

Doing What They Can? Low-Income Fathers Providing Informal Support to Their Nonresident Children

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Short Abstract

Some charge that the child support system is not working. Many parents behind in their court-ordered child support payments seem unlikely to catch up, given their economic circumstances. Yet, some of them provide support outside the formal system. To understand what noncustodial parents (NCPs) are providing, and whether they could do more, requires information about both formal and informal support. The current study uses data from a federally funded intervention for NCPs behind in child support payments to learn more about them, the informal support they provide, and the main factors associated with such provisions. Our preliminary findings indicate that even though NCPs are quite disadvantaged, they make significant informal contributions to their children. However, previous incarceration, depression, and housing instability are all generally associated with providing less informal support. We discuss the implications of informal contributions for child support policy, child well-being, and our understanding of complex families.

Extended Abstract

In the past several decades, changes in family structure have led to a substantial increase in single-parent households in the United States. Due to high divorce rates and an increasing proportion of births to unmarried parents (Cancian, Meyer, and Han, 2011), almost a third of children did not live with both parents in 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Children living with a single parent are particularly economically vulnerable, their poverty rates in 2015 were 37 percent, substantially higher than that of other children, whose rate was 14 percent (Grall, 2018). The child support system tries to ensure that NCPs provide an appropriate amount of financial support to CPs, and for poor families that receive it, child support is a key income source (Sorensen, 2010).

However, some charge that the child support system is not working, with about three-fourths of cases behind in payments. Many parents who are behind seem unlikely to catch up, given their low current earnings, barriers to employment and obligations to children across multiple families. Yet, some of these parents, mostly fathers, are involved with their children and provide support outside the child support system, which may be particularly important for economically vulnerable children's well-being. In order to learn more about fathers who are behind in their formal child support obligations, the levels of informal support they provide, and their connections with other service systems that may be able to encourage involvement and support, we focus on 3 questions: (1) What are the characteristics of NCPs behind in their payments? Here we have a special focus on characteristics that may bring them into connection with other service systems (criminal justice, mental health, housing, and public benefits). (2) How much informal support do they provide to their children? (3) What factors are associated with this provision? We define informal support as money given to the custodial parent (CP) to pay for

items such as food, diapers, clothing, or school supplies for children (informal cash support) and as purchasing items such as food, diapers, clothing, or school supplies for children (informal non-cash support).

Data

We use data from the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED), a multi-state program that implemented an integrated approach to serving NCPs. Through the CSPED program, participating child support agencies provided a variety of employment, parenting, and child-support case services to NCPs who were behind in their child support payments and had employment difficulties. A baseline survey was administered to all CSPED participants prior to program participation in order to gather information on their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, children and relationships, economic stability, parent background and well-being. For this study, we use information for participants enrolled throughout the entire enrollment period (from October 1, 2013 through September 30, 2016), from the standard baseline survey, which was administered in seven states (California, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin).¹ Our sample includes 8,425 NCPs with valid interviews and at least one minor nonresident child (under age 18)² for whom we have complete information on child support provision. With data from more than 8,000 NCPs, this is the largest analytic sample currently available for this understudied group.

Analytical Approach

In order to address research questions one and two, we use descriptive statistics to provide sample characteristics of NCPs behind in their child support payments in addition to a picture of the informal financial support they provide to their nonresident children. Finally, to address question three and examine the factors associated with this provision (NCP's demographic characteristics, potential connection to several service systems, among other factors), we use ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. We estimate logit regressions for two dichotomous outcomes: whether NCPs provided informal cash support and informal non-cash support in the past month. We estimate OLS regressions for two continuous outcomes: amounts of informal cash support and informal non-cash support provided in the past month.

Preliminary Findings

We summarize our preliminary findings by each one of our research questions.

(1) What are the characteristics of NCPs behind in their payments?

Information from our sample suggests that NCPs who are behind in their child support payments are disadvantaged across many dimensions and have complex family responsibilities. NCPs in

¹ In the eighth state participating in CSPED, Texas, a shorter version of the survey was used that does not include many of the measures used here; these participants have been excluded from our analyses.

² We define children as non-resident if the participant reported staying with the child overnight for 15 or fewer nights of the past 30, and resident if the participant reported staying with the child overnight at least 16 of the past 30 nights.

our sample had low levels of educational attainment – nearly 70 percent had at most a high school education. Most identified as non-Hispanic black or African American (42 percent), non-Hispanic white (36 percent), or Hispanic or Latino (17 percent). Only 13 percent were currently married and about half had never married, and 62 percent had children with more than one partner.

NCPs also faced substantial economic disadvantages. Only 55 percent worked in the 30 days prior to enrollment. Among those who worked in the last 30 days, median earnings were \$500, well below the poverty threshold for a single person. Less than half reported receiving public assistance (38 percent received SNAP) or having health insurance coverage (44 percent). Many (70 percent) had a history with the criminal justice system.

Housing instability and depression, factors often missing from survey data on economic support, were also factors affecting parents in our sample. Nearly 30 percent reported not paying rent where they lived and 2 percent reported living in a shelter, on the streets, or in an abandoned car or building. Nearly one-third lived with their parents or grandparents and 30 percent did not expect to live in the same place the following year. Finally, in terms of emotional well-being, using a standard eight-item depression scale (PHQ-8), more than one-fourth of NCPs would be categorized as depressed. As another indicator of emotional well-being, one-fourth reported that they never or rarely felt in control of things that were happening to them.

(2) How much informal support do NCPs behind in their payment provide to their children?

Many of the NCPs in our sample reported that they had contributed to the financial support of their nonresident children in the past 30 days, either by providing cash directly to the CP(s) of their child(ren) (48 percent) or by purchasing items for their nonresident children such as food, clothing, and diapers (60 percent). For those providing informal cash support in the past 30 days, the median payment was \$130. For those providing informal non-cash support in the past 30 days, the median payment was \$150.

(3) What factors are associated with the provision of informal child support?

Based on logit models, we find that multiple dimensions of disadvantage, including previous incarceration, depression, and housing instability are negatively associated with the likelihood of providing any informal cash and non-cash support to nonresident children. Based on OLS models, we find that these same factors are generally associated with providing lower amounts of informal support.

In ongoing analysis to be included in the final paper, we explore the relationship between provision of formal and informal support. We document the factors associated with informal support complementing, or substituting for, formal support.

Our preliminary findings demonstrate that many NCPs in difficult circumstances make significant informal contributions to their children, but factors such as previous incarceration, depression, and housing instability limit these contributions. Potential policy implications could include innovations in the formal child support system to recognize some aspects of informal support (with the mothers' permission), using other service systems to address identified barriers

to payment and encourage involvement, and considering co-locating a variety of other services with child support.

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