



Child Support Gains Some Ground

by Elaine Sorensen

No. 11

Significantly more children in low-income families received child support in 2001 than in 1996. Half of all children with family incomes below the federal poverty thresholds lived with their mothers and had fathers living elsewhere in 2001, making them potentially eligible to receive child support. Thirty-six percent of those children actually did receive support that year, up from 31 percent in 1996. Support for children in families with incomes between 100 and 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds also increased. These gains suggest that efforts to improve the child support program have met with some success.¹

States administer the federal child support program, which aims to ensure that parents who live apart from their children provide for them financially. All families with children who have a parent living elsewhere are eligible for its services. The program tends to serve low-income families, in part because most public assistance programs require recipients to participate in government child support collection efforts. Higher-income families tend to hire attorneys rather than requesting assistance from the government when they need child support services.

Congress views the child support program as a key element of the government's social safety net. In 1996, Congress enacted significant reforms of the program as part of its sweeping reform of welfare. Specifically, it increased the use of wage withholding to collect child support by mandating that employers report all newly hired employees to the child support program. It also allowed states to revoke driving licenses, professional licenses, and recreational licenses of parents who fall behind in their child support.² This Snapshot uses data from the 1997 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families to examine whether child support has increased since the passage of welfare reform.

Child Support Increased, Mainly in Low-Income Families

More children who lived with their mothers and whose fathers lived elsewhere received child support in 2001 than in 1996 (table 1). Gains were greatest for children in families with low incomes. For example, 35.5 percent of children whose family incomes fell below the federal poverty thresholds received child support in 2001, up from 30.8 percent in 1996, a statistically significant gain.

Significant gains in child support were also made among children with family incomes between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty thresholds: 50.1 percent received child support in 2001, up from 44.6 percent in 1996. Children whose family incomes were more than twice the poverty threshold did not experience significant gains in child support.

Families with child support income did not experience significant gains in the amount of that support (table 1). After adjusting for inflation, the average amount of child support received in 2001 was \$4,650, compared with \$4,390 in 1996. On average, poor families received \$2,550 per year in 2001 (about 18 percent of the federal poverty threshold for a family of three), an amount that is not significantly greater than what they received in 1996. Among poor families receiving some support, child support represented 30.0 percent of total income in 2001.

DATA AT A GLANCE

36 PERCENT OF POOR CHILDREN
LIVING WITH SINGLE MOTHERS
RECEIVED CHILD SUPPORT IN 2001,
UP FROM 31 PERCENT IN 1996.

NEAR-POOR CHILDREN SAW CHILD
SUPPORT RECEIPT INCREASE FROM
45 PERCENT IN 1996 TO 50 PERCENT
IN 2001.

CHILD SUPPORT AS A SHARE OF A
POOR FAMILY'S INCOME WAS
30 PERCENT IN 2001.

Discussion

While these gains are good news for low-income families, the child support program needs to do more. Over 60 percent of poor children who live with their mothers and whose fathers live outside the home do not receive child support. One reason is that the fathers of these children tend to have low incomes themselves,



Table 1. Child Support Received from Noncustodial Fathers for Children Living with Their Mothers, by Family Income, 1996 and 2001

Family Income (% of Poverty Thresholds)	Families Receiving Child Support (%)		Among Families Receiving Child Support			
			Average Amount of Support (\$ 2001)		Average Share of Family Income (%)	
	1996	2001	1996	2001	1996	2001
< 100%	30.8	35.5 [^]	2,280	2,550	27.3	30.0
100–200%	44.6	50.1 [^]	3,870	3,980	15.6	15.5
200–300%	53.9	56.3	5,140	5,240	12.7	13.0
≥ 300%	62.2	60.9	6,620	6,760	9.5	9.5
Total	43.7	48.9 [^]	4,390	4,650	16.8	16.8

Sources: 1997 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families
[^] Increase between 1996 and 2001 is significant at the 0.10 level.

limiting their ability to pay child support (Sorensen and Zibman 2001). Work-oriented programs designed to ensure that fathers are doing what they can to support their children financially could be beneficial (Miller and Knox 2001).

Another reason that child support receipt is low among poor families is that nearly all of the support paid on behalf of children receiving public assistance goes to the government rather than to the children. In 1996, Congress eliminated the requirement that the first \$50 of child support go directly to families on public aid. While some states have retained the \$50 child support pass-through, most have not. Eliminating the pass-through has not only reduced the amount of child support received by poor families, it has also reduced the incentive of fathers to pay child support (Meyer and Cancian 2002).

References

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Acknowledgments

The author thanks Liliana Sousa and Kate Pomper for their assistance in preparing this Snapshot.

Endnotes

¹ For further evidence that the program has made progress in increasing child support since 1996, see Sorensen and Oliver (2002).

² For a more complete discussion of these reforms, see Sorensen and Oliver (2002).

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Snapshots of America's Families III, No. 11



SNAPSHOTS
of America's Families



Snapshots III presents findings from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families

(NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered from approximately 40,000 representative households in each round. The NSAF is part of the *Assessing the New Federalism* project (ANF). Information on ANF and the NSAF can be obtained at <http://www.urban.org/anf>.

The *Assessing the New Federalism* project is currently supported by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Ford Foundation, and The David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

Alan Weil is the director of *Assessing the New Federalism*. Kenneth Finegold is the editor of *Snapshots III*. Design is by Bremmer & Goris Communications.



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