

Child Support Enforcement and Fathers' Contributions to Their Nonmarital Children

Lenna Nepomnyaschy
School of Social Work
Rutgers University

Irwin Garfinkel
School of Social Work
Columbia University

Abstract

Research shows that stronger child support enforcement increases the amount of formal support received by children from their nonresident fathers. Yet, little is known about: 1) the informal cash and non-cash contributions that nonresident fathers make—especially to nonmarital children, 2) the effect of child support enforcement on these types of contributions, and 3) most importantly, the effect of child support enforcement on total (formal plus informal) child support contributions. Using data on unmarried parents from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, we find that informal payments decline more rapidly than formal payments increase for the first 36 months, after which time this pattern flips. The flip suggests that public enforcement on average has positive effects on payments. States with stronger than average enforcement have larger than average increases in formal support and smaller decreases in informal support, resulting in a statistically insignificant increase in cash support. That the results differ substantially by when parents stopped cohabiting - with negative effects in the short-run and positive effects in the long-run - suggests that stronger child support enforcement may be efficacious in the long run.