

The disconnection between marriage and fertility has led to unprecedented numbers of biological fathers and children living separately (Cherlin 2004). The child support system in the US has generally looked to individual fathers to provide financial support for these children, rather than collectively providing through tax dollars (Bartfield 2000; Cancian and Meyer 2001; Huang, Kunz, and Garfinkel 2002). Many of these fathers impacted by this system, however, are already disadvantaged and may suffer negative mental health consequences under a punitive child support enforcement regime.

The stress process model has highlighted the importance of chronic stressors for impacting mental health (Aneshensel and Mitchell 2014; Pearlin et al. 1981). Interaction (or potential interaction) with increasingly punitive child support enforcement sanctions may be an important and overlooked chronic stressor that is associated with father's mental health. Interaction with child support enforcement may bring about stress both because of the severity of the potential of not paying child support and the emotional consequences of not properly fulfilling the valued social role of father. Further, potential child support enforcement threat may impact psychosocial resources, such as mastery, which then leads to depression. Punitive measures that child support enforcement actions such as driver's license suspension, property forfeiture, and incarceration or the threat of such actions, may lead to child support enforcement anxiety, feelings of little control over one's life, and depression.

Very little research, however, has examined how the threat of interaction with child support enforcement (CSE) may impact fathers' mental health. This study seeks to fill this gap by using the Stress Process model to examine whether the chronic stress of child support enforcement and pending punishment for failure to pay is associated with negative mental health outcomes in fathers. Our study makes several contributions to the literature. First, we document a potential negative consequence of current punitive child support enforcement measures that could have implications for other potentially negative consequences in the future. For instance, father's mental health has been associated with father-child relationships (Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2007; Davis et al. 2011; Paulson, Keefe and Leiferman 2009) and, thus, if child support enforcement threat influences father's mental health this could have ramifications for father-child relationship. Second, we are the first to use the Stress Process Model to conceptualize actual and potential interaction with child support enforcement as a chronic stressor to fathers. Third, we are better able to deal with selection into child support enforcement threat because the longitudinal nature of the data allows us to account for prior levels of depression and child support enforcement threat as well as a multitude of father characteristics measured prior to child support enforcement. In short, this study will help us understand the potential mental health ramifications of CSE for an overlooked but growing group—non-resident fathers.

Using Fragile Family and Child Well-being Study data, we seek to answer the following four research questions: (1) Is child support enforcement threat associated with depression in non-resident fathers? (2) Does this relationship persist after taking prior paternal depression and child support enforcement threat into account? (3) Is this relationship explained by fathers'

characteristics? (4) Does mastery mediate the relationship between child support enforcement threat and paternal depression?

DATA

The data for this analysis are drawn from fathers' survey responses from Wave 5 (nine-year old children) of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). (Reichman, Nancy, Julien Teitler, Irwin Garfinkel, & Sara McLanahan 2001). FFCWS is uniquely suited for this research because non-resident fathers and items related to child support enforcement are included in several waves of the study.

Paternal depression is the dependent variable of interest. Zero indicates the absence of depression and one indicates the presence of depression as measured by the wave 5 Mental Health Scale for Depression liberal diagnoses criteria (our results were robust to using the conservative depression measure). Because this variable is binary, we used logistic regression to predict paternal depression.

Our main independent variable of interest is child support enforcement threat. We conceptualize this as a chronic stressor. No threat indicates that the father does not have a legal order for paternity or child support. Potential threat indicates the existence of a legal order. Imminent threat indicates that the father owes arrears. Actual interaction indicates that the father reports enforcement actions have been taken. The variable is constructed variable using items regarding legal child support obligation and child support enforcement.

After showing the baseline relationship between our main dependent and independent variables of interest, we also take into account several potential selection variables. In our second model, we control on measures of pre-existing paternal depression and child support enforcement threat from the prior wave (wave 4). In our third model, we add in controls for potential factors that might increase the likelihood of depression and child support enforcement threat such as economic hardship (measured using the father's household income relationship to the official poverty line), ever being incarcerated, employment status, educational attainment, race, and age. In our final model, we include mastery to test if this particularly relevant psychosocial resource mediates the relationship between child support enforcement threat and paternal depression. Mastery was only measured once and, thus, we cannot measure changes in mastery between waves. In future analysis, we will include other psychosocial and social support resources such as self-esteem and social support. Multiple imputation was used to address missing data. However, we did not impute the dependent variable, paternal depression.

RESULTS

Table 1 reflects the results of the logistic regression stress process modeling of the effect of child support enforcement anxiety on paternal depression. Using Model 1, we examine our first research question: Is child support enforcement threat associated with depression in non-resident fathers? This model shows, in comparison to fathers who do not face any threat of child support enforcement interaction, the odds of paternal depression are significantly greater when experiencing all three levels of child support enforcement threat.

Table 1. Logistic Regression Stress Process Model of Paternal Depression on Child Support Enforcement Interaction Anxiety¹

	Model 1 ^a	Model 2 ^b	Model 3 ^c	Model 4 ^d
	No Controls	+ Prior Depression and CSE Threat	+ Individual Characteristics	+ Mastery
CSE Interaction –				
<i>No Threat (reference)</i>				
Possible Threat of Interaction	1.445** (0.209)	1.238 (0.230)	1.126 (0.216)	0.999 (0.198)
Imminent Threat of Interaction	3.069*** (0.545)	2.673*** (0.577)	2.168*** (0.481)	1.999** (0.458)
Actual Interaction	3.202*** (0.529)	2.730*** (0.514)	2.246*** (0.443)	1.835** (0.376)
Mastery				0.409*** (0.449)
N = 2,564				

¹Coefficients are expressed using odds ratio. S.E. are shown in parentheses. Results are based on unweighted data using multiple imputation.

^aNo controls

^bControls for prior depression and CSE threat

^cControls for race, age, educational attainment, employment status, poverty, and ever incarcerated

^d Mastery added

+p < .1 *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Model 2 examines our second research question: Is this relationship explained by pre-existing child support enforcement threat or paternal depression? We find pre-existing conditions help explain some, but not all of these relationships. After controlling for prior depression and CSE, the odds of paternal depression for fathers who have a possibility of interaction with CSE in the future is statistically indistinguishable from fathers who face no threat of CSE interaction. However, greater threat of child support interaction and actual interaction still strongly predict depression. Fathers who face an imminent threat of child support interaction, or who have had enforcement actions taken against them, are roughly 167% and 173% more likely to experience depression than fathers who face no threat of child support enforcement interaction, respectively.

Our third research question asked: Is this relationship explained by characteristics of fathers? Model 3 adds controls for poverty status, race, age, educational attainment, employment status, and whether the father had ever been incarcerated, we find the association between paternal depression and higher levels of threat remain strong but are explained somewhat (by about 20%, e.g., the coefficients decline by 19% for actual interaction after including these controls, $[\ln(2.246) - \ln(2.730)] / \ln(2.730)$). Fathers who face an imminent threat of interaction

with CSE, as well as fathers' who have had enforcement actions taken against them, have a greater likelihood of experiencing paternal depression than fathers without child support enforcement threat.

Model 4 examines our final research question: Does feelings of control mediate the direct relationship between child support enforcement threat and paternal depression? Table 1 shows by adding mastery to the model, the relationship between fathers' depression and imminent child support enforcement threat and actual interaction weakens by 10% and 25%, respectively. However, there is still a strong statistical and substantive relationship between the variables. When compared to those who do not face child support enforcement threat, fathers with an imminent threat of CSE interaction are about 100% more likely to experience depression, while fathers who have the highest level of CSEA are about 84% more likely. In this model, mastery also has a highly significant relationship with paternal depression.

CONCLUSION

The preliminary results of this study reflect the impact of constant threats of child support enforcement (such as revocation of driver's licenses, wage, tax return, and/or property garnishment), as well as the potential to of going to jail acts as a chronic stressor for poor fathers. Our findings also show feelings of control over your life is an important mediator of the relationship between depression and actual interaction with child support enforcement. CSE involvement might spiral into increasing difficulties for fathers that could lead to stress proliferation, declines in psychosocial resources, and, thus, could have significant economic and emotional consequences that follow the fathers throughout their life course. Further, studies show fathers who are depressed have a difficult time parenting their children (Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2007; Davis et al. 2011; Paulson, Keefe and Leiferman 2009); their children's negative outcomes may, at least somewhat, reflect the impact of paternal depression. Policy makers and CSE actors should keep this in mind while discussing increasing the pathways leading fathers, specifically poor fathers, into the web of CSE.

Prior to PAA, we will improve this paper in multiple ways. First, we plan to take into account the timing and ordering of other stressors that may influence the likelihood of child support enforcement interaction. For instance, job loss may lead to becoming late on child support payments which may then lead to child support enforcement interaction. Alternatively, child support enforcement interaction such as being put in jail or having a driver's license suspended could lead to job loss. In future analysis, we will attempt to untangle the nexus of stressors and psychosocial resources and their temporal interconnections that may influence paternal depression. Second, we understand that comparing nested non-linear models may not be accurate and we plan to examine mediation in our models using the KHB method (Kohler, Karlson, and Holm 2011). Third, FFCWS uses population weighting. These weights will be applied to the logistic models. There were also technical issues with 10 missing cases during the imputation process that we will address as the project continues. We expect these issues will not change the results of our model estimates.

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