

Voluntary Paternity Acknowledgment

Summary

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Since the mid-1990s the state of Wisconsin has operated a voluntary paternity acknowledgment process, which allows the fathers of non-marital children born in the state to voluntarily acknowledge their paternity by signing a notarized form, instead of going through a judicial hearing. The premise behind this program is that by reducing obstacles to establishing paternity the state can encourage unmarried fathers to increase their financial and non-financial participation in their children's lives. This report examines the relationship between the use of paternity acknowledgment by fathers and two measures of their subsequent participation in the responsibilities of child-rearing: paying child support and having the children live with them (as shown by placement decisions).

Examining differences in child support and placement outcomes between cases where paternity was voluntarily acknowledged and cases where paternity was adjudicated is complicated by the fact that the two groups of fathers are different in other relevant ways. Without controlling for other differences we found that adjudicated fathers actually paid \$150 more per year in child support than did voluntarily acknowledged fathers, but this finding did not take into account that a much lower percentage of voluntary paternity cases have a child support order (due in part to the higher likelihood of voluntary paternity fathers living with the mother). When we limit our analysis to just fathers who have orders, the voluntary paternity fathers are 10 percentage points more likely to pay and they pay about \$250 more per year than do adjudicated fathers.

Differences in the likelihood of having an order are not the only distinctions between voluntary and adjudicated cases that require consideration. Children with voluntary paternity acknowledgments are more likely to be an only child and to live outside Milwaukee than are children who have adjudicated paternity. Acknowledged children are younger at the time when paternity is established and younger at the time the child support petition is filed. They have parents with higher earnings, and their parents are less likely to have spent time on public assistance. Adjudicated paternity children appear more often to have black parents and parents who were not living together at the birth of the child, whereas children with voluntary paternity acknowledgment are more likely to have white parents and parents who have lived together at birth or at the time of paternity establishment.

We used multivariate models to control for differences in these background characteristics. With the controls, voluntary paternity acknowledgment cases, as compared to adjudicated cases, are associated with a lower incidence of child support orders, higher likelihood of payment when an order exists, no significant difference in the level of payment when any is paid, and a greater likelihood of shared child placement. Cases at the average in all other characteristics have a 77 percent probability of paying child support if paternity was adjudicated and an 82 percent probability of paying child support if paternity was voluntary.