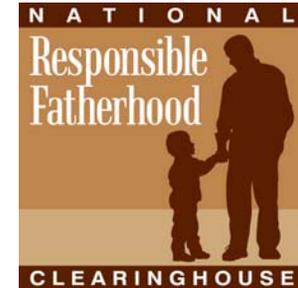




U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services  
Administration for Children  
and Families  
Office of Family Assistance

# Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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## Custodial Fathers and Child Support

In 2004, an estimated 14 million parents had custody of 21.6 million children. Five of every six custodial parents were mothers (83.1 percent) and one in six were fathers (16.9 percent). Child support can represent an important income source for many families, and the receipt of this support may be critical for child well-being.<sup>i</sup>

### Definitions

A *custodial parent* refers to the parent with whom a child primarily lives, and the person to whom payments are to be made under a child support order.

A *Noncustodial parent* refers to a parent who is not the primary caregiver of a child or children and who typically is obligated to pay child support.

*Child support* embodies the principle that parents are responsible for providing financial support to ensure the well-being of their children, even when the children do not live with them. During parental divorce or separation, courts typically grant visitation rights to the noncustodial parent; in such cases, one parent is often awarded custody and takes on the role of primary caregiver of the child or children. The other

parent is then obligated to pay a proportion of the costs involved in raising the child or children.

Child support is often awarded to one parent, even when both parents share joint custody of the child or children involved. In rare cases, a parent with sole custody of his or her children may be ordered to pay child support to the noncustodial parent to support the children while they are in the care of that parent.

*Child Support Enforcement (CSE)* refers to child support policy aimed at ensuring the economic security of children in father-absent homes. Congress established a major federal role in child support in 1975 when it enacted Title IV-D of the Social Security Act.<sup>ii</sup> The basic purpose of this law was to ensure that noncustodial parents financially supported their dependent children, especially those on welfare.<sup>iii</sup>

*Child custody* has two dimensions:

- *Physical custody* refers to the day-to-day care of a child and establishes where a child will live. Parents with physical custody have the right to have their child or children live with them.
- *Legal custody* generally refers to parents' right to make major decisions for their child or children. It is much

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more common for parents to have joint legal custody of a child than it is for them to have joint physical custody.<sup>iv</sup>

### Importance and Implications of Child Support

Child support legislation has focused on fostering responsible behaviors toward children by parents, and contributing to the well-being of families.<sup>v</sup> As noted, child support can represent an important income source for many families, and the receipt of such support may be critical for child well-being. Particularly since 1975, policy makers have focused on the child support system as a means of reducing the number of families in poverty and the public cost of supporting those families.<sup>vi</sup> Many policy makers view child support as a key income support.<sup>vii</sup>

#### *Implications for Fathers*

- While some noncustodial fathers fail to make child support payments because they are unwilling to do so, the majority of low-income noncustodial fathers fail to meet their child support obligations because they do not earn enough to pay what is ordered.<sup>viii</sup>
- As child support enforcement forges a monetary connection between many nonresident fathers and their children, fathers may have more desire to maintain or develop an emotional connection to their children.<sup>ix</sup>

#### *Implications for Children*

- “Fathers who pay child support are more likely to visit their children. A support order increases the chances that children born out of wedlock will have contact with their nonresident fathers.”<sup>x</sup>

#### *Implications for Fathers’ Partners*

- Child support is an extremely important source of income for poverty-level families.<sup>xi</sup>
- Many mothers value fathers’ in-kind contributions and consider the sharing of child care and other responsibilities as a demonstration of genuine father involvement. In this respect, the child support enforcement system, which ignores noncash support, does not recognize some values of low-income communities regarding child support.<sup>xii</sup>

### Trends in Child Support Awards and Agreements Over Time

The following tables illustrate child support trends for custodial parents. **Tables 1** and **2** show trends in child support awards and agreements between 1993 and 2003 for both custodial mothers and custodial fathers. (Agreements were reported by the custodial parent as legally established by a court or other government entity). **Table 1** shows that the percentage of custodial mothers who had child support agreements or awards increased from 59.8 percent in 1993 to 64.2 percent in 2003. Conversely, **Table 2** shows that the proportion of custodial fathers who had child support agreements or awards decreased modestly between 1993 and 2003 and was lower than that of custodial mothers.<sup>xiii</sup>

**Table 1: Percentage of Custodial Mothers Who Were Granted Child Support Agreements or Awards, 1993-2003**

Year	Custodial Mothers	N (in thousands)
1993	59.8%	11,505
1995	61.4%	11,607
1997	59.6%	11,872
1999	62.2%	11,499
2001	63.0%	11,291
2003	64.2%	11,587

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 1994-2004

**Table 2: Percentage of Custodial Fathers Who Were Granted Child Support Agreements or Awards, 1993-2003**

Year	Custodial Fathers	N (in thousands)
1993	42.2%	2,184
1995	40.0%	2,108
1997	38.3%	2,077
1999	39.2%	2,030
2001	38.6%	2,092
2003	39.8%	2,364

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 1994-2004

### Differences in Child Support by Subgroups

Some studies indicate a steady increase in the amount of child support collected, yet the amount owed continues to be much greater than the amount received. As a result, some people

worry that child support policies—rather than improving compliance and enforcement as intended—may in some cases have the opposite result of reducing the number of child support awards made.<sup>xiv</sup>

### Differences by Gender

**Table 3** shows that in 2003 among all custodial fathers, 39.8 percent were granted an award to receive child support from the noncustodial parent. This proportion was much lower than that of custodial mothers who were granted awards.

**Table 3: Percentage of Custodial Parents Granted Child Support Awards and Agreements by Sex, 2003**

	Awards Granted	Awards Not Granted	N (in thousands)
Custodial Father	39.8%	60.2%	2,364
Custodial Mothers	64.2%	35.8%	11,587

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 2004

### Differences by Race/Ethnicity

**Table 4** shows that in 2003 non-Hispanic white custodial fathers were supposed to receive child support payments at a higher rate than were non-Hispanic black fathers. **Table 4** also shows that among all custodial fathers, a higher proportion of non-Hispanic white fathers actually received child support payments, compared with other racial subgroups.

**Table 4: Percentage of Child Support Payments Awarded to Custodial Fathers by Race and Ethnicity, 2003**

Race	Supposed to receive payment	All Received Payments	Did not receive any payments
Non-Hispanic White	34.6%	27.6%	7.1%
Non-Hispanic Black	21.4%	8.6%	12.8%
Hispanic (any race)	32.7%	18.8%	13.9%
<b>Total (in thousands)</b>	<b>722</b>	<b>521</b>	<b>201</b>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 2004

*Differences by Marital Status*

**Table 5** shows that in 2003 among all custodial parents who were supposed to receive child support payments, married, divorced, and separated custodial mothers received child support payments at higher rates, compared with custodial fathers of similar marital statuses. Perhaps surprisingly, among those who were never married, a similar percentage of custodial fathers and mothers received payments that were due to them.

**Table 5: Among Custodial Parents Who Were Supposed to Receive Child Support Payments, the Percent of Those Who Actually Received Payments, by Marital Status, 2003**

Current Status	Custodial Father	Custodial Mother
Married	72.4%	80.8%
Divorced	75.4%	79.2%
Separated	51.7%	75.1%
Never Married	71.8%	70.9%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 2004

*Differences by Educational Level*

**Table 6** shows that in 2003 among all custodial fathers, those with less than a high school education were supposed to receive payments at a higher rate, compared with fathers of different educational levels, and were least likely to receive payments due to them.

**Table 6: Percentage of Child Support Payments Due and Not Received, by Educational Attainment, 2003**

Educational Attainment	Custodial Fathers	
	Supposed to Receive Payments	Did not Receive Payments
Less than H.S. grad	36.7%	14.0%
H.S. grad (or GED)	31.8%	10.2%
Some college	31.9%	8.5%
Associate degree	28.8%	6.5%
Bachelor's degree or more	25.8%	3.5%
<b>Total (in thousands)</b>	<b>740</b>	<b>211</b>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 2004

### *Difference by Employment Status*

**Table 7** shows that in 2003 working custodial fathers were about as likely as were custodial fathers who did not work to have child support due to them and to actually receive support payments.

**Table 7: Percentage of Child Support Payments Awarded, and Received by Work Experience, 2003**

Employment Status	Custodial Fathers	
	Supposed to Receive	Received Payment
Working	31.5%	22.6%
Nonworking	29.6%	21.0%
<b>Total (in thousands)</b>	<b>741</b>	<b>530</b>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 2004

### **Definition of Measures**

Child support received pertains to the entire calendar year prior to the survey year.<sup>xv</sup>

### **Data Sources**

Information on child support trends was reported using the Current Population Survey (CPS), specifically the CPS Child Support Supplement (CPS-CSS), a national survey that collects data in April of every other year. The CPS-CSS provides information about the amount of child support received between April 1994 and April 2003, based on data collected by the U. S. Census Bureau. The Census Bureau surveys collect detailed national information about child support agreements or awards, such as the reported amounts due and received, as well as other socioeconomic characteristics about custodial parents and their families.<sup>xvi</sup> The sample represented consists of people in the civilian noninstitutionalized population (e.g., those not in correctional facilities or nursing homes) living in the United States who are

15 years of age or older and who have their own children under 21 years of age living with them, while the other parent lives outside the home.

The tables documenting child support payments (received, not received, awarded, and not awarded) were created using data from the April 2004 CPS-CSS.

### **Data Limitations**

The estimates in the Current Population Survey results are subject to sampling errors. To minimize these errors, the Census Bureau employs quality control procedures in sample selection, the wording of questions, interviewing, coding, data processing, and data analysis. Consequently, apparent differences between the estimates for two or more groups may not be statistically significant.<sup>xvii</sup>

### **Resources**

- The **U.S. Census Bureau** surveys collect detailed national information about child support agreements or awards, as well as information on the socioeconomic characteristics of custodial parents and their families. The Bureau produces reports, briefs research papers, and other materials on child support: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/childsupport/reports.html>
- The **Office of Child Support Enforcement** aims to enhance the well-being of children by seeing that children receive the support they are due by providing assistance in locating absent parents, establishing paternity, determining support obligations, and monitoring and enforcing those obligations. The agency's Web site provides national statistics and information on regulations related to child support enforcement: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/>

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