



FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

April 2003 • Number 15

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study changed its name to The Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). Due to the issue date of this document, FFCWS will be referenced by its former name. Any further reference to FFCWS should kindly observe this name change.

Child Support Enforcement and Fragile Families

Background

The composition of single-parent families has shifted dramatically in the past thirty years. At the beginning of the 1970's, almost all single-parent families were headed by widowed, divorced or separated mothers. Today, over 40 percent of single mothers were never married to the father of their child(ren). Never-married mothers are much more likely to be poor, much more likely to receive public assistance, and much less likely to receive child support—a potential lifeline for children—than formerly-married mothers. Thus, knowing how the child support system is working for never married mothers is important to policy makers and child support agencies.

Several research studies have examined the effects of child support enforcement policies, prior to 1996, on formerly married parents. Yet there has been little investigation of child support outcomes for never-married families, particularly in the post-PRWORA years. This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study [see box, back cover] to examine child support outcomes for never-married families. The questions addressed are:

- How successful is the nation in establishing paternity, securing obligations and enforcing support during the child's first year of life?
- How do outcomes vary across cities with different child support enforcement environments?
- How do characteristics of the mother, father, and children in never-married single-parent families impact child support outcomes?
- What do the Fragile Families data on child support for never-married single-parent families portend for child support policy?

The National Enforcement Picture

Table 1 presents national estimates of paternity establishment, child support orders, and child support payments for cities with populations of over 200,000. Paternity establishment rates overall are very high- 72 percent of all births to unwed parents.

Table 1: Child Support Outcomes for Nationally Representative Sample

	All Unmarried	Non-Resident	Resident
% w/ Paternity	72	56	87
% w/ Orders	13	20	6
% w/ Formal Support	8	11	5
Sample Size	2280	1130	1150

Our data indicate that hospital-based voluntary paternity establishment plays a major role—86 percent of all paternities established were done so in the hospital shortly after birth.

Nearly one-half of unmarried mothers are living with the father of their child at the time of birth. And, paternity establishment rates are much higher (87 percent versus 56 percent) for these couples. Our data suggest that the overwhelming majority of cohabiting fathers want to be legally and socially recognized as the father of their child. Not surprisingly a much smaller proportion of non-cohabiting fathers are so committed. What may be surprising is that nearly 6 of 10 non-cohabiting fathers are so committed.

Although nearly three-quarters of all unwed fathers have established paternity, only 8 percent have a legal obligation to pay child support. This gap between paternity establishment rates and child support orders may be explained largely by cohabitation and informal support. Nearly all cohabiting fathers establish paternity, but virtually none pay formal child support because they are supporting the child informally by sharing a household and other living expenses. For non-cohabiting fathers, the establishment-order gap is much smaller—56 percent paternity versus 20 percent child support order. Moreover, among the 80 percent of non-cohabiting fathers without child support orders, 60 percent contribute informal support to the mothers.

One year after the birth of the child, only 11 percent of non-cohabiting fathers actually pay any formal child support. However, when combined with the 48 percent who

pay informal support, 59 percent of all non-cohabitating fathers are providing at least some economic support to their children. At the same time, 41 percent of fathers are providing no support.

City Differences

As shown in Figure 1, child support outcomes for parents who live apart from one another vary substantially by city. Paternity establishment rates range from 34 percent in Austin to 72 percent in Pittsburgh and Newark. The proportion of non-cohabitating fathers who have a legal obligation to pay child support varies from 3 percent in Boston to 42 percent in Pittsburgh. Finally, the proportion of non-cohabitating mothers who receive formal child support ranges from 0 in Boston to 31 percent in Pittsburgh. Although the lack of reported support in Boston might indicate weak enforcement in that city, we know from other data that this is not the case. Massachusetts has one of the stronger enforcement records in the country. Boston is one of eight "small sample" cities included in the Fragile Families study. Therefore the number of observations in Boston is quite small. Additionally, we are looking at the first year of an 18-year child support obligation. Therefore, the low figure for Boston is misleading due to the role of chance. However much of the city variation in Figure 1 can be attributed to differences in the demographic composition of the city populations, labor market opportunities, welfare policy, and most important, differences in the strength of the state's child support enforcement system.

Figure 2 shows the percentage point difference between the actual payment rate and the rate we would expect to observe if

each city had the same demographic composition and the same child support enforcement regime as the average city. In this figure, cities are again displayed from low to high according to the observed payment rates indicated in Figure 1. The first bar tells us that Boston's payment rate is 13 percentage points below average. The last bar tells us that Pittsburgh's payment rate is 13 percentage points above average. Note that cities with the greatest negatives (Boston, Chicago, Norfolk, and Jacksonville) and the greatest positive (Pittsburgh) are all small sample size cities and therefore more prone to measurement error. Differences between large sample size cities (Milwaukee, Richmond, and Indianapolis versus Oakland, San Jose, and New York) are much smaller but still quite substantial. Because state child support enforcement is much stronger in Wisconsin than California, a non-resident parent living in Milwaukee is 6 percentage points more likely than average to pay support while the same non-resident parent living in San Jose is 2 percentage points less likely than average to pay support. Given that the average is about 20 percent, an 8 percentage point difference is quite substantial.

Individual Differences and Child Support Outcomes

Paternity Establishment

Several variables were found to be positively associated with paternity establishment. Mothers who have at least a high school education and mothers who have more than one child

Figure 1: Percent of Mothers with Paternities Established, Child Support Awards and Formal Payments in 20 Cities

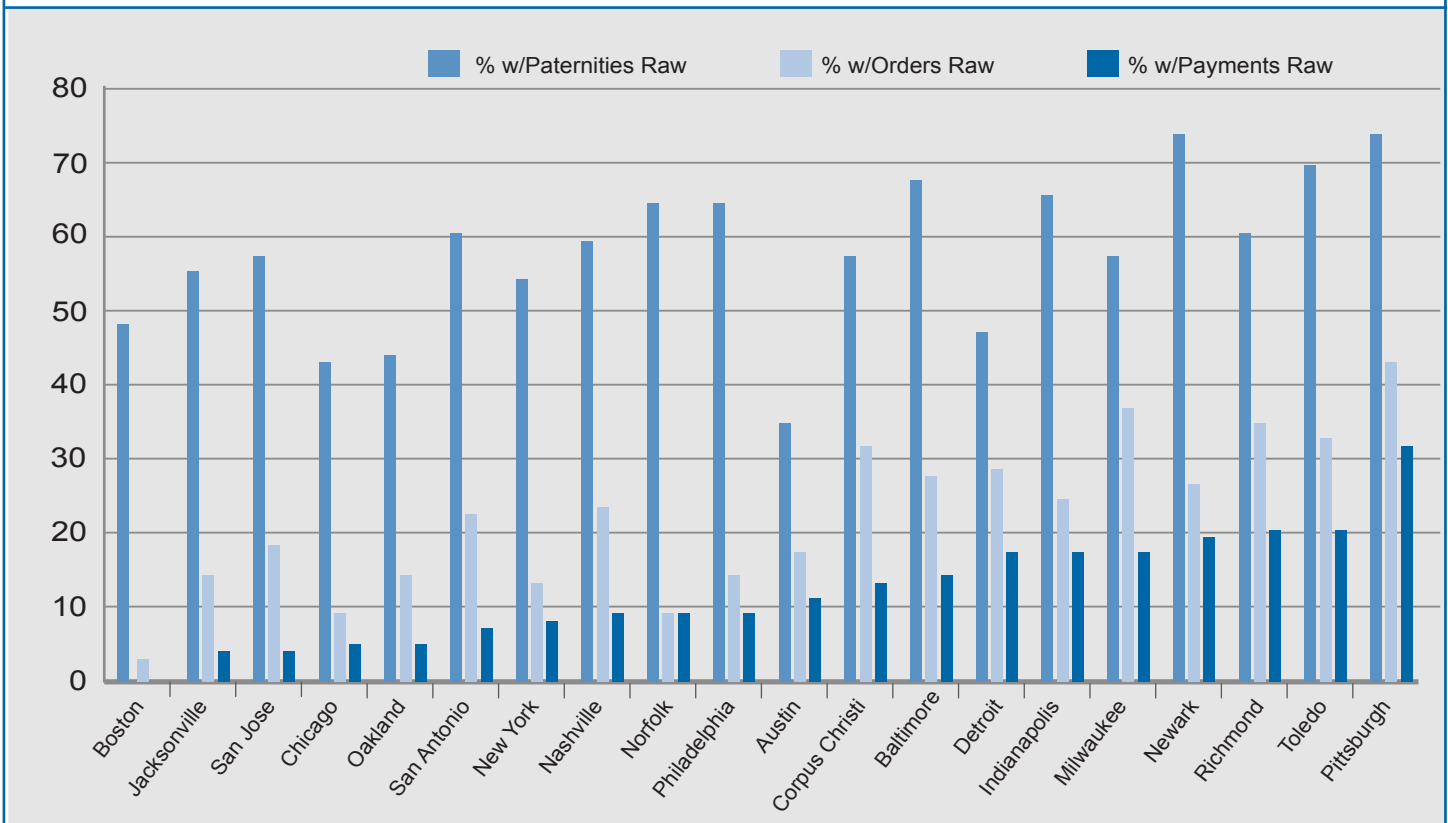
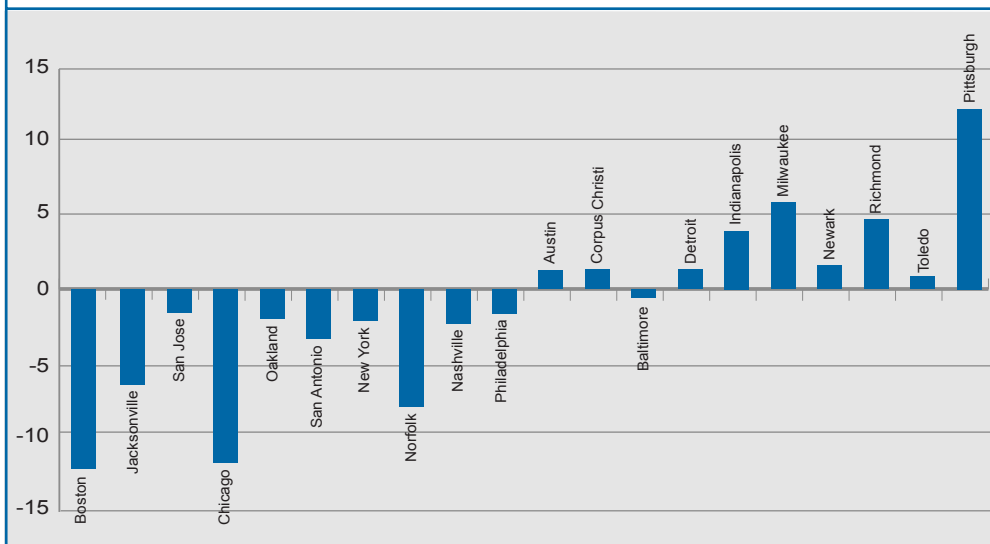


Figure 2: Percentage Point Differences between Raw and Adjusted City Means for Percent of Mothers with Formal Payments



with the same father are more likely to have paternity established for their children. As expected, fathers who visited their babies in the hospital or contributed financially during the pregnancy are more likely to establish paternity. Interestingly, fathers involved in drugs or alcohol are also more likely to have paternity established. Hispanic fathers, and, to a lesser extent, white fathers, are more likely than black fathers to establish paternity for their children. Fathers are less likely to establish paternity if they have children with other mothers.

Child Support Orders

As indicated earlier, mothers who were cohabiting with the father at birth are less likely to pursue formal orders. U.S. born mothers are nearly 50 percent more likely than their immigrant peers to seek child support orders. Mothers who want the father involved are more likely to have orders, suggesting that mothers are less likely to pursue fathers through the formal system if the father is violent. On the other hand, a father's involvement in drug activity increases the likelihood of having an order, perhaps because these fathers cannot be counted on to contribute informally. Mothers receiving welfare/food stamps prior to birth were only 24 percent more likely to have orders, even though states have an obligation to pursue fathers whose children receive public funds. One child characteristic—low birth weight—is shown to be associated with a lower likelihood of orders.

Formal Support Receipt

The same individual characteristics relevant to child support orders are associated with varying rates of formal child support received. In addition, 40 percent of non-resident fathers have been in jail and compared to never-incarcerated fathers, they are 30 percent less likely to pay child support. Interestingly, mothers living in states with higher welfare benefits are less likely to receive child support payments. In fact, a \$100 weekly increase

in welfare leads to a one-percentage point decrease in the likelihood of receiving child support. Do welfare benefits lower a mother's incentive to seek child support from the formal system? Or, do generous welfare benefits go hand in hand with a more lenient child support enforcement regime? Such questions will be addressed in future research.

Conclusions and Policy Implications.

The Fragile Families study yields interesting findings about national as well as local child support enforcement systems. Very high paternity establishment rates do not translate into high proportions of child support orders because so many of those with paternity established

are co-habiting. While early establishment of paternity is likely to facilitate enforcement in later years as an increasing proportion of cohabitators split up, this remains to be seen.

That informal child support payments are so much more common than formal payments during the first year of the child's life, makes the effects of enforcement of formal support on the provision of informal support a very important question for future policy research.

That incarceration is so common among non-resident fathers and that incarcerated fathers are so much less likely to pay child support suggests that less support for children may be an important negative side effect of widespread incarceration.

Finally, the Fragile Families study documents both wide variation across cities in rates of paternity establishment, child support awards, and receipt of formal support and the critical role of state and city child support policies and practices. This suggests that there is still plenty of room for improvement in enforcement in cities and states with below average records.