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## CHAPTER VII

### THE ATTITUDES OF UNMARRIED PARENTS TOWARD PATERNITY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

While in-hospital paternity programs clearly increase the number of voluntary acknowledgements, they are not effective with everyone. Many unmarried parents are uninterested in acknowledging paternity even when presented with a simplified in-hospital procedure to do so.

To better understand the incentives and disincentives to voluntary paternity acknowledgement, we interviewed 100 unmarried mothers who delivered at Denver General Hospital during 1994 and were presented with the in-hospital paternity overture. All mothers were interviewed in the hospital following their delivery but before their discharge. The face-to-face interview took approximately fifteen minutes to complete and was conducted by a trained researcher. All respondents were paid \$20 for their participation. A copy of the interview schedule we used appears in Appendix E.

Although half of the interviewed mothers were interested in voluntarily acknowledging paternity (and signed the portion of the acknowledgement reserved for mothers) and half were not, none of these respondents and their partners both signed the voluntary paternity acknowledgement form. Typically the father was not at the hospital when the mother was presented with the paternity option. As a result, none of these parents succeeded in acknowledging paternity on a voluntary basis in the hospital setting. Their interviews shed light on the obstacles to voluntary paternity acknowledgement in an inner-city hospital.

#### **A. Profile of the Mothers**

The 100 mothers we interviewed tended to be young, Latina, poorly educated with other children at home. A quarter of the mothers were less than 18 years of age, another 30 percent were 19 to 22 years old. This means that more than half (53 percent) were 22 years or younger. Despite their youth, 57 percent had other children, generally one (43 percent) or two (33 percent), most of whom were not by the same father as the new baby born when the interview took place.

Only 11 percent of the interviewed women were White; most (60 percent) were Latina. African-American (22 percent) and Native American (7 percent) women comprised the remainder of the respondents. Nearly two-thirds of the women (61 percent) had less than a high school education. Only 10 percent had any education beyond the high school level. The remainder (29 percent) reported that they had a high school degree. Most of the women said they were living with parents (23 percent) or other family members (38 percent). Only 16 percent were living with the father of the baby. Twenty percent were living alone and 4 percent were living with friends.

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At delivery, 80 percent reported being unemployed and 30 percent were receiving AFDC in connection with a prior birth.

## **B. Profile of the Fathers**

The male partners of the women we interviewed resembled the mothers in many respects. An identical 61 percent were Latino. The rest were African-American (28 percent), White (7 percent), Native American (3 percent) or Asian (1 percent). Like the mothers, most fathers (59 percent) had less than a high school education and only 10 percent had completed any school beyond the high school level. Finally, most of the fathers had other children, usually with another woman (35 percent) or the woman we interviewed (25 percent). Forty percent of the fathers had no other children.

Unlike the mothers, many fathers (38 percent) were over the age of 26; only 17 percent were below the age of 18. Mothers reported that 32 percent of the fathers were employed full-time and that 17 percent were employed part-time. Most of the employed fathers were engaged in manual labor (41 percent) or service (31 percent) types of jobs. The rest were either unemployed (20 percent), incarcerated (6 percent) or disabled (1 percent). Mothers were unsure of the employment status of 24 percent of the fathers. Table VII-1 presents selected characteristics of the unmarried mothers whom we interviewed and their partners.

## **C. Relationships Between Unmarried Mothers and Fathers**

Unmarried parents reported having a variety of relationships ranging from casual encounters to long-term arrangements that involved financial support and cohabitation. Asked to characterize their relationships, 20 percent said the father was someone they had met shortly before they became pregnant. Nearly half of the women (47 percent) reported that they had dated the father "occasionally" when they became pregnant. One-third had been seeing the father regularly or living together and 25 percent had other children by the same father.

Perhaps the more telling indicators of the mother's relationship with the baby's father were whether he supported her financially during the pregnancy and/or whether he attended the birth. As to financial support, (which was never explicitly defined in the survey), 41 percent reported receiving "none" and ten percent reported receiving "very little." The other half of the respondents reported receiving more substantial financial support although most of these women (33 percent) characterized it as "some" support rather than "full" support which was reported by only 16 percent. Only 37 percent of the fathers attended the birth; the other 63 percent did not.

**Table VII-1**  
**Selected Characteristics of Interviewed Unmarried Mothers**  
**and Their Partners**

Mothers		Fathers
<b>Race and Hispanic Origin</b>		
11%	White	7%
22%	African-American	28%
60%	Latina	61%
7%	Native American	3%
<b>Age</b>		
23%	Less than 18	17%
30%	19-22	19%
10%	23-25	26%
38%	26+	38%
<b>Education</b>		
61%	Less than High School	59%
29%	High School	27%
10%	More than High School	10%
<b>Other Children</b>		
43%	No	40%
25%	Yes - Together	25%
32%	Yes - With another partner	35%
<b>Living Arrangement</b>		
20%	Lives alone	
16%	Baby's father	
23%	Parents	
38%	Other family	
4%	Friends	
<b>Employment Status at Birth</b>		
20%	Employed full-time	32%
--	Employed part-time	17%
80%	Unemployed	20%
--	Not sure	24%
--	Incarcerated	6%
--	Disabled	1%
<b>AFDC Status at Birth</b>		
30%	On AFDC at baby's birth	
8%	On AFDC in the past, but not at baby's birth	
62%	Never on AFDC	

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Asked whether they expected the father of the child to help support the child, about half of the mothers (52 percent) felt that he would. The rest said they didn't know (31 percent) or that he would not (18 percent). Only 12 percent of the mothers thought that they would be married to the father of their baby in two years time and another 18 percent thought that they would be seeing him regularly or occasionally (6 percent). The rest either had "no idea" (40 percent) what type of relationship they would have with the baby's father in two years or were sure they would have no contact (24 percent). Table VII-2 summarizes relationships between unmarried parents interviewed in the study.

#### **D. Reasons Given for Not Acknowledging Paternity**

Even with an active, hospital-based, paternity program, many fathers do not hear about paternity because they are not present when the paternity worker or birth registration clerk visits. In this sample, only 11 percent of fathers were at the hospital when the paternity worker came to the mother's room. In 89 percent of the cases, it was up to the mother to discuss the paternity option with the father or pass on the affidavit to him. Although none of these parents ultimately both signed the affidavit and succeeded in acknowledging paternity, half of the interviewed mothers signed the mother's portion of the affidavit, and half of the mothers did not. Most of the non-signers (86 percent) said they had never talked to the father of the child about paternity. Clearly, the mother plays an important "gatekeeper" role in the voluntary paternity acknowledgement process and her concerns about putting the father on the birth certificate are important to understand.

The single most common reason for not signing cited by mothers was having a bad relationship with the baby's father. Fully 44 percent of mothers who did not sign said it was because they were "not getting along" with the baby's father. The next most commonly cited reasons had to do with concerns about the father visiting, being a good father or gaining custody or visitation rights. A quarter of the mothers who refused to sign were deterred because "he'd want visits," 22 percent said they were concerned about "custody or legal rights to the child," and 17 percent indicated that "he wouldn't be a good father." Finally, 15 percent of the mothers said they "saw no reason" to voluntarily acknowledge, 14 percent said the baby's father was in Mexico or out-of-town and 10 percent indicated that the putative father did not think he was the baby's real father. Table VII-3 presents, by frequency of mention, the reasons given by interviewed mothers for not signing the paternity acknowledgement form.

**Table VII-2**  
**Relationships Between Unmarried Mothers and Fathers**

<b>Percent characterizing relationship when pregnancy occurred:</b>	
Casual, just met	20%
Occasionally see one another	47%
Date regularly or live together	33%
<b>Percent reporting various levels of financial support during pregnancy:</b>	
None	41%
Very little	9%
Some	33%
Full	16%
<b>Percent reporting father attended the birth</b>	37%
<b>Percent reporting father interested in being on the birth certificate</b>	67%
<b>Percent characterizing relationship at birth:</b>	
Living together	15%
See one another often	32%
See one another rarely	25%
No contact	25%
Phone contact	3%
<b>Percent characterizing their anticipated relationship with the father of the child in two years time:</b>	
Probably married	12%
Seeing him regularly	18%
Seeing him occasionally	6%
Not seeing him at all	24%
No idea	40%

**Table VII-3  
Reasons Given by Mothers for Not Signing  
the Paternity Acknowledgement Form**

Not getting along with the father of the child	44%
Concerned about custody or visitation	25%
Doesn't see the point	15%
Father in Mexico or out of town	14%
Father doesn't want to be involved	10%
Father doesn't believe he is the father	10%
Mother married to someone else	4%
Mother doesn't know who the father is	4%
Feels it will be harder to get AFDC	4%
Doesn't want the child support agency to pursue father	2%

**E. Demographic and Attitudinal Characteristics of Signers and Non-Signers**

There were no consistent differences between signers and non-signers with respect to father's age, education level or race. In addition, signers and non-signers differed only modestly in their responses to a series of questions on common male and female attitudes toward paternity. These questions did not tap the respondents' experiences; they aimed to assess the extent to which the respondent agreed or disagreed with certain stereotypes about paternity.

Most women agreed that men generally don't want their name on the birth certificate because of child support (82 percent) and that many women are afraid of having the father on the birth certificate because of custody and visitation concerns (58 percent). To the extent there were differences, non-signers were more apt than signers to agree that men don't think that it matters whether their name is on the birth certificate (31 percent versus 17 percent) and that men do not want the responsibility of having a child (69 percent versus 48 percent). Table VII-4 presents the reactions of mothers who signed and failed to sign to a series of statements summarizing common attitudes held by men and women toward the issue of paternity.

**Table VII-4**  
**Percent of Mothers Agreeing With a Variety of Statements**  
**About Paternity, by Willingness to Sign the**  
**Voluntary Acknowledgement Form**

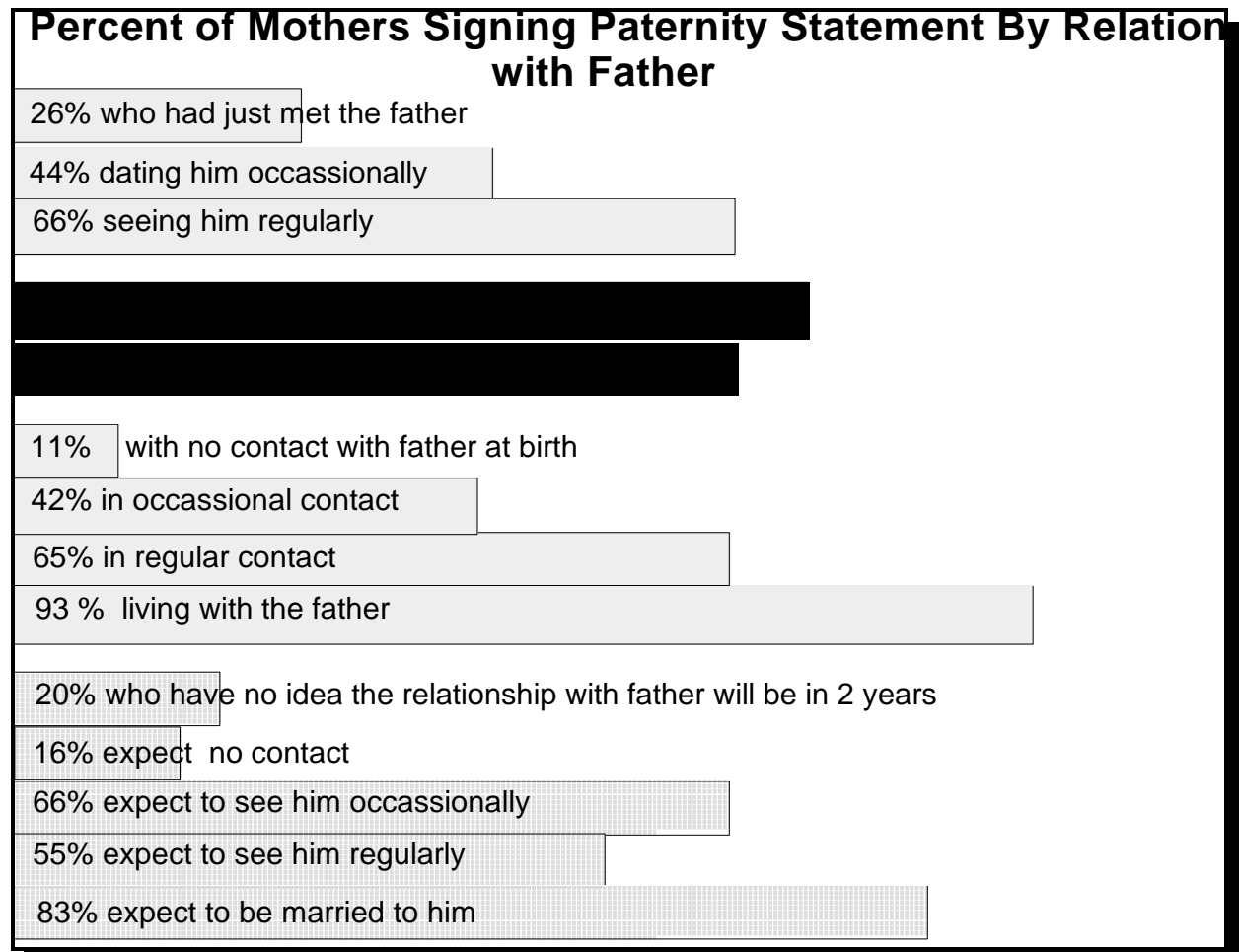
	<b>Mothers Who Sign</b>	<b>Mothers Who Do Not Sign</b>	<b>All Mothers</b>
Men think having their name on the birth certificate as the legal father of the child won't make a real difference in the child's life	17%	31%	24%
Men don't want to have their names on the birth certificate as the legal father of the child because they're worried about child support	78%	85%	82%
Men don't want to be on the birth certificate as the legal father of the child because they don't want the responsibility of a child	48%	69%	59%
Women don't want fathers on the birth certificate as the legal father of the child because they're afraid it will give men more rights to the baby or men will go after custody	57%	59%	58%
Women don't want fathers on the birth certificate because of violence or because the men are into drugs/alcohol/crime	37%	46%	42%
Women don't want fathers on the birth certificate as the legal father of the child because they can get more benefits on their own	39%	46%	43%
Women often don't want fathers on the birth certificate as the legal father of the child because they're not getting along as a couple or they're afraid it will hurt their relationship with the father	44%	60%	52%

**F. Relationship and Financial Characteristics of Signers and Non-Signers**

Perhaps more telling than the reasons mothers give for fathers not signing are the financial and relationship characteristics that distinguish mothers who signed the acknowledgement form from those who refused to sign. Although these maternal signatures did not result in voluntary paternity acknowledgements since none of the fathers signed, a comparison of signers versus

non-signers affords us an opportunity to explore what mothers expect of fathers and their relationships before they will even consider putting the father on the birth certificate.

As to relationship factors, we found that signers were significantly more likely to report cohabitation, regular contact, father attendance at the birth and father interest in being on the birth certificate. Thus, two-thirds of the mothers who were living with the father of the baby during their pregnancies wound up signing the affidavit. At birth, signers, as compared with non-signers, were significantly more likely to be living with the father of the child or seeing him often. In a similar vein, signers were significantly more likely than non-signers to report that they expected to be married to the father of the child or seeing him regularly in two years. Finally, 72 percent of mothers whose partner attended the birth wound up signing the affidavit as did 66 percent of those who reported that their partner was interested in being on the birth certificate (See Figure VII-1).



**Figure VII-1**



Financial factors also appeared to be relevant to the mother's decision to put the father on the birth certificate. This included father's employment status and his willingness to provide financial support both during and after the pregnancy. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of the woman who received financial support from the father of the child during pregnancy wound up signing as compared with only 15 percent of the women who reported receiving no support. Signers were significantly more likely to think that the father of the child would provide financial support in the future. Asked whether they expected to be receiving AFDC in two years time, 30 percent of signers responded, "probably yes" as compared with 71 percent of non-signers. Finally, while 40 percent of mothers who signed reported that the father of the child was employed full time, this was reported by only 20 percent of those who failed to sign (see Table VII-6). That a man's work behavior features in a mother's paternity decision is consistent with findings of other researchers on the importance of employment factors in determining an unmarried father's marriageability (Sullivan, 1985; Testa and Krogh, 1995).

**Table VII-6**  
**Financial Characteristics of Signers and Non-Signers**

	<b>Percent of Mothers Who Sign</b>	<b>Percent of Mothers Who Do Not Sign</b>
Father of the child employed full-time	44%	20%
Father of the child provided support during mother's pregnancy:		
None	15%	85%
Little	67%	33%
Some	69%	31%
Full	75%	25%
Mother expects father of the child to provide support after the birth	86%	28%
Mother expects to be receiving AFDC in two years	30%	71%
Mother is interested in a formal child support order	25%	19%

## G. Paternal Participation

Voluntary paternity acknowledgement is clearly a form of paternal participation that is strongly correlated with the types of relationships never-married parents have with one another. As Figure VII-2 shows, those who said they had "just met" the father of the child when they became pregnant and had little or no contact with him, almost never experienced any form of support from him. These men rarely provided any financial support during pregnancy or attended the birth. Studies of young African-American males (Anderson, 1989) find that many are strongly influenced by peer groups that value "casual" sex. This value system clearly works against assuming responsibility for a child.

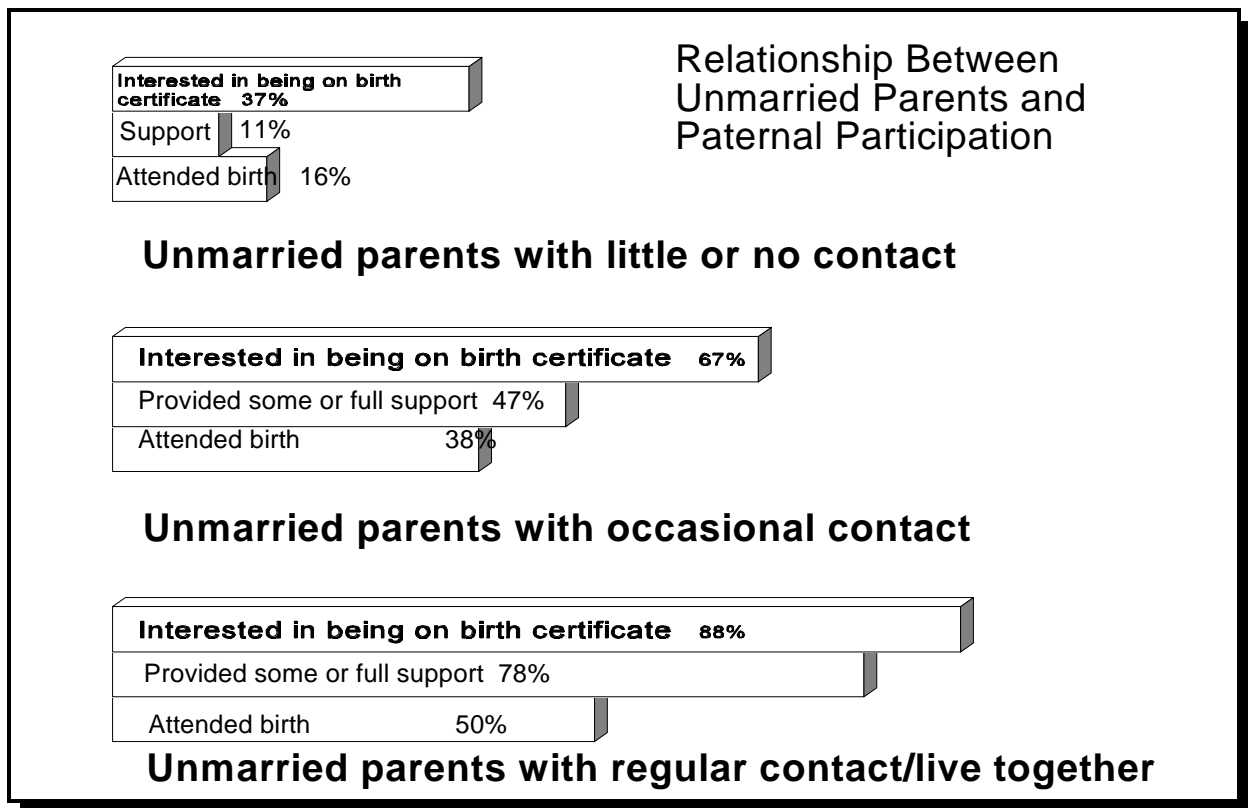


Figure VII-2

Mothers who had occasional contact and said they had "dated the father of the child" once in a while when they discovered they were pregnant, were significantly more likely to have received at least some financial support during pregnancy and to have gone through the birth with the father present.

Finally, women who reported that they had dated the father of the child "regularly," or had lived with him when they learned that they were pregnant, almost always received some financial support. Half of these women were also supported during the birth by having the father present.

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Not surprisingly, fathers who provided financial support during pregnancy tended to also attend the birth. Only 11 and 12 percent of fathers who provided "none" or a "little" support attended the birth. Among those who provided "some" or "full" support, the attendance rate stood at 59 and 69 percent, respectively.

## **H. Reactions to Formal Child Support**

Whether or not they signed the paternity acknowledgement form, most mothers (69 percent) were uninterested in obtaining a formal child support order. Only 22 percent said that they were interested in such an order and 9 percent were unsure. This differs markedly from the responses of separated and divorced women, most of whom express intense interest in formal child support. Naturally, we do not know whether unmarried mothers will come to resemble separated and divorced mothers over time and become more interested in a formal support order. Nevertheless, these findings are consistent with those of other researchers who have studied unmarried mothers and found many of them to be in favor of establishing paternity but uninterested in formal child support (Wattenburg et al, 1991; Pirog-Good and Good, 1990; Edin, 1994).

The mothers who were most interested in obtaining a formal child support order tended to be those who were already involved with the child support enforcement agency with a prior child at the time of the birth. Thus, 43 percent of mothers with an open child support case at the time of the interview reported interest in formal child support as compared with only 20 percent of mothers not known to the agency (see Table VII-7).

The evidence on whether mothers avoid paternity acknowledgement because it might jeopardize their access to AFDC and other benefits is ambiguous. Asked directly whether this featured in their decision not to sign the voluntary acknowledgement form, few said that it did. For example, only 6 percent of mothers who did not sign said it was because it would "make it harder to get AFDC." Only 3 percent claimed they didn't want to put the father on the birth certificate because they didn't want "the child support agency coming after him."

Contrary to other data generated in this project, the AFDC status of mothers in the survey also appeared to have little consistent impact on whether the father of the child heard about the paternity option from the mother, whether the mother signed the affidavit herself, or whether the mother was interested in a formal child support order. Forty-three percent of interviewed mothers on AFDC and 33 percent of mothers never on AFDC reported that the father of the child had either met with the paternity worker or had heard about the paternity option from her. While 41 percent of mothers who had never received AFDC signed the paternity affidavit, it was signed by 60 percent of mothers who were receiving AFDC when they delivered and 61 percent of mothers who had received AFDC at some time in the past. Finally, there was no statistically significant difference in maternal interest in formal child support among women with and without a history of receiving public assistance.

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On the other hand, when asked to explain the reasons for paternity disavowal among their friends, 17 percent of unmarried mothers who signed the acknowledgement form indicated it was because of fear of loss of benefits. In addition, substantial, but statistically equivalent, proportions of mothers who signed (39 percent) and did not sign (46 percent) agreed with the statement, "women don't want fathers on the birth certificate as the legal father of the child because they can get more benefits on their own."

Like other researchers who have studied single mothers (Edin, 1994), the Colorado project suggests that many welfare-reliant mothers act strategically to maximize their family's economic situation. Instead of a formal child support order that might well go unpaid and/or only go to reimburse the state for AFDC, they favor informal cash assistance or in-kind contributions. They combine these contributions with other more reliable benefits and income-generating strategies to help them survive.

Unmarried men appear to face community pressures that are consistent with these survival strategies. While they face no pressure to marry or assume a legal child support responsibility, they do face pressure to provide informal cash contributions, gifts, and in-kind support when they visit (Sullivan, 1985; Stack, 1974). Indeed it has been suggested that the payment of formal child support might reduce a father's ability to provide informal support that is visible to the community, and consequently might result in more attenuated visitation among unmarried fathers (Cleveland, 1995).

**Table VII-7**  
**Reaction of Mothers to Formal Child Support**  
**by Paternity, IV-D and AFDC Status**

<b>Willingness to Sign the Paternity Acknowledgement Form</b>			
<b>Percent of Mothers</b>	<b>Signed</b>	<b>Didn't Sign</b>	<b>All Women</b>
Interested in child support	25%	19%	22%
Not interested in support	67%	71%	69%
Not sure	8%	10%	9%
Number of cases	(36)	(52)	(88)
<b>IV-D Status</b>			
<b>Percent of Mothers</b>	<b>Open Child Support Case</b>	<b>No Child Support Case</b>	
Interested in child support	43%	20%	
Not Interested in Support	43%	72%	
Not sure	14%	9%	
Number of Cases	(7)	(81)	
<b>AFDC Status</b>			
<b>Percent of Mothers</b>	<b>On AFDC in the Past</b>	<b>On AFDC At Birth</b>	<b>Never on AFDC</b>
Interested in child support	14%	30%	19%
Not interested in support	86%	59%	72%
Not sure	--	11%	9%
Number of cases	(7)	(27)	(54)

**I. Summary:**

Even in a hospital setting with an aggressive paternity outreach effort, mothers are typically the gatekeepers for the paternity acknowledgement process. Since the father of the child is often not at the hospital when the paternity worker visits the mother's room, it is usually up to the mother to pass on information about paternity to the father. Interviews conducted soon after the birth of their baby with 100 unmarried mothers who delivered at Denver General Hospital indicate that they are willing to sign the acknowledgement form themselves only when the relationship with the baby's father meets certain minimal standards.

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Mothers who sign are more likely to report cohabitation, regular contact, the likelihood of marriage or a long-term relationship, father attendance at the birth, and father interest in being on the birth certificate. Financial factors also come into play. Mothers who sign are significantly more likely to report that the father of the child provided financial support during the pregnancy and that they expect him to continue to help out. The fathers of children whose partners sign are also more likely to be employed on a full-time basis.

Whether or not they sign, most interviewed mothers are uninterested in obtaining a formal child support order. Asked to explain why unmarried mothers and fathers fail to put the father's name on the birth certificate, most say that fathers are deterred by child support and the responsibilities associated with being a parent while mothers have concerns about not getting along with the father or fear that he will seek custody or visitation rights. The evidence on whether mothers avoid paternity acknowledgement to protect their benefit status is mixed. Although few say this is a personal reason for not signing the affidavit, nearly half agree with the general statement that women don't want fathers on the birth certificate as the legal father of the child because they can get more benefits on their own.