

# info sheet 16



## Unmarried Father Involvement

Nationally, nearly 40% of all children were born to unmarried parents in 2007. In Minnesota, nearly 2/3 of open child support cases involve children born to unmarried parents.

Until recently, the situation and capabilities of unmarried parents, and unmarried fathers in particular, were not well known. Therefore, little reliable data was available to guide policies and practice relating to unmarried parents. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study helps fill this gap.<sup>1</sup>

### UNMARRIED PARENTS' CAPABILITIES AT THE BIRTH OF THEIR CHILD:

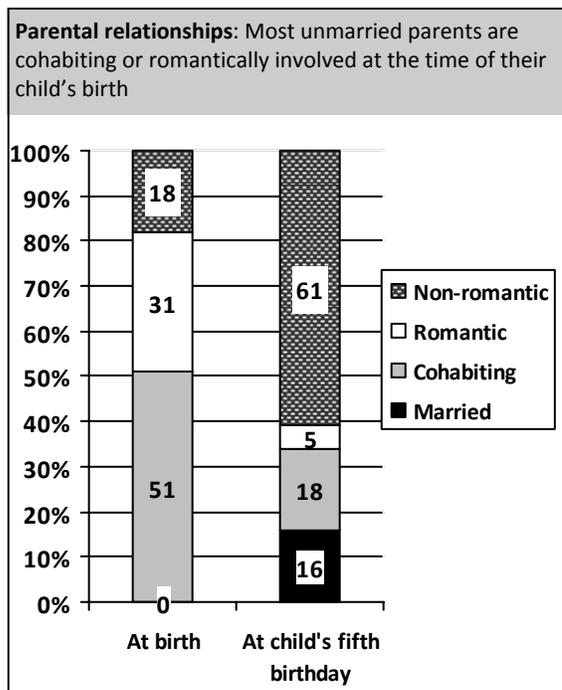
- **Most are poor or near-poor.** 73% of mothers and 56% of fathers were at or below 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines.
- **Many lack education.** 43% of mothers and 38% of fathers lacked a high school degree.
- **A majority have children with someone else.** 59% of mothers and 53% of fathers already had a child with another partner.
- **A small percent report drug/alcohol or abuse issues.** 4% of mothers and 6% of fathers had drug or alcohol problems; 5% of mothers reported violent or abusive behavior on the part of the father towards her. 11% of mothers reported physical abuse at year 3 (possibly due to improved questionnaires, not increased violence).
- **Most unmarried mothers and fathers are healthy and bear healthy children.**

### FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH:

- **Almost all mothers want fathers to be involved.** 93% of all unmarried mothers report at the birth of their child that they want the father to be involved; and 2/3 of mothers who are not romantically involved with the father want the child's father to be involved. A recent national study of mothers found that mothers with lower incomes and fewer years of education were more likely than other mothers to want greater father involvement.<sup>2</sup>

- **Almost all fathers want to be involved.** 99% of unmarried fathers interviewed report at the birth of their child that they want to be involved. Over 4/5 of fathers supported the baby's mother during pregnancy, either financially or in other ways.
- **Most unmarried parents start out together as families, but their family relationships are indeed fragile.** At their child's birth, 4 out of 5 unmarried parents are cohabiting or romantically involved. By the time of the child's fifth birthday, 3 out of 5 are no longer romantically involved.
- **Poor unmarried families start out with high father involvement.** 1 of 4 poor children under the age of 2 who were born outside of marriage lived with both biological parents while another 35% lived with their mother and saw their father at least every week.<sup>3</sup> Poor nonblack infants primarily experience father involvement through marriage, while poor black infants primarily do so through fragile-visiting relationships.<sup>4</sup>

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**Research on unmarried families explores father involvement**

### Our mission

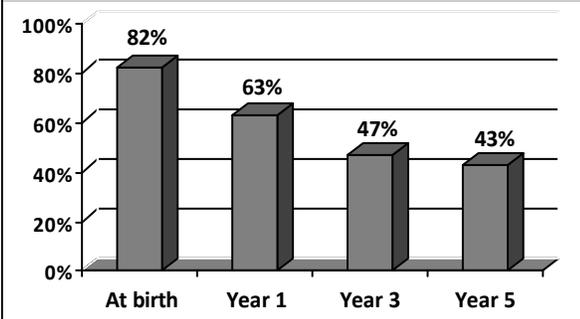
The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network enhances healthy father-child relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide.

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Leading Minnesota's campaign for healthy fatherhood.

**Father involvement:** Percent of unmarried fathers who have seen their child in the past month



- **While the vast majority of unmarried fathers start out involved with their child, father involvement declines over time.** At year one, 87% of nonresident fathers have seen their child at some time since the baby’s birth. By year five, 37% of fathers have not seen their child in the last two years.
- **Father involvement in fragile families often includes high levels of father-child interaction.** A study of poor fragile families in Louisiana pre-Katrina found that both mothers and available fathers of two and three year old children reported high levels of father-child interaction including fathers playing with and feeding children, reading stories, putting children to bed and visiting together with relatives. Of children who saw their fathers in the last year, almost half spent at least one overnight with their father. A majority of the non-cohabiting fathers had an overnight visit with the child at least once a week.<sup>5</sup>
- **A good predictor of father involvement is the quality of the parent’s relationship.** While past research suggests that a father’s education, employment, mental and behavioral health, attitudes and relationship with the mother are

all important predictors of his involvement with the child, what seems to matter most is the father’s relationship with the mother. Positive co-parenting is a strong predictor of nonresident father involvement.

- **While involved biological fathers engender a number of benefits for children, social fathers are also important for child well-being.** 21% of mothers unmarried at the birth of the child live with a new male romantic partner (a “social father”) five years later. In looking at three-year old children in the fragile families study, high levels of engagement by resident social fathers and biological fathers are found to be beneficial for child well-being – both are associated with fewer behavioral problems and better overall health for these children at the three-year mark. And for those children living with their mother and a social father at age three, frequent contact with the child’s nonresident biological father provides additional benefits for the child.

**The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study** was developed to provide information about unmarried parents and their children. Starting in 1998, new mothers were interviewed in the hospital within 48 hours of their child’s birth, and fathers were interviewed either in the hospital or elsewhere as soon as possible after the birth. The study follows 5,000 parents for 5 years, including a subset of married parents for comparison, to see what factors (including government policy) may push them closer together or pull them apart. Data are representative of nonmarital births in large cities in the U.S.

Notes:

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all findings are from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Research briefs, working papers and published articles are available on their website: <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>.
2. A report commissioned by the Mothers’ Council, Martha Farrell Erickson and Enola G. Aird, Co-Authors, “The Motherhood Study: Fresh Insights on Mothers’ Attitudes and Concerns,” May 2005, online at <http://www.motherhoodproject.org>.
3. Elaine Sorenson, Ronald Mincy, and Ariel Halpern, “Redirecting Welfare Policy Toward Building Strong Families,” *Urban Institute*, 2000, online at: <http://www.urban.org>.
4. Ronald B. Mincy and Helen Oliver, “Age, Race, and Children’s Living Arrangements: Implications for TANF Reauthorization,” *Urban Institute*, 2003, online at <http://www.urban.org>.
5. Ronald B. Mincy and Hillard Pouncy, “Baby Fathers and American Family Formation: Low-Income, Never-Married Parents in Louisiana before Katrina,” *Institute for American Values*, 2007, online at <http://center.americanvalues.org>.

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