

CHILD SUPPORT OUTCOMES OF MARYLAND'S IN-HOSPITAL PATERNITY ACKNOWLEDGMENT PROGRAM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hospital-based voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs were established in the mid-1990s and today are the single most common vehicle through which paternity is established for children born outside of marriage. The majority (57%) of the more than 1.5 million paternities established in the U.S. in federal fiscal year 2005 were voluntary acknowledgments. In Maryland, in that same year, the percentage was even higher (82%). These programs, which provide unmarried parents a chance to acknowledge paternity at the time of the child's birth, have clearly proven effective in increasing the number of children who, in the eyes of the law, have two parents and who may also enjoy the tangible, intangible, actual and potential benefits of having two legal parents.

Voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs are also invaluable to public child support programs as they strive to meet federal performance standards, minimize financial penalties and maximize the receipt of federal incentive funds. Without doubt, Maryland and most other states would be hard-pressed to achieve the federal paternity establishment standard absent voluntary paternity acknowledgments. There are other potential child support program benefits as well. In theory, when acknowledged children become known to child support it should be easier, faster, and less costly to secure an order for current support. Also, if the act of voluntarily acknowledging paternity reflects fathers' willingness to take responsibility for their children, one could surmise that they also might be more likely to pay support and less likely to accumulate support arrears than fathers whose paternity had to be judicially-determined.

Despite their importance for children and for child support, there has been relatively little research into voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs, especially longer-term child support outcomes. This research gap is unfortunate from a child well-being perspective because more than one of three children are born outside of marriage, poverty rates among non-marital children remain high and receipt of child support can make a significant, positive difference in the economic well-being of children, particularly those in low-income, single-parent families. Child support can also make the difference in women's successful transitioning from welfare to work.

The research gap is also unfortunate from a child support viewpoint. This is because so many non-marital children do become part of the child support caseload because the custodial parent applies directly for child support services or because the child receives benefits from a means-tested program (e.g., TANF) which requires cooperation with child support. Acknowledged children, as a subset of all non-marital children, have high rates of involvement with child support and/or with means-tested programs. A Maryland study, for example, found that within five years of birth more than half (56.5%) of all acknowledged children were known to child support and more than four-fifths (86.7%) were known to child support and/or programs such as TANF, Food Stamps, or the Children's Health Insurance Program (Owvigho, Bouchet & Born, 2006).

Today's study begins to fill the information gap for Maryland with regard to the voluntary paternity acknowledgment program by looking at the child support caseload and comparing if and how certain child support outcomes differ between children for whom paternity was acknowledged and those for whom it was not. Specifically, for our sample

of 7,762 children we use various administrative data sources to answer several important questions:

- 1) Among non-marital children who become known to child support before their 1st birthdays, how many had paternity acknowledged by means of the Voluntary Acknowledgment of Paternity Program (VAPP)? To what extent are the acknowledgments reflected in the automated system by their 4th birthdays?
- 2) How many non-marital children have a current support order established within four years of birth and does order establishment rate and/or timing differ for children for whom an acknowledgment was signed?
- 3) How much child support do non-marital children receive in their first four years of life and does the extent to which orders are paid differ for children for whom a paternity acknowledgment was signed?

To the best of our knowledge, this is the largest and most methodologically rigorous study of the real-world outcomes of voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs. Key findings from this study are summarized below:

☒ Children for whom a voluntary paternity acknowledgment was signed are significantly more likely to have the fact of paternity establishment reflected in the automated child support system than children without a paternity acknowledgment. Compared to children whose paternity was established judicially, the fact of paternity establishment is also more quickly reflected in the automated system for acknowledged children.

Almost universally (97.8%) the automated system, CSES, did show that paternity had been established for children with an acknowledgment; moreover, for the vast majority (94.4%) of acknowledged children, CSES did reflect that paternity had been established via an affidavit. In rare cases, the system indicates that the child's paternity was established via a court order (3.4%) or not established (2.2%). In stark contrast, more than half (55.2%) of children without a Maryland paternity acknowledgment still did not have their paternity established by their fourth birthday. About two-fifths (41.4%) had paternity established via a court order and an additional 3.3% had a voluntary paternity acknowledgment from another state.

In most cases, voluntary paternity acknowledgments are signed within a few days of a child's birth. Thus, it is not surprising to find that, on average, the fact of paternity establishment is reflected significantly more quickly in CSES for acknowledged youngsters than for children whose paternity was established through the courts.

☒ Children whose paternity has been acknowledged are significantly more likely than their counterparts without an affidavit to have a final current support order established by their fourth birthday.

Nearly half (45.7%) of children with a paternity affidavit known to child support have an order for current support in place by their fourth birthdays. In contrast, only one-third (32.2%) of children in the non-VAPP group have an order established within that time

frame. The time from birth to support order establishment is similar for both groups (mean=14.6 months for non-VAPP; mean=15.1 months for VAPP).

For policy makers and program managers, these findings confirm what many have long suspected: having a voluntary paternity acknowledgment increases the odds that an order for current support will be established. Although our data show no advantage in terms of the time to order establishment, this would likely change with additional follow-up data. Because two-thirds of non-VAPP children still did not have a court order by their fourth birthday, we know that, if and when support orders are finally established for them, the elapsed time from birth to support order establishment can not be less than 49 months.

✘ Initially, there are no differences between the two groups in the percent of cases in which support is paid. However, by the fourth year, support obligations are higher and significantly more likely to be paid for children whose paternity was acknowledged.

No matter whether paternity was acknowledged or judicially established, during the child's first year of life more than seven out of 10 obligors paid at least part of their child support obligation. Overall, these rates increase over the study's four-year period for both children with and without paternity affidavits. However, by the fourth year, the total annual, average support obligation amount is significantly higher (\$3598 vs. \$3387) and significantly more likely to be paid for children with affidavits (80.4%) than for children whose paternity was adjudicated (77.1%).

✘ There are statistically significant differences on two of our three measures of child support arrears: total arrears and arrears owed to the custodial parent. In all four study years, average total child support arrears and average arrears owed to custodians are significantly lower for children whose paternity was acknowledged. There was no difference between the two groups with regard to arrears owed to the state as reimbursement for the cost of public assistance provided to the child.

The mean or average amount of total arrears for acknowledged children was \$504 in the first year, about \$100 less than the average amount (\$607) among adjudicated children. For youngsters whose paternity had been voluntarily acknowledged the average amount of custodian-owed arrears was also significantly less in the first year (\$296 vs. \$387). Both average total arrears and average arrears owed to custodial parents increase, for both groups of children, in each follow-up year. By the end of the fourth year, average total arrears are \$3,196 for acknowledged children and \$3,776 for adjudicated children and this difference is significant. Similarly, custodian owed arrears averaged \$2,023 and \$2,465 for acknowledged and adjudicated youngsters, respectively, and this difference was also statistically significant.

These differences with regard to arrears are heartening, especially because we found relatively few differences between the two groups in terms of the total amounts of support owed and paid, the percent of paying cases, or the percent of support due that was paid. Unfortunately, it is beyond the power of these descriptive data to determine which of several competing hypotheses best account for study results. For policy

makers, program managers, and advocates, however, the take home point is clear and important. Even if the voluntary paternity acknowledgment program may not directly be the factor preventing arrears accumulation, non-custodial fathers who acknowledge paternity voluntarily accumulate less child support debt over time than do fathers whose paternity was adjudicated.

In sum, our findings indicate that the value of voluntary paternity acknowledgments extends well beyond paternity establishment and well beyond a child's infancy. All else equal, children whose paternity is acknowledged through VAPP are significantly more likely to have the fact of paternity establishment reflected in the child support automated system, and to have it reflected there more quickly. They are also significantly more likely to have a support order by their fourth birthday and, on average, have lower total arrears and total custodian-owed arrears over an extended period of time.

These results hold several important implications for policy, program development, and research:

☒ Awareness of the existence of a paternity acknowledgement in the automated system, CSES, is good but can be better. The general nature of the problem seems clear, but certain steps must be taken to more specifically isolate the problems, to correct them, and to prevent their future occurrence.

We find that almost half of children born outside of marriage in 2001 who became known to Maryland's child support system in their first year of life had a Maryland paternity affidavit. Except in rare cases where the affidavit was rescinded, this means that almost half of these children had a legal father before they entered the child support system. However, the affidavit is of little use in establishing a child support obligation if the agency does not know about it. Our data show that the automated child support information system, CSES, did reflect awareness of roughly two of three affidavits (68.8%). However, the fact that, four years after affidavit execution in many cases, CSES appeared unaware of approximately one in three affidavits filed at Vital Records should be a matter of managerial concern and priority attention. While regular file matching is now routinely done between the Vital Records and CSES databases, it seems obvious that data matching and data management protocols are in need of revisiting and revision.

The good news is that improvement should be fairly easy to accomplish because the precise nature of the problems should be able to be identified through the use of existing empirical data. Specifically, a comprehensive three-way universe file match among Vital Records, CSES and the SSW affidavit database should reveal the true magnitude and nature of the problem or problems and, almost certainly, would provide useful information about steps that could be taken to both correct historical problems and prevent the lion's share of future ones.

☒ **Once data issues have been addressed, thought should be given to ways in which the considerable benefits of voluntary paternity acknowledgement could be expanded to even more of our state's children. In particular, efforts should be made to increase acknowledgement rates among demographic groups with lower than average levels of participation.**

Our findings show that acknowledged children benefit in many ways in terms of child support. Among other things, they are more likely to have current support orders and less likely to have arrears balances. Currently, affidavits are filed in about two-thirds of all non-marital Maryland births. This is an excellent rate and its consistent achievement is testament to the considerable efforts of the child support agency, the Division of Vital Records, and birthing hospital partners to run an effective program. However, more can be done and should be. The benefits of very early paternity acknowledgment are so many and so powerful that Maryland's efforts to increase its acknowledgment rate should continue and be expanded. One fruitful avenue would be to explore ways to increase acknowledgments among underrepresented groups such as African-Americans and younger parents. Another would be to expand the venues in which information about paternity acknowledgment is made available (e.g. obstetric clinics).

Expanding the venues in which actual execution of paternity acknowledgment can be done is another option that should be explored, albeit very carefully, very cautiously, and incrementally. Policy, training and other resource requirements required need to be enumerated and brought to bear and the many legal requirements associated with execution of a valid paternity acknowledgment also would need to be taken into account. In particular, excruciating attention would have to be paid to insuring that, in alternate venues, parents are fully informed of their rights and responsibilities. We believe this is a fruitful initiative that should be pursued, but only after data issues have been addressed and meticulous design work has been done and detailed program plans and procedures have been promulgated.

The most general conclusion from this study is that, in its relatively short existence, the Maryland voluntary paternity acknowledgment program has had numerous, far-reaching, and long-lasting benefits for our state's children and our state's child support program. Children whose parents avail themselves of the opportunity to establish paternity at or near the time of birth are more likely to have child support orders, are more likely to receive financial support from their absent parents, and are less likely to have large arrears balances. Child support benefits greatly from the voluntary paternity acknowledgment program on many of the performance measures of which it is held accountable by the federal government. Notwithstanding these positive outcomes, however, study results also show there is room for improvement. Issues related to inter-agency data matching and data management protocols clearly warrant investigation and prompt corrective action, while strategies to expand the availability and benefits of voluntary paternity acknowledgment to even more of our state's children is an area of great opportunity. By building on the strong foundation and partnerships that already exist, we are confident that, even in this time of fiscal uncertainty and budgetary constraints, the needed 'next steps' in the evolution and enhancement of Maryland's program can be accomplished. Taking these steps, of course, would not only benefit child support but, more importantly, the nearly 40% of our state's children who are born outside of marriage each year.

INTRODUCTION

Less than 20 years after their creation, voluntary in-hospital paternity acknowledgment programs have become the primary method by which legal fatherhood is secured for non-marital children. National estimates are that at least two-thirds of unmarried parents complete voluntary paternity acknowledgments at the time of their child's birth (Mincy et al., 2005; Williams, 2001). Maryland's situation is similar; today, voluntary paternity acknowledgments are filed for two of three non-marital children born in our state. Clearly, providing unmarried parents with a chance to acknowledge paternity at the time of the child's birth has proved an effective method to increase the number of children who, in the eyes of the law, have two parents, and who also may enjoy the tangible, intangible, actual, and potential benefits afforded by having two legal parents.

Voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs have also been beneficial for public child support programs. For most states, including Maryland, the ability to meet the 90% federal paternity establishment performance standard rests heavily on voluntary acknowledgments. Nationally, voluntary acknowledgments accounted for an estimated 56% of all paternity establishments in 2005 (ECONorthwest & The Lewin Group, 2006). In Maryland, the importance is even more obvious: four of every five (82%) statewide paternity establishments in federal fiscal year 2005 were voluntary paternity acknowledgments (Author calculations from OCSE 157 report).

There may be other child support program benefits as well. In theory at least, when acknowledged children become known to child support, it should be easier, faster, and less costly to secure an order for current support. Also, to the extent that voluntary paternity acknowledgment reflects fathers' willingness to accept responsibility for their children, they also might be more likely to pay their child support (and thus be less likely to accumulate arrears) than fathers whose paternity had to be judicially-determined.

Despite its significance for children and child support programs, relatively little research has focused on voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs and longer-term outcomes for the children involved. This research gap is unfortunate from a child well-being perspective because more than one of three children are born outside of marriage, poverty rates among non-marital children remain high, and we know that, all else equal, receipt of child support can make a significant, positive difference in the economic well-being of children, particularly those in low-income, single-parent families.

The gap is also unfortunate from a child support viewpoint because so many non-marital children do become, sooner or later, part of the child support caseload. This usually happens either because the custodial parent applies directly for child support services or because the child is participating in one or more means-tested assistance programs which require cooperation with child support enforcement as a condition of benefit receipt. An earlier Maryland study found that, within five years of birth, more than half (56.5%) of all children with paternity acknowledgments were known to the child support program and more than four-fifths (86.7%) were known to child support and/or means-tested programs such as TANF, Food Stamps, or the Children's Health Insurance Program (Ovwigbo, Bouchet & Born, 2006).

Today's study begins to fill the information gap for Maryland with regard to the paternity acknowledgment program. The purpose of the study is to analyze the state's child support caseload and compare if and how certain key child support outcomes differ between children for whom paternity was acknowledged and those for whom it was not. As a by-product of our work to document child-level outcomes, the study also provides much-needed information and action recommendations about the extent to which the existence of children's paternity acknowledgments is reflected in the child support automated information management system (CSES). Using various administrative data sources, we address the following specific questions:

- 1) Among non-marital children who become known to the public child support system in their first year of life, how many had paternity acknowledged through the Voluntary Acknowledgment of Paternity Program (VAPP)? To what extent are these acknowledgments reflected in the automated child support system (CSES) by the children's fourth birthdays?
- 2) How many non-marital children have an order for current support established within four years of birth? Do the support order establishment rate and/or timing differ for children for whom a paternity acknowledgment was signed?
- 3) How much child support do non-marital children receive in their first four years of life? Does the extent to which orders are paid differ for children for whom an acknowledgment was signed?

The answers to these questions provide valuable information on the real-world benefits of paternity acknowledgments. Moreover, the results suggest areas in which various program, policy, practice or data enhancements or modifications would likely be beneficial for Maryland's children and Maryland's child support program. Last but not least, the study also demonstrates, once again, how empirical data can be used to support, inform, and enhance program management and outcomes monitoring.

BACKGROUND

For America's public welfare and child support programs, a major concern is the economic well-being of children born outside of marriage. In the United States today, over one-third of all children are born to unmarried parents; Maryland's rate (37% in 2005), is comparable, though there are some racial and regional differences (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Nationally, rates are higher for children of African American and Hispanic descent; more than two-thirds of African American and two-fifths of Hispanic births occur outside of marriage. In Maryland, non-marital birth rates among African-Americans and Hispanics were 60% and 51% respectively in 2005 (Maryland Vital Statistics, 2005). Rates also differ dramatically across Maryland jurisdictions. In 2005 the lowest rates of nonmarital births were observed in Howard (18.3%) and Carroll (21.1%) counties, while the highest rates were in Dorchester County (60.0%) and Baltimore City (69.4%; Maryland Vital Statistics, 2005).

There is justifiable concern about the future prospects of non-marital children because a large body of empirical evidence indicates that they are at greater risk to experience poverty and a variety of negative outcomes (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLanahan & Carlson, 2002; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Households headed by single mothers receive more public assistance and have lower incomes than two-parent families, and, as a group, have had no significant increase in household income since the early 1970s (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). This latter reality is reflected in the fact that median family income for a single mother family was \$16,327 in 1969, but had only increased by about 10% to \$18,000 by 1996. In contrast, two-parent households, as a group, experienced a 25% increase of over \$10,000 in income between 1969 and 1996, from a median income of \$41,453 to \$51,950. Thus, additional sources of income, such as child support, are vital for single-parent families, and have been shown to greatly reduce the economic hardship children in single-parent households face (Graham, Beller, & Hernandez, 1994; Hernandez, Beller, & Graham, 1995; King, 1994). However, child support may be difficult to establish and collect, particularly for children of never-married mothers who tend to fare worse than children in other types of single-parent homes (Pearson & Thoennes, 1996).

One of the main reasons for this lower rate of child support receipt is that it is more difficult to establish paternity for children of never-married mothers, the essential first step to establishing and enforcing a child support order. Amidst considerable policy and program attention focused on increasing paternity establishment for children of never-married mothers, many observers believe that the single most successful and most cost-effective initiative in this area has been the establishment in every state of voluntary hospital paternity acknowledgement programs.

In-Hospital Paternity Acknowledgment

Since its inception in the mid-1970s, a main focus of the public child support program, Title IV-D of the Social Security Act, has been increasing paternity establishment and subsequent child support collections for children born outside of marriage. Perhaps the most significant legislative development in this area has been the Omnibus Budget

Reconciliation Act of 1993 (OBRA) (P.L. 103-66), which required that all states establish a simple procedure to permit unmarried fathers to voluntarily acknowledge paternity in birthing facilities and other locations.¹ The OBRA-mandated in-hospital voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs were intended to take advantage of the fact that many unmarried fathers visit their children in the hospital at birth and may be willing to acknowledge the child at that “magic moment.” Research has shown that unwed fathers are typically more willing to acknowledge paternity shortly after the child’s birth but their willingness to do so usually wanes as the child gets older (Turner, 2001).

Over the past 14 years these hospital-based programs have become, arguably, the most important tool in paternity establishment (Mincy, Garfinkel, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005). Between 1994 and 1998 in-hospital paternity establishment rates increased from 6.6% to 42% nationwide, and during the first three years of these programs there was an 80% increase in the number of paternities established (Turner, 2001; Federal Register, 64, #46, March 10, 1999). By 1998, the number of paternities was triple the 1992 level, at least partially a result of voluntary acknowledgment programs (American Public Human Services Association, 2001). According to the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (2006) paternity was acknowledged or established for 1.5 million children nationally in Fiscal Year 2005 and the majority of these (56.9%) were voluntary paternity acknowledgments. Overall, it appears that voluntary acknowledgments are signed in the majority (66% to 75%) of non-marital births (Mincy et al., 2005; Williams, 2001).

Mirroring national trends, Maryland’s Voluntary Acknowledgment of Paternity Program (VAPP) has also experienced substantial growth since its inception in 1994. For example, in 1996 paternity acknowledgments were filed for 14,263 children, representing 59.0% of all non-marital births. By 2005, the number of acknowledgments had grown to 18,300. Today a voluntary paternity affidavit is filed for two-thirds of all non-marital births in Maryland.

Studies of the characteristics of voluntary paternity affidavit signers and non-signers are relatively few in number, but generally report similar results. Our own Maryland study showed that an affidavit is more likely to be completed if the child’s mother is Caucasian, has at least a high school education, and is employed (Ovwigo, Born, & Srivastava, 2002). Several other studies have confirmed that paternity establishment is positively correlated with being white, higher educational attainment, full-time employment, higher family income, cohabitation, financial independence from government transfer programs, and having fewer children (Mincy, et al., 2005; Pearson & Thoennes, 1995; Seltzer, 1997; Turner, 2001). Maryland data also show that most children whose parents acknowledge paternity through VAPP will enter the state’s public child support and/or welfare systems. Within five years of birth, just over half (56.5%) of all children with a paternity affidavit enter the public child support system and more than four-fifths (86.7%) enter the child support and/or public assistance programs such as TANF, Food Stamps, or Medical Assistance (Ovwigo, Bouchet, & Born, 2006).

¹For a concise summary of the history of paternity establishment, see Roberts, P. (1996). *A Guide to Establishing Paternity for Non-Marital Children*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy.

Operation and Outcomes of Paternity Acknowledgment Programs

As noted earlier, paternity establishment via voluntary paternity acknowledgment at or near the time of birth is of vital importance for children born outside of marriage. It is of equal value to public child support programs which, among other things, are charged by the federal government with achieving paternity for 90% of all non-marital children. Paternity establishment, of course, is a pre-requisite to all other steps in the child support process (e.g. establishing current support orders, and collecting current support due). For this reason and because the majority of paternities nationwide are established through the voluntary acknowledgment process, it seems self-evident that a high-quality, high-yield paternity acknowledgment program can be of tremendous practical value to a state in achieving all mandated federal child support performance thresholds, maximizing federal incentive payments, and avoiding fiscal penalties.

Obtaining maximum programmatic value from in-hospital paternity acknowledgment programs, however, is not without challenges for child support programs. In Maryland, child support is responsible for the design of forms and processes, the promulgation of policies and the provision of training, but other key tasks are carried out by the staff of other organizations, in particular birthing facilities and hospitals and the Division of Vital Records.²

Voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs historically and today operate mainly, if not exclusively, in hospitals and birthing facilities. Thus, it is hospital personnel who have direct contact with unmarried parents to explain the rights, responsibilities and procedures associated with paternity acknowledgment and who, in most cases, actually witness parents' execution of the form and file the completed acknowledgments with the Division of Vital Records. Vital Records, in turn, confirms that forms have been properly executed, places fathers' names on the birth certificates, maintains acknowledgment forms on file and creates an electronic file of acknowledgments which is periodically matched against the statewide automated child support information management system, CSES. Thus, while voluntary paternity acknowledgments are a primary tool for our state's child support program, the child support program plays somewhat of a secondary role in the day-to-day, direct, front-line implementation of the program with non-marital couples and in data management and data exchange.

In terms of the outcomes of in-hospital acknowledgment programs, the previously-cited statistics on the growing share of all paternities accounted for by these programs are the best-known indicator. In general, children for whom paternity has been voluntarily-acknowledged or judicially-established are more likely to have access to emotional/psychological support, social entitlement, and financial resources than their peers without legal fathers (Pearson & Thoennes, 1995). For example, fathers who establish legal paternity have significantly higher rates of involvement and interaction with their children³ (Argys & Peters, 2003). Paternity establishment can also pave the way for a child to receive health insurance coverage from his/her father and provides inheritance

² Child support has other responsibilities relating to the acknowledgment program, including funding Vital Records staff, but these are the major ones vis-à-vis the day-to-day operation of the in-hospital paternity acknowledgment program.

³ The causal direction of this association is ambiguous. Paternity establishment may prompt increased involvement, or fathers who are more likely to be involved may also be more likely to establish legal paternity.

and potential social insurance benefits in the event of the father's death (Pearson & Thoennes, 1996). Research also suggests that when fathers provide for their children economically and are regularly and positively connected to them, whether or not they live in the home, children do better emotionally and have fewer behavioral problems (Pleck, 1997).

To date, only two published studies have directly assessed the relationship between voluntary paternity acknowledgment and subsequent father involvement. A Wisconsin study examines the relationship between paternity acknowledgment and two measures of father involvement: child support payments and children living with their fathers (Brown, Cook & Wimer, 2004). It found that about half of children born outside of marriage in 2000 and 2001 had their paternity acknowledged. However, these figures underestimate the true rate of voluntary acknowledgment in the study state because they are based on child support data and some counties regularly adjudicate paternities, even if there is an affidavit. Children with paternity acknowledged were less likely to have a child support order in their first three years of life. However, among those with orders, fathers who acknowledged paternity were more likely to pay support.

A second study utilizes one-year follow-up survey data from the Fragile Families study to examine the relationship between paternity establishment and father involvement (Mincy, et al., 2005). Paternity establishment was found to be associated with significantly better outcomes on all father involvement measures, with consistently stronger effects for in-hospital paternity acknowledgment. For example, fathers who established paternity in the hospital were 15% more likely to have seen their child in the past month, 20 percentage points more likely to have provided any support, and 16.2% more likely to have had an overnight visit with the child.

Research has also been limited in terms of economic well-being in general and the receipt of child support in particular, but results have again been encouraging. Two macro-level studies reveal that voluntary paternity programs could be linked to an increased likelihood of child support payments to mothers who were not on welfare (Sorensen & Halpern, 1999) and that children with a never-married mother were the only group of children to experience significant gains in child support receipt between 1997 and 1999 (Sorensen & Oliver, 2002). Although these results are interesting and encouraging, they are limited in that they were not based on individual level data on the actual presence (or absence) of a voluntary paternity acknowledgment.

Finally, but not insignificantly, there have been anecdotal reports that voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs save taxpayers money. For example, in Oregon, it is estimated that the administrative cost to establish a support order for a child with paternity acknowledged is less than \$150, compared with an estimated \$1,600 for adjudicated paternity cases (ECONorthwest & The Lewin Group, 2006).

The Present Study

Although research findings related to voluntary paternity acknowledgment so far have been encouraging, they have not been conclusive, largely due to methodological limitations. As mentioned, the authors of the Wisconsin study did not have direct access to affidavit data. Thus, because of local variations in child support practice, an

unknown number of cases in the adjudicated group actually had signed a voluntary acknowledgment (Brown, et al., 2004). The Fragile Family Study is based on self-reports of father involvement and, more specifically, child support payments. In addition, the sample sizes are relatively small, the follow-up period is limited to the first year of the child's life, and child support payments are measured at a very general level (yes/no whether father provided any support since the child's birth). Previous studies have also not generally yielded any discrete program improvement recommendations for child support or other entities involved in the program.

Our study builds on the existing literature, addresses identified shortcomings and expands knowledge by analyzing both paternity acknowledgment and child support data over a four year period for a sample of over 7,500 children. Our sample consists of children, born in 2001 to unmarried, custodial mothers, who became known to Maryland's public child support system within one year of birth. Four years of child support outcome data are compared for children for whom an acknowledgment was signed vs. children whose paternity was established judicially or not at all.

To our knowledge, this is the largest and most methodologically rigorous study of the real-world outcomes of in-hospital paternity acknowledgment. Our rich data set allows us to ascertain, with a greater degree of certainty, the true economic value and child support outcomes of voluntary paternity establishments. In addition, study results should provide valuable empirical and potentially actionable information for policy makers on the utility of voluntary paternity acknowledgments across the spectrum of child support performance outcomes. Results may also suggest feasible ways in which inter-agency interfaces could be improved and/or the overall acknowledgment program could be enhanced or expanded.

METHODS

Sample

The study sample consists of the universe of children born to unwed parents in calendar year 2001 who became known to the Maryland child support system within one year of their birth. In 2001, the official estimate is that 25,164 births occurred to unmarried⁴ women in Maryland (Maryland Vital Statistics, 2001). Ultimately, 9,722 children born outside of marriage in 2001 became known to the state's child support program within one year of their birth. We eliminated children who, according to the administrative data, had ever been removed from their mother's care during the study period (n = 581) and those whose case was not appropriate for the study for various reasons (e.g., child or father became deceased during the study period; n = 48). The final study sample thus consisted of 9,093 children.

Almost one of every two (47.0%; 4,274/9,093) sample children had a paternity acknowledgment on file at the Division of Vital Records (i.e., they had paternity established). However, in order for the child support agency to be able to promptly take the next steps to secure a support order and collect payments, it must know that the acknowledgment exists. Maryland child support workers can obtain this knowledge through one of three mechanisms at present: 1) mother provides affidavit information/copy; 2) automated file match between the Division of Vital Records affidavit database and the Child Support Enforcement System (CSES); and/or 3) contact with the University of Maryland School of Social Work's Voluntary Acknowledgment of Paternity Program (VAPP) faxback service to obtain a hard copy of the paternity acknowledgment, if one does exist.

These mechanisms are reasonably effective in alerting workers about paternity affidavits but they are not perfect. In our study sample, the existence of the paternity acknowledgment was reflected in the automated child support information management system, CSES, in roughly two of every three cases (68.8%, 2,943/4,274).⁵

For purposes of this study, where our intent is to provide a somewhat "pure" examination of child support outcomes for voluntarily-acknowledged children, we exclude the roughly one-third of acknowledged children who were not indicated as such in the automated CSES system (31.1%, 1,331/4,274). Therefore, from the universe of non-marital children born in 2001 who became known to the public child support program before their first birthdays (n=9,722) our analysis groups are: (1) children for whom paternity had been acknowledged and child support was aware of that fact through some means (n=2,943); and (2) children who did not have an affidavit (n = 4,819), resulting in a total sample of 7,762 children.

⁴ "Unmarried" includes cohabiting women.

⁵ This does not necessarily mean that the CSES documentation resulted from the DVR-CSES automated file matching process. CSES documentation could have been done manually by the worker based on information obtained from the custodial parent, the School of Social Work, or other sources.

Data Sources

For this study, we utilize administrative data from two sources, the Child Support Enforcement System (CSES) and the VAPP affidavit database. The nature of these data and their use in this study are described in the following sections.

CSES.

The Child Support Enforcement System (CSES) contains child support data for the state and is the official automated system of record for Maryland's public (i.e. IV-D) child support program. Counties began converting to this system in August 1993 with Baltimore City completing the statewide conversion in March 1998. CSES includes identifying information and demographic data on children, non-custodial parents and custodial parents/custodians receiving services from the IV-D agency. Data on child support cases and court orders, including paternity status and payment receipt, are also available. For the present study, CSES was used to identify the sample and to provide information on child support outcomes.

VAPP.

Under a long-standing inter-agency agreement with the Child Support Enforcement Administration, Maryland Department of Human Resources, the Family Welfare Research and Training Group (FWG) of the University of Maryland's School of Social Work receives copies of paternity affidavit forms directly from the Division of Vital Records (DVR). We maintain a database of these forms, produce paternity acknowledgment reports for state and local child support offices, and provide a fax-back service for local child support agents requiring copies of affidavits in their work.

We used a multi-step process to determine if a paternity acknowledgment had been filed for each child in our sample. First we looked in the automated system, CSES. All children who were not marked in CSES as having an affidavit were then matched with the VAPP database again using a multi-step process. In the first step, the child's first and last names and date-of-birth were used to find exact and potential matches.⁶ In the second step, additional variables (e.g. mother's first and last names) were used to identify which partial matches were, in fact, probable matches and each case was then manually examined to determine if it was the correct study child.

Finally, because any matching process is susceptible to typographical errors in one or both data systems, a random sample of unmatched children ($n = 276$) was selected for further investigation. Specifically, manual searches for these children were done using all available information (e.g., names and dates of birth for child, mother and father). These manual searches yielded only two additional child-affidavit matches, suggesting that children with paternity affidavits who were not found using the above matching procedures likely total less than 1% of the entire sample. The end result is that we are highly confident that the findings of this study are accurate and representative.

⁶ Differences and/or inconsistencies between the two databases in the handling of hyphenated first and/or last names accounted for the vast majority of eventual matches that were not evident in step one of the matching process. This is also a common problem between CSES and the Vital Records databases.

FINDINGS

What did we learn about the child support outcomes of children in the child support caseload whose paternity was acknowledged at birth and how those outcomes differ, if they do, for children whose paternity was established judicially or not at all? We begin by reporting on children's paternity status as reflected in the official system of record, CSES. We then present findings on other child support outcomes, including support order establishment rates and timing, child support payments, and child support arrears.

Paternity Acknowledgment and CSES

Our research sample, as noted in the Methods chapter, consists of 9,093 non-marital children born in 2001 who became known to the Maryland child support program before their first birthdays. Nearly half of them (47.0%, 4,274/9,093) had a confirmed paternity acknowledgment on file at the Division of Vital Records. The fact that paternity had been established via acknowledgment was reflected in CSES, in some fashion, in a bit more than two-thirds of cases (68.8%, 2,943/4,274) by the time of the child's fourth birthday. In about one case in three (31.1%, 1,331/4,274) we could find no evidence in CSES that child support was aware that a paternity acknowledgment was on file and, in most instances, had been for several years.

Because regular file matching between Vital Records and CSES has now been in place for a number of years, this particular finding should be of more than passing concern to child support program managers. At minimum, this finding indicates that there are gaps or deficiencies of some nature in the data matching process between Vital Records and CSES. Our finding that CSES remains unaware of affidavits even several years after their execution also suggests there is room for improvement in existing procedures for periodic recycling of unmatched cases (i.e., subsequent attempts to match originally unmatched cases) and/or in the policies or practices for manually researching unmatched cases or both. The good news is that this situation lends itself to further diagnostic investigation, identification of the specific nature of the problem or problems, and the design and implementation of corrective actions that could address these data-related problems retrospectively as well as prospectively.

All other findings presented in this paper with regard to acknowledged children are only for youngsters with affidavits known to the system. That is, for purposes of this study, we exclude cases where Vital Records had an acknowledgment on file, but CSES was not aware of that fact. However, underscoring all the outcomes reported should be the understanding that, all else equal, any positive benefits found for children with paternity affidavits would also be potentially available for one-third more children merely by improving data matching/management processes.

Paternity Status in CSES

Our first research question concerns the paternity status shown in the child support automated system, CSES, for each child. Specifically, we wanted to determine what paternity status was officially recorded at the end of the four-year follow up period.

Among children for whom CSES did reflect some awareness of the existence of a paternity acknowledgment, the system almost universally did show that paternity had been established (97.8%) and, further, that it had been established via voluntary acknowledgment (94.4%). As shown in the left bar in Figure 1, following, the discrepant cases were those where CSES indicated that the child's paternity was established via a court order (3.4%) or not established at all (2.2%).

There are many reasons why paternity status as recorded in the automated system may appear to contradict the reality that paternity was established via an affidavit, but full exposition of those reasons is beyond the scope of this paper. However, among the obvious possibilities is that, absent knowledge that an acknowledgment was on file, the agency pursued and obtained paternity establishment via court order.

Two other important findings are also illustrated in the right-most bar in Figure 1. The most striking and programmatically relevant of these appears in the top section of the bar. That is, four years later, some 55% of all study children with no verified affidavit on file have not had paternity established through any means, according to CSES. In contrast, only 2% of acknowledged children were recorded as having no legal fathers.

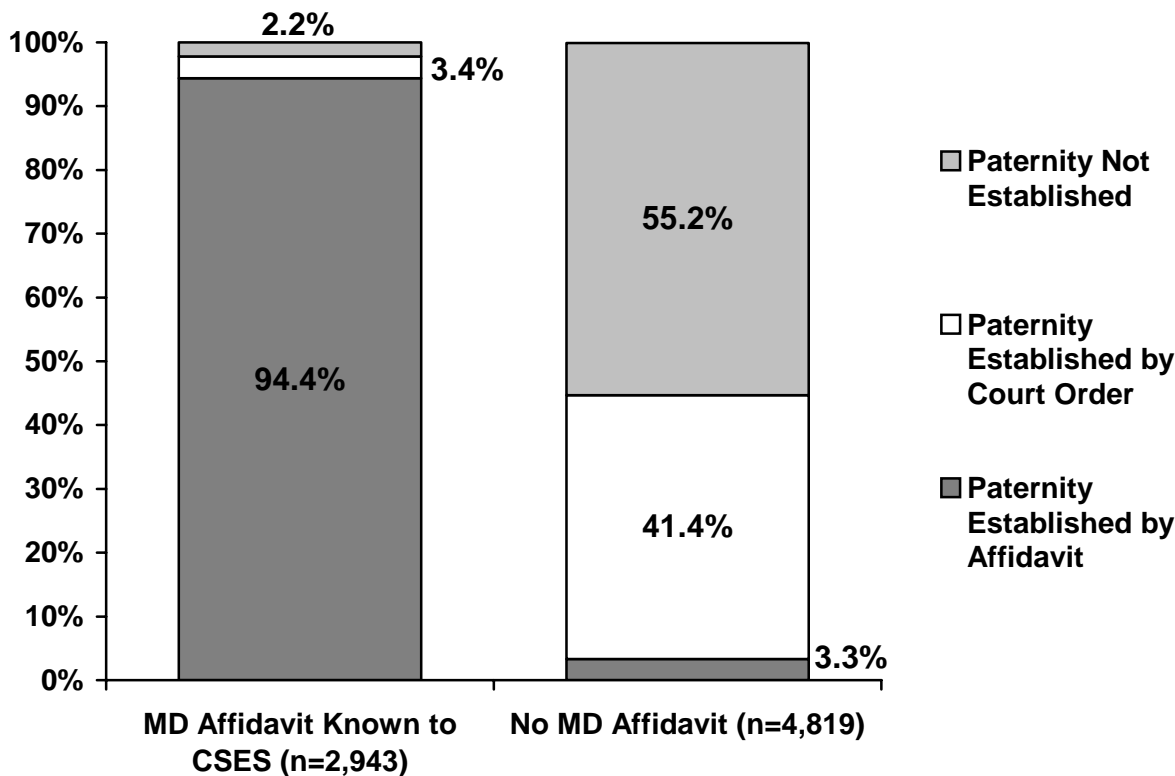
Considered as a whole, the essential point from the Figure 1 depictions is this: four years later and even with discrepant cases considered, children for whom a paternity affidavit had been executed are significantly more likely to appear in CSES as having had paternity established than are nonmarital children without paternity affidavits. The magnitude of the difference is stark: paternity was recorded as established for fully 97.8% of acknowledged, non-marital children versus only 44.7% of non-marital children for whom a paternity acknowledgment had not been filed at or near the time of their birth.

The above statistics alone confirm the value and success of our state's voluntary acknowledgment program. However, they also make it clear that, if paternity is not voluntarily acknowledged at or near the time of the child's birth, it is very unlikely to be done in later years. Similarly, the data also show that when paternity is subsequently established for youngsters who were not acknowledged at the time of birth, it is almost always done through the much more time-consuming and resource-intensive court process. The most striking and perhaps the most important point is that if paternity is not established very early in a child's life, the odds are that it will not be established later. As Figure 1 shows, 55% of unacknowledged children still did not have paternity established by their fourth birthdays.

The straightforward findings reflected in Figure 1 suggest three take-away points for managers. First, it would probably be beneficial in many ways for the state and local program managers to explore ways to increase the number of paternity acknowledgments that are completed at or near the time of birth. Second, it would also be appropriate to consider means and vehicles through which acknowledgment could also be facilitated for older children and to expand the venues (i.e., obstetric clinics, local health departments) in which the acknowledgment program is available. Third, it seems clear that for the present program to operate most effectively and as a pre-condition to program expansion, attention should be given to diagnosing and correcting apparent deficiencies in data matching and/or data management protocols, particularly

vis-à-vis the interface between the Vital Records and child support databases. As part of this effort, attention should also be paid to insuring that all previously executed affidavits are appropriately reflected in the child support automated system.

Figure 1. Paternity Status in CSES by Affidavit Status***



*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Time to Paternity Establishment in CSES

Both common sense and the available research literature suggest that time is of the essence with regard to establishing paternity for a non-marital child, regardless of the method of establishment (i.e., acknowledgment or adjudication). In theory at least, less time elapsing between a child's birth and the establishment of paternity should also result in less overall time required to establish an order for current support. This in turn should lead to the child more quickly receiving financial support from the non-custodial parent and thus increase the total amount of support received over the child's lifetime. Increased receipt of child support could also mean decreased dependence on cash assistance (TANF).

Clearly, this ideal scenario would be of great benefit to the individual child. It would also be of direct and enormous benefit to the state's child support program by increasing performance in multiple areas (i.e., paternity establishment, cases with orders, paying cases) tied to federal performance measures, incentive payments, and fiscal penalties. Voluntary paternity acknowledgments are, in fact, extremely effective in achieving the first stage of the ideal process, shortening the time between birth and paternity

establishment. This is because, in the majority of cases, voluntary paternity acknowledgments are signed within a few days of a child's birth. To illustrate, the paternity acknowledgment was signed within two days of the child's birth for half of the children in our VAPP group.

In order for the next steps in the process (obtain support order, collect support payment) to expeditiously occur, the child support agency, in the form of its automated system, CSES, must be aware of and reflect the fact that paternity has been established via voluntary acknowledgment. In the preceding section of this chapter we have reported that, while CSES' awareness of affidavits is good (68.8%), there is also room for improvement. This data gap notwithstanding, we thought it important to examine whether or not, using CSES data alone, paternity establishment is more quickly reflected in the automated data system for children who were known to have an acknowledgment versus those who really did not have an acknowledgment on file with Vital Records.

We compared the number of months from birth to paternity establishment, according to CSES, for children with and without a paternity acknowledgment. As shown in Table 1, on average it takes a little over half a year from the time of birth (7.9 months) for CSES to reflect paternity establishment for children with an acknowledgment of which the CSES system is aware. However, for children for whom no affidavit has been filed at Vital Records, the notation of paternity establishment in CSES takes twice as long, averaging just over one year (14.5 months) from the time of birth. Importantly, in terms of being able to promptly pursue the next step (support order establishment), the median value shows that the automated system, CSES, reflects the fact of paternity establishment within six months of birth for fully half of all children in the acknowledgment group. For children who were not acknowledged, in contrast, the comparable figure is 11 months, nearly twice as long.

We must point out, however, that in the real world context of child support practice, the above comparison is not really a fair one. That is because, for the children who were not acknowledged, paternity was established through the judicial system, where the processes and requirements are much more time-consuming and resource-intensive for local support agency staff. From this perspective, an average time of 14.5 months is impressive. Nonetheless, the data do confirm that voluntary paternity acknowledgment is the most expeditious way for children to obtain legal fathers and, further, that paternities established via this mechanism do show up in CSES relatively quickly. The data also suggest that, on average, establishing paternities through the courts may take more than twice as long.

It should be noted that the data in Table 1 are for children born in 2001 and reflect child support activities between 2001 and 2005. Since then, some improvements have been made in the process of matching the Division of Vital Records affidavit database to the automated child support system database, CSES. Thus, it is likely that today the time between birth, affidavit completion and the appearance of the affidavit in CSES is even shorter for children, much closer to the reality that their paternity was acknowledged

within the first few days of their lives.⁷ At minimum, the data presented here indicate that the documentation of paternity establishment in the child support automated system is at least twice as fast for children with an affidavit as children without one.

It is also imperative to reiterate our finding that, at least for this cohort of children born outside of marriage in 2001, fully half (55.2%) of those who did not have paternity acknowledged at or near the time of birth still did not appear to have paternity established by their fourth birthdays. For these children, at minimum, we know that if paternity is established, it will have taken at least 49 months and will likely be significantly longer, at least for some.

Table 1. Number of Months from Birth to CSES' Reflection of Paternity Establishment by Affidavit Status

Number of Months to Paternity	Has affidavit (in CSES)	No paternity affidavit (at Vital Records)
Mean	7.9	14.5
Median	6.0	11.0
Standard Deviation	7.5	11.2
Range	0.0 – 49.0	0.0 – 49.0

Current Support Orders

This findings section builds on our previous findings. Here, we consider whether the higher rates of paternity establishment reflected in the automated system (97.8% vs. 44.7%) and shorter time intervals (7.9 months vs. 14.5 months) for children with a voluntary paternity acknowledgment known to child support actually translate into an increased likelihood of having an order for current support, and whether the order is established in less time.

The answer to the first part of the question is a clear yes. Table 2, following, displays data on the percentage of children with an order for current support at any point in the first four years of life and, for those with orders, the average number of months from birth to support order establishment. Children with a paternity affidavit of which CSES is aware are significantly more likely than children without an affidavit to have a final current support order established. Nearly half (45.7%) of children with a known affidavit have a support order established by their fourth birthday. In contrast, only one-third (32.2%) of children in the other group (no affidavit filed with Vital Records) have a support order established within that time frame.

The shorter time between birth and CSES documentation of paternity establishment for acknowledged children does not seem, however, to translate into faster rates of final

⁷ Although, at the time of this writing, further improvements to data matching and data management protocols are needed, it is also likely that the changes already made will have decreased the percentage of actual affidavits on file at Vital Records which should have matched to CSES, but did not (i.e., roughly one child/affidavit in three). The ultimate goal, of course, must be to have matching processes and protocols in place that can be effective in insuring that all children who should match do match.

support order establishment, at least in the first four years of a child’s life. The mean number of months between birth and when CSES reflects that a support order has been established is nearly identical for both groups of children. The mean number of months is 15.1 for children for whom child support was aware that an acknowledgment had been filed and 14.6 months for those for whom paternity had been established through the courts.

For policy makers and program managers, these data confirm a hugely important point that many have long suspected: having a voluntary paternity acknowledgment does significantly increase the odds that an order for current support will be established. Our data show no advantage for acknowledged children in terms of elapsed time to support order establishment, but this would likely change with additional follow up data. That is, two-thirds (67.8%) of children in the other group (no acknowledgment filed with Vital Records) still did not have a support order by their fourth birthday. Thus, we know that, if support orders are finally able to be established for them, their elapsed time between birth and support order establishment can not be less than 49 months. In contrast, only a little more than half (54.3%) of acknowledged children – those who had no current support order at the end of our four year follow-up period - could possibly have that long a period of time between birth and the establishment of an order for current support.

Table 2. Number of Months from Birth to Support Order Establishment by Affidavit Status.

Support Order Information	Has Affidavit (in CSES)	No paternity affidavit (at Vital Records)
Child Has a Final Order***	45.7%	32.2%
Months from Birth to Order Establishment		
Mean	15.1	14.6
Median	12.0	12.0
Standard Deviation	11.4	10.5
Range	1.0 – 48.0	1.0 – 48.0

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Payment of Support

Empirical evidence demonstrates that child support is a crucial source of income for many single-parent families and can significantly reduce the economic hardship children in these families face. Receipt of child support may also make the difference in a single mother’s attempts to exit welfare and be able to remain financially independent. Therefore, child support payment is arguably the ultimate or most important child support outcome. Thus, in the final two sections of this findings chapter, we focus on child support payments for the non-marital children in our sample and, in particular, if payment patterns differ depending on the child’s voluntary paternity acknowledgment status. We first consider the extent to which support obligations are paid and then the extent to which they remain unpaid and arrears accumulate.

Payments to Current Support.

Table 3 presents data on the amount of support due and support payments made for the children in our two sample groups for whom support orders had been established during their first four years of life. We look at the total amounts of support due, the percentage of non-custodial parents paying any of their support obligations, the percentage of the total support obligation paid, and the total dollar amount of payments.

There are both similarities and differences between the two groups. As shown in Table 3 and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, in the first few years after birth, whether paternity was voluntarily acknowledged or adjudicated does not seem to matter with regard to either the total amount of support due or the total amount and percentage of support paid. On average, children in both groups were due roughly \$1600 in current support in the first year and, in both groups, at least some support was paid in seven of 10 cases in that year. On average, in both groups, about half of the year one current support due was paid; the average amounts paid were \$1153 for the acknowledged group and \$1199 for the adjudicated group, respectively.

These patterns remain generally the same over the second, third, and fourth years. As might be expected, however, the average amounts of support due increase over time. In fact, the total amounts due more than double between the first and fourth years (from \$1590 to \$3598 for acknowledged children and from \$1605 to \$3387 for adjudicated children). Furthermore, by year four, the average amount of current support due for acknowledged children (\$3598) is significantly higher than the average for adjudicated children (\$3387).

Given the incremental increases in the amounts of support that should be paid, it is heartening to see that the percent of cases paying any support also increases over time for both groups – from 69.9% to 80.4% in acknowledgment cases and from 71.0% to 77.1% in adjudicated cases. Moreover and quite importantly, by the fourth year, the difference between the two groups in the percent of paying cases is statistically significant. That is, four years later, obligations are significantly more likely to be paid, in whole or in part, for children whose paternity was acknowledged (80.4%) than for children whose paternity was adjudicated (77.1%). Although the differences in years two and three were not statistically significant, Table 3 does show that, in both of those years, the rate of paying cases was consistently higher for acknowledged children than for adjudicated children.

The average total dollar amount of support paid also increases year over year for both groups of children. There are no significant differences between the two groups in the in total amounts paid, but it is notable that, for both groups, the amounts paid in the fourth year were nearly double the amounts paid in the first year. For acknowledgment cases the average amount paid increased from \$1153 to \$2418; among adjudicated cases, the average total amount of support paid increased from \$1199 in year one to \$2394 in year four.

On the other hand, it must be noted that averages are just that and, in fact, are skewed by values (in this case, payments) that are very high or very low. Thus, it is also

appropriate to report the median amounts of support paid. In year one, median support amounts paid were \$777.93 for acknowledged children and \$848.08 for adjudicated children, respectively; in other words, half received more than these amounts and half received less. Median amounts paid also increase over time for both groups such that, in year four, the medians are \$1967 (acknowledged) and \$1892 (adjudicated).

The last section of Table 3 indicates the percent of total current support that was paid during each of the four follow-up years. For the non-marital children in our sample with support orders established, roughly half of total support obligations due are paid in the first year. The percentage paid goes up, albeit incrementally, in each subsequent year such that, for both groups, about 60% of all support due was actually paid in year four. There are no significant differences between the two groups of children on any of these measures.

Table 3. Child Support Payments by Affidavit Status for Established Support Orders

	Has Paternity Affidavit(in CSES)				No Paternity Affidavit (at Vital Records)			
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Total Current Support Owed								
Mean	\$1590.29	\$3077.18	\$3413.26	\$3598.23*	\$1605.38	\$2921.14	\$3260.95	\$3386.70
Median	\$1267.50	\$2460.00	\$2706.00	\$2868.00	\$1328.00	\$2292.00	\$2712.00	\$2833.02
Standard Deviation	\$1495.06	\$2366.45	\$2393.58	\$2496.37	\$1490.26	\$2132.95	\$2169.48	\$2179.21
Minimum	\$50.00	\$50.00	\$100.00	\$70.00	\$22.00	\$65.00	\$76.00	\$50.00
Maximum	\$14,586.00	\$19,448.00	\$19,444.00	\$23,106.00	\$22,000.00	\$24,000.00	\$24,000.00	\$24,000
Total Support Paid								
% paying any support	69.9%	79.0%	79.4%	80.4%*	71.0%	76.3%	76.6%	77.1%
Mean	\$1,153.46	\$2,058.22	\$2,362.86	\$2,418.05	\$1,199.30	\$2,029.01	\$2,303.32	\$2,393.82
Median	\$777.93	\$1,515.00	\$1,840.00	\$1,967.17	\$848.08	\$1,425.00	\$1,714.00	\$1,891.71
Standard Deviation	\$1,215.97	\$2,009.25	\$2,113.53	\$2,116.10	\$1,375.00	\$2,172.25	\$2,262.46	\$2,351.24
Minimum	\$11.29	\$1.00	\$10.29	\$0.15	\$7.27	\$3.89	\$4.22	\$10.00
Maximum	\$8,956.00	\$13480.00	\$13,480.00	\$13,572.00	\$12,856.29	\$22,760.41	\$22,051.73	\$24,462.77
% of Current Support Paid								
Mean	52.8%	56.9%	60.2%	59.9%	52.8%	56.3%	59.7%	59.4%
Median	53.4%	59.4%	65.0%	63.8%	52.7%	58.0%	65.2%	66.1%
Standard Deviation	29.1%	31.1%	32.1%	32.2%	29.2%	31.3%	32.6%	34.2%
Minimum	1.3%	1.4%	1.5%	1.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.0%	1.0%
Maximum	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Payment to Current Arrears.

In this section, we shift our focus from current support payments to obligations that are not paid (i.e., arrears). Our interest is to determine whether arrears amounts differ depending on whether paternity was voluntarily acknowledged or court established. Arrears can be owed to the custodial parent or to the state as reimbursement for the cost of welfare and other services provided to children. For this reason and because Maryland just enacted legislation that, under certain conditions, will allow state-owed arrears to be abated, Table 4 separately presents data on arrears owed to custodians and arrears owed to the state, as well as total arrears owed.

Table 4 is an excellent illustration of a reality known all too well to front-line child support agents: support not paid when it is due is unlikely to be paid later and, as a result, arrears balances can accumulate rather quickly. For both groups of children, arrears owed to the custodial parent, arrears owed to the state, and total arrears increase appreciably during our four-year follow up period. With regard to total arrears, to illustrate, the average first year amount among acknowledged children was \$504 and among adjudicated children, \$607, a difference of roughly \$100 in absolute terms. By year four, total arrears had risen to \$3196 and \$3776 for the two groups, respectively and the gap between them had widened (to roughly \$600).

There are a few statistically significant and programmatically relevant differences between the two groups. First and foremost and as shown in the top third of Table 4, in each of the four years, total arrears owed in acknowledged cases are significantly lower than total arrears owed in adjudicated cases. Similarly, total arrears owed to custodial parents are also significantly lower in each of the four years in cases where paternity had been acknowledged. In year one, for example, custodian-owed arrears were \$296 for acknowledged children, compared to \$387 for adjudicated children. In contrast, we find no significant differences in the average amount of state-owed arrears in any of the four years. State-owed arrears, on average, are roughly \$200, \$500, \$900, and \$1200 in each of the first through four years, respectively, for both groups of children.

The findings that children whose fathers voluntarily acknowledged paternity at or near the time of their birth have significantly lower total arrears and significantly lower custodian-owed arrears in all four years are heartening and important. These findings are particularly noteworthy because, as discussed previously, the total support amounts due did not differ significantly between the two groups. It is beyond the power of this descriptive study to assert that the fact of acknowledging paternity is the 'cause' of these positive findings with regard to arrears, but there is at the very least a correlation.

It should be noted that variations in local child support and judicial practice with regard to paternity adjudication and support order establishment no doubt exercise some degree of influence on study results with regard to arrears. Under Maryland law, for example, courts may order support back to the date on which the complaint for support was filed. In most situations, this would cause a case to start out with arrears. Courts are not required to order support back to the filing date, however, and some do not. Another possibility is that fathers who sign voluntary paternity acknowledgments may be more likely to provide informal support before an order is established and the court takes this into account when determining the support order effective date.

Additional research would be needed to determine which of the above or other hypotheses best explain the reality of arrears accumulation in cases such as these. However, these findings with regard to arrears do offer additional support for the need to enhance and expand our state's voluntary paternity acknowledgment program and to make certain that data matching and data management protocols are such that all acknowledgments are captured and reflected in the child support automated system. Study findings also provide additional empirical evidence that, in terms of child support program performance measures, voluntary paternity acknowledgments can have far-reaching, positive, and potentially long-lasting effects. The bottom-line is that unmarried fathers who voluntarily acknowledge paternity accumulate less child support debt over an extended period of time, even if the voluntary paternity acknowledgment program may not directly be the factor preventing arrears accumulation.

The overarching programmatic implication of this finding is that the voluntary paternity acknowledgment program should not just be viewed as a tool that can help a state meet federal paternity establishment performance thresholds. Rather, it should be conceptually approached, as well as proactively managed and monitored, as a program tool that, if widely available and publicized, efficiently operated, and taking full advantage of information technology possibilities, can yield beneficial results in nearly all areas in which performance is measured and financially rewarded or penalized. Taking steps to maximize the benefits of the voluntary paternity acknowledgment program to the public child support program, of course, would also have great positive value for the ultimate and most important beneficiaries of both programs: the nearly 40% of our state's children who, each year, are born outside of marriage.

Table 4. Child Support Arrears by Affidavit Status

	Has Paternity Affidavit (in CSES)				No Paternity Affidavit (at Vital Records)			
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Total Arrears Owed								
Mean	\$503.85*	\$1,397.99**	\$2,312.30***	\$3,196.18**	\$606.94	\$1,652.30	\$2,696.02	\$3,775.96
Median	\$0.00	\$457.86	\$825.06	\$1,373.01	\$0.00	\$771.82	\$1,348.57	\$1,901.00
Standard Deviation	\$1169.49	\$2,141.99	\$3,239.84	\$4,254.79	\$1,403.56	\$2,362.01	\$3,405.31	\$4,779.43
Range	\$0-\$24,364	\$0-\$25,462	\$0-\$32,980	\$0-\$33,660	\$0-\$27,338	\$0-\$28,067	\$0-\$28,448	\$0-\$41,261
Arrears Owed to Custodian								
Mean	\$295.67*	\$877.93**	\$1,389.80***	\$2,023.46**	\$387.05	\$1,080.58	\$1,765.46	\$2,464.68
Median	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$179.46	\$393.20	\$0.00	\$98.18	\$331.41	\$476.05
Standard Deviation	\$805.95	\$1,680.07	\$2,451.94	\$3,338.88	\$1224.21	\$2,053.89	\$2,949.93	\$4,143.07
Range	\$0-\$14,566	\$0-\$12,677	\$0-\$19,864	\$0-\$28,652	\$0-\$27,338	\$0-\$28,067	\$0-\$28,448	\$0-\$41,261
Arrears Owed to the State								
Mean	\$208.18	\$520.06	\$922.50	\$1,172.71	\$219.89	\$571.71	\$930.56	\$1,311.28
Median	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Standard Deviation	\$724.13	\$1,472.38	\$2,428.38	\$2,970.79	\$724.13	\$1,477.01	\$2,207.04	\$2,980.54
Range	\$0-\$10,074	\$0-\$25,462	\$0-\$32,980	\$0-\$27,191	\$0-\$10,401	\$0-\$13,968	\$0-\$18,032	\$0-\$24,772

*p < .05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

CONCLUSIONS

Voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs, in particular hospital-based programs, have, since their inception in the mid-1990s, become the single most common method through which paternity is established for children born outside of marriage. As such these programs have also become invaluable to public child support programs in their efforts to meet federal performance standards, avoid fiscal penalties, and maximize the receipt of federal incentive payments. Despite their importance for children and for public child support programs, there has been relatively little research into voluntary paternity acknowledgment programs and the longer-term child support outcomes for children in the child support caseload whose paternity is established through this mechanism at or near the time of birth. The relatively few studies which have been done have suffered a variety of methodological limitations. Today's study builds upon and is an important addition to the existing literature. Because of our access to affidavit data as well as child support data and our ability to consider outcomes over an extended period of time (four years), this is the largest and most methodologically rigorous study of the real-world outcomes of voluntary paternity acknowledgment, to the best of our knowledge.

What do we conclude as a result of this study? First and foremost, study findings make it crystal-clear that, in a child support context, the benefits of voluntary paternity acknowledgment are many and long-lasting. Results suggest that a high-quality, high-yield paternity acknowledgment program can be beneficial in virtually all areas where performance is federally measured and fiscal incentive payments and penalties are assessed. Most simply stated, we find that when paternity is acknowledged voluntarily, that fact is significantly more likely to be reflected in the child support automated system (CSES) and, by their fourth birthdays, acknowledged children are significantly more likely than other non-marital children to have an order for current support order in place. In addition, four years later, significantly more fathers who acknowledged paternity were making at least some current support payments. Moreover, fathers who acknowledged their children at or near the time of birth accumulate significantly less child support debt over an extended period of time than do fathers for whom paternity was judicially-determined. Even though the total amounts of support due were the same, both total arrears and arrears owed to custodial parents are significantly less in acknowledged cases than in adjudicated cases. On a less sanguine note, the data show that the automate system, CSES, appeared unaware that a paternity acknowledgement had been filed in roughly one of three cases.

These results have several important implications for research, policy, program development and program management and monitoring. Chief among these is that while our state's voluntary paternity program is a good one, it could be better; the good news is that there are some fairly straightforward corrective action and/or program improvement steps that could be taken. In terms of areas for improvement, the most obvious and pressing one is that of data matching and data management. Regular file matching is done between the Division of Vital Records' acknowledgment database and the child support automated system, CSES. However, the fact that – four years later – CSES appears unaware of the existence of roughly one in three acknowledgments filed at Vital Records should be a matter of managerial concern and priority action. The

good news is that the precise nature of the problems and the appropriate corrective actions should be able to be identified through the use of existing empirical data. Specifically, the first step should be a universe file match between the Vital Records database and the VAPP database. This should reveal the true magnitude of the problem or problems and their nature and, almost certainly, would also provide useful information about steps that should be taken to both correct historical problems and prevent the lion's share of future ones.

A second important implication is that, unquestionably, it would be in the best interest of the child support program and the State of Maryland to try and extend the demonstrated positive, long-term effects of the voluntary paternity acknowledgment program to even more non-marital children. Currently, voluntary paternity acknowledgments are filed in about two of every three non-marital Maryland births. Compared to other states, this is more than a respectable rate of performance and speaks well of the considerable and ongoing efforts of child support, Vital Records, and hospital personnel to run a quality paternity acknowledgment program.

The benefits of very early establishment of paternity are so many and so powerful, however, that attempts to increase our current acknowledgment rate should continue and be expanded. One fruitful avenue would be to explore ways to increase acknowledgments among groups which have been underrepresented (e.g., younger parents, minority parents). Another would be to expand the venues in which information about paternity acknowledgment is made available (e.g., obstetrical clinics). Expanding the venues in which actual execution of paternity acknowledgment can be done should also be explored, albeit carefully and incrementally because of the legal requirements and long-term ramifications of establishing paternity through this mechanism, as well as the policy, training and other resource requirements that would be associated with program expansion.

The most general conclusion from this study is that, in its relatively short existence, the Maryland voluntary paternity acknowledgment program has had numerous, far-reaching, and long-lasting benefits for our state's children and our state's child support program. Children whose parents avail themselves of the opportunity to establish paternity at or near the time of birth are more likely to have child support orders, are more likely to receive financial support from their absent parents, and are less likely to have large arrears balances. Child support benefits greatly from the voluntary paternity acknowledgment program on many of the performance measures of which it is held accountable by the federal government. Notwithstanding these positive outcomes, however, study results also show there is room for improvement. Issues related to inter-agency data matching and data management protocols clearly warrant investigation and prompt corrective action, while strategies to expand the availability and benefits of voluntary paternity acknowledgment to even more of our state's children is an area of great opportunity. By building on the strong foundation and partnerships that already exist, we are confident that, even in this time of fiscal uncertainty and budgetary constraints, the needed 'next steps' in the evolution and enhancement of Maryland's program can be accomplished. Taking these steps, of course, would not only benefit child support but, more importantly, the nearly 40% of our state's children who are born outside of marriage each year.

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