

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Fathers in the First Few Months: A Study Of Unmarried Parents and Their Children

Children whose fathers are involved in their lives perform better across nearly every measure of well-being. For children of married parents, this involvement is often a given; for children of unmarried parents though, the father-child connection may be more tenuous. To better understand the nature of unmarried fathers' involvement with their children, CFRP surveyed more than 800 Texas mothers who had recently given birth outside of marriage. The data show that roughly a quarter of unmarried fathers are completely uninvolved in their children's lives just three months after birth. Further analysis reveals that low involvement is often foreshadowed by several key signs, including troubled parental relationships, family violence, and a failure to establish paternity at the hospital when the child is born. The mother's hospital stay can serve as a point of intervention for policies to improve the level and quality of support for children of unmarried parents. Policymakers should focus on providing mothers at that time with information on how to access child support and make visitation arrangements through the court system, particularly when family violence is present.

When fathers are involved in their children's lives, children do better across nearly every measure of wellbeing, from cognitive development and educational achievement to self-esteem and pro-social behavior. Though there is little question that children benefit from engaged and committed fathers, roughly 2 in 5 children in the U.S. are born to unmarried parents. Over time, fathers in these fragile families are less likely to remain in their children's lives, jeopardizing the developmental progress and long-term prospects of their children.¹ Drawing on survey data collected from over 800 Texas mothers who recently gave birth outside of marriage, this brief provides an overview of how unmarried fathers are involved at the earliest stages of their children's lives.

¹ This research brief is part of a series exploring the dynamics of nonmarital parenting. For other briefs in this series, as well as additional information about the studies that guide this research, please visit <http://childandfamilyresearch.org/>.

Shortly after birth, the vast majority of unmarried fathers see their children regularly, participate in shared activities, and help out with basic childrearing duties. Roughly a quarter of fathers, however, have largely disengaged by the time their child is 3-months-old. For many of these fathers, the harbingers of low involvement were present long before the birth of their child. Short and turbulent relationships with the mother, as well as prior children with other partners, often foreshadow low father involvement. Fathers with a history of abusive behavior toward the mother or child are also significantly more likely to be uninvolved, though it is important to note that in cases of family violence, sparse interaction with the father is preferable out of a concern for mother and child safety. Because uninvolved fathers are also less likely to provide financial support, a majority of mothers in these relationships are already considering applying for child support just three months after birth.

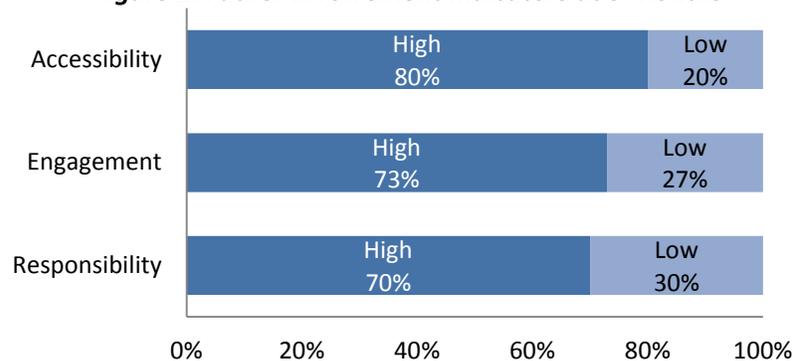
Defining Father Involvement

To examine the involvement of unmarried Texas fathers, CFRP analyzed mothers' survey responses from a wide range of questions designed to measure a father's commitment to his child. These questions were combined into three dimensions of involvement, and fathers were divided into high- and low-involvement groups.

Just three months after a child's birth, 27% of unmarried fathers are already uninvolved in the lives of their children.

1. **Accessibility** is the extent to which a father has contact with his child, and is measured by the number of times a father saw his child in the last month.
2. **Engagement** captures the quality of relationship between father and child, including play, teaching, and other shared activities.
3. **Responsibility** reflects a father's involvement in daily duties and childrearing obligations, including health, childcare, and decision-making about the child's life.

Figure 1: Father Involvement Indicators at 3 Months



Source: PES Mothers at 3 months, weighted

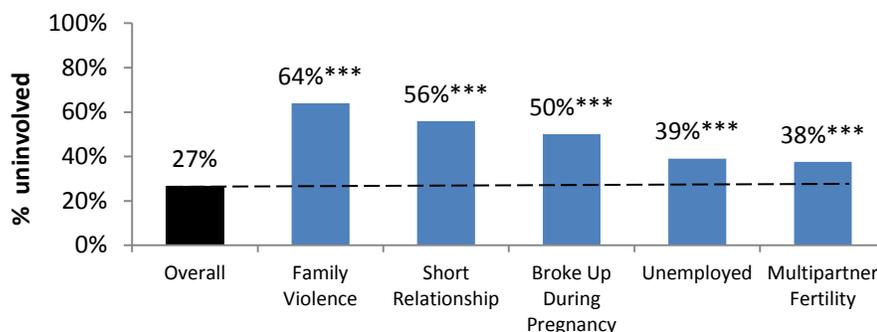
As illustrated in Figure 1, the vast majority of unmarried fathers are involved with their children shortly after birth. Roughly a quarter of fathers, however, are already both physically and emotionally absent from their children's lives. To better understand why some fathers are apt to disengage, the remainder of this brief uses an aggregated measure of accessibility, engagement, and responsibility, to analyze the predictors of low father involvement.

Predictors of Low Father Involvement

Three months after a nonmarital birth, 27 percent of fathers are completely uninvolved in the lives of their children. As Figure 2 makes clear, some fathers are far more likely to end up in this group than others. In particular, fathers with the following characteristics are considerably more likely to be uninvolved:

- **Family violence:** Nearly two-thirds of fathers with a history of family violence are uninvolved.
- **Short relationships:** Compared to the average father, those who were dating the child’s mother for less than 6 months at the time of conception are more than twice as likely to be uninvolved.
- **Breakups during pregnancy:** Half of fathers who experienced a breakup with the child’s mother during pregnancy are uninvolved.
- **Unemployment:** Nearly 2 in 5 fathers without a job are uninvolved.
- **Multipartner fertility (MPF):** Unmarried fathers with previous children from another relationship are considerably more likely to be uninvolved, with almost 2 in 5 disconnected from the life of their new child.

Figure 2: Percentage of Uninvolved Fathers by Subgroup, 3 Months After Birth



Source: PES Mothers at 3 months, weighted
 Note: ***p<0.01; indicates statistically different from Overall

Policy Implications

Although most unmarried fathers are involved in their children’s lives shortly after birth, roughly a quarter have already begun to disappear. Fathers with dangerous antisocial behaviors such as family violence are especially likely to be uninvolved. In addition, these fathers often lack a quality connection with the child’s mother, and many have previous commitments to other households. At the birth of their child, nearly 70 percent of uninvolved fathers will decline to sign an Acknowledgement of Paternity (AOP), the form that legally establishes their rights and responsibilities as the child’s father. In fact, two-thirds will not even attend the birth to sign an AOP in the first place, signaling their weak commitment from the very outset of fatherhood.

7 in 10 fathers who are uninvolved shortly after birth also declined to establish paternity when the child was born.

By three months, not only have these fathers largely disengaged from the act of fathering, but many have also withdrawn their financial support. As a result, 6 in 10 mothers associated with uninvolved fathers are already looking to the child support system for help just three months after the birth of their child. A failure to sign the in-hospital AOP is one of the earliest signals that a father will soon neglect his financial and emotional commitments to his child. Policymakers should consider providing supplementary information and guidance to non-signing mothers in the hospital on why and how to arrange for child support early in the postnatal period. This material could be distributed through printed handouts, or read aloud as part of a required statement by birth registrars. Mothers experiencing family violence deserve careful attention, and should be encouraged to establish child support and visitation arrangements through the court system where legal parameters can be erected to ensure the safety of the mother and child.

About CFRP's Paternity Studies

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

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

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

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