

Objectives

To promote and facilitate co-parenting among unmarried parents because father involvement has significant benefits related to child development; to address a racial and socioeconomic equity issue; and to affirm the public health interest in fathers as a part of our family and early childhood work.

Scope of nonmarital births

Unmarried parenting is increasingly common in the United States, with over 40% of all births occurring to unmarried mothers. In Minnesota, about one-third of children were born to unmarried mothers in 2016. The highest percentage of non-marital births was in Mahnomon County (about 83%) and the lowest was in Carver County (about 13%), with most counties falling somewhere in the middle, such as Isanti County (about 35%) and Hennepin County (about 31%). Among all births, percentages of non-marital births are much higher among women under age 30 (71%), and among mothers who are American Indian, Hispanic, or Black (80%-90%). Roughly half of unmarried couples who have a baby are living together at the time of their child's birth. Studies have found that virtually all fathers and a majority of mothers report wanting the father involved in the child's life. Given that these rates have been relatively static since 2010, it is critical to ensure that policies and procedures align with unmarried co-parents desire to do the best they can for their children.

Background on paternity establishment for unmarried fathers in Minnesota

At the time of their child's birth, many unmarried parents want to co-parent and share custody of their child whether they live together or not. However, most parents do not receive information about how a father establishes paternity and legal custody until after their child is born during an in-hospital Recognition of Parentage process. Unmarried parents are offered a video and written information that explain that when both parents sign the Recognition of Parentage form, the father becomes a legal father and his name can be added to his child's birth certificate. However, under state law, the mother has sole custody of the child at birth. To obtain shared custody and parenting time, an unmarried father has to go to court.

Feedback from local parents and government and community agency staff

Minneapolis Health Department researchers interviewed 81 parents who were unmarried at the time their child was born¹ as well as 35 governmental and community agency staff who serve parents (unpublished data). Individuals from both groups identified particular areas of concern related to paternity acknowledgment and child custody. Researchers then presented findings at the Minnesota Fathers and Families Network summit in 2017 and 2018 and consulted with attendees from around the state to gather additional perspectives. The major concerns identified included:

- Timing of the in-hospital Recognition of Parentage process: understanding the consequences of signing legal documents so soon after the emotional and exhausting experience of childbirth was problematic for many parents.
- Legal nuances: despite the provision of explicit information to parents after childbirth, many did not understand the distinction between being a legal father and having custody of a child.
- Mothers granted sole custody at birth: concerns related to gender equity and the substantial burden of requiring fathers to go to court to get shared custody.

¹ Rebman PA, Caines MC, Harrison PA. In-hospital paternity establishment: Experiences and meaning perceived by unmarried parents. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 2018;29:492-502.

Suggestions from unmarried parents and service providers

- Allow unmarried expectant parents to sign and submit to the Office of Vital Records the Voluntary Recognition of Parentage form before their child is born and have it become effective at birth. This change would require a change in wording to Minnesota Statutes §257.75 Declaration of Parentage.
- Allow shared custody to be the default when both parents state this is what they want. Alternatively, develop an expedited court process to establish custody and parenting time for parents who agree on all aspects of their custody/parenting time plan. This would also require changes to Minnesota Statutes §257.75.
- Have the state Departments of Health and/or Human Services offer training to local government, community and faith-based agencies to provide assistance to unmarried parents related to completing the Recognition of Parenting form and developing a co-parenting plan.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research project cited was supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under grant number R40MC26807, and the R40 Maternal and Child Health Field-initiated Innovative Research Studies Program. This information or content and conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.

ALTERNATIVE FORMATS

For reasonable accommodations or alternative formats please contact the Minneapolis Health Department at 612-673-2301 or email health@minneapolismn.gov.

People who are deaf or hard of hearing can use a relay service to call 311 at 612-673-3000.

TTY users can call 612-673-2157 or 612-673-2626.

Para asistencia 612-673-2700, Yog xav tau kev pab, hu 612-673-2800, Hadii aad Caawimaad u baahantahay 612-673-3500.

CONTACT

Minneapolis Health Department
Research & Evaluation Division
250 S. Fourth St. - Room 510
Minneapolis, MN 55415
phone: 612-673-2301
email: health@minneapolismn.gov
minneapolismn.gov/health