

INTRODUCTION

Our high rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births make adequate child support critical to the economic well-being of millions of American mothers and their children. Many noncustodial fathers pay little or no support, leaving their families in poverty and on welfare. If child support enforcement programs could compel more of these men to meet their financial obligations, many women and children would be better off financially.

By now, the numbers are familiar. Less than two-thirds of all mothers with children from a noncustodial father have court orders to receive child support. Of these, just over a quarter receive none of what they are owed, and another quarter receive only partial payments. Less than half of those with support orders receive all of what they are owed.¹

As we reviewed the existing data, however, we were struck by how little is really known about why some fathers do not pay child support--and what to do about it. So we sought to learn more. This book presents the results of this effort.

Part One presents some basic data on child support awards and payments. It contains our own tabulations of published and unpublished census data, as well as proceedings from a conference in which key government officials and other experts reviewed and interpreted these tables.

This research reveals that child support problems are not distributed evenly across families. Combined award and payment rates are much higher among certain groups of fathers (e.g., the recently divorced) and much lower among others (e.g., the never-married, the separated, and the remarried). More specifically:

- o the lowest concentration of awards granted is found among unwed and separated fathers, and not divorced ones;
- o the size of recent awards and payments appears to be higher than commonly reported;
- o high non-compliance rates appear to be heavily concentrated among specific groups of fathers; and

¹U.S. Bureau of the Census, Child Support and Alimony: 1985 (Advance Data from March-April 1986 Current Population Surveys) (Current Population Reports, Series P-23, No. 152, 1987), pp. 11 and 13, tables 1 and 3.

- o non-compliance increases and total payments decrease as the length of separation increases.

These findings raise some fundamental questions about the direction of child support policy. For instance, if certain types of families are far less likely to receive child support, why are federally funded enforcement services becoming increasingly universal? Should they not be targeted to women and children who need help the most?

Part Two pursues the implications of these initial findings and presents a policy-oriented research agenda. It is based on an AEI conference held with the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which brought together twenty of the nation's leading child support researchers on December 2, 1988. It identifies seven questions which research must answer for child support policy making.

1. To what extent can unwed fathers be compelled to support their children? Currently, only 18 percent of unwed mothers with children from a noncustodial father have awards, compared to 82 percent of divorced mothers.²

2. Are awards actually declining? And, if so, why? Census data indicate a decline in the value of child support awards. In 1985, the average child support award was \$2,495, compared to \$2,003 in 1978; however, accounting for inflation, that is a drop of 24 percent.³

3. To what degree can the decline in payments be explained by legal rules and changing family demographics? Like award levels, the amount of child support payments received also declined 25 percent between 1978 and 1985.⁴ Some argue that factors such as the parents' remarriage, the aging of the child, and the increasing income of mothers are leading to reductions in the size of awards and payments.

4. Will formal guidelines and periodic review increase the size of awards? Congress has mandated both guidelines and periodic review in order to raise the value of initial awards, and to maintain their value over time. While there is wide support for such guidelines, some research suggests that they may not raise the amount of support awarded.

5. Will strengthened enforcement tools increase payments? Congress has forced states to adopt and implement a number of enforcement measures, such as immediate wage withholding in all support orders. Yet, again, no one knows what effect these enforcement tools will have on child support payments.

²Ibid., p. 25, table B.

³Derived from *ibid.*, pp. 5-6, and Child Support and Alimony: 1978 (Current Population Reports, Series P-23, No. 112, 1981), pp. 5 and 8.

⁴The average payment received in 1985 was \$2,215, compared to \$1,800 in 1978; taking inflation into account, that is a decline of 25 percent. Derived from *ibid.*

6. To what extent can heightened child support improve the financial situation of female-headed families? Poor mothers are simply not being served by the child support system. Poor women, for example, are only about half as likely to have an award as nonpoor women. For every four nonpoor women who receive all they are due, only three poor women do. And poor women are half again more likely to receive nothing at all as nonpoor women.⁵

7. How effective is the federal child support program? Who benefits from it? Between 1976 and 1985, federal spending on child support enforcement went from \$139 million to about \$571 million; accounting for inflation, this represents an increase of 118 percent.⁶ And yet, national data have shown little improvement in the aggregate amount of child support being collected.

For too long, federal child support initiatives have been developed on the basis of incomplete and misleading information. This paper seeks to improve child support enforcement by identifying the key policy-related questions for the 1990s. The next step will be for researchers to answer these questions, and for government to apply their findings.

⁵Derived from U.S. Bureau of the Census, Child Support and Alimony: 1985 (Supplemental Report) (Current Population Reports, Series P-23, No. 154, 1989), pp. 21-25, and 40-44, tables 1 and 7.

⁶Federal expenditures for 1987 totalled \$745 million, a real increase of 24 percent since 1985. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support Enforcement, Child Support Enforcement: Twelfth Annual Report to Congress for the Period Ending September 30, 1987 (1988), volume II, p. 10, table 1; and Child Support Enforcement: Fifth Annual Report to Congress for the Period Ending September 30, 1980 (1981), p. 69.