



Who Enrolls in Healthy Marriage Programs?

The federal government has a long-standing commitment to supporting healthy relationships and stable families. Since 2005, Congress has funded \$150 million each year in healthy marriage (HM) and responsible fatherhood (RF) grants. The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has awarded and overseen three cohorts of these grants. HM grantees promote healthy marriage and relationships through eight legislatively authorized activities to support the long-term success of families (see Box 1 for a description of HM services). OFA works with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, also within ACF, to conduct research on how to best serve families through these grants.

Box 1. What are HM program services?

HM grantees may use grant funds for eight allowable activities:

1. public advertising campaigns;
2. education in high schools;
3. marriage and relationship education and skills that may include job and career advancement;
4. premarital education;
5. marriage enhancement;
6. divorce reduction;
7. marriage mentoring;
8. reduction of disincentives to marriage.

The primary service that HM grantees provide is group-based workshops, which typically range from a few days to a few months. Under the 2015 funding opportunity announcement, grantees were also required to offer case management (unless they received an exemption from ACF), during which clients receive individualized attention and might receive referrals to other services.

Box 2. Practice Tips

This brief describes the characteristics of adults who enrolled in 43 HM programs that were funded in 2015. This information is intended to increase the field's understanding of who is interested in HM services. For practitioners, when designing and improving your program:

- Tailor your recruitment strategies based on how people typically hear about your program and your messaging based on why clients typically enroll. See Table 1 for the most common ways HM adult clients learned about the programs and reasons for enrolling.
- Develop or modify your program services to be appropriate and relevant for your typical clients. See the section on “What are the characteristics of HM adult clients?” for characteristics of people who enrolled in HM programs.
- Identify gaps in current services based on the characteristics of typical clients.

You can also use this information when you talk to funders about who is commonly served in HM programs, to show the reach of such programs.

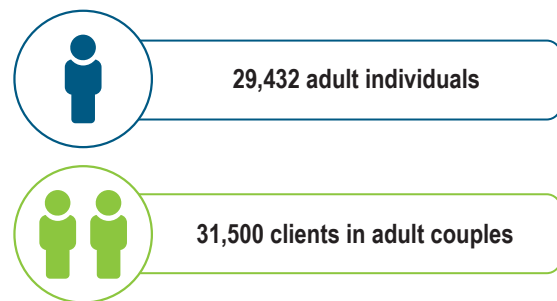
Overview and methods

This snapshot describes the adult clients served by 43 HM grantees, which received five-year grants in September 2015. It focuses on adult clients enrolled from July 2016 through March 2019. Data were from an applicant characteristics survey that clients completed when they enrolled in the program. See Box 2 for practice tips on using the data in this snapshot. Separate snapshots describe the characteristics of youth clients served by HM programs and clients served by RF programs. An interim report describes a fuller range of findings including the services grantees provided and the ways that clients have changed from the beginning to the end of the program.¹

Whom did HM programs aim to serve and how many HM adult clients enrolled?

HM grantees enrolled more than 60,000 adult clients in about three years (Figure 1). HM grantees can serve one or two distinct adult client populations. The first is adult individuals, that is, clients who enrolled in an HM program without a partner,

Figure 1. Adult clients enrolled by HM adult target population from July 1, 2016, through March 31, 2019



regardless of whether they were in a romantic relationship. Second are HM adult couples, who enrolled in an HM program with their romantic partner. HM programs for adult couples serve both partners.

How did adult clients learn about HM programs, and why did they enroll?

Adult clients learned about HM programs through direct contact with individuals and agencies.

The three most common ways that adult clients reported that they learned about the program were: (1) word of mouth, (2) government agency (such as

¹ Avellar, Sarah, Alexandra Stanczyk, Nikki Aikens, Mathew Stange, and Grace Roemer (2020). The 2015 Cohort of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grantees: Interim Report on Grantee Programs and Clients, OPRE Report 2020-67, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Table 1 . Most common ways HM adult clients learned about program and reasons for enrolling

How learned about program and reasons for enrolling*	Adult individuals (%)	Adult couples (%)
How learned about the program		
Word of mouth	28	37
Government agency or community organization	24	19
Program staff or event	25	13
Why chose to enroll in the program		
To learn how to improve personal relationships	37	53
To learn about being a better parent	23	19
Spouse or partner asked client to come	2	15
To find a job or a better job	11	2
Number of clients	28,133	31,245

Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.
 Note: We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple. *We excluded “other” from the ranking.

the Office of Child Support Enforcement or Child Protective Services) or community organizations (such as hospitals, places of worship, or Head Start), or (3) program staff or event (Table 1). Word of mouth was the most common source of information about the program, reported by more than one-quarter of adult individuals and one-third of clients in adult couples. Many adult clients also reported learning about the program from program staff or events, which suggests that grantees’ on-site recruitment at community agencies and street outreach efforts can be successful.

For HM adult clients, a desire to learn how to improve personal relationships was a common motivation to enroll. Among HM adult clients, about one-third of adult individuals and about half of clients in couples reported enrolling to improve

personal relationships. HM adult individuals and couples also commonly reported enrolling to learn about being a better parent. For clients in adult couples, the third most common reason they reported for enrolling was because their spouse or partner encouraged them to come.

What are the characteristics of HM adult clients?

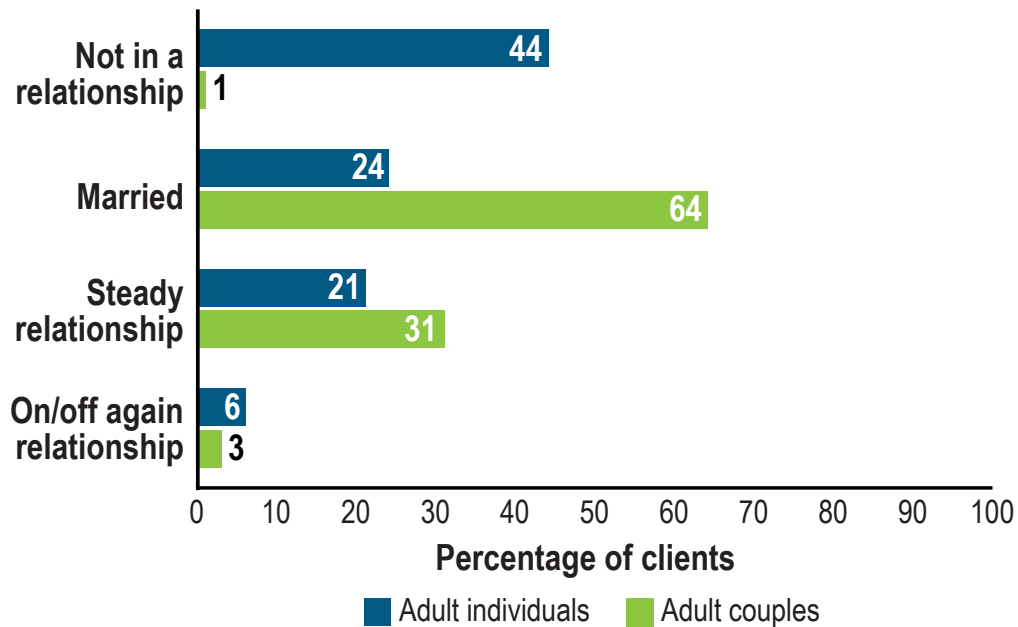
About half of HM adult clients were younger than 35 years. They were racially and ethnically diverse and half to two-thirds were women, depending on the client population. About 20 percent of adult individuals were 24 years or younger and another 30 percent were 25 to 34 years (Table 2). Among clients in adult couples, less than 14 percent were

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of HM adult clients at enrollment

Characteristic	Adult individuals (%)	Adult couples (%)
Female	60	51
Age		
Less than 18 years	2	< 1
18 to 24 years	18	13
25 to 34 years	30	34
35 to 44 years	23	27
45 to 54 years	14	14
55 and older	11	10
Race/ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	24	26
Black, non-Hispanic	24	21
White, non-Hispanic	32	35
Other	14	16
Primarily speaks English in the home	68	71
Number of clients	29,432	31,500

Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.
 Note: We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.

Figure 2. Partner status of enrolled HM adult clients



Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.

Notes: We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.

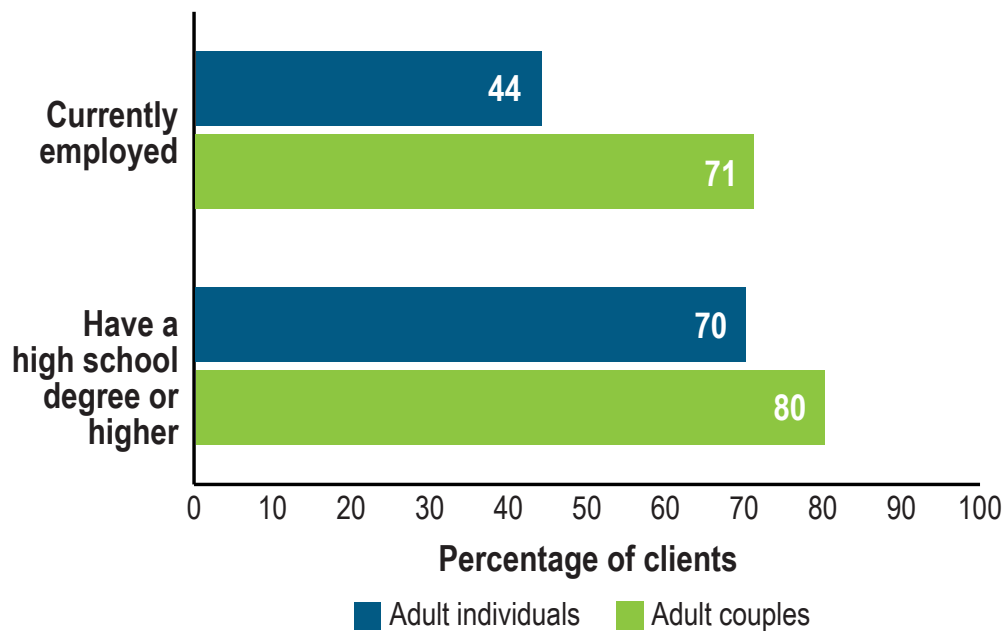
24 years or younger; about one-third were ages 25 to 34 years. About one-third of HM adult clients were non-Hispanic White, a quarter were Hispanic or Latino, and a quarter were non-Hispanic Black or African American. Most HM adult clients primarily spoke English at home.

Most HM couples were married or had a steady romantic partner; almost half of adult individual clients were single. Forty-four percent of adult individuals were not in a relationship at the time of enrollment and about a quarter were married (Figure 2). Unsurprisingly, almost all clients in the adult couple population were in a relationship; 64 percent clients in adult couples were married. More than 20 percent of adult individuals and 31 percent of clients in adult couples were romantically involved with a partner on a steady basis. A small percentage of adults were in an on-again and off-again relationship.

HM adults had one or two biological or adoptive children, on average. Adult individuals had 1.3 children and clients in adult couples had 1.4 children, on average. Among HM clients in a relationship, more than one-third of adult individuals were a mother or father figure to their partner's children (39 percent), as were almost half of clients in adult couples (48 percent).

Most HM clients enrolled in programs for couples were employed, but most clients enrolled in programs for individuals were not. Most had at least a high school education. More than two-thirds of adult clients enrolled in programs for couples were employed, whereas about half of adult individuals were not currently working (Figure 3). Almost half of adult individuals reported making less than \$500 in the most recent month, compared to one-quarter of clients in adult couples (Table 3). Seventy percent of adult individuals had a high school education or higher, as did 80 percent of clients in adult couples.

Figure 3. Socioeconomic well-being of enrolled HM adult clients



Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.

Note: We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.

Table 3. Earnings of HM adult clients at enrollment

Earnings in the past 30 days	Adult individuals (%)	Adult couples (%)
Less than \$500	45	23
\$500–\$1,000	14	15
\$1,001–\$2,000	13	20
\$2,001–\$3,000	6	14
\$3,001–\$4,000	3	7
More than \$4,000	3	10
Missing	16	10
Number of clients	28,133	31,245

Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.

Note: We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.

Most HM clients experienced barriers to employment. The survey asked clients to report the extent to which they found seven issues to be a challenge for finding or keeping a good job. About 21 percent of adult individuals and 38 percent of clients in adult couples did not report any of the specified barriers as a challenge. Among adult individuals, the most commonly reported barriers were not having the right skills or education (48 percent), reliable transportation (44 percent), or the right clothes, including uniforms (36 percent). Among clients in adult couples, the most commonly reported barriers were not having the right skills or education (37 percent), good enough childcare or family help (30 percent), or reliable transportation (30 percent).

Table 4. Challenges that make it hard for HM clients to find or keep a good job at enrollment

Barriers to finding or keeping a job	Adult individuals (%)	Adult couples (%)
Not having reliable transportation		
Not at all	47	63
A little or a lot	44	30
Missing	10	7
Not having right clothes (including uniforms)		
Not at all	53	67
A little or a lot	36	25
Missing	11	8
Not having documentation for legal employment (e.g., birth certificate)		
Not at all	60	72
A little or a lot	29	20
Missing	11	8
Not having good enough childcare or family help		
Not at all	56	62
A little or a lot	32	30
Missing	12	8
Having a criminal record		
Not at all	60	80
A little or a lot	30	13
Missing	10	7
Not having the right skills or education		
Not at all	42	55
A little or a lot	48	37
Missing	11	8
Having substance use or mental health problems		
Not at all	63	81
A little or a lot	27	12
Missing	10	7
No barriers to finding or keeping a good job reported	21	38
Number of clients	28,133	31,245

Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.

Notes: We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.

About half of HM adult clients lived in households that receive federal assistance or other income supports.

Fifty-two percent of adult individuals and 46 percent of clients in adult couples lived in a household that received public assistance. The most common type of assistance was from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (reported by 35 percent of adult individuals and 28 percent of clients in adult couples), followed by the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (reported by 15 percent of adult individuals and 19 percent of clients in adult couples).

Most HM clients rented or owned their home.

About half of HM adult clients rented their home and almost one-third owned their home (Table 5). Smaller percentages of adult clients reported living rent-free with a relative or someone else who owns or rents the home.

Table 5. Housing situation of HM adult clients at enrollment

Housing situation	Adult individuals (%)	Adult couples (%)
Owns home	14	32
Rents home	44	53
Lives rent-free with a relative or someone else who rents or owns the home	15	9
Lives in shelter, halfway house, or treatment center	12	<1
Lives on streets or in car, abandoned building, or other place not meant for sleeping	1	<1
Other	10	2
Missing	4	2
Number of clients	29,432	31,500


Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.

Notes: We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.


This brief was written by Sarah Avellar, Alexandra Stanczyk, Nikki Aikens, Mathew Stange, and Grace Roemer of Mathematica, 1100 1st St NE, Washington, DC 20002, under contract with OPRE, ACF, DHHS (#HHSP2332009564WC/HHSP23337050T). OPRE Project Officers: Katie Pahigiannis and Pooja Gupta Curtin. Mathematica Project Director: Sarah Avellar.


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