



## **RECENT RESEARCH ON THE CHILD SUPPORT OBLIGATIONS OF NONRESIDENT FATHERS**

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**BASED ON RESEARCH WITH MARIA CANCIAN**

Fathers who do not live with their children are often ordered to pay child support. These obligations attempt to improve the economic well-being of these children; child support policy is also intended to get nonresident parents to provide economic resources so that public supports (welfare and other programs) can be more limited. Over the last 35 years, there have been substantial changes to the child support system, with most changes designed to increase the amount that noncustodial fathers owe and pay. Although a body of research has examined the results of these policy changes, including their effects on nonresident fathers, much is still unknown. This presentation focuses on two topics of recent research, both examining aspects of the child support obligations of fathers.<sup>1</sup>

The first topic explores with whom children are supposed to live after divorce, and whether increases in equal physical custody explain part of the decline in the prevalence of child support orders reported by the Census Bureau.<sup>2</sup> Using data on over 6000 divorces in Wisconsin, custody and child support order arrangements in 1997-98 are compared with those in 2005-07. Dramatic changes in where children are supposed to live were found: the proportion of divorce cases in which children are supposed to spend equal time with each parent has gone from 16% to 31%, and the proportion of cases that have sole mother custody has declined from 64% to less than half (46%). These trends explain much of the decline in the prevalence of child support orders, since cases with equal time are less likely to have orders.

The second topic examines the extent to which child support obligations change when the economic circumstances of nonresident fathers change.<sup>3</sup> Using data from administrative records in Wisconsin, the results show substantial instability in fathers' earnings, with nearly half of fathers having annual earnings changes of 50% or more between 2006 and 2009. Despite this instability, only 1/3 of the fathers have changes to their child support orders, and the cases with changes are not always the ones with the largest changes in earnings, nor do orders always change in the same direction as earnings.

The presentation thus provides data on some of the dynamics of the lives of nonresident fathers and whether these changes are reflected in changes to their financial obligations to their children. The presentation closes with a discussion of the implications for policy and research.

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<sup>1</sup> The research reported here was conducted as part of a research agreement between the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP). Any opinions are those of the authors alone.

<sup>2</sup> This section of the presentation is based on a working paper ("Full-time Father or "Deadbeat Dad"? Does the Growth in Father Custody Explain the Declining Share of Custodial Parents with a Child Support Order?" by Daniel R. Meyer, Maria Cancian, Eunhee Han, Patricia Brown, Steven T. Cook, Yiyu Chen).

<sup>3</sup> This section of the presentation is based on two recent papers, ("Unchanging Child Support Orders in the Face of Unstable Earnings" by Yoonsook Ha, Maria Cancian & Daniel R. Meyer, published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis & Management* in 2010 and "Child Support in an Economic Downturn: Changes in Earnings, Child Support Orders, and Payments." by Chi-Fang Wu, a 2011 report to Wisconsin Bureau of Child Support).