it is also beneficial to the child in many ways. For example, a child may qualify for certain benefits such as Social Security or veterans' benefits awarded to the father. Furthermore, paternity establishment is a condition of child support receipt, which is an important potential source of income for families, especially poor families (Sorensen, 2010). If paternity is established, the child is more likely to receive child support through the public child support system, should the need ever arise (Mincy, Garfinkel, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005).

Among children born to unmarried parents, paternity is most often established through two main programs: 1) a voluntary paternity acknowledgment program, or 2) the local child support enforcement agency. Maryland, through a long-standing partnership with the Child Support Enforcement Administration, Department of Human Resources, has collected data on in-hospital voluntary paternity acknowledgements since October 1994 under the Voluntary Acknowledgment of Paternity Program (VAPP). Since 2000, acknowledgements via an affidavit of parentage have been filed for more than 250,000 children born to unmarried parents in Maryland, with an average of about 19,700 acknowledgments signed on an annual basis.

Previous research examining Maryland's in-hospital paternity acknowledgment program found that in 2000, two-thirds of nonmarital births resulted in a paternity acknowledgment (Ovwigbo, Born, & Srivastava, 2002). One-third of children with affidavits of parentage during this year had a public child support case within one year of their birth (Ovwigbo, Head, & Born, 2006). Considering this

finding, the importance of such a program is clear, as it ensures that children born to unmarried parents are given the opportunity to be supported by both parents.

Methodology

Previous research on Maryland's VAPP program focused on a single year (Ovwigbo et al. 2002; Ovwigbo et al. 2006). Trends in nonmarital birthrates over the last decade, however, warrant further analysis of the program to document any trends. Utilizing 12 years of data (2000-2012), this research brief explores the following questions:

- 1) How many children had paternity established through Maryland's in-hospital paternity acknowledgment program over time?
- 2) Have the characteristics of unmarried parents participating in the program changed over time?
- 3) How many of these children become known to the public child support system, and has this changed over time?

This study utilizes the universe of Maryland in-hospital paternity acknowledgments signed for children born to unmarried parents from calendar year 2000 through 2012. There were a total of 256,572 in-hospital paternity acknowledgements signed over this 12-year period. Only paternity acknowledgements for children born between 2000 and 2007 (n=148,767) were used to answer the questions about how many children became known to child support. The sample was limited to provide all cases with at least five years of follow-up data, during which they could establish a child support case.

Administrative data on paternity acknowledgments were obtained from the VAPP affidavit database maintained by the Family Welfare Research and Training Group

at the University of Maryland, School of Social Work. For child support analyses, administrative data were obtained from the Child Support Enforcement System (CSES). CSES contains detailed child support data for the state, including identifying information and demographic data for children, noncustodial parents, and custodial parents receiving services from the public child support agency.

Paternity Acknowledgements

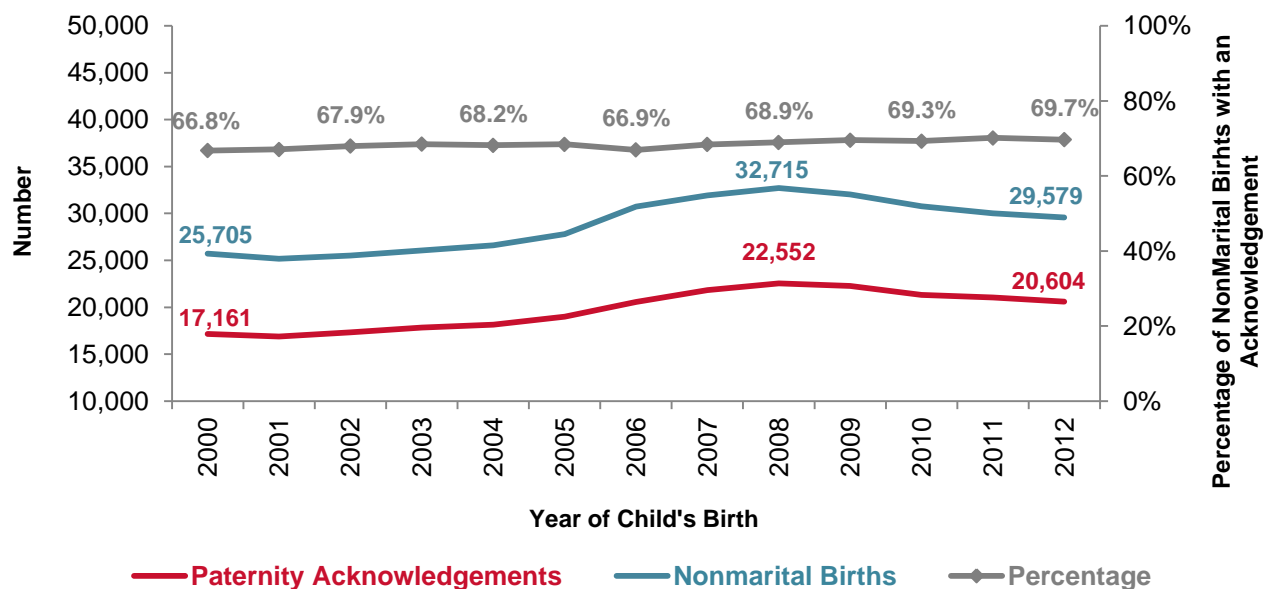
As shown in Figure 1, the percent of nonmarital births in Maryland increased in the early and mid-2000s, eventually reached a plateau, and then declined slightly. Figure 2 presents the number of in-hospital paternity acknowledgements signed between 2000 and 2012. For comparison, nonmarital births are also shown.

In 2000, there were 17,161 in-hospital paternity acknowledgements signed by unmarried fathers and mothers with a newborn child. Over time, there was an

increase in the number of affidavits signed, reaching a peak of 22,552 in 2008. Since 2008, there has been a slow decline in the number of affidavits signed. In 2012, 20,604 affidavits were signed. This initial increase and gradual decline reflects overall trends in Maryland's nonmarital births.

Perhaps a more important measure of paternity acknowledgments, however, is the rate of acknowledgment, measured by a comparison of the number of paternity acknowledgments to the total number of nonmarital births. As shown in Figure 2, Maryland has maintained a fairly consistent paternity acknowledgment rate, between 67% and 70%, over the last 12 years. In 2000, for example, 66.8% of all nonmarital births resulted in a father signing a paternity acknowledgement in the hospital. Similarly, in 2012, 69.7% of all nonmarital births resulted in a paternity acknowledgment. Hence, Maryland's VAPP program is able to serve its purpose and keep pace with changes in nonmarital births.

Figure 2. Paternity Acknowledgments and Nonmarital Births



Characteristics of Unmarried Parents

Previous analyses of Maryland's VAPP program focused on children born to unmarried parents in 2000 who later became known to the public child support system or a safety-net program. We have taken a broader approach for this study by examining the characteristics of the entire population of parents who completed an affidavit of parentage from 2000 through 2012.

Demographic data included on the affidavits is limited to the age of the parents as well as their residence. Therefore, we examine the rates of cohabitation among these unmarried parents and their age at the time of the birth of the child.

Cohabitation

In the last few decades, national cohabitation rates of unmarried couples have increased considerably (Smock, 2000). Recent estimates indicate that nearly half of women of child-bearing age cohabit at some point before marriage (Copen, Daniels, & Mosher, 2013). Cohabitation among unmarried men and women is often considered a stepping stone towards marriage or even an alternative to marriage (Smock, 2000; Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; U.S. HHS, 2010). For women, cohabitation spells are short-lived; half of women cohabit for less than two years, and half do so for more than two years (Copen et al. 2013). Cohabitation generally ends in one of two ways: marriage or dissolution of the relationship.

Between 2006 and 2010, two in five first premarital cohabitations among women transitioned to marriage within three years (Copen et al. 2013). The remaining cohabitating relationships either stayed together without marrying (32%) or dissolved (27%). Additionally, the probability of marriage among cohabitating women who

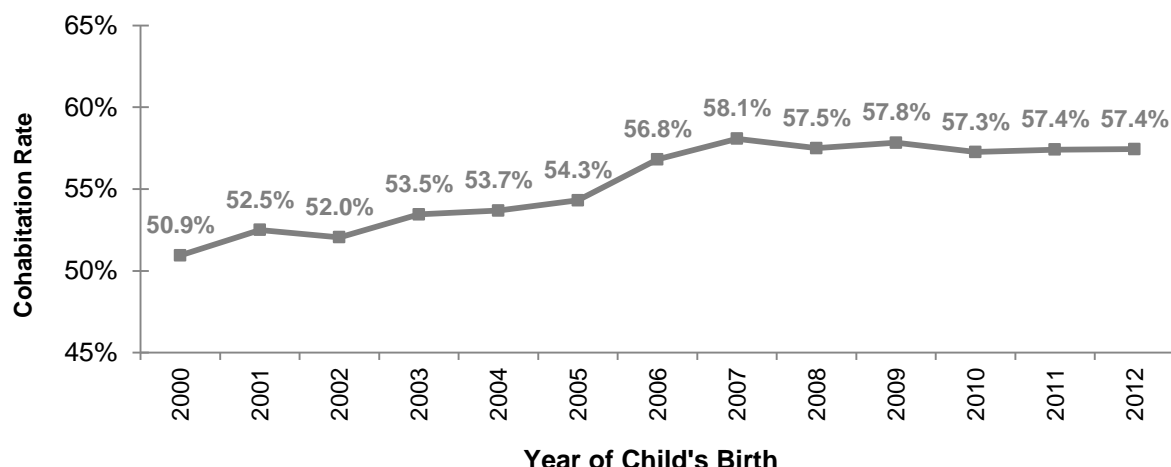
became pregnant decreased over time. These data, coupled with the overall decrease in national and state marriage rates,² suggest that marriage is no longer the only avenue for bearing and rearing children. Thus, we examine the rate of cohabitation for unmarried parents in Maryland who participated in the in-hospital paternity acknowledgment program.

Between 2000 and 2012 nearly all mothers (97.2%) and fathers (93.1%) who completed an affidavit of paternity were Maryland residents. However, not all were cohabitating. Figure 3 shows the percentage of unmarried mothers and fathers who were cohabitating at the time of their child's birth.³ There was a significant increase in unmarried parents cohabitating over the last 12 years. In 2000, half (50.9%) of unmarried couples who participated in the paternity acknowledgment program were living together at the time of their child's birth. This percentage increased through 2007 to 58%. Since 2008, though, the cohabitation rate has remained stable, with approximately 57% of unmarried parents cohabitating. These trends reflect the aforementioned national increases in premarital cohabitation and marital declines.

² Data retrieved from the National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System. The number of marriages in the United States decreased from 8.2 to 6.8 per 1,000 total population from 2000 to 2011 (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/marriage_divorce_tables.htm). The number of marriages in Maryland decreased from 7.0 to 5.8 per 1,000 total population from 2000 to 2011 (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/marriage_rates_90_95_99-11.pdf).

³ Parents were coded as cohabitating if the street address provided by both parents matched on the in-hospital paternity acknowledgement form.

Figure 3. Cohabitation of Unmarried Parents over Time: 2000 to 2012***



Note: Cohabitation data were not available for some participants (n=977). Valid percentages are reported. *p<.05
 p<.01 *p<.001

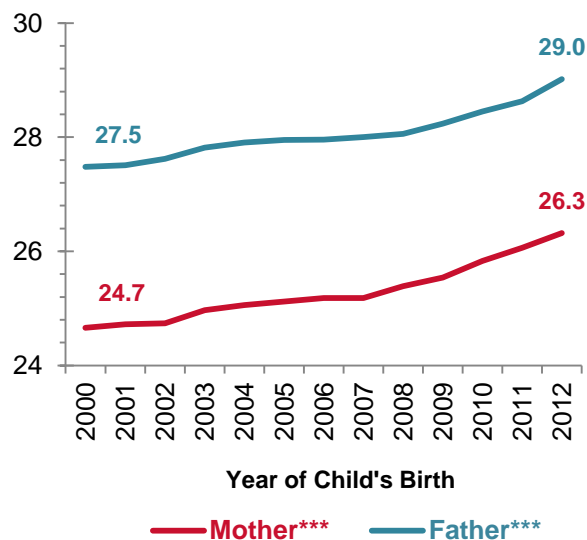
Age

Since the 1970s, women have been more likely to be older when they have children. Delayed childbearing has been associated with higher rates of employment and educational attainment among women. The rates of birth among women age 25-29 have remained relatively stable over time, but births have decreased among teenage women and increased among women in their 30s and 40s (Monte & Ellis, 2014; Ventura et al. 2012). In fact, the percent of women, married or unmarried, who had their first child under the age of 25 decreased from 42.7% in 2000 to 36.8% in 2012 (DHMH, 2000; 2012).

Figure 4 presents the average age of unmarried parents who signed an affidavit of parentage between 2000 and 2012. As expected, there was an increase in the average age of both mothers and fathers over the last 12 years. In 2012, unmarried mothers and fathers were approximately one year and a half older, on average, than they were in

2000. The average age of unmarried mothers increased from 24.7 years to 26.3 years, while the average age of unmarried fathers, who are older than mothers, increased from 27.5 years to 29.0 years.

Figure 4. Average Age of Unmarried Parents: 2000 to 2012



Note: Valid percentages are reported. *p<.05 **p<.01
 ***p<.001

To better understand the observed increase in average age, unmarried mothers' and fathers' ages were categorized into different age groupings. Figures 5 and 6 present the categorical ages of mothers and fathers, respectively, in 2000 and 2012. We begin by looking at unmarried mothers in Figure 5. As shown, there was very little change in the percent of unmarried mothers in their early twenties. In both 2000 (35.6%) and 2012 (35.1%), about one-third of unmarried mothers who signed an affidavit of parentage were between 20 and 24 years of age, the most common ages for child bearing in both years. For all other age categories, there was a clear shift. There was a substantial decrease in the percentage of teenage mothers, for example. In 2000, one-quarter (24.3%) of mothers who signed an affidavit of parentage were 19 years or younger. By 2012, though, only one out of every eight (12.2%) unmarried mothers were 19 years or younger.

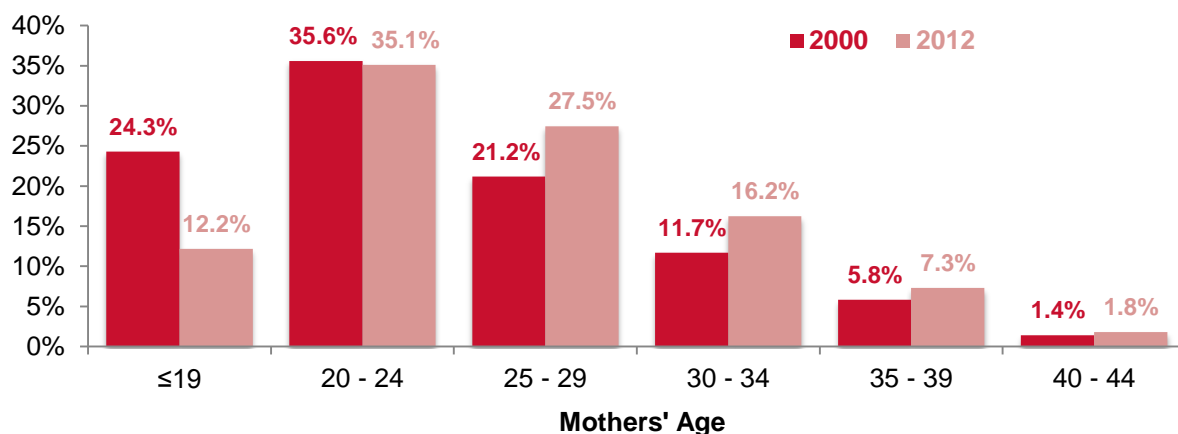
Although there was a decrease in teenage mothers, there was an increase in mothers 25 and older. In 2000, two-fifths (40.1%) of unmarried mothers were 25 or older, with fewer having children as they got older. In 2012, however, more than half (52.8%) of unmarried mothers who signed an affidavit of

parentage were 25 years or older. Overall, percentages for mothers in each of the age categories above 25 were higher in 2012 compared to 2000.

While nearly 70% of all unmarried births result in a signed paternity acknowledgment, statewide data on *all* unmarried mothers were also analyzed to be sure that the in-hospital paternity acknowledgment program was not underserving mothers of particular ages. According to data collected by the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH), ages of unmarried mothers resemble the results found in this brief.⁴ While not shown, in 2000, two-fifths (39.6%) of *all* unmarried mothers in Maryland were 25 years of age or older, and in 2011, the most recent year for which this data is available, exactly half (50.0%) of all unmarried mothers were 25 years or older (DHMH 2000; 2012). Therefore, we can conclude that VAPP serves a representative proportion of unmarried mothers of all ages.

⁴ In 2000, there were 15,534 nonmarital births for women age 24 or younger and a total of 25,705 nonmarital births for this same year. From the authors' calculation, 60.4% of all nonmarital births were to mothers 24 years old or younger. In 2012, there were 14,247 nonmarital births for women age 24 or younger and a total of 29,579 nonmarital births. From the authors' calculation, 48.2% of all nonmarital births were to mothers 24 years old or younger.

Figure 5. Mothers' Age: 2000 and 2012***



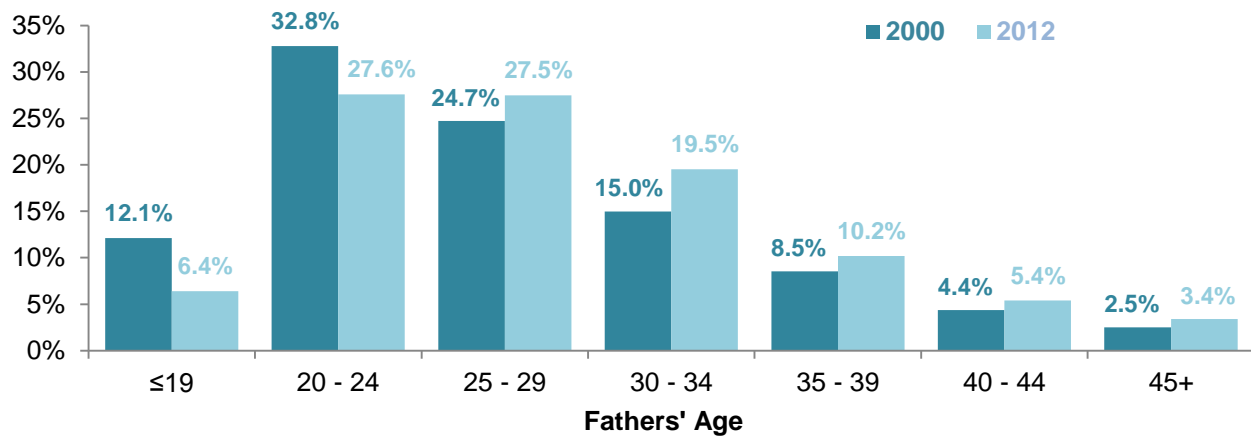
Note: Valid percentages are reported. *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Figure 6 presents the categorical ages of unmarried fathers who signed an affidavit of parentage between 2000 and 2012. Overall, mother and fathers followed the same patterns. Between 2000 and 2012, the percentage of teenage fathers decreased from 12.1% to only 6.4%. In 2000, the most common ages for unmarried fathers were 20 to 24 years of age (32.8%) and 25 to 29 years of age (24.7%). In 2012, these were still the most common ages, but fewer unmarried men were having children in their

early twenties (27.6%), and more were having children in their late twenties (27.5%).

Again, while there was a decrease in teenage fathers, there was an increase in fathers over 25 years of age who signed an affidavit of parentage. In 2000, more than half (55.1%) were 25 years or older. In 2012, though, two-thirds (66.0%) of all unmarried fathers who signed an affidavit of parentage were 25 years of age or older. Overall, percentages in older age categories were higher for unmarried fathers in 2012 compared to 2000.

Figure 6. Fathers' Age: 2000 and 2012***



Note: Valid percentages are reported. *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

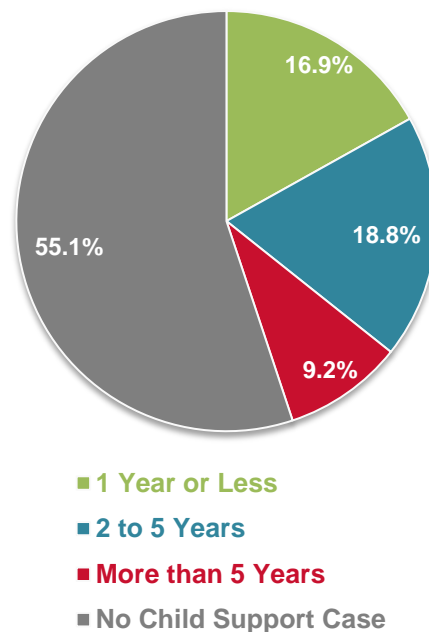
Participation in Child Support

The goal of the child support program is to determine a child support order amount and enforce that order; however, paternity must first be established. The VAPP program is one of the tools for establishing paternity and securing financial assistance for children born to unmarried parents. Paternity research has shown that establishment at birth is positively associated with child support payments later in the child's life (Mincy et al. 2005). To examine which children became known to the public child support system, we matched identifying information from the in-hospital paternity acknowledgments with the Child Support Enforcement System (CSES) database, which houses all information about public child support cases in Maryland.⁵ To allow for a full five years of follow-up data through July 2013, all child support analyses only include children for whom an in-hospital paternity acknowledgment form was signed between calendar years 2000 and 2007.

First, we examine the percentage of children born to unmarried parents that had an active child support case with the Maryland Child Support Enforcement Administration (CSEA) within one year after the birth of the child, five years after birth, and at any point in time through July 2013. As shown in Figure 7, one out of every six (16.9%) children born to unmarried parents, for whom paternity was acknowledged, had a child support case within one year after birth. By the time the

child reached five years of age, an additional one in five (18.8%) children had an active child support case. Less than 1 in 10 (9.2%) children had an active child support case open after their fifth birthday. Fewer than half (44.9%) of these children ever had an active child support case. Since the follow-up period ends in July 2013, we expect this percentage to increase slightly in the future. Nonetheless, most children who had an established child support case did so by their fifth birthday, so it appears that is the opportune time for outreach among the population of unmarried parents who sign an affidavit of parentage.

Figure 7. Percent with a Child Support Case: 2000 to 2007



⁵ A match was considered valid if the noncustodial parent's name in CSES matched either the mother's or father's name on the affidavit of parentage and if the child's name and birthdate matched. A match was also considered valid for some cases in which the mother's and child's information matched between CSES and the affidavit of parentage but information on the noncustodial parent was missing.

Note: Paternity acknowledgements among children born after 2007 are excluded in order to provide at least five years after the birth of the child for follow-up data (n=148,767). Follow-up data is available through July 2013. Valid percentages are reported.

While Figure 7 provides an overall perspective of child support cases opened among unmarried parents who signed an affidavit of parentage, it masks differences that occurred over time. Figure 8 presents the percentage of children who had an active child support case by year of the child's birth. We display two different percentages, however. First, we show the percent with a child support case within five years of the child's birth, so that there is a full five years of follow-up data for each child. We also provide the percent with a case by the end of our study period, July 2013, to show how many additional cases open after the fifth birthday. The latter percentage allows more time for earlier births to open a case.

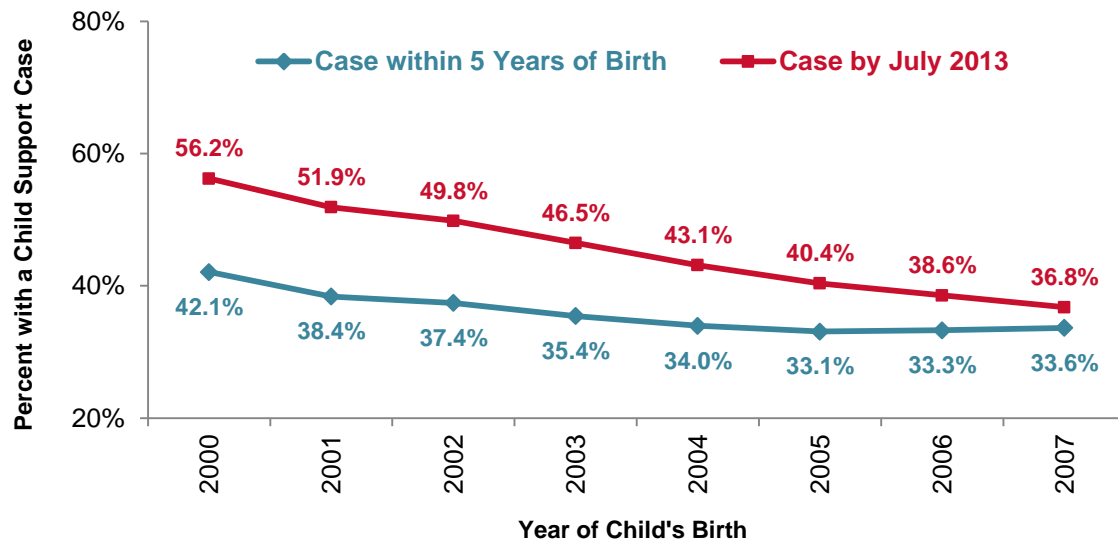
Among children for whom paternity was acknowledged, there was a decrease in the percent who later had an active child support case. In 2000, about two in five (42.1%) children with an affidavit had a child support case within five years of their birth. By 2007,

though, only one-third (33.6%) of children with an affidavit had an active child support case within five years of their birth.

By extending the follow-up period beyond the fifth birthday, however, we find that more children end up with a child support case. In fact, nearly three in five (56.2%) children born in 2000 had an active child support case when the follow-up period is extended to July 2013, a 14 percentage point increase when compared to the five-year follow-up period. Between 2000 and 2004, there was about a 10 percentage point difference between children with a case within five years of birth and children with a case by July 2013.

It appears that the majority of children who ever have child support cases established do so within the first five years after birth. Nonetheless, there remains potential for additional cases as time passes. Hence, we may find that nearly half of children with acknowledged paternity born in 2007 have an open child support case in another five years.

Figure 8. Percent with a Child Support Case: 2000 to 2007***

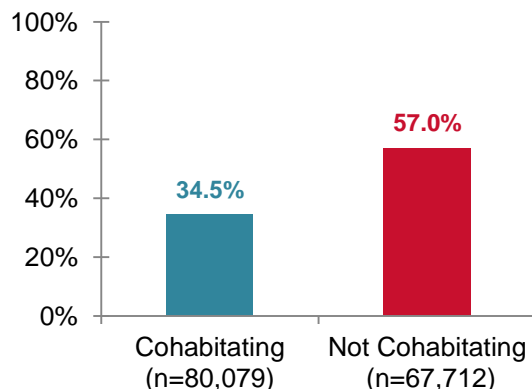


Note: Paternity acknowledgements among children born after 2007 are excluded in order to provide at least five years of follow-up data after the birth of the child (n=148,767). Follow-up data is available through July 2013. Valid percentages are reported. *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Thus far, a few trends are clear: unmarried parents are older at the time of the child's birth; cohabitation has increased among unmarried parents; and fewer child support cases are opened among those with an affidavit of paternity. We conducted analyses to determine whether the increase in parental age or cohabitation was related to the decline in child support cases among children with an affidavit of paternity. Parental age was not significantly related to the establishment of a child support case; there is a relationship, not necessarily causal, with the cohabitation status of the parents.

Figure 9 shows the percentage of active child support cases among the unmarried parents in the sample who were cohabitating between 2000 and 2007. This analysis suggests that unmarried parents who were cohabitating at the time of the child's birth were less likely than non-cohabitating parents to ever open a child support case. During the study period, only one-third (34.5%) of unmarried parents who were living together at the time of birth had a child support case. Conversely, unmarried parents who were *not* cohabiting were much more likely to have an active child support case (57.0%).

Figure 9. Percent with a Child Support Case by the Cohabitation of Unmarried Parents***

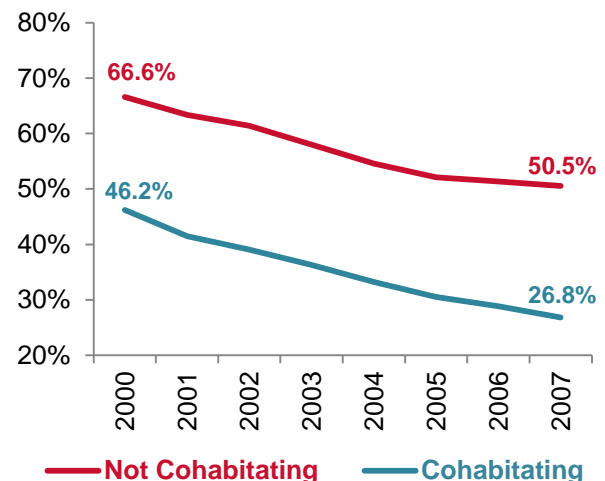


Note: Valid percentages reported. *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

When examining the relationship between cohabitation and opening a child support case in Figure 10, a couple of findings become evident. First, cohabiting parents have always been less likely to have a public child support case. There is at least a 20 percentage point gap in the percentage with a case between the cohabitating and non-cohabitating parents. For example, two-thirds (66.6%) of non-cohabitating parents in 2000 had a child support case at some point after the child's birth, while less than half (46.2%) of cohabitating parents also had a case.

Second, there has been a decline in the percentage of active child support cases among both cohabiting and non-cohabiting parents. Among non-cohabitating parents, two-thirds (66.6%) who had a child in 2000 established a child support case at some point by July 2013. By 2007, however, only half (50.5%) of non-cohabitating parents had a child support case by July 2013. Similarly, cohabitating parents were less likely to open a child support case over time, declining from 46.2% in 2000 to just 26.8% in 2007.

Figure 10. Percent with a Child Support Case by the Cohabitation of Unmarried Parents: 2000 to 2007***



Note: Valid percentages reported. *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Conclusions

This research brief examined trends, from 2000 to 2012, in Maryland's in-hospital paternity acknowledgment program. This program was created to establish paternity for children born to unmarried parents. Paternity establishment remains a vital component for securing financial resources for children through the public child support system.

The first finding showed that Maryland has a thriving and responsive paternity acknowledgment program. Since 2000, the program has served over 250,000 children statewide. Over a 12-year period, the program was able to adapt to changing patterns in nonmarital births, maintaining a consistent paternity acknowledgment rate between 67% and 70%.

Additionally, characteristics of unmarried parents who participated in this program changed over time. The percentage of unmarried parents who were cohabitating at the time of their child's birth increased, suggesting these parents initially considered childrearing together outside of marriage. Moreover, both mothers and fathers were older, on average, at the time of their child's birth. In 2000, it was common for unmarried mothers younger than 25 years of age to have children, while unmarried fathers, who were slightly older, were commonly in their twenties. By 2012, though, more than half (52.8%) of unmarried mothers, and two-thirds (66.1%) of unmarried fathers, were 25 years of age or older at the time of the child's birth.

Among children for whom an affidavit of parentage was signed, another observed trend was a decrease in the percentage of children with an active child support case.

From 2000 to 2007, the percentage of these children who had a child support case within five years of birth decreased from just over two in five (42.1%) children to one in three (33.6%) children.

The decrease in child support cases may be partially related to the increase in parental cohabitation. It is possible that unmarried parents are remaining in partnerships to care for their child and perhaps even getting married after the child's birth. However, non-cohabitating parents, while more likely to open a child support case, also experienced a decline in the opening of a child support case. This suggests that unmarried parents may be more willing to work out their own informal agreements (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2007; 2011).

The decline in child support cases may also be related to the decreased use of public cash assistance. With fewer parents receiving cash assistance in Maryland, fewer parents are required to participate in the public child support program as a condition of benefit receipt. This decline in child support cases among unmarried parents with an affidavit of paternity, then, may simply be the effect of a cash assistance program designed to be temporary and one that, today, provides benefits to a small portion of the population.

Regardless, the findings in this brief are reassuring. Maryland's in-hospital paternity acknowledgment program still successfully establishes paternity and is a valuable tool that assists the Maryland Child Support Enforcement Administration (CSEA) in pursuing and securing child support payments for families.

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For additional information about this research brief, please contact Letitia Logan Passarella (410-706-2479; llogan@ssw.umaryland.edu) at the School of Social Work.

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