
Child Support and Children's Well-Being¹

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High on the political agenda of policymakers from across the political spectrum is an issue of central importance to families—child support reform. This briefing report addresses how parents who live apart from their children divide the responsibility for taking care of them and the economic and noneconomic effects of these arrangements on the children. The report focuses on the causes and effects of child support. Our intent is to provide an overview of the growing number of studies on child support, custody, and visitation. We present information necessary to help evaluate broadly the effects of child support on children, their mothers, and their fathers. The effects of child support are sometimes different for children than for their parents, and sometimes different for mothers than for fathers. Any decision about child support policy requires balancing the competing interests of children, mothers, fathers, and the state. Because children are the weakest party among those with competing interests, they are the primary focus of this report. We emphasize their economic needs because these needs motivate recent child support reforms. Moreover, financial strain affects the emotional environment of families and parents' ability to care for children.

Demographic Change and Child Support

Over the past 30 years, the percentage of children who live in single-parent households has approximately tripled. Over one quarter of children live in a household maintained by one parent (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). Nearly all of these children live with one parent because they were born outside of marriage or because their parents are separated or divorced. In other words, children today who live with a single parent have another parent living elsewhere. This is a dramatic change compared to earlier in this century. Even as recently as the middle of the century, most children who lived in a single-parent household did so because they had lost a parent through death (Bane, 1976). This demographic change is important for policymakers because many programs that help poor children in single-parent households were originally designed to help widowed mothers (Garfinkel, 1992). Today, most children in single-parent households have another parent living elsewhere who may be able to help pay for their living expenses.

Demographic estimates suggest that about half of children born today will spend time in a single-parent household; these children are about evenly split between those who will live in a single-parent household because of divorce and those

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who will be born outside of marriage (Bumpass & Raley, 1995; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Because children whose parents are divorced have different experiences with the legal system from children born to unwed mothers, it is important to be precise in describing the two groups in discussions about child support.

Family Support Act of 1988

The Family Support Act of 1988 sets the legal stage for considering matters of child support and the effects of child support. This act is among the most recent in a series of federal laws over approximately 20 years designed to strengthen child support enforcement. The Family Support Act of 1988 has two major purposes: (a) to improve the system for administering private child support transfers between parents to help support their children, and (b) to establish work programs and work provisions for parents who participate in Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the public support or welfare system for children (Garfinkel, 1992).

This description focuses on the child support reforms that address private responsibilities. The goal of child support reforms is to make child support orders—the legal obligation to pay child support—more universal, more equitable, and more strictly enforced. Many requirements in the federal act encourage states to change their administration of child support. This is because family law governing marriage, divorce, and non-marital child bearing is made and administered primarily at the state level.

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The Family Support Act of 1988 has three major provisions regarding child support orders. The first component requires states to strengthen paternity establishment for children born outside of marriage. Paternity establishment is important because it identifies a child’s legal parents—the first step in determining who is responsible for taking care of the child. The second component mandates uniform guidelines within states for child support orders. The third component requires cases that go through the Office of Child Support Enforcement to be reviewed every 3 years. Child support orders may be increased if the nonresident parent’s income increases and decreased if income decreases.

Another major component of the Family Support Act of 1988 addresses child support collection. Child support payments may be withheld from the nonresident parent’s earnings, in the same way that income tax is withheld, as a way of routinely collecting the child support obligation. This requirement went into effect in 1990 for cases in the Office of Child Support Enforcement, and in 1994 for all new cases. (See Garfinkel, 1992, for further discussion of the Family Support Act of 1988.)

Who Is in the Family?

When parents live apart, they have to decide where the children will live, who will be responsible for their daily care, and who will make major decisions about the children’s lives. As time passes, children may also acquire other family mem-

bers through remarriage and cohabitation. This section considers children's living arrangements (sometimes called physical custody or placement), legal responsibility for children (legal custody and paternity), and other family members who may help provide for children.

Children's Living Arrangements

Where and with whom children live indicate what their physical environment is like and the material resources to which they have direct access. Co-residence also provides opportunities for intimate interactions and the adult supervision which is necessary for successful socialization of children. The majority, 87%, of children who live with a single parent live with their mother (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). Most information about children's living arrangements comes from the U. S. Census. However, the census does not provide direct information about the complexities of children's living arrangements after divorce. Data from large state surveys of recent divorces show that most parents still assign primary physical custody of children to the mother (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Seltzer, 1990). For instance, a study of divorced families in northern California shows that even in California, which has more liberal laws than in many other states, physical custody of children was assigned to the mother in about two out of three families; only one out of six children lived in both parents' households (dual residence), and the remainder lived either with their father or had some other arrangement (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). In this study, dual residence meant that out of every 14-day period, the children would spend 4–10 days in each parent's household. This finding counters the myth that it is common for children to split their time evenly between their two parents' households. Even with the liberal definition of dual residence used in this study, only a small percentage of children lived in both parents' households. When both children of divorce and children born outside of marriage are taken into account, very few children spend half of their time in each parent's home (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Seltzer, 1991b). Even though the number of children who spend significant amounts of time with both parents is relatively small, evidence from Wisconsin suggests that it may be growing rapidly (Cancian & Meyer, 1994).

Boys are somewhat more likely than girls to live with their father or have dual residence. This gender difference becomes more apparent as children get older, from about age 11 on up (Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1988). Research about whether it is better for boys to live with their father and girls to live with their mother is inconclusive, in part, due to inadequate data. Some studies show that girls who live with their fathers are more depressed and less socially competent compared with boys who live with their fathers (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Warshak & Santrock, 1983). Another study shows that girls who live with their fathers have lower grades and more school problems compared with girls who live with their mothers (Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993). We lack evidence that boys who live with their fathers fare

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better than boys who live with their mothers. In fact, among remarried families, children's adjustment does not depend on whether they live with a father and stepmother or a mother and step-father, once other factors are taken into account (Zill, 1988). Another recent study also shows that children who live with single fathers are just as likely to drop out of school as children who live with single mothers (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

A major problem with this research is that most studies have had to rely on small samples of fathers who have custody. Moreover, fathers who got custody, until very recently, did so under unusual circumstances, for instance when the mother had an emotional or physical problem. Thus, studies of differences between mother-custody and father-custody families compare single mothers from families with a wide range of characteristics to single fathers from families with more problems. This makes it difficult, and often impossible, to distinguish between the effects of the sex of the custodial parent and the effects of preexisting family characteristics. As custody laws and practices become more neutral and as men become more involved with their children, the fathers who acquire custody are likely to represent a wider range of family experiences than in the past. This will allow a more effective evaluation of whether boys and girls fare differently when they live with their mothers than with their fathers.

Children move around in the early period after divorce. Children who start out living with their fathers or in dual residences are more likely to move in the first 3–4 years than children who start out living with their mothers (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Some evidence indicates that children who relocate more often have more adjustment problems, but it remains unclear whether the moving causes the adjustment problems or whether the child's living arrangement is changed because the child is having problems (Maccoby et al., 1993). Studies that look at both children whose parents are divorced and children whose parents are not divorced show that frequent moving causes problems in school (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

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Legal Parenthood

Joint Legal Custody. In addition to deciding where children will live after divorce, parents negotiate legal custody, which establishes the formal right to make decisions about major aspects of the child's life. Usually, legal and physical custody coincide, but in a substantial minority of cases they do not (Seltzer, 1990). The most common exception is when parents have joint legal custody and the children live most of the time with the mother (Maccoby et al., 1988; Seltzer, 1990). National data suggest that about 11% of all resident mothers share joint legal custody with the children's father, but this is more common in recent divorces. In Wisconsin, the percentage with joint legal custody has risen to two thirds in recent divorces. This arrangement is also more common with separated or divorced parents than with parents of children born outside of marriage (Seltzer, unpublished data).

A rationale for joint custody is to make children's lives after divorce as similar as possible to the lives of children who live with both parents. Compared to fathers in families in which mothers have sole legal custody, nonresident fathers who have joint legal custody spend more time with their children and may be more likely to comply with child support orders (Kline, Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989; Pearson & Thoennes, 1988; Wolchik, Braver, & Sandler, 1985; but see Albiston, Maccoby, & Mnookin, 1990 and Seltzer 1991a, for contrary evidence on compliance). Evidence about compliance may be mixed because the studies consider only transfers to the other parent and not money spent directly on the child. These studies also differ in how they take account of time the children spend with each parent. Children whose parents have joint legal custody spend more time with both parents; therefore, the nonresident parent who has custody less of the time may spend money directly on the children and pay less in child support transfers to the other parent.

Compared to families with sole legal custody, those with joint legal custody are less likely to return to court for disputes about child support, and more likely to return for disputes about access (Koel, Clark, Straus, Whitney, & Hauser, 1994). Regardless of their legal custody arrangement, however, families are more likely to return to court with problems about child support than problems about access (Koel et al., 1994).

Parents with higher incomes and education are more likely to acquire joint legal custody. The greater resources of these parents may explain, in part, the greater involvement with children after separation (Koel, Clark, Phear, & Hauser, 1988; Seltzer, 1990; Seltzer, 1991a). Other family characteristics, such as the quality of the parents' relationship with each other and the parents' involvement with the children before the divorce, may also explain why families with joint legal custody have higher levels of involvement by both parents after separation. Social researchers commonly expect that men who took an active role in taking care of children before a divorce, would be likely to do so afterward as well. In general, research does not show this type of continuity in paternal involvement (Hetherington, 1993; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The absence of continuity in father's involvement before and after separation may occur because studies do not take full account of variation over time in fathers' participation in postdivorce child rearing. Fathers' involvement is generally higher in the short term, soon after the separation; as time passes and fathers establish new relationships and relocate, fathers become less involved with their children. At least one study shows that fathers' predivorce involvement with children does predict his participation in child rearing in the early period after separation. As time since separation increases, other factors become more important predictors of participation in child rearing than his predivorce involvement (Ahrons & Miller, 1993).

Paternity. The legal responsibilities for children born outside of marriage are organized differently than for children of divorce. State laws assume that for chil-

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dren born in marriage, the child's legal father is the mother's husband. For children born outside of marriage, the child's father may be easy to identify socially, as when the parents are living together or have a long-term relationship, but this is not the same as legally identifying the father. One reason that the Family Support Act of 1988 emphasized paternity establishment is that there is room for improvement on this aspect of child support enforcement. Rates of paternity establishment have been low. During the mid 1980s, less than one third of children born outside of marriage had paternity established for them (Nichols-Casebolt & Garfinkel, 1991). There is wide variation in paternity establishment rates and in the mechanisms that states and counties use to identify a child's legal father (Garfinkel, 1992; Sonenstein, Holcomb, & Seefeldt, 1994).

Research suggests that a combination of two mechanisms is reasonably successful for increasing rates of paternity establishment. The first step offers the father multiple opportunities to acknowledge paternity voluntarily. The second step is for cases in which fathers contest the allegation of paternity. In these instances, the family's case is immediately sent to the prosecuting attorney's office instead of remaining in the Office of Child Support Enforcement. The principle underlying the combination of these two strategies is to take advantage of the father's willingness to identify himself as the child's legal father (Sonenstein et al., 1994).

Little is known about the effects of legal paternity on children's well-being. Economically, legal paternity increases children's access to child support and gives them rights to their biological father's health insurance and social security benefits. Legal paternity is likely to increase contact between the nonresident father and the child, and between the nonresident father and the child's mother. Higher rates of paternity establishment may also have a negative effect. More rigorous attempts to establish paternity may increase contact between parents who would otherwise avoid each other, thereby exposing the children to more conflict. Exposure to conflict may counter some of the economic benefits to children of paternity establishment, a point to which we return below.

Acquiring New Parents

After their parents separate, whether the relationship was nonmarital or broken by divorce, children may acquire new family members. About half of children spend fewer than 5 years of childhood in a single-mother household before acquiring a stepfather through remarriage or cohabitation (Bumpass & Raley, 1995). While the noneconomic effects of remarriage vary considerably, acquiring a stepparent, especially a stepfather, boosts the economic resources available to children. This reduces considerably the economic disadvantage of living in a single-parent household.

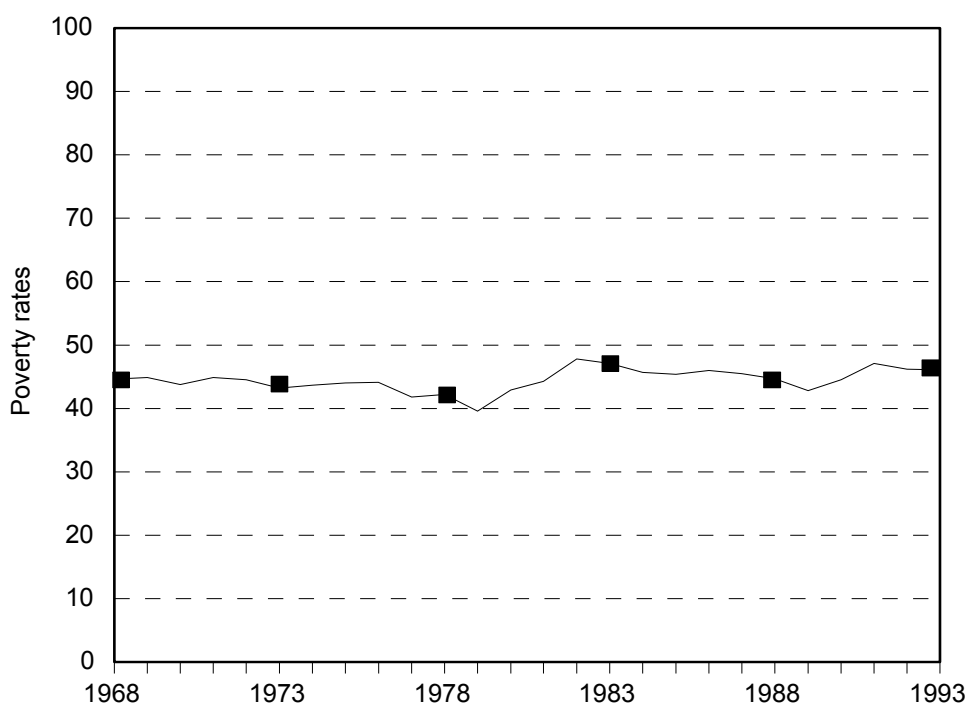
Grandparents may also help provide for children's needs. About a fifth of children who have lived in a single-mother household have also spent time in a grandparent's home with their single mother. Living with a grandparent is more common for children born outside of marriage than for children whose parents are divorced (Bumpass & Raley, 1995).

Children's Economic Needs

Economic Disadvantages of Children Who Live Apart From a Parent

Although money cannot insure a child's happiness, it is difficult for a child to be happy without nutritious food, warm clothes, and a safe place to live. Compared to children who grow up in two-parent households, those who live with single mothers are more than five times as likely to be poor based on official definitions of poverty (Hernandez, 1993, Table 8.2). As shown in Figure 1, the poverty rates for single-mother families have remained stubbornly high and remarkably stable. For children whose parents lived together before separation, family income declines by about one third when the father leaves the household (Bianchi & McArthur, 1991). Losing the father's income is not the only economic disadvantage these children face. In addition, parents who separate or divorce have lower incomes even before separation than parents who stay together (Bianchi & McArthur, 1991; Duncan & Hoffman, 1985; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Once parents separate, they bear the costs of maintaining two households instead of one. Children born to unmarried parents suffer even more severe economic disadvantages. In 1993, about 66% of children who lived with never-married mothers were below the poverty line, compared to 38% of children who lived with divorced mothers (Zill & Nord, 1994).

Figure 1. Poverty Among Single-Mother Families: 1968–1993



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1995. *Income, Poverty, and Valuation of Noncash Benefits, 1993*. Current Popul. Rep. P60-188. Washington, DC: U.S. Govt. Printing Office.

These economic differences go a long way toward explaining the educational disadvantages of children in single-parent households (Guidubaldi, 1988; Krein & Beller, 1988; McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Low income, however, does not explain all of the disadvantages experienced by children who live in a single-parent household. In addition, some effects of economic insecurity are indirect. Financial problems may affect children indirectly by creating stress and anxiety and reducing mothers' emotional welfare (Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986). Mothers' emotional adjustment affects child rearing practices and may reduce the quality of parent-child relationships (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; McLoyd, 1990).

Economic Resources and Children's Needs

Children who live with a single mother rely primarily on her earnings to meet their material needs. Single mothers earn considerably less than do married fathers because single mothers have more child care responsibilities, less training and education, and more disadvantages in the labor market (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986). The lower earnings of single mothers are not compensated for by child support — either private support or public support through AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986). In this context of material need, it is important to consider the extent to which contributions from nonresident fathers help to meet children's economic needs. We focus on nonresident fathers instead of nonresident mothers because, as noted above, the vast majority of children who do not live with two parents live with their mother and have a nonresident father.

Economic Needs and Nonresident Fathers' Contributions

Child Support Payments. In 1992, 10 million women were eligible for child support, that is, these mothers had a child whose father was living elsewhere. About half of eligible mothers were legally due child support. Of these, about half got all of the support owed to them and one quarter did not get anything (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Taken together, these figures show that more than 60% of women who had children whose father was living elsewhere did not get any support. Among those who did get support, the average yearly payment was about \$3,000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). When only poor families maintained by mothers are considered, the average amount of child support was notably lower, about \$2,000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995).

Mothers' Versus Fathers' Reports of Child Support Payments. Studies show that fathers report paying more in child support than mothers report receiving (Braver, Fitzpatrick, & Bay, 1991; Schaeffer, Seltzer, & Klawitter, 1991; Sonenstein & Calhoun, 1990). Fathers' reports of child support payments may be higher than mothers' because fathers who do not pay any child support are less likely to be interviewed than resident mothers who receive no support (Cherlin, Griffith, & McCarthy, 1983; Schaeffer et al., 1991; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994). If studies were to include nonresident fathers, whom we know from other sources are not paying child support (e.g., based on information in court

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records), estimates of child support would be more similar for mother and father respondents. Fathers' reports about child support are also likely to be higher than mothers' because fathers know more about some types of payments. Fathers may include in their reports of child support the payments they make to third parties (e.g., doctors), payments for the expenses of visiting the children, and direct payments to the children. Finally, the discrepancy between mothers' and fathers' reports about child support may occur because fathers try to cast themselves in a more favorable light by overreporting contributions to child support.

Child Support Orders and Informal Payments. Data from one of the most commonly used sources of information on child support, the U.S. Current Population Survey, are often criticized because the surveys do not ask mothers without child support orders whether they receive informal support from the child's nonresident father. Information from the National Survey of Families and Households shows that about 80% of mothers without orders do not get any informal support. Among mothers without child support orders who do get informal support, about half of them receive at least \$80 per month, or \$960 per year. Although this may not seem like much compared to the average \$3,000 per year received by mothers with formal child support orders, it constitutes about 10% of the average annual income, \$9,200, for single mothers without orders (Seltzer, forthcoming).

Informal transfers, while important for some families, do not compensate for low levels of child support payments. About half of divorced fathers buy presents for their children, but most do not provide other informal contributions for their children. Fathers who already pay child support are more likely to make these extra transfers than fathers who do not pay formal child support (Teachman, 1991). A concern in child support enforcement is whether requiring all nonresident parents to have a formal child support order, will simply substitute formal transfers for informal transfers, without a net gain to children's economic welfare. Because informal payments are not very common among families without orders, and because the amount of informal transfers is small compared to support paid as part of child support orders, increasing formal orders has potential for improving children's economic well-being.

Factors Associated With Paying Support. Several factors account for whether fathers pay child support. Obviously, fathers' ability to pay child support, including employment, income, and education, affect payments and compliance with child support orders (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Sheets, Fogas, & Bay, 1993; Meyer & Bartfeld, forthcoming; Peters, Argys, Maccoby, & Mnookin, 1993; Seltzer, 1991a). The degree to which a child support order is a burden also affects compliance rate. Wisconsin data show that fathers of nonmarital children who owe more than 20% of their income and divorced fathers who owe more than 35% of their income have lower compliance rates (Bartfeld & Meyer, 1994; Meyer & Bartfeld, forthcoming).

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Noneconomic factors also affect whether fathers pay support and how much they pay. Fathers who live apart from their children may be reluctant to pay support because they do not trust the mother to spend it all on the children and not on herself (Arendell, 1992; Sherwood, 1992). Fathers' inability to monitor how the resident mother spends child support money lowers payments (Weiss & Willis, 1985). Compared to fathers who live with their children, nonresident fathers enjoy fewer of the benefits of being a father, which also discourages payments. The longer parents are separated, the less child support fathers pay and the less likely the nonresident father is to pay any child support (Beller & Graham, 1993; Seltzer, 1991b). Finally, when payment is withheld from fathers' earnings, compliance with child support orders is higher (Garfinkel & Klawitter, 1990). This finding provides a motivation for the withholding provisions in the Family Support Act of 1988.

What happens to payments when fathers remarry or take on child rearing responsibilities in another family? Some studies show that remarriage increases payments, some show it decreases payments, and others show no effect (Hill, 1992; O'Neill, 1985; Seltzer, 1991b). Inconsistent findings about the effect of fathers' remarriage on child support may be due to the lack of information in some studies on fathers' income and employment. Social researchers are continuing to investigate this important question.

Fathers who see their children are more likely to pay support, and these fathers pay more support than do those who have no contact with their children (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Seltzer, 1991b; Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989; but see Veum, 1993). It is difficult to determine whether fathers who have more contact with their children pay more support as a result of spending more time with the children or alternatively, whether paying more support increases contact with children. Yet another possibility is that a third characteristic of families, such as fathers' commitment to children or how well the separated parents get along together, explains both higher child support payments *and* more frequent visits with children. Despite researchers' inability thus far to disentangle the association between spending time with children and paying child support, evidence suggests a reasonably consistent pattern in which visiting and paying support go together. This pattern is also evident among families who report problems in their postseparation arrangements. Those who report difficulties about visitation and access also often report problems about child support, and vice versa (Pearson & Anhalt, 1994). Thus, even though child support and access or custody matters are usually handled separately in family law, in practice, they are intertwined.

Some differences exist between divorced and nonmarital cases in child support payments. Divorced mothers are much more likely to have child support orders than mothers who have never been married (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). When there is a child support order, average compliance rates are lower for nonmarital than divorce cases. Nonmarital fathers in Wisconsin are twice as likely as divorced fathers not to pay anything (Meyer & Bartfeld, forthcoming).

Wisconsin data also show that divorced fathers who do not comply with their orders have substantially higher incomes than noncomplying fathers whose children were born outside of marriage. (Meyer & Bartfeld, forthcoming).

The Effectiveness of Child Support in Reducing Poverty

An important question from a policy perspective is how effective child support is in removing families from poverty. Child support has a small effect on poverty, removing only about 1 of 20 single-mother families from poverty (Meyer, unpublished data). However, child support increases the incomes of some poor families even if it does not bring them out of poverty. Among single-mother families, about 8% of the “poverty gap” (the distance between the income of a poor family and the poverty line) is filled by child support (Meyer, unpublished data).

These figures have spurred discussions about why child support removes so few single-mother families from poverty. One explanation is that child support would remove more families from poverty if the amount owed were collected. Yet difficulties in collecting the amount due are a much less serious problem than the lack of orders or orders that are too low (Meyer, 1995a; Sorensen, 1995). A second explanation is that many of the child support policy changes in the Family Support Act of 1988 affected only new cases. Thus, it will take time before the results of these changes can be detected because these new cases comprise only a small percentage of all child support cases. A third possibility is that the reforms are effective, but the types of families in the child support system are changing; the child support caseload is increasingly comprised of cases in which child support is difficult to collect (Beller & Graham, 1993). Finally, child support will never be enough on its own to lift many single-mother families out of poverty, perhaps because the fathers associated with these poor mothers are poor themselves (see, for example, Edin, 1995; Sorensen & Clark, 1994).

Can Fathers Afford to Pay Child Support?

Little research has examined the economic circumstances of nonresident fathers. The emerging research suggests that there is a great deal of diversity among nonresident fathers. For example, 15–25% have annual incomes below \$5,000, but 40–50% have incomes above \$20,000 and 10–15% have incomes above \$40,000 (Meyer, 1995b). There are also substantial differences between nonmarital fathers and divorced fathers, with nonmarital fathers having lower incomes (Meyer, 1995b; Sorensen, 1995). For example, fathers of children born outside of marriage in Wisconsin have average incomes of about \$10,000 when paternity is established (Meyer, 1995c), compared to over \$20,000 for divorces (Phillips & Garfinkel, 1993).

Income grows substantially over time, especially among fathers of children born outside of marriage (Meyer, 1995c; Phillips & Garfinkel, 1993). For example, the median change in annual income among paternity fathers in Wisconsin was an increase of \$3,500 between the time paternity was established and 3 years later (Meyer, 1995c).

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A consistent finding across studies is that most nonresident fathers could afford to pay more child support than they are currently paying (e.g., Garfinkel & Oellerich, 1989; Sorensen, 1995). Very few fathers fall into poverty because of the amount of child support they are paying, and few would fall into poverty even if they paid all that was due (Hill, 1992; Meyer, 1995b).

Who Meets Children's Economic Needs If Fathers Do Not?

Children's loss of their father's income is compensated for partly by the mother's earnings and by AFDC. About one fifth of married and cohabiting mothers who separate receive AFDC in the year after separation (Bianchi & McArthur, 1991). Use of AFDC is higher among never-married mothers, especially those who give birth when they are teen-agers. For instance, about 48% of unmarried teen mothers receive welfare in the year after the child's birth (U.S. House of Representatives, 1994). However, mothers' earnings and AFDC do not eliminate the income discrepancies between married and single mothers. As can be seen in Figure 2, average annual income is nearly \$36,000 for mothers who remarry and about \$13,000 for mothers who remain single. The largest share of a single mother's income, about 61%, comes from her earnings. For a mother in a remarried family, the largest share of income comes from "other income," usually her husband's earnings. In addition to husbands' income, other kinds of transfers, such as support from grandparents, are included under "other income." Maternal grandparents help meet the economic shortfall of children in single-mother households, often by sharing a household with the child and single mother (Bumpass & Raley, 1995).

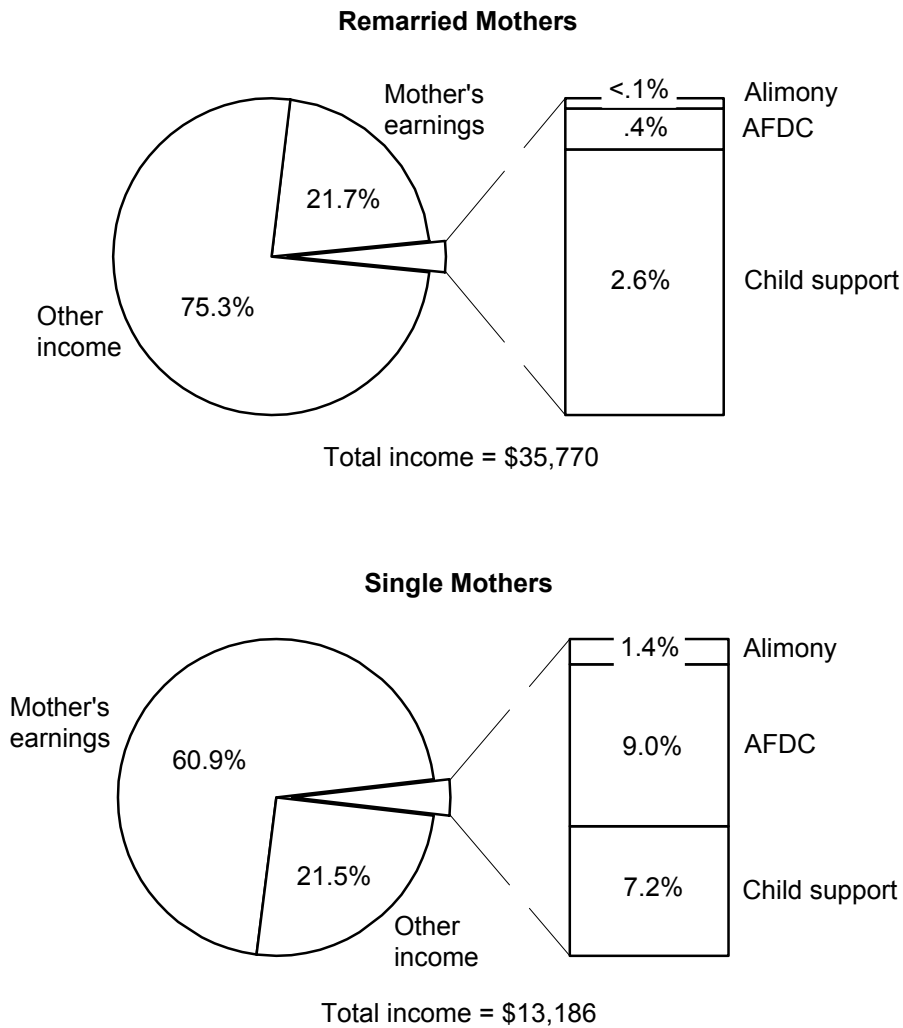
Does It Matter for Children Who Provides for Their Economic Needs?

A growing number of studies show a positive association between the amount of child support that nonresident fathers pay and their children's behavior (Furstenberg, Morgan, & Allison, 1987) and school achievement (Graham, Beller, & Hernandez, 1994; King, 1994; Knox, 1993; Knox & Bane, 1994; McLanahan, Seltzer, Hanson, & Thomson, 1994). Several of these studies also show that a dollar of child support has a greater effect on child outcomes than a dollar from other sources, such as earnings or AFDC (Beller & Graham, 1993; Graham et al., 1994; Knox, 1993; Knox & Bane, 1994; McLanahan et al., 1994). Why would child support dollars benefit children more than dollars from some other source? Child support payments may have a symbolic value to children, who see them as an indication their father cares about them (e.g., Wallerstein & Huntington, 1983). Fathers who pay child support also spend more time with their children. The combination of these two activities may reassure children and facilitate their emotional adjustment. In addition, fathers who pay support more regularly may get along better with the children's mother. The absence of conflict may explain the higher amounts of child support, greater amount of contact with the children, and the children's better adjustment in the family. Child support may also benefit children more than other income if resident mothers spend

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more on children than when income comes from other sources (Del Boca & Flinn, 1994). Results of studies that try to assess competing interpretations are inconclusive; yet the positive effect of child support payments persists even after taking into account the amount of time the child spends with the father and the amount of conflict between the parents. This preliminary evidence suggests that more universal and rigorous child support enforcement may enhance the well-being of children whose parents divorce. However, this evidence also suggests that stricter enforcement is likely to have more negative effects on the well-being of children born outside of marriage than on children of divorce (McLanahan et al., 1994).

Figure 2. Income Sources of Mothers Eligible for Child Support



Note: Income in 1985 dollars.

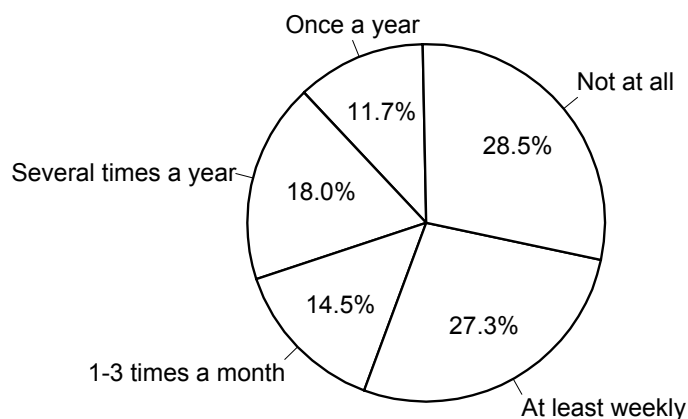
Source: *Small Change: The Economics of Child Support*, by A. H. Beller and J. W. Graham, 1993, New Haven CT: Yale University Press. Adapted from Table 7.1.

Children's Emotional and Social Needs

Levels and Patterns of Contact Between Nonresident Parents and Children

Children depend on adults to look after them and to provide emotional as well as material support. When parents separate, their children experience the loss of at least one parent's time and attention. Figure 3 shows that about 40% of nonresident fathers either did not see their child or saw the child only once in the preceding year (Seltzer, 1991b). Indirect forms of communication, such as mail and telephone, do not compensate for this low level of contact (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Seltzer, 1991b).

Figure 3. Fathers' Frequency of Visits With Children After Separation



Source: National Survey of Families and Households, Wave 1, children who live with their mothers. Adapted from J. A. Seltzer, "Relationships between Fathers and Children Who Live Apart," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 53, Feb. 1991, Table 1.

Yet nonresident fathers vary widely in patterns of contact. Fathers of children born outside of marriage are twice as likely to lose touch with their child as fathers who are separated from their child because of divorce. However, among separated families in which fathers spend at least some time with their children, there is little difference between nonmarital and marital families in whether fathers have weekly contact with children (Seltzer, 1991b).

Despite the overall picture of fathers' disengagement, some fathers do stay involved with their children. About one quarter of nonresident fathers see their children at least weekly (see Figure 3), and about 30% of fathers who see their children spend significant portions of time with them. From the child's point of view, even those who have little contact with their nonresident parent view their relationship as close (Maccoby et al., 1993).

Nonresident fathers who stay involved with their children generally pursue recreational activities together rather than instrumental activities, such as doing homework together (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Teachman, 1991). Another way to look at fathers' involvement is to examine what happens when children spend time in both parents' households. After divorce, mothers take care of the more routine work of child rearing, such as scheduling doctor and dentist appointments and making sure that the child gets to these appointments (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

Contact and Children's Well-Being: The Role of Conflict Between Parents

Many fathers and children want to maintain contact after separation (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1990), and many resident mothers prefer that their child's father be more involved with the child (Furstenberg, 1988). Most national studies, however, show no evidence that an increase in the frequency or amount of contact is beneficial for children (Furstenberg et al., 1987; King, 1994; McLanahan et al., 1994). What matters for children's well-being is what happens during that contact, and, importantly, how much conflict occurs between parents. When conflict is high, contact is associated with behavior problems in children. When conflict is low or controlled so that children are not exposed to it, they appear to benefit from contact with the nonresident father (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Hetherington et al., 1982).

One way to assess the amount of conflict in separated families is to examine the incidence of access disputes. These are reports of visitation problems filed in Child Access Demonstration Project sites, projects authorized by Congress to address difficulties in nonresident parents' access to children. Estimates from these sites of visitation problems range from about 1 in 5 to about 1 in 25 cases (Pearson, 1993). Other studies take a broader view of conflict, assessing how often mothers report conflict about various aspects of child rearing when they live apart from the child's father; about half of mothers report conflict and one quarter report a substantial amount of conflict (Seltzer, unpublished data).

In addition to having a direct effect on a child's well-being, conflict also has an indirect effect. Conflict hampers the mother's and father's ability to provide stable and secure child-rearing practices, and hurts the quality of the parent-child relationship. Parents who are preoccupied with their own needs may have difficulty meeting the needs of their children, especially when parents are experiencing the trauma of a break-up. Money and child-rearing practices are major sources of disagreement among married parents (Hanson, 1993), and it is not surprising that these may be more difficult for divorced parents to resolve. Separated parents already have a history of conflict and are now facing ambiguous role responsibilities. They may respond to the challenges of child rearing by remaining engaged either in reasonable harmony or in hostility; or, they may disengage from each other and manage their child rearing in parallel households (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). Over time, disengagement becomes much more common (Maccoby et al., 1993), especially as parents establish new relationships, remarry, and move to new locations.

When conflict between parents is high, contact with nonresident fathers is associated with behavior problems in children.

**Children's
contact with
nonresident
fathers declines
when mothers
remarry.**

Child support reforms, including paternity establishment and more universal enforcement of child support orders, are likely to increase the proportion of children who have contact with conflicted parents. These reforms require parents to be involved who, in other circumstances, would choose not to be involved because they do not get along. Pushing these families together may improve children's economic welfare while it threatens their social and emotional development by exposing them to much higher levels of conflict. The threat to children's welfare is particularly severe if the reforms increase contact with abusive parents.

"Parallel parenting" or when divorced parents arrange their child-rearing activities to be as separate from each other's as possible, is one way that parents manage their conflict and avoid disagreements. Parallel parenting is likely to work well if parents do not use their child as a messenger for their hostile exchanges. Children who are involved in their parents' disagreements or who feel that they must manage their parents' relationship with each other are more likely to be depressed and behave in a deviant manner, compared to children who are not involved in their parents' hostile relationship (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). The effects of the child support reforms in the Family Support Act will depend heavily on how parents manage their conflict with each other.

Social and Emotional Security and Father Substitutes

Stepfathers and other adults may compensate, in part, for children's loss of the nonresident father's time and attention. Compared to biological or adoptive fathers who live with their children, stepfathers are less socially and emotionally engaged with their stepchildren (Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992; Smith & Morgan, 1994). A good relationship with a stepfather enhances a child's emotional, social, and academic achievement (Hetherington, 1993). However, acquiring a stepparent does not reduce the chance that a child will drop out of school or become a teen parent (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Children's contact with nonresident fathers declines when mothers remarry (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). The strains of acquiring a stepfather at the same time that they lose ties with their original father may also threaten children's emotional welfare. However, there is no evidence that contact with a nonresident father threatens the child's relationship with the stepfather (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Zill, 1988).

Child Support Policy and Children's Families

Biological fathers' ties to their children depend greatly on the men's relationship with the children's mother. When parents are married or living together, biological fathers devote their time and financial resources to the children; when parents divorce or a nonmarital relationship breaks up, fathers disengage from both the mother and their children. Fathers may acquire other children through remarriage or cohabitation, but here again, their ties to the children are through the men's attachment to the children's mothers. While a man's relationship with the

children's mother continues, he helps to provide for the children's needs. But when the relationship dissolves, men move on from these children as well. In contrast, women's ties to children persist whether or not they are involved with the child's father. Even when separated children live with their fathers or spend time in both parents' households, mothers spend more time with their children, organize more child-rearing activities than do nonresident fathers, and, by some reports, supervise children more effectively than do fathers (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988).

Federal and state reforms are trying to strengthen men's ties to their children—both their legal and social rights to children through access and custody, and their financial ties to children through child support orders and better enforcement of those orders. The preliminary evidence suggests that these reforms will help children's economic welfare. The reforms may also improve children's social and emotional well-being as long as the changes do not increase children's contact with highly conflicted parents or as long as these parents manage their conflict in a way that protects their children.

Parent education and mediation offer the potential to help parents. Parents who no longer get along as spouses or lovers may be able to learn to get along as parents (Kelly, 1994; Pearson, 1993). Parents cannot have a clean break when their relationship sours because they still share a common resource, their children. In many instances, however, parents can work together cooperatively to manage their hostility and to meet the children's needs. When parents maintain a high level of conflict and are unable to work together, children suffer (e.g., Johnston, 1994).

Although this report has focused on parents' responsibilities, especially those of nonresident fathers, it is important to recognize that child support reform alone cannot do everything. Some fathers cannot pay more support because they do not have sufficient income. Child poverty will persist even in a system of perfect child support enforcement (Sorensen & Clark, 1994). In addition, some parents need help in learning how to manage the difficulties of the ambiguous responsibilities they face. Government can play a role in helping parents meet their responsibilities to children by acknowledging both children's economic and non-economic needs.

Parent education and mediation offer the potential to help parents learn to get along as parents.



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