

## **Full-time Father or “Deadbeat Dad”? Does the Growth in Father Custody Explain the Declining Share of Single Parents with a Child Support Order?**

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The share of single parent families with a child support order has declined significantly in recent years. We use a unique set of court record data to assess the extent to which this trend is due to: (1) the growth in nonmarital fertility, (2) changes in family living situations (especially the increase in children residing with their fathers rather than their mothers), (3) changes in income (especially the growth in mothers with earnings equal to or greater than fathers'), (4) changes in other characteristics of the parents, or (5) changes in the probability of an order net of these factors. Our analysis suggests that, especially for single parent families that result from divorce, changes in living situations explain the bulk of the decline in child support orders. That is, we find more evidence of a growth in full-time fathers (at least part of the week) than “deadbeat dads.”

### **Extended abstract:**

After an extended period of growing reach and effectiveness, the formal child support enforcement system appears to have reached a plateau; the share of single parents with a child support order has actually declined in recent years. According to national figures drawn from the Current Population Survey- Child Support Supplement (CPS-CSS), the proportion of single parent families with a child support order increased somewhat from 1993 (57.0%) to 2003 (60.0%), but then declined to 57.3% in 2005 and further to 54.0% in 2007. Some have argued that this represents the failure of child support policy to enforce nonresident fathers' obligations. Especially given increased nonmarital births, mothers may not even pursue a child support order—creating an extreme form of “deadbeat dad,” so disengaged that no legal obligation for support exists. However, over the same period there have been marked increases in the number of households that include a single father and his resident children—cases where an order may be less common because they involve full-time (at least for part of the week) fathers.

Improving child support enforcement is a key family policy goal because child support, paid by the non-resident parent (typically the father) to the resident parent (typically the mother), is the primary policy tool used to assure private financial support of children of divorced or never-married parents. Over the last 30 years, increases in divorce and nonmarital childbearing have increased the population potentially served, at the same time that political and economic changes have reduced the availability of alternative public economic support (e.g. welfare). Child support enforcement policy has been expanded and strengthened in an effort to improve the economic wellbeing of children, and to reduce costs to taxpayers of alternative public supports. While these policy changes initially met with some apparent success, and the proportion of custodial parents awarded child support rose, in recent years the reach of the formal child support enforcement system appears to have stagnated or even declined.

The typical explanation for the stagnation in the percent of single parent families with child support orders has been changes over time in the composition of custodial mothers, away from those ever-married and toward those never-married (who have a lower likelihood of having an order). Some have also suggested that changes in relative incomes have reduced the frequency of orders, as more resident mothers have incomes similar to or greater than the incomes of their children's nonresident fathers. Since child support guidelines generally would call for child support to be paid in both marital and nonmarital cases, and even when resident parents' incomes are similar or greater than nonresident parents' incomes, both these explanations suggest a failure of the child support enforcement system.

An alternative possibility focuses on changes in family organization and the living arrangements of children with separated parents. We know that a growing proportion of children live at least part time with their fathers (only). However, national data are quite limited in addressing this issue, as they generally do not adequately measure shared custody—the arrangement that has been shown in prior research using court records to have grown most dramatically.

We use Court Record Data for Wisconsin, which includes information on over 6000 divorce and paternity cases with legal judgments related to physical placement and/or child support issued between 1996 and 2007. These data are unique in including a state-wide sample of cases over an extended period, with detailed information on custody and child support arrangements, as well as information on family and parents' characteristics. We examine the growing proportion of cases in which the physical placement of children is shared by both biological parents (shared placement), or in which the father has full placement of all (father-sole placement) or some (split placement) of the children. Child support guidelines generally call for less (or no) child support to be paid from one parent to the other when placement is shared or split. Father-sole placement cases are also less likely to be awarded child support. Using these data we estimate the relative importance of changes in custody, and changes in the relative earnings of matched pairs of mothers and fathers, as well as other more commonly measured changes, including the growing proportion of nonmarital births, on overall trends in the proportion of single-parent families with a child support order.

Initial analysis shows that over the 12 year period considered, the proportion of divorce cases in which the mother has sole physical placement fell from 64 to 47 percent, father sole custody remained fairly stable at about 8 percent, but shared custody arrangements grew dramatically, from 24 percent to 44 percent. (Split custody cases, in which each parent has sole custody of at least one child, remained fairly uncommon, accounting for 2 to 4 percent of cases). Among never-married couples, while mother-sole custody remained dominant, there were significant changes over time, as shared custody arrangements increased from about 1 percent of cases to over 10 percent in 2007. We use a shift-share analysis, bounded with alternative counterfactual baselines, to estimate the proportion of changes in order probabilities that can be accounted for

by changes in living arrangements.