



# Barriers to Unmarried Father Involvement During Infancy: Qualitative Study from Professionals' Perspectives

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## Abstract

**Introduction** Unmarried fathers in the U.S. face barriers to establishing a relationship with their newborn children that married fathers do not confront. Our study was implemented to determine how systems and services could be modified to better support the engagement of unmarried fathers. **Methods** We conducted interviews with 35 professionals who interact with primarily low-income unmarried mothers and fathers to elicit their perceptions of such barriers. We developed a social ecological model to inform the study design and used purposive sampling with chain referrals to ensure a wide breadth of perspectives. Themes and subthemes categorizing personal and environmental factors were placed within five nested categories corresponding to different levels of influence on unmarried fathers' behaviors: public policy, community, institutions, interpersonal relationships, and intrapersonal characteristics, and their intersections. **Results** Participants challenged as inaccurate the stereotype of unmarried fathers as disengaged and uninterested in being involved with their children. Rather, they described the marginalization and devaluing of unmarried fathers by government policies and family service systems and programs and also the dearth of resources available to them. They called on decision makers to adjust policies and services to be more inclusive of unmarried fathers, to promote father engagement more actively, and to urge direct service providers to respond to fathers as valued individuals. **Discussion** Adapting to the common reality of nonmarital childbearing will entail a systematic shift in the integration of ways in which we value, understand, include, and serve fathers.

**Keywords** Qualitative research · Unmarried father involvement · Social ecological model

## Significance

*What is already known.*

Nonmarital parenting is increasing, and while children benefit from quality relationships with both parents, unmarried fathers face barriers to establishing a formal parenting relationship that married fathers do not.

*What this study adds.*

This study is the first we know of to create a rich, multi-dimensional description of barriers experienced by expectant and new unmarried fathers as observed by representatives of the many agencies designed to serve them. This study describes the larger context in which gender bias plays

out to the detriment of fathers across multiple levels of systems that are working to support families.

## Introduction

Children benefit when they have quality relationships with both parents (Adamsons and Johnson 2013); the benefits of father involvement, particularly in infancy and early childhood, have been recognized for decades (Alio et al. 2010; Coleman et al. 2004). However, in the U.S., unmarried fathers face barriers to establishing a formal parental relationship with their newborn children that married fathers do not confront. Since 1996, as part of national welfare reform, a federal law has required that an unmarried father sign a voluntary acknowledgment of paternity in order to have his name added to his child's birth certificate (Public Law 104–193). The voluntary paternity establishment process most commonly occurs in a hospital or birthing center (Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2006) where it is required by federal

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law to be offered (Public Law 103–66). Legal paternity obligates a father to pay child support if the mother is a recipient of Temporary Aid to Needy Families (Waller and Plotnick 2001) but does not typically grant rights to custody or parenting time. By law in 15 states or by custom in others, the mother automatically gets legal custody at birth and the father must petition the court for custody or parenting time (Huntington 2015).

In the U.S., federal and state policies related to paternity establishment, child support, and welfare assistance are based on long-held societal views of the father's primary role as a financial provider (Huntington 2015). They also reflect a general belief that unmarried fathers are not interested in parenting their children, a pervasive stereotype (Hines and Boyd-Franklin 2005) which runs counter to the reality that at the time of birth, an overwhelming majority of unmarried fathers as well as mothers report a desire for fathers to have such a relationship (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2000).

Births to unmarried parents in the U.S comprised 40% of 1.6 million births in 2015 (Martin et al. 2017), including 70% of births to black mothers, 66% of births to American Indian mothers, 53% of births to Hispanic mothers, 29% of births to non-Hispanic white mothers, and 16% of births to Asian/Pacific Islander mothers. Proportions of births that were nonmarital were much higher among teen mothers (89%) and mothers in their 20s (50%) than among mothers age 30 or older (23%). The majority (62%) of nonmarital births were to mothers in their 20s. Comparable demographic data for nonmarital fathers are not available from birth records or other sources.

The longitudinal U.S. Fragile Families study (Robert Woods Johnson Foundation 2014) identified some of the disadvantages of unmarried parents relative to married parents: they were more likely to become parents at a younger age, to have had children with other partners, to suffer from depression or substance abuse, to be poor or less educated, and to have spent more time in jail; their relationships were also more likely to end earlier. Given changing norms related to marriage and parenting roles, legal scholars make cogent arguments that government should play a role in strengthening functional co-parenting relationships among unmarried parents so both mothers and fathers can provide the healthy relationships crucial to child development (Huntington 2015).

The research reported here is part of a broader study in a U.S. metropolitan area that emerged from a series of community-based focus groups (unpublished data) seeking input on better ways to serve expectant and new parents. In response to parents' recommendations, a randomized control trial of a father advocate intervention to complement perinatal home visiting services was designed and implemented; analyses of results of that study are underway. Anecdotal

reports from participants and service providers involved in that study identified some barriers specific to unmarried fathers being fully engaged during their partners' pregnancy and after childbirth. In response, the research team designed a complementary qualitative study to more formally elicit perspectives from unmarried parents and the individuals who serve them. The parents' perspectives on the acknowledgment of paternity process have been reported elsewhere (Rebman et al. 2018). This report focuses on the perceptions of professionals serving in a variety of government agency, human services, or advocacy roles to determine how systems and services could be modified to better support the engagement of expect and new unmarried fathers.

## Methods

The study was conducted by research staff from a local public health agency in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul Metropolitan area in Minnesota, USA, in accord with ethical standards. An institutional review board determined the study to be exempt from IRB review. We followed the COREQ (Tong et al. 2007) criteria for reporting qualitative research. Interviews were conducted by the second author (a male research assistant) under the supervision of the principal investigator (third author). The lead author, a co-investigator, provided training on qualitative research data collection and led the analyses.

## Study Design and Data Collection

The semi-structured interview guide included questions about participants' experience working with unmarried fathers, perceived barriers to father involvement around the time of childbirth, and suggestions for reducing identified barriers. Based on familiarity with government and community-based services, the authors first identified a small pool of prospective participants and then used purposive selection with chain referrals seeking information-rich sources to ensure a wide breadth of perspectives (Polkinghorne 2005; Patton 1990). Initial contact was made via phone or email using a script to ensure consistency of study description; interview questions were provided to participants ahead of time. Interviews typically lasted about an hour and were conducted privately, usually in participants' offices. Interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed; authors reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. During the interviewing phase, the researchers assessed the data using field notes to ensure a range of perspectives were included and data saturation was reached.

## Analysis

To inform the analysis plan, we developed a social ecological model based on preliminary analysis of initial interviews. Data coding and analyses were conducted inductively by the first two authors using Braun and Clark's Stages of Thematic Analysis (2006) in NVivo software version 9, informed by a social constructionist approach by which themes were allowed to emerge, but took into account outside influences on the analytic process (Charmaz 2006). The unit of analysis was the experiences described by participants. Themes and subthemes categorize personal and environmental factors observed by participants that limit the ability of an unmarried father to take action to develop a custodial parenting relationship with his child after childbirth. Themes were iteratively developed into a social ecology framework around multi-leveled opportunities for change (Stokols 1996) and shared with participants and others in the professions represented in the sample. The final codebook reflected five levels of the social ecologic model (Public Policy, Community, Institutional, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal Factors). Each level was assigned the structural issue identified by participants (e.g., structure—paternity establishment) and contained two to three themes (e.g., father frustration) and four to six subthemes (e.g., organization reacts negatively). Our analysis used a consequential matrix as a conceptual guide (Corbin and Strauss 1998) to trace the interplay between the levels, how participants perceived fathers' experiences, their reactions to their experiences, and the consequences of those responses.

## Results

The 35 study participants included 21 individuals who provided direct services to mothers, fathers, families, or children primarily through community-based agencies; 12 individuals who worked for state or county government agencies in the areas of human services, child support, correction systems, and child protective services; and two university faculty members.

Many participants spontaneously described unmarried fathers' excitement and joy at the prospect of fatherhood and their commitment to stay involved in their children's lives. One participant from a father advocacy agency described men working with her program:

The guys we work with, when they get that custody, you should see their faces. That's like the biggest victory that they could ever win. It's like them winning the lottery, because "now," they say, "now I have been recognized by the system. That's my child and I can see my child. I can take care of my child the way I want to." And that is a huge, huge victory [P5].

However, participants also described many barriers to involvement that arose from factors related to public policy, community factors, institutions, interpersonal relationships, and intrapersonal characteristics, as well as the connections and interactions among these factors. They identified barriers that apply to all unmarried fathers, but emphasized repeatedly that barriers are much more difficult to surmount if the father is a person of color, has less formal education, or has a low income.

## Public Policy Factors

Participants identified government policies related to paternity establishment, paternal child custody and parenting time, receipt of public assistance, the father's obligation to pay child support, and the intersections between them. Participants were aware of the government's primary interest in facilitating the collection of child support as well as the parents' appreciation of the symbolic value of legal fatherhood. Nonetheless, some were ambivalent about whether unmarried fathers should sign the paternity acknowledgment form following childbirth and some even recommended that they not do so, because of the potential for incurring financial obligations without rights to custody or parenting time. One participant stated: "...there are plenty of people now—father advocates—who will tell you that's the wrong decision. That once the father signs that recognition of parentage, he should be a presumed custodial parent" [P12].

Another participant commented: "I would talk to people who would say, yeah, but she's the mom. And you know I would say, yeah, but he's the dad" [P28]. Some noted that having to go to court to establish paternal custody may delay the father's involvement with his child during early infancy, a period critical for building emotional attachment.

Participants uniformly believed the court process to establish custody and parenting time to be time consuming and expensive. A legal service provider described the emotional impact on the parents: "It's daunting, especially when it's concerning such an important relationship.... that a complete stranger is going to determine the quantity of your relationship, possibly the quality of your relationship with your child. That's scary" [P30].

Participants frequently mentioned the child support process as a barrier to father involvement, citing a range of challenges. They did not believe most fathers were unwilling to financially support their children; they believed they were unable to. They also felt that both parents generally preferred to have the father support the family directly, without the involvement of the government because that gave them flexibility to adjust the child support amount to their current situations. One perinatal home visitor explained that many of the mothers she worked with preferred this arrangement: "...moms feel like, I'm better off getting that money from

him, because if you go to court then they say you have to pay, then you pay to the court. You don't pay directly to the mom....And then nobody's in your life. That's another big thing. Nobody wants to be watched, or told what to do" [P04]. Participants also described cases in which fathers preferred to buy items directly instead of providing cash because they feared that mothers would not use the child support payments for the child's needs. They also stated that sometimes a father preferred to take care of his child's specific needs, enjoying the parental duties of picking up diapers or a winter coat.

Participants reported that child support often created tension between parents, and that mothers would threaten fathers with child support unless they met certain demands or expectations. One participant, speaking about whether fathers stay involved with their children after their romantic relationships end, said, "I do see some still involved, as long as the other half doesn't put them on child support.... Once that happens, that's when the fighting starts" [P05]. Participants also noted that some fathers blamed the mothers for putting them on child support because they did not understand that mothers are required to cooperate with government agencies as a condition of receiving public assistance. Participants also questioned the benefit of requiring mothers to assign to the state the right to collect child support on their behalf because the amount of public assistance the mother receives is reduced by the amount of the child support award the father pays:

So you talk about how do fathers learn that they're not important ... the only reason the federal government and the county government have historically been interested in fathers is for child support. And not even child support for the kid, but child support to reimburse welfare costs. It doesn't do a damn bit of good for the family, the kid, the mom, or the dad. That's our policy. That's why dads don't feel like they're important [P12].

### Community Factors

Community factors relate to the relationships among organizations and institutions. Participants saw navigating family court, child support, and other social service systems and their interactions as a formidable endeavor, with some noting the absence of advocacy services and the sometimes inhospitable nature of staff working in these systems. One father advocate explained, "If you don't have somebody to help guide you through, [a father] can often get lost and become discouraged and then just put up his hands like, 'this is too much'" [P27].

Participants described how racial and gender discrimination adversely affected father involvement, specifically noting the effect of historical trauma resulting from separation of families in African American and American Indian

communities. They attributed strained relationships between people of color and systems to a long history of discriminatory policies. As one explained, "They [fathers] come in angry because of the messages that they're hearing out there, because they feel like they can't do anything right. They feel like everybody's against them. [...] And then you got generations of distrust about the system... about the courts" [P20].

### Institutional Factors

A variety of institutions affect father involvement through their formal and informal operational rules. Participants stated that many "family" social service and legal assistance agencies did not have any services for fathers. As one participant explained: "... 'family' means mom and children... So dad's out of the picture. Even if dad is in the picture, dad is out of the picture" [P07]. Another participant described the situation with striking similarity: "We don't do nothing with fathers. There's organizations all over the country that have a title 'family' in it, and don't do nothing with fathers. Matter of fact, in some cases, they're scared to death to have men show up" [P14].

Participants also noted a systemic lack of services targeted specifically to fathers, driven by a lack of funding and training. Speaking of the discordance between funding and interest, one participant commented, "We did try to include dads in our program and we couldn't because that's not where the money was. We had one opportunity to include the dads... and all the dads came. They all came" [P10].

Participants generally concurred that service systems had been created to support outcomes that benefit mothers more than fathers:

... if she has a child, she gets assistance and resources, and then she gets directed to go to work and get training and put in a position to be able to become gainfully employed or get trained to better her earning potential....What happens with him? A child support case is automatically opened. So she gets help and resources, he gets debt [P35].

One participant also noted the adverse consequences on providers when they are exposed solely or predominantly to mothers' perspectives, believing that she herself had been conditioned to side with mothers and generally perceive unmarried fathers negatively. Even in agencies that served both parents, participants described services that were supportive for mothers, but felt punitive or controlling for fathers. One participant explained:

...there's programs, they'll say, 'all right dad, you gotta get your GED, you gotta do something with the criminal record. You gotta get your butt a job. You gotta pay child support. You gotta, you gotta, you gotta.' And the mom's [program] is really supportive ... saying, 'moms and kids

you come in through the front door, dad you're coming through the side or the back' [P02].

Participants also described the exclusion of fathers at prenatal care visits and in the childbirth setting: "If you're there for those doctor visits, you're not really a part of the conversation. The provider doesn't really talk to you and they don't really base any conversation around the fact that you are in the home or anything like that. It's always directed to the mother" [P14].

A legal aid worker described her observations about legal institutions:

...what I found personally is that when a guy goes into a courtroom with no lawyer, which most of our clients cannot afford a lawyer, and zero support, they normally get what I call steamrolled by the court system. They just get ran over. ... Well I'll be blunt about it. The judicial officers, I think, that make a lot of these decisions, they kind of look right past a guy if there's nobody with him [P11].

Gender and racial and gender discrimination were identified as having an adverse impact on the experiences of unmarried fathers when they were seeking custody and parenting time. Participants perceived that family court was biased in favor of awarding mothers with custody and parenting time and that law enforcement was more likely to enforce a parenting time order for a mother than a father. One participant described how African American fathers have an even greater burden to prove their case: "They're under pressure ... They feel like they're the one being judged. And then based on the history of the black community, you know from hearing other people and family members get negative vibes ... on these results from the court ... they are urged by family members, don't go to court" [P11]. Another participant noted how some of her co-workers were afraid of African American and Native American men and were more likely to interpret their behaviors as aggressive or violent, resulting in these men not receiving adequate services.

### Interpersonal Factors

Father involvement was also influenced through formal and informal social networks, including family, friends, and other social supports. Participants identified the quality of the co-parenting relationship as one of the most critical determinants in either facilitating or impeding father involvement, especially if co-parents struggle with or terminate their romantic relationship. In many cases, when the parents' relationship was poor, a mother would act as a gatekeeper, impeding the father's involvement by refusing to allow him to see his child, criticizing his parenting, or making his parenting time conditional on his ability to meet various demands. In one fatherhood service provider's analysis: "I'd have to say most commonly I saw the mom putting up large barriers... making the child unavailable, not answering

the phone, not answering the door" [P09]. Because many parents at the time of childbirth did not expect their relationships to end, they did not formally pursue custody and parenting time for the father. Consequently, when they ended their romantic relationship, they had to try to negotiate parenting time in a period of typically increased acrimony.

Participants reported that having children from multiple relationships increased the challenges of managing interpersonal and family dynamics. They described common patterns of maternal gatekeeping when either parent started a new relationship. When a father got a new partner, the mother would not want that woman around her child out of concern for the child's safety or jealousy. When the mother got a new partner, she would try to create a new nuclear family involving him and would discourage involvement from the biological father. One participant said, "You often hear, 'you know what, I've already got a man in my life, and that man's willing to help care for this child also. So why do I need a third person involved in this?'" [P30].

Participants observed that extended family members, peers, and community members also influence unmarried father involvement, sometimes by providing misinformation about government systems and public policies. As one fatherhood service provider explained:

You've got misinformation from dads, and uncles, and grandparents saying they [child support officials] just took all my money. So when you're working with a father, you have to understand that is religion to them. That comes from everybody who ever raised them .... That is coming from people who they love and trust, so it's hard to combat that [P20].

The mother's relatives, especially her own mother, may wield a great deal of influence in terms of facilitating or discouraging father involvement either directly by supporting the father or indirectly by influencing the mother. Because public policy, community, and institutions favor mothers, maintaining interpersonal relationships may be essential to an unmarried father's ability to remain involved in his child's life.

### Intrapersonal Factors

Individual characteristics of an unmarried father may be a barrier to formal co-parenting and these factors often interact with interpersonal and institutional factors. Specifically, participants noted that unmarried fathers often knew little about the legal systems pertaining to unmarried parenthood. For example, some fathers assumed that they automatically received joint physical and legal custody of the child after voluntarily acknowledging their paternity and therefore had not taken any actions to legally establish custody. Other fathers thought a verbal agreement with the mother was

sufficient to allow them to spend time with their child and did not understand the value of a court order.

Participants reported that fathers' struggles were compounded by a lack of communication and self-advocacy skills needed to effectively navigate the systems they depended on. One explained: "What frustrates the father who cannot comprehend or speak to the level of the system that has been created ... they don't know how to approach any of those barriers ... so it makes it hard for them to speak their mind without coming off as angry or aggressive or belligerent" [P08]. Participants from a range of organizations witnessed how fathers' attempts at self-advocacy often backfired because agency staff would negatively interpret the father's statements and behavior when he became frustrated.

## Discussion

Barriers that impede father involvement undervalue co-parenting as contrasted with mothering (Panter-Brick et al. 2014). We believe this is the first study to create a rich, multi-dimensional description of the barriers experienced by expectant and new unmarried fathers as observed by representatives of the many agencies designed to serve them.

Study participants acknowledged the stereotype of unmarried fathers as "deadbeat dads" but offered a very different portrait of unmarried fathers' commitment to fatherhood based on their experiences with them and the mothers of their children. From their perspective, the fathers with whom they interacted, predominantly men with low incomes and from marginalized groups, wanted meaningful relationships with their children but faced a myriad of impediments that stymied their considerable efforts. Participants also described the limitations of their own efforts to provide services and support, acknowledging that the availability and effectiveness of their work occurs within an environment influenced by public policy and institutional barriers beyond their control. They were keenly aware that in U.S. society, low-income men and men of color are particularly disadvantaged.

Not only does an unmarried father feel devalued; he has little access to resources and support. Consequently, his ability to demonstrate his commitment and ability to care for his child is compromised and his paternal relationship becomes highly dependent on his co-parent's willingness to collaborate. Some participants observed that the system as a whole is so difficult to work through that even if a father does everything asked of him, he may still have no way to protect his relationship with his children. To benefit children and to foster effective co-parenting relationships, participants called on decision makers to adjust policies and services to be more inclusive of unmarried fathers, to promote

father engagement more actively, and to urge direct service providers to respond to fathers as valued individuals. These local recommendations align with those based on a comprehensive global review of parenting intervention evaluations which calls for "a game change" in engaging fathers (Panter-Brick et al. 2014) by addressing, among other factors, institutional, professional, and policy gender biases and moving away from the deficit model that sees fathers as ineffective or neglectful as parents.

Despite the importance of these findings, they have several limitations. First, the sampling technique may have overestimated the level of consensus among participants to the extent they referred others with similar opinions. Second, the findings are not generalizable to other countries, or even to all states or localities within the U.S. While we believe many of these barriers exist elsewhere since they are defined by U.S. policies and larger social dynamics, each community has its own unique challenges and the nuances of how the barriers are experienced by fathers may play out differently. Future research should be done to more directly compare the experiences of middle- or high-income fathers with low-income fathers or compare the perspectives of professionals who explicitly interact mainly with mothers in order to further discussion on barriers to unmarried fathers' involvement with their children.

Recognizing and defining the range and intersections of barriers to father involvement in infancy and throughout childhood is essential for policymakers, program planners, and service providers who share the goal of facilitating effective co-parenting among unmarried co-parents for the ultimate benefit of their children. Adapting to the common reality of nonmarital childbearing will entail a systematic shift in the integration of ways in which we value, understand, include, and serve fathers.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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