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Research on Nonresident Fathers

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Presentation based on research with

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Acknowledgements

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Overview

- Research on 2 issues related to the child support obligations of nonresident fathers:
 - Why don't more nonresident fathers owe child support? Is it because they're disengaged?
 - How stable are nonresident fathers' earnings? When their earnings change, do their child support obligations change?
- Implications for policy and research

Why don't nonresident fathers owe child support?

- 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

Background

- Recent decline in the proportion of custodial parents with a child support order according to Census data
 - Increased from 57% in 1993 to 60% in 2003, then fell to 57% in 2005, 54% in 2007 and 51% in 2009
- Lack of improvement surprising, given improved child support enforcement tools
 - Cannot be explained by simple change in mix of marital v. nonmarital cases, as decline holds true even for divorced parents
- At first glance, could see this as reflecting disengaged fathers. BUT don't have national data to see whether there are some very engaged fathers – those whose children live with them a substantial portion of the time

Research Focus

- Looking at Wisconsin divorces from 1997-2008, is there a decline in the likelihood of a child support order?
- Can this be explained by changes in custody?
 - Or by changes in the incomes of parents?
 - Or by changes in the proportion of parents required to cooperate with child support?

Approach: Data & Sample

- Data: Wisconsin Court Record Data: court cases with child support potential in 21 Wisconsin counties
 - Includes demographics of the parents and children, employment and income, case characteristics (e.g., legal representation), court order details (e.g., legal and physical custody)
- Sample: divorce cases entering the WI court system, 1997-2008. N = 6287 divorces. For key analyses, contrast 1532 cases from the early cohorts (1997-98) with 2312 cases from the later cohorts (2005-07)

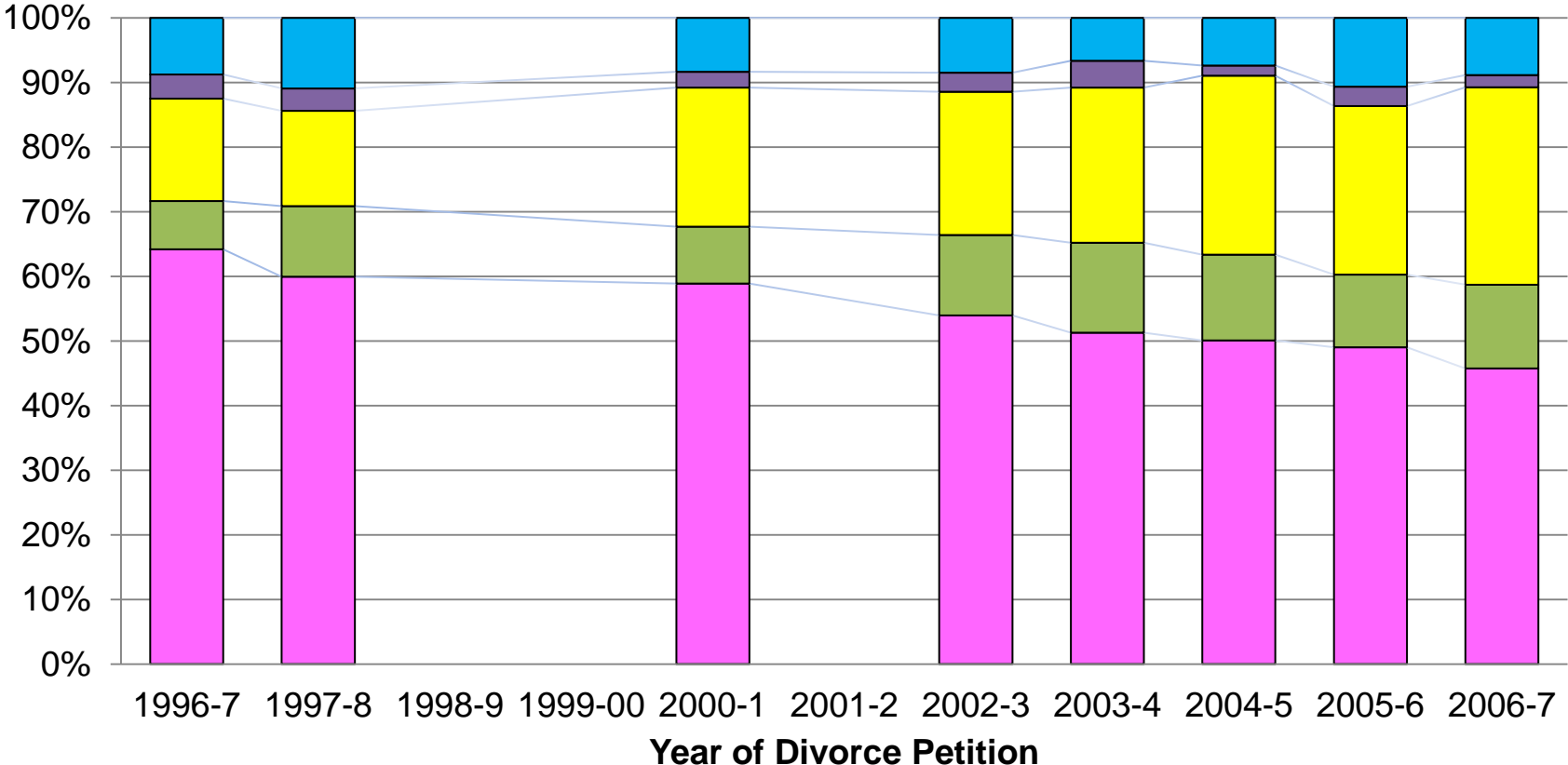
Measures and Methods

- Detailed information on the time children are expected to spend with each parent. We distinguish:
 - Mother sole
 - Shared/mother primary (51-75% of the overnights)
 - Equal shared
 - Split (some children with each parent)
 - Father sole, shared/father primary
- Empirical approach includes series of nested LP models to see if lower likelihood of orders in later period holds when controlling for other variables and custody

Time Trend, 1997-99 to 2005-08

- Proportion with orders declined from 80% to 67%
- Proportion required to cooperate with child support agency (TANF/SNAP) increased from 15% to 24%
- Proportion in which the noncustodial parent had income below poverty increased from 7% to 9%
- Proportion in which the noncustodial parent and custodial parent have similar incomes increased from 17% to 20%

Custody Outcomes for Divorce Cases



Mother Sole
 Mother Primary
 Equal Time
 Split
 Father Sole & Primary

Probability of an Order Varies by Custody

	Early (97-98)	Late (05-07)
Sole Mother	93%	85%
Shared, Mother Primary	90%	76%
Shared, Equal	45%	47%
Split	56%	55%
Sole Father, Shared, Father Primary	46%	36%

Results from Multivariate Analyses

- Lower likelihood of an order in later period
 - Income, welfare use, and background characteristics all important, but they do not change the coefficient on time trend
- Custody statistically significant
 - Controlling for custody is associated with a substantial decline in the importance of the time trend
- Work in progress

Switching Focus

- Presentation has focused on whether there is a child support obligation
- Now exploring whether fathers' obligations change as circumstances change (and whether they can meet them)

How Stable Are Nonresident Fathers' Earnings? When Earnings Change, Do Child Support Obligations Change?

- “Unchanging Child Support Orders in the Face of Unstable Earnings” by Yoonsook Ha, Maria Cancian & Daniel R. Meyer. *Journal of Policy Analysis & Management* 29(4): 799-820, 2010
- “Child Support in an Economic Downturn: Changes in Earnings, Child Support Orders, and Payments.” by Chi-Fang Wu, report to Wisconsin Bureau of Child Support, 2011

Background

- New awareness of instability of earnings, instability exacerbated by recession
- Some groups hit especially hard. This research examine patterns of changes in earnings among nonresident fathers
- Unstable earnings could create difficulties if child support obligations do not change
- Published analysis examines 2000-05 and new cases; recent update examines 2006-2009 and all cases. In this talk, focusing on update

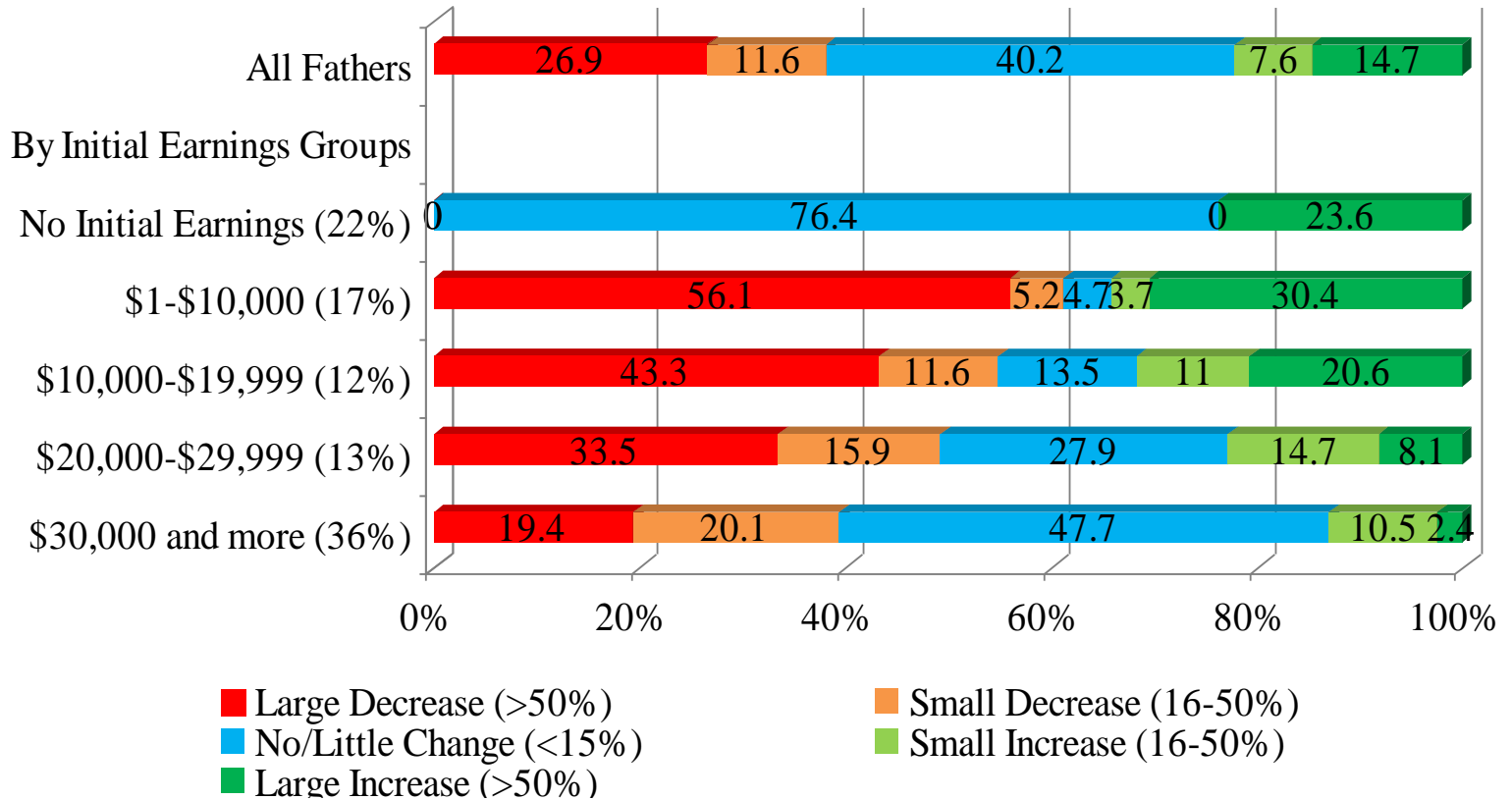
Approach: Data & Sample

- Data: Administrative records in Wisconsin: child support (KIDS) and earnings data (UI)
 - Advantages and limitations of UI records
- Sample: Couples with an order in 2006; father is the noncustodial parent; no changes in placement/custody or number of children. N = 91,000

Measures and Methods

- Measures: changes in earnings and orders over a 3-year period divided into 5 categories:
 - Large decrease (>50%)
 - Small decrease (16-50%)
 - No and little changes (<15%)
 - Small increase (16-50%)
 - Large increase (>50%)
- Essentially descriptive analyses, comparing changes in earnings to changes in orders. (The published paper contains a variety of multivariate models)

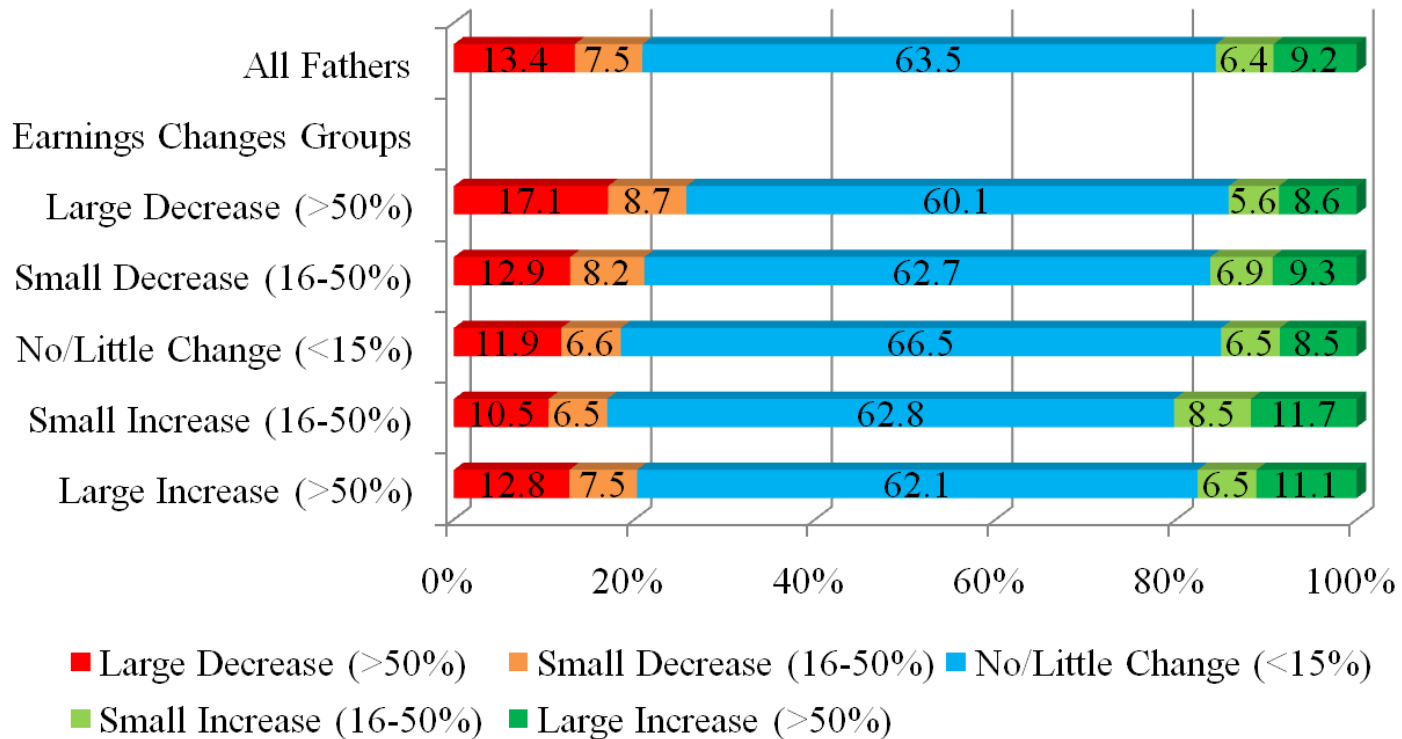
Changes in Earnings by Fathers' Initial Earnings



Results: Initial Earnings and Changes in Earnings

- Substantial proportion of fathers with low initial earnings ($1/2 < \$20,000$)
- Substantial instability in earnings, particularly for fathers with low initial earnings
- Decline in earnings of noncustodial fathers over time, particularly for cases in counties with most severe economic declines

Changes to Child Support Orders by Changes in Earnings



Results: Changes in Orders and Relationship between Earnings Change and Order Change

- Most orders stable over time; overall a slight decrease
- Orders are somewhat more likely to change when significant changes in earnings occur
- BUT not a close relationship between earnings changes and either the likelihood of order change or even the direction of order changes

Summary: Paper 1

- Declining percent of custodial parents with child support orders nationwide and in Wisconsin divorces
- Dramatic changes in where children are supposed to live after divorce within a relatively short period
 - Equal time from 16% to 31% of divorces
 - Sole mother custody from 64% to 46% of divorces
- Trends toward equal custody, shared custody, and father custody all are associated with the decline in orders

Summary: Paper 2

- Substantial instability in earnings
 - 1/3-1/2 fathers have changes of 50% or more
- Limited changes to orders
 - 1/3 change, not always cases with biggest earnings changes, not always in same direction

Time of Substantial Change: Implications for Policy and Research

- Substantial changes in arrangements for fathers to provide physical care for their children after divorce
 - Implications for family policy
 - Family research needs to consider living arrangements
- Substantial instability in fathers' earnings, yet child support obligations do not track well. Results in some fathers with disproportionate burdens, and some children not benefiting from increases in father's improved economic status
 - Implications for child support policy (and family policy?)
 - Family research needs to recognize dynamic context

Thank you!

- For more information:

<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/research/childsup.htm>