

Child Support Enforcement Has Benefited Most Single Mothers Testimony before the House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources

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Chairman Johnson and members of the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the House Committee on Ways and Means, thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important topic. I am a Principal Research Associate at the Urban Institute, where I have worked for 12 years.

I am not someone who usually trumpets the success of the child support enforcement program. On the contrary, I am probably best known for estimating that child support enforcement could potentially collect another \$34 billion in child support. Nonetheless, the main point that I would like to make today is that the data clearly show that the actions of the U.S. Congress, along with its partners in the states, have succeeded in increasing child support payments to never-married mothers, a group of mothers who essentially had no chance of receiving child support prior to the enactment of Title IV-D to the Social Security Act.

Much of the testimony that you have heard thus far has focused on program performance, generally measured by order establishment and collection rates within the child support program. Measuring program performance in this manner assesses the success of reform policies for those in the child support program, but many families eligible for child support enforcement services are outside of the child support program. One hopes that good programmatic performance within the child support program and good outcomes for families go hand-in-hand, but that is not necessarily the case.

To ascertain the effects of these reforms on families, I have examined more than 20 years of household survey data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, which provides a nationally representative sample of families between 1976 and 1997. The most current data that I have is from the March 1998 Current Population Survey, which measures child support receipt in 1997. This means that my analysis only examines the immediate effects of the 1996 child support enforcement reforms. But it also means that I have more than enough data to examine the impacts of earlier child support reforms, such as the voluntarily in-hospital paternity establishment program.

From these data, I find that never-married mothers have experienced a dramatic increase in their child support receipt rates and that the child support enforcement program has been the primary factor contributing to these gains.

Never-Married Mothers Have Experienced Dramatic Gains in Receipt of Child Support

As [figure 1](#) shows, only 4 percent of never-married mothers received child support in 1976. By 1997, the percent of never-married mothers who received child support had increased nearly five fold, to 18 percent. That means, of course, that only about one in five never-married mothers receives child support today, but that is dramatically higher than it was in 1975 when Congress enacted Title IV-D of the Social Security Act, establishing the current federal/state partnership in child support enforcement. Child support is now a possibility for children born outside of marriage; 25 years ago it was not.

How Much of the Rise in Child Support Receipt Can Be Attributed to Child Support Reforms?

Six child support policies were examined in this analysis ([figure 2](#)). These policies were selected because they reflected key reforms in each of the major federal efforts to improve child support enforcement. As [figure 2](#) shows, a few states experimented with each of these policies prior to their federal enactment (except for the \$50 pass-through), but it was not until the U.S. Congress mandated their adoption that most states undertook these reforms. For example, a dozen or so states had experimented with a voluntary in-hospital paternity establishment program prior to its federal enactment, but once this program was federally mandated every state adopted it. The new hire directories is another example. About 10 states had implemented a state-wide new hire directory before the 1996 reforms, but by 1998, when my data ends,

nearly all had enacted legislation to implement a new hire directory.

We estimate that these six child support policies, in conjunction with the increase in IV-D expenditures, explains over half of the rise in child support receipt rates for never-married mothers.

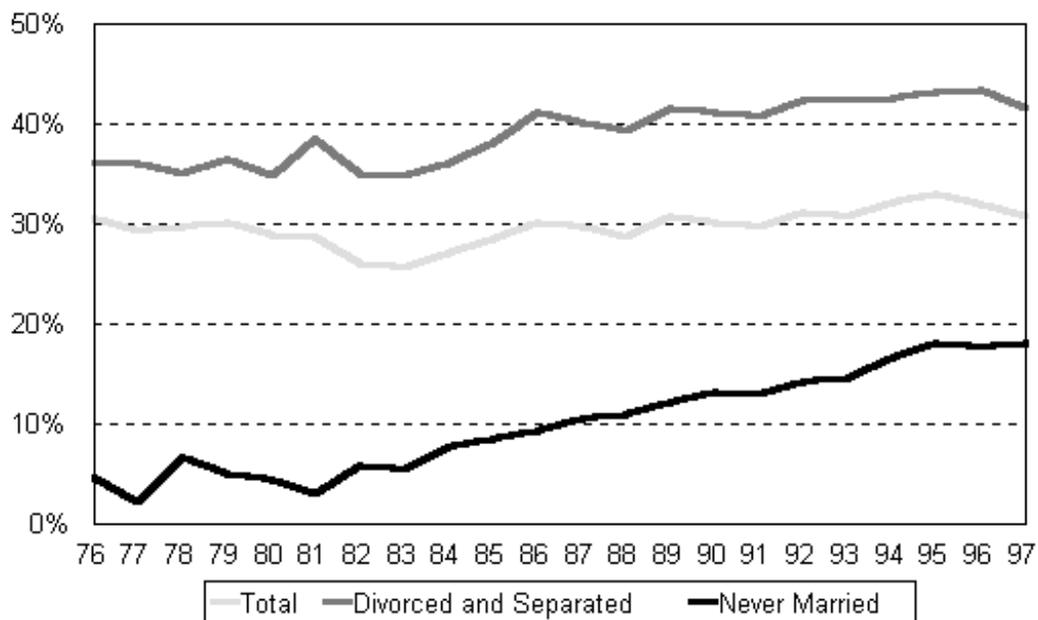
Particularly effective for never-married mothers has been the voluntary in-hospital paternity establishment program. We estimate that this program alone increased the likelihood of never-married mothers receiving child support by 2 percentage points, explaining about one fourth of the impact of child support on never-married mothers. Earlier reforms that are also found to be effective are immediate wage-withholding, the tax-intercept program, and presumptive guidelines.

The new hire directory program has had a positive effect on receiving child support for never-married mothers, but these effects are not yet statistically significant in my analysis. Given the impact of earlier reforms on child support receipt rates, I am quite confident that the new hire directories will have a statistically significantly positive effect in the future.

These data show, without a doubt, that the federal and state governments have succeeded in increasing the likelihood of never-married mothers receiving child support.

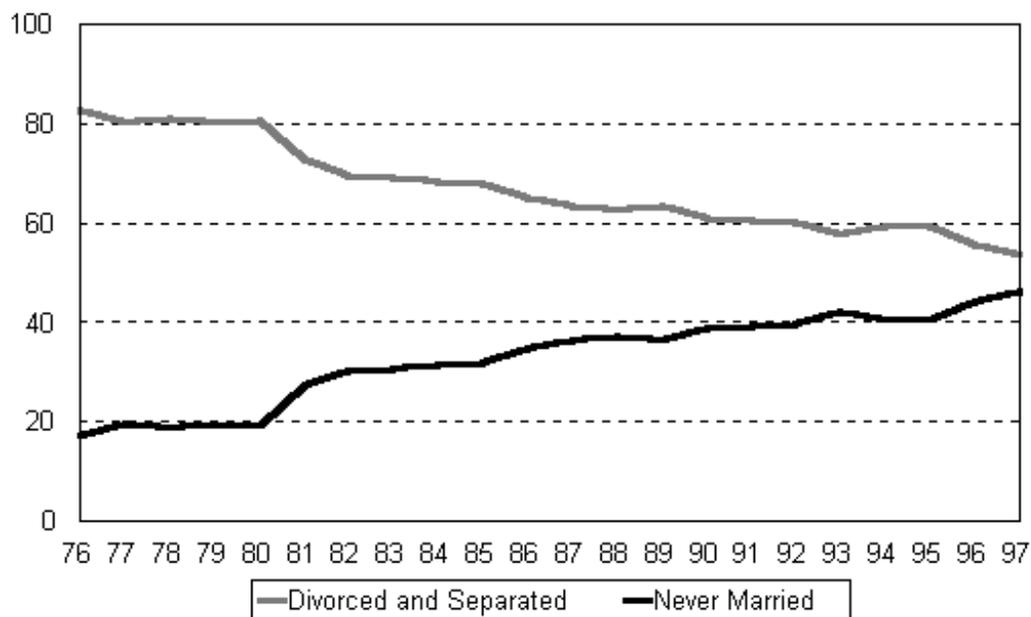
Figures

Figure 1: Percent of Single Mothers Receiving Child Support By Marital Status



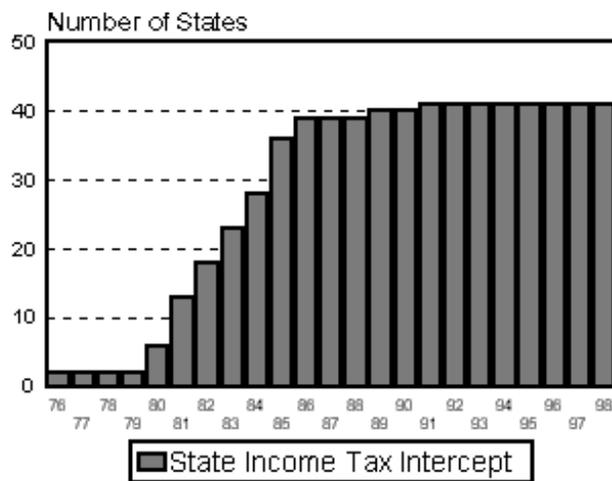
Source: March Current Population Surveys 1977-1998

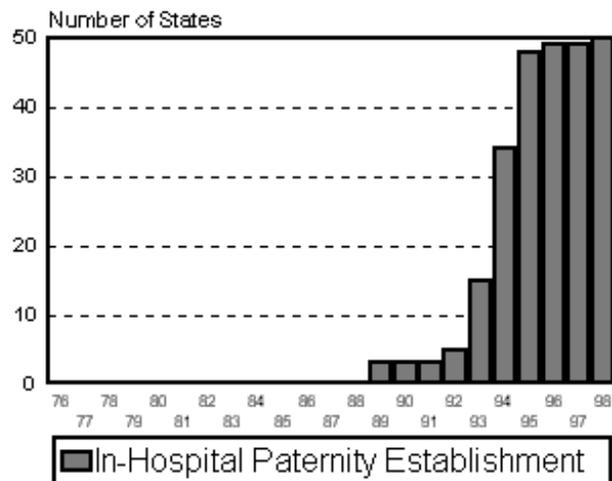
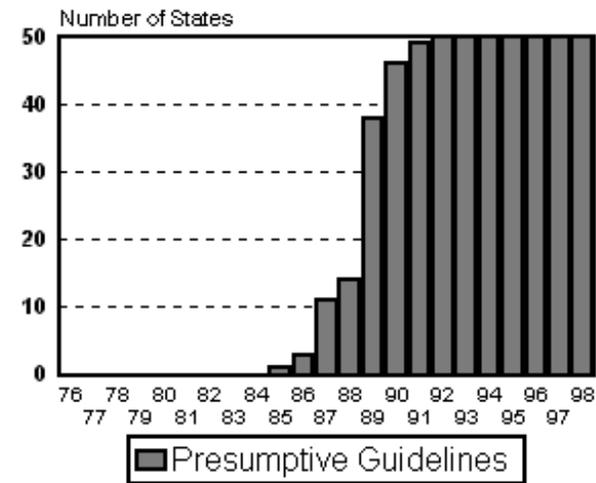
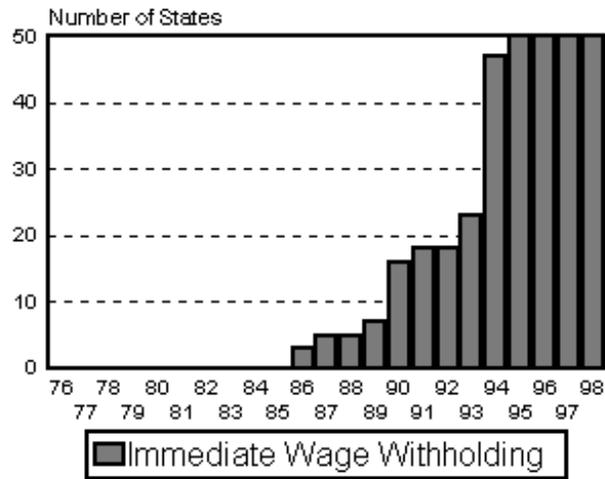
Figure 2: Marital Status Composition of Single Mothers

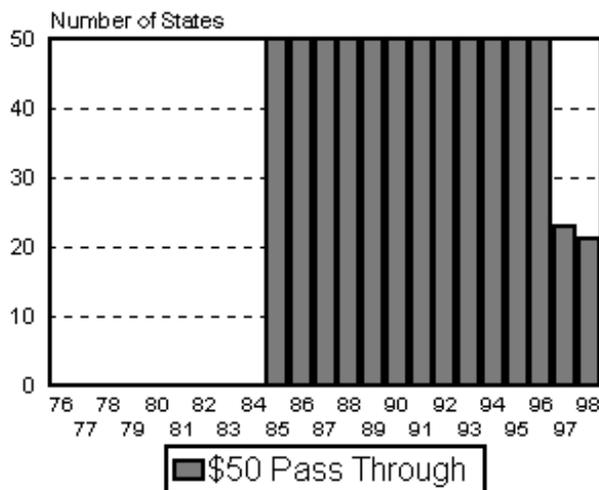


Source: March Current Population Surveys 1977-1998

Figure 3: Trends in Child Support Policies







Source: Authors' review of state statutes, supplemented when necessary by information from legal and policy staff at state child support enforcement offices.

Other Publications by the Authors

- [Elaine Sorensen](#)

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