

NON-CUSTODIAL PARENTS PARTICIPATION IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LIVES: EVIDENCE FROM THE SURVEY OF INCOME AND PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Divorce and non-marital childbearing have become commonplace and have dramatically altered children's lives. It can no longer be assumed that most children will spend their entire childhoods living with both parents. To the contrary, approximately half will live in single parent homes at some point before they turn age 18. Unfortunately, a common pattern is for the non-residential parent to become increasingly detached over time, paying minimal or no child support and visiting infrequently if at all. The costs to the children involved and to society at large of this disengagement are far from trivial. Many non-custodial parents do not pay all the child support they owe. Many others have no obligation to pay support. Nonpayment of support forces some families below the poverty level and onto government welfare programs. For others, it means a reduced standard of living and an uncertain future. The costs to children are seen in an increased likelihood of dropping out of school and increased, social, emotional, psychological, and behavioral problems. Not all children are affected and some that are overcome their difficulties in a few years, but others experience long-term setbacks.

The connections between custody arrangements, payment of child support, parental involvement, and child well-being are still not well-understood. Many of the studies on which policy is being made are based on small, unrepresentative samples or on the experiences of divorcing couples in particular states. These studies may not reflect the experience of most custodial parents and their children. If the assumptions about the positive influence of joint custody, for example, or links between payment of child support and visitation are wrong, then the outcomes for families and children may not be to their benefit after all. Although not based on experimental designs, national survey data can be used to cast more light on the issues surrounding visitation, custody, child support, and child well-being and provide policymakers with a more solid base from which to proceed.

The aim of this project was to improve understanding of the relationship between non-custodial parent involvement, children's well-being, child support, and custody arrangements. Two approaches were used. Analyses of data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) were used to provide national estimates of persons living in different custody arrangements, and to examine the connections between custody arrangements, child support payments, parental involvement, and children's well-being in both the divorced and never-married populations. In addition, a review of recent literature was conducted and gaps in the research were noted. The findings of the review were used to guide the SIPP analyses. Also, as part of the project, a limited set of articles was annotated and a bibliography of selected papers on custody, visitation, and child well-being was created. The analyses of

SIPP are contained in Volume I of this report. The literature review, selected annotated articles, and the extended bibliography are contained in Volume II. In addition, supplementary tables based on the SIPP were produced. These tables show the demographic characteristics, economic status, and living conditions of custodial parents, and selected measures of children's well-being by the existence of a child support award and whether child support was received, whether the agreement was voluntary or court-ordered, and the type of arrangement. Information on demographic background, the economic status, and the living conditions of the custodial parent and selected measures of child well-being are also shown by the amount of visitation with the non-resident parent. These tables were prepared for all custodial parents, for female custodial parents, for male custodial parents, and for divorced female custodial parents. The sample size for male custodial parents is small in some cells of the tables, so caution should be used in drawing inferences from these tables.

VOLUME I: SUMMARY OF SIPP ANALYSES

The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is based on a national probability sample of the U.S. civilian, non-institutionalized population. It is funded and conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The SIPP is a major source of information about the demographic and economic situation of persons and families in the United States. The SIPP is one of two national surveys containing extensive amounts of child support information. The other survey is the Current Population Survey.

There are three reasons why SIPP was uniquely suited to examine the relationship of child support, child custody, and child well-being: (1) detailed programmatic information; (2) longitudinal nature of the data, and (3) a child support module with questions on award, payment, custody, visitation, and child well-being. There are a variety of questions that can be used to assess the economic well-being of such children and, to a lesser extent, their social well-being. SIPP also contains topical modules which ask about consumer durables owned by each household, the living conditions of households, and the ability of households to meet basic needs. These modules were used to characterize the circumstances in which children are growing up. In addition, the SIPP contains information about the health of persons aged 15 and older.

The analyses relied on a variety of methods. Frequencies and crosstabulations were used to develop profiles of custodial parents with different child support characteristics, such as the number of persons with joint physical and legal custody arrangements, and information about the extent of non-cash support received from non-residential parents. In addition, ordinary least squares regression and logistic regression were used to examine in more detail the predictors of child support and visitation. Multivariate models were also estimated to examine the link between child support awards, custody arrangements, visitation, and payment of child support on children's health and on the receipt of AFDC in the previous year.

Highlights of Descriptive Findings

- Twenty-one percent or 1.3 million custodial parents with formal written child support agreements

report that they have a joint custody arrangement. Of these, over 1 million (80%) have a joint legal only arrangement. The remaining 262 thousand report that they have a joint legal and physical custody arrangement.

- A large minority of custodial parents (45%) have never had a child support agreement of any type. About 14 percent of custodial parents without a written award report that the non-resident parent provided child support or non-cash assistance in the previous year.
- Court-ordered agreements are the most common type of written agreement. Seventy-three percent of custodial parents with written agreement report that they had court-ordered agreements. Twenty-three percent report that the agreements were voluntary ones ratified by the court. Three percent report that they had some other type of written agreement, such as one not ratified by the court.
- Nearly two-thirds (64.6%) or almost 4 million custodial parents with written agreements report that their agreements contain visitation provisions.
- According to the reports of custodial mothers with written agreements, nearly one-third (32%) of non-resident fathers have not spent time with their children in the previous 12 months. However, nearly one-quarter (24%) of non-resident fathers see their children at least once a week.
- Non-resident mothers are more likely to visit their children and to see them more often than non-resident fathers. Sixteen percent of non-resident mothers had not visited their children in the past year compared to 32 percent of non-resident fathers. Thirty-five percent of non-resident mothers saw their children once a week or more compared to 24 percent of non-resident fathers.
- Custodial parents with written child support agreements who were owed child support, received about 65 percent of what they were due. Parents with voluntary agreements received 73 percent of what they were due, while those with court-ordered agreements received 62 percent of what they were due. Parents living in the same city or county as the non-resident parent received 70 percent of what was due compared to 58 percent if the non-resident parent lived in a different state.

Multivariate Results and Policy Implications

This study is not a randomized policy experiment or even a non-randomized study of specific policy initiatives. Thus, we must be circumspect about how far we go in drawing policy-related conclusions about the findings. A correlational panel study such as the present one cannot prove that a given policy will work as its advocates content it should. An observed relationship may be due to the operation of other, unmeasured factors. However, the *failure* to find an expected correlation can provide firmer grounds for believing that a specific policy will *not* work as anticipated. These results apply to couples who have a written child support agreement. Information on contact and payment of child support was not asked of persons without a written agreement. With these warnings in mind, the SIPP analyses provide support for the following types of activities:

- **Encouraging parents to establish child support agreements through a process of bargaining and mutual agreement, whenever feasible, rather than through litigation and court mandate, and providing services, if needed, to assist in the process.** Multivariate models indicated that even after controlling for background characteristics, fathers who had a voluntary

written agreement ratified by the court maintained more contact with their children, were more likely to pay some child support, complied more fully with the child support orders, and paid greater amounts of child support than fathers who had court-ordered child support agreements.

- **Encouraging couples to specify visitation provisions in their agreements.** Nonresidential fathers had significantly more contact with their children when the child support agreement had an explicit provision specifying the frequency and schedule of visitation than when such a provision was not present in the agreement. The existence of a visitation provision, however, had no direct effect on the payment of child support.
- **Encouraging and facilitating contact between non-resident fathers and their children, when feasible.** The SIPP analyses suggest that continued contact with the non-resident father has a beneficial influence on older teens and young adults. Moreover contact had a positive association with both the payment of child support and with compliance with child support orders. Although this relationship diminished with the addition of past child support behavior to the model, the positive sign remained suggesting that contact is not hindering the payment of child support and is actually exerting pressure towards the payment of child support.
- **§ Promoting joint custody arrangements.** The results of the analyses were broadly supportive of arguments for joint custody, though the influence of joint custody differed somewhat depending upon whether it was joint legal or joint legal and physical. Nonresidential fathers with joint legal and physical custody were more likely to have paid some child support in the current year (significant at .10 level) and to have complied more fully with their support obligations than fathers in other arrangements. There was no difference in the probability of paying support or in the degree of compliance with the child support orders between fathers with joint legal only custody arrangements and other fathers. However, fathers with joint legal only arrangements paid larger amounts of support than other fathers, even after controlling for the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the custodial parent and other possible mediating factors.

VOLUME II: SYNTHESIS OF LITERATURE

The literature review contains three components: a synthesis of the literature on child development, custody, visitation, and child well-being; an annotated bibliography; and a selected bibliography. The synthesis briefly summarizes recent perspectives on children's development and on the role of the father in families. These two perspectives are important in understanding how and why marital disruption may affect children. The fact that children change over time, developing new skills and capacities and having different needs means that their response to the breakup of their families may differ depending upon their age at the time. Moreover, since the majority of non-custodial parents are fathers, it is important to understand the role that fathers play in children's lives and how that role changes as children grow older. The review then discusses several possible ways in which family disruption may affect children's lives. These are the loss of a parent (usually the father), the adjustment of the custodial parent, parental conflict, economic hardship stemming from the disruption, stressful life changes, including the loss of social supports and other resources. Gaps in existing research are noted. Key findings that helped guide the SIPP analysis are:

- All persons who are involved in working with single parent families and with divorcing families

need to be made more aware of the developmental needs of children, the potential difficulties that they will face from family disruption or turmoil, and steps that could ease those difficulties.

- Given that conflict, if inappropriately handled, can be harmful to children and can alienate the two adults so that they cannot cooperate over matters concerning the child's well-being, it is important to provide services to reduce conflict or to express it in a healthier manner.
- Several studies showed that all the parties in a divorce experience stress. The stress can adversely affect the custodial parent's ability to function effectively; it can serve to inhibit the non-custodial parent from remaining involved in the child's life; and it may affect how the child adjusts to family disruption and turmoil. More research and training on how to reduce stress is needed.
- Given that most children desire the continuing presence of a father in their lives and that fathers may disengage from their parental responsibilities in part because they feel no sense of control over the new arrangements, steps should be taken to enable fathers when it is at all feasible to have a more active post-divorce role.
- There is a scarcity of research that has examined couples who never establish awards and couples who never married each other. Such couples are particularly vulnerable economically and the children face risks as well.