

The Economic Reality of Nonresident Mothers and Their Children

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In 2002, 4.7 million children lived apart from their mothers, up from 3.7 million in 1997. Understanding who these mothers are and how their children are faring is important for social policy in general and, specifically, for the child support program. Despite their large and growing numbers and policy relevance, nonresident mothers and their children have remained largely under the radar.¹ Considerable research has been devoted to understanding nonresident fathers and their children, but this literature does not necessarily offer insight into nonresident mothers and their support of nonresident children.

This brief provides a national portrait of nonresident mothers and their children, contrasting them with nonresident fathers and their children. The brief uses data from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), one of the few nationally representative surveys with data on nonresident mothers. It shows that nonresident mothers have demographic characteristics similar to nonresident fathers but differ in two important ways: nonresident mothers are more likely to be living with some of their children than nonresident fathers, and fewer nonresident mothers are working. Most children who live apart from their mothers do not receive child support, but these children tend to live in economically secure families. Children living apart from both their parents, however, experience relatively high rates of poverty and, depending on the circumstances of these

arrangements, may benefit from increased child support enforcement.

Over 2 Million Mothers Have a Child Living Elsewhere

The NSAF identifies 10 million adults (18 years and older) who report that they have at least one child under the age of 18 who lives elsewhere. Of the 10 million adults who self-report as nonresident parents, 2.2 million are nonresident mothers. Prior research has found that nonresident fathers and mothers are underestimated in household surveys, and thus these numbers underestimate the size of this population.²

Nonresident Mothers and Nonresident Fathers Are Demographically Similar, Yet Economically Different

By all measures, nonresident mothers are economically disadvantaged when compared to nonresident fathers. Average annual personal earnings for all nonresident fathers are \$29,540 compared with \$16,040 for nonresident mothers. Average family incomes also differ significantly between both groups of nonresident parents, with fathers reporting \$46,970 in income and mothers reporting \$38,150. Given their lower incomes and larger family sizes, nonresident mothers are much

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more likely than nonresident fathers to live in families that are poor (27 percent compared with 11 percent). Further, over half of nonresident fathers (52 percent) live in families with incomes that are over three times the federal poverty level (FPL), compared with only 38 percent of nonresident mothers.

Table 1 shows that nonresident fathers are far more likely to report working all year than nonresident mothers, and nonresident mothers are more likely to report not being in the labor force at all. Specifically, 59 percent of nonresident fathers worked 50 or more weeks in the past year, compared with 41 percent of nonresident mothers. At the other end of the employment spectrum, only 7 percent of nonresident fathers report not being in the labor force, compared with 21 percent of nonresident mothers.

The proportion of nonresident parents who have a biological or adoptive child living with them also differs dramatically between nonresident fathers and nonresident mothers. Just under a quarter of nonresident fathers live with other biological or adoptive children, compared with over two-fifths of nonresident mothers. Since more nonresident mothers have their own children living with them, they may be less able than nonresident fathers to provide child support for their children living elsewhere.

Given the differences in the economic situation of nonresident mothers and nonresident fathers, it is not surprising to find differences in child support payment rates between the two groups.³ Differences in labor force attachment between nonresident mothers and fathers can have important effects on child support payments,

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Nonresident Parents

	Demographic Characteristics		Economic Characteristics		
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	
Number (millions)	7.8	2.2	Earnings/Income Status		
Age (%)			Average personal earnings	\$29,540	\$16,040*
Under 30	17	15	Average family income	\$46,970	\$38,150*
30–40	43	48	Poverty Status (%)		
Over 40	40	37	Below poverty level	11	27*
Race/Ethnicity (%)			100–300% of poverty level	37	35
Black	22	16*	Above 300% of poverty level	52	38*
Hispanic	22	22	Employment Characteristics (%)		
Other	4	8	Not in the labor force	7	21*
White	52	55	Worked < 26 weeks	5	10*
Education (%)			Worked 26–49 weeks	26	22
Less than high school	23	22	Worked 50+ weeks	59	41*
High school only	46	44	Child Support Characteristics		
Some college	19	29	Percent paid child support	63	44*
College or more	11	13	Amount paid (for payers)	\$5,250	\$2,700*
Marital Status (%)			Percent of earnings paid	13	10
Currently	43	45	Percent paying with no earnings	33	30
Previously	30	31			
Never	27	33			
Have Own Children in Household (%)	24	44*			

Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Notes: The NSAF "adult-pair" weights are used in this table and the results in this section of the brief. Dollars are expressed in nominal terms and reflect prices in 2001.

* Difference between nonresident fathers and nonresident mothers is significant at least at the 0.10 level.

since parents who have steady employment are more likely to have wage withholding orders for child support. Wage withholding orders have been shown to be a major source of child support payments (Sorensen and Hill 2004). Only 44 percent of nonresident mothers report that they made at least one monetary contribution to their nonresident children in the last year, while 63 percent of nonresident fathers report that they contributed financially to their nonresident children in the last year. The average nonresident father who reports paying child support paid \$5,250 in support in the last year, compared with \$2,700 for the average nonresident mother who pays support.

Once the earnings and employment differences between nonresident mothers and nonresident fathers are taken into account, the differences in their child support payment behavior become insignificant. Among nonresident parents with earnings, nonresident mothers contribute 10 percent of their income to child support, while nonresident fathers contribute 13 percent, a statistically insignificant difference. Among nonresident parents who have no reported earnings, 33 percent of nonresident fathers and 30 percent of nonresident mothers report paying child support. These findings suggest that parents of similar earnings and employment profiles are paying similar amounts.

Despite stark economic differences, nonresident mothers and nonresident fathers are surprisingly similar in basic demographics. The age distribution, for example, is not statistically different for the two groups. Just under half of both groups is between the ages of 30 and 39. Only 15 to 17 percent of either group is under 30. Nonresident mothers are less likely to be black than nonresident fathers, but other racial groups are not statistically different. Both groups of nonresident parents are nearly identical in the level of schooling completed; just over one-fifth of each gender does not have a high school diploma or the equivalent while nearly half has only a high school education. Nearly half of both nonresident groups is currently married.

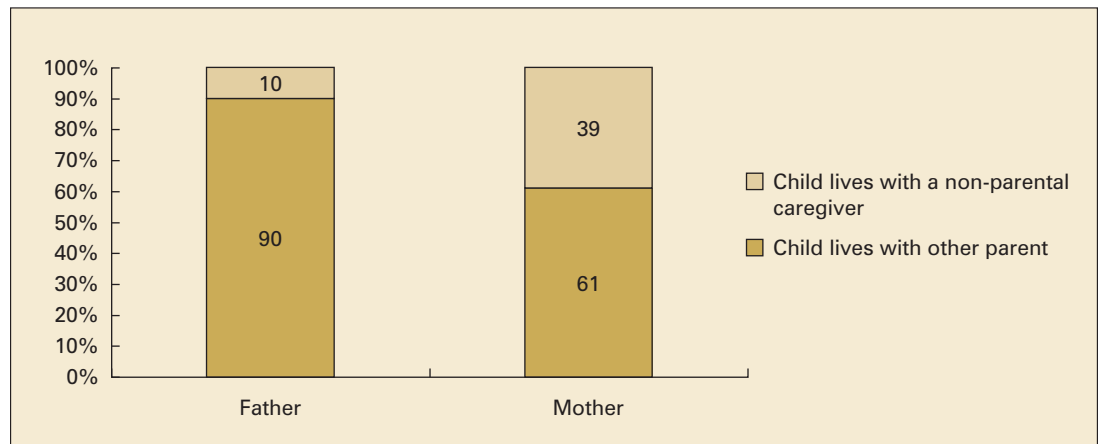
Nearly 40 Percent of the Children Who Live Apart from Their Mothers Live with Non-Parental Caregivers

While differences between nonresident fathers' and mothers' demographic and economic circumstances provide some clues about their ability to support their children, the lives of the affected children can best be observed through the lens of their current family circumstances. Some children live with their other parent, while others live with a non-parental caregiver. Differences in living arrangements and the incomes of the resident families, including child support, can determine whether children live in poverty or are economically secure.

In 2002, 22.4 million children had a parent living elsewhere. That year, 21 percent of these children, or 4.7 million, lived apart from their mothers. The living arrangements of these children are very different from children who live apart from their fathers (figure 1). Children who live apart from their mothers are much more likely to live with neither parent than children who live apart from their fathers.⁴ While 61 percent of children with mothers living elsewhere live with their fathers, 39 percent live with non-parental caregivers. In contrast, 90 percent of children who have fathers living elsewhere live with their mothers; only 10 percent live with non-parental caregivers. Most children who live with non-parental caregivers are living with relatives. Over half live with a grandparent and 31 percent live with other relatives, such as an aunt or uncle. Only 11 percent of these children live with an unrelated foster parent.

The disproportionate number of children of nonresident mothers living with non-parental caregivers has important research implications. Since the surveys typically used to conduct this research only interview parents, most research on children who have a parent living elsewhere underestimates the number of children living apart from their mothers.⁵ Non-parental caregivers are not asked about the living situation of the parents of the children under their care. By limiting these questions to parents, prior research has

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FIGURE 1. *Living Arrangements of Children with a Nonresident Parent, by Which Parent Lives Elsewhere*

Source: 2000 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF).

Note: NSAF child weights are used in this figure and the results presented in this section of the brief.

missed nearly 40 percent of children of nonresident mothers, thus underestimating the number of nonresident mothers.⁶ The NSAF, on the other hand, interviews the adult who is most knowledgeable about the child (who may or may not be a parent), thus identifying a much larger number of children living apart from their mothers.

Child Support Receipt and Poverty Differ Greatly among Children with a Nonresident Parent

The child support receipt rates of children living with their mothers, their fathers, and non-parental caregivers differ substantially (table 2).⁷ Resident mothers receive child support more often than resident fathers or non-parental caregivers (64 percent compared with 43 and 44 percent, respectively). In addition, the amount of child support received by resident mothers is greater than the amount received by other families. For example, resident mothers received \$1,720 in child support during the prior year, compared with \$430 received by resident fathers. Non-parental caregivers receive the least amount of child support—only \$260 during the prior year. If we exclude the resident families who do not receive any support, resident mothers still receive, on average, nearly three times as

much in child support as resident fathers, who in turn receive nearly twice as much as non-parental caregivers.

Part of the reason that children living with their mothers are more likely to receive child support is that they are more likely to be covered by a child support order. Over half (54 percent) of resident mothers had a child support order, compared with 37 percent of resident fathers and 28 percent of non-parental caregivers.

Over 80 percent of resident mothers with an order for child support received child support in the past year. On the other hand, 61 percent of resident fathers with an order for child support and 58 percent of caregivers with an order for child support received child support in the past year. Furthermore, resident mothers with a child support order receive, on average, more than double the child support received by nonresident fathers or caregivers with an order for child support.

Not surprisingly, child support represents a larger share of income for families in which the children live with their mother than for either of the other types of resident families. Overall, child support represents an average of 7 percent of the income of families where the children live with their mothers and an average of 16 percent of the total income among families receiving any child support. Families in which the children live with their

TABLE 2. Characteristics of Families with Children Who Have a Nonresident Parent

	Child Lives with		
	Mother	Father	Non-parental caregiver
Child Support			
Received Child Support (%)	64 ^	43*	44
Average Received	\$1,720 ^	\$430* ^	\$260
If any received	\$2,680 ^	\$990* ^	\$460
With an Order (%)	54 ^	37* ^	28
Received support (%)	81 ^	61* ^	58
Average received last year	\$2,710 ^	\$1,140*	\$620
Without an Order (%)	46 ^	64* ^	72
Received support (%)	45 ^	33* ^	38
Average received last year	\$570 ^	\$20*	\$120
Child Support as a Portion of Income (%)			
All residential families	7 ^	2* ^	1
Among those who received some support	16 ^	9* ^	5
Annual Family Income	\$37,750 ^	\$52,830* ^	\$44,380
Poverty Status (%)			
Below poverty level	28 ^	10* ^	23
100–300% of poverty level	47	44	45
Over 300% of poverty level	26 ^	46* ^	32

Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Notes: Adult-pair weights are used in this table. Dollars are in nominal terms; they reflect 2001 prices.

*Difference between nonresident fathers and nonresident mothers is significant at least at the 0.10 level.

^ Difference between the nonresidential parent (depending on the column) and non-parental caregivers is significant at least at the 0.10 level.

fathers, on the other hand, receive an average of 2 percent of their total income from child support. Among those families in which children live with their fathers and receive child support, an average of 9 percent of their family income is from child support payments. Child support contributes the least to children living with non-parental caregivers. Only 1 percent of these families' income comes from child support. For families in which children live with caregivers who receive child support, the contribution increases to 5 percent of income.

Resident mothers and their children are more likely to need child support. These mothers and their families have the lowest income levels and the highest poverty rates among resident families. For example, 28 percent of resident mothers and their families are poor, compared with

10 percent of resident fathers and their families. Further, nearly half (46 percent) of resident fathers and their families have family incomes that meet or exceed three times the FPL.

While non-parental caregivers have somewhat higher family incomes than families in which children live with their mothers, they too show relative economic need. Nearly 25 percent of non-parental caregivers live in families that are poor, and only 32 percent of them and their families have family incomes equal to or above three times the FPL. Prior research shows that many children living with relatives without a parent present live in low-income families and do not receive the financial assistance for which they are eligible, such as foster care, TANF child-only, Social Security, or Supplemental Security payments (Ehrle and Geen 2002). A forth-

coming analysis of this population suggests, however, that poverty rates declined steadily for children in these arrangements between 1997 and 2002 (Main, Macomber, and Geen forthcoming).

The fact that non-parental caregivers receive so little child support is likely a function of how these children came into these arrangements. Most child support orders are awarded during divorce proceedings. The custodial parent is typically the mother, and she is awarded child support. If a child's residency changes after a divorce, the child support order does not necessarily follow the child. Parents or non-parental caregivers usually have to alert legal authorities of the change in residency and ask that the mother be obligated to pay child support or ask that the original child support order be awarded to the new caregiver.

If a child is born outside of marriage, the unwed parent or the non-parental caregiver caring for the child must take legal action to obtain a child support order. Parents or non-parental caregivers in these situations may hesitate to pursue child support for many reasons, the most obvious of which is that it may threaten the child's residency with them. For relative caregivers, it may mean requesting child support from a son, daughter, or other close relative, which they may prefer not to do.

Finally, children separated from their parents due to abuse or neglect who live in foster care receive foster payments. Foster parents do not receive child support; any child support collected on behalf of these children is used to reimburse the state for the foster payments. For all the reasons discussed above, it is not surprising that resident fathers and non-parental caregivers are less likely to receive child support than resident mothers.

Conclusions

While most children who do not live with both parents live apart from their fathers, a significant minority lives apart from their mothers. Recent research focusing on nonresident fathers has overlooked these children and their nonresident mothers. This has occurred, in part, because nearly

40 percent of these children live with non-parental caregivers, who are rarely surveyed about the living situation of the children's parents.

We find that nonresident mothers are relatively poor and unlikely to be working full time. Further, they are more likely than nonresident fathers to be living with other children. Nonresident mothers are also less likely to pay child support than nonresident fathers, but once their income and employment characteristics are taken into account, this disparity is no longer significant. Thus, it appears that child support enforcement has been equally effective in collecting child support from nonresident fathers and mothers.

Child support is not playing a large a role in the lives of children who live apart from their mothers. The majority of children who live apart from their mothers live with their fathers, and the vast majority of these families are economically secure. However, children living with non-parental caregivers are another matter; 23 percent lived in poverty in 2001. Relative caregivers are eligible to receive various supports through the welfare and child welfare systems, but as prior research suggests, sometimes they do not access them. Child support enforcement for these families, particularly for those not receiving foster care, may be another way to improve their economic circumstances.

Notes

1. Throughout this brief we refer to parents who are not living with their children as "nonresident." These parents have responded affirmatively to a question in the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) that asks, "Do you have any children under 18 years of age living outside of this household?"

The NSAF includes a household roster that identifies whether the biological or adoptive parents of the focal child are usual residents in the household. If either parent is missing from the household roster, the survey asks the most knowledgeable adult (MKA) of the focal child the following questions: "Does (child) have a mother who lives somewhere else?" and "Does (child) have a father who lives somewhere else?" If the MKA says yes to either question, then the MKA is referred to as a "resident" parent or non-parental caregiver. This means, however, that a child is only identified as having a nonresident parent if a parent is missing from the household roster and the MKA

answers affirmatively to the questions about a parent living elsewhere.

If a child is living with a stepparent and neither biological or adoptive parent is in the household, we consider this stepparent a “non-parental” caregiver. Stepparents are not “legal” parents in the sense that they do not have custodial rights nor do they have the legal obligation to financially provide for their stepchildren. Thus, it seemed more appropriate to classify them as relative caregivers than parents.

2. This underrepresentation is due to three main factors: (1) nonresident parents are more likely, by definition, to be institutionalized than resident parents; (2) surveys use weights based on census data, thus groups that are undercounted in the census are also undercounted in surveys; and (3) some nonresident parents either do not know that they have children living elsewhere or, due to social stigma, do not admit to having children outside the household. On survey underrepresentation, see Elaine Sorensen, “A National Profile of Nonresident Fathers and Their Ability to Pay Child Support,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59, no. 4 (1997): 785–97. On social stigma attached to being a nonresident mother, see Geoffrey L. Greif, “Working with Nonresidential Mothers,” *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services* (January/February 1997).
3. Child support payments are also largely a function of whether the nonresident parent has an order for child support. Unfortunately, this information is not available for all nonresident parents. Instead, the issue of child support orders is considered in the analysis of the resident families.
4. The NSAF does not provide information on the length of time that children live apart from their parents. Many children who live apart from their mothers may be living in situations that are not intended to be permanent but rather are expected to last a short period.
5. The most prominent survey used to analyze children and their nonresident parents is the Current Population Survey-Child Support Supplement (CPS-CSS), which is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau every other year. In addition, the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), also conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, limits data collected on children with nonresident parents to children who live with a parent.
6. For example, see Donna H. Christensen, Carla M. Dahl, and Kathryn D. Rettig, “Noncustodial Mothers and Child Support: Examining the Larger

Context,” *Family Relations* 39, no. 4 (1990): 388–94. This study is limited to children who live with a parent.

7. If a child lives with a non-parental caregiver, the NSAF does not ask how much of the child support received is from the nonresident mother and how much is from the nonresident father. Thus, when examining children who live with a non-parental caregiver, we do not distinguish between those with nonresident mothers and those with nonresident fathers.

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This series 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 in each round from more than 42,000 households with and without telephones that are representative of the nation as a whole and of 13 selected states (Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin). As in all surveys, the data are subject to sampling variability and other sources of error. Additional information on the NSAF can be obtained at <http://newfederalism.urban.org>.

The NSAF is part of *Assessing the New Federalism*, a multiyear project to monitor and assess the devolution of social programs from the federal to the state and local levels. Olivia A. Golden is the project director. The project analyzes changes in income support, social services, and health programs. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies child and family well-being.

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