



## FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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# Child Support Enforcement and Domestic Violence among Non-Cohabiting Couples

## Background

The number of children eligible for child support has increased dramatically over the last three decades. Nearly half of all children born in the United States today will become eligible for child support at some point before reaching age eighteen, and many of these children will experience poverty and economic insecurity as a result of parent absence. Because of their precarious economic status and because child support is a potentially important source of income for these children, stricter child support enforcement has become an important priority for policy makers.

In 1975, Congress established the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement and created incentives for states to establish similar offices. In 1984, a series of amendments were passed requiring states to withhold child support obligations from fathers' wages, in cases of delinquency, and to establish legislative guidelines for setting award levels. In 1988, policy makers went even further by making income-withholding automatic and by making guidelines presumptive. States were also required to establish paternity for all children born outside of marriage. Most recently, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) made child support even more important by strengthening previous reforms and by limiting single mothers' access to public assistance.

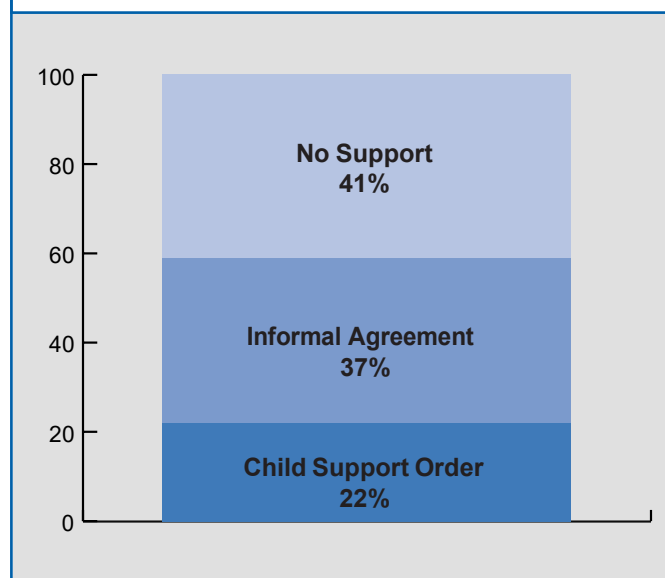
Most people believe that fathers should support their children, even when they live in separate households. Thus child support enjoys widespread bi-partisan support among legislators at the state and federal levels. A few policy makers and many advocates for poor mothers, however, worry that stricter child support enforcement may increase domestic violence by making poor women more dependent on men and by placing unrealistic burdens on poor fathers. This analysis addresses that concern by examining whether child support policies are associated with a greater incidence of domestic violence.

## Child Support and Violence

According to data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study (see box, page 2), by the time of the first follow-up interview, when the children are between the ages of

12 and 18 months, the percentage of non-cohabiting mothers with child support orders is about 22 percent. Thirty-seven percent of the non-cohabiting mothers have some kind of informal child support arrangement with the father, and 41 percent have no support from the father in the first 12 to 18 months. Given the young age of these children and the fact that all the births occurred outside of marriage, these rates of child support, although low, are comparable to other sources.

**Figure 1: Percent of Non-Cohabiting Mothers Receiving Child Support When the Child is 12 - 18 Months Old**



The two survey questions on violence used in this analysis involve mothers' reports of being hit or slapped and mothers' reports of being seriously hurt in a fight with the father at the follow-up interview. Fourteen percent of mothers report being hit or slapped after the birth of their child and eight percent of mothers report being seriously hurt. The reports of violence are slightly higher if there is a child support order in place, particularly with respect to hitting and slapping. That is, 17 percent of mothers with child support orders report being hit or slapped after the birth of the child compared with only 13 percent of mothers without an order in place.

**Figure 2: Percent Violent by Child Support Order**



Since child support orders are most prevalent in the strictest child support enforcement states, the data presented in figure 2 suggest that there is a positive relationship between enforcement and violence. Indeed, we find that living in a state with stricter child support enforcement increases a non-cohabiting mother's risk of being hit or slapped, particularly if she reports previous abuse. In figure 3, we see that if a mother with no history of abuse lives in a state with enforcement strictness that ranks in the top 25 percent of the states in our sample (strict), her risk of being hit or slapped is over three percentage points higher than if she lived in a state with enforcement strictness than ranks in the bottom 25 percent of the states in our sample (weak). More dramatically, if she has reported prior abuse, her risk of being hit or slapped is almost three times higher (43 percent vs. 16 percent) in a 'strict' enforcement state compared to a 'weak' enforcement state. On the other hand, we observe very little difference across states in a mother's risk of being seriously hurt in a fight with the father, regardless of her history of violence

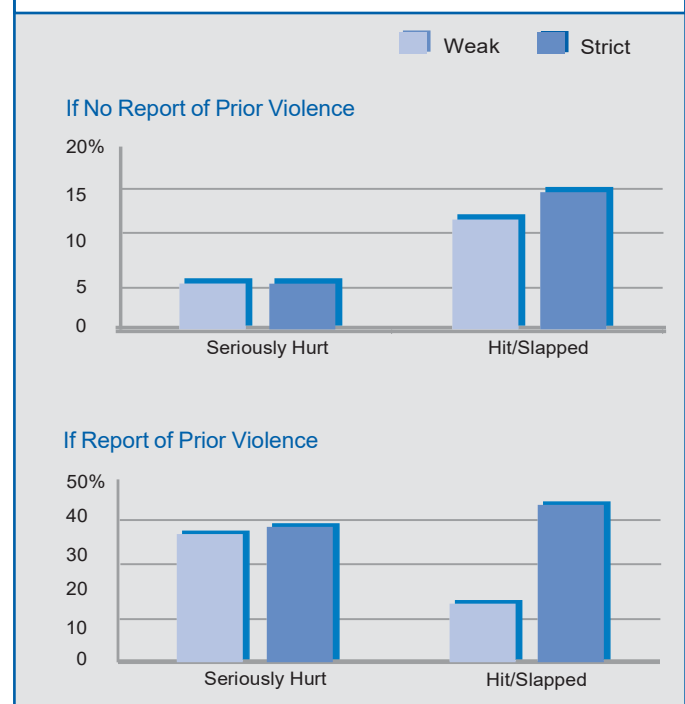
### Consequences for Policy

Child support enforcement appears to be positively associated with whether a mother is hit or slapped in the first year of the child's life but has a negligible effect on her being seriously hurt in a fight with the father. This pattern suggests that these

two measures of violence do not represent some generic form of violence, but rather identify two distinct phenomena. If being hit or slapped is an indicator of being in a volatile relationship and being seriously hurt indicates a controlling father, then our findings are consistent with stronger child support enforcement leading to increases in child support orders among volatile couples, but only minimal increases in orders among couples in which the father is extremely controlling. Thus, it appears that although enforcement is associated with an increase in violence among parents, it is not associated with the type of violence most feared by policymakers and women's advocates.

One important caveat is that the first year after the birth of the child may be too soon to see the full effects of child support enforcement on violence. When additional waves of the Fragile Families data become available, this question must be re-evaluated.

**Figure 3: Probability of Violence by Strictness of Enforcement**



The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a birth cohort of nearly 5,000 children, including 3,712 children born to unmarried parents and 1,186 children born to married parents. The data are nationally representative of births in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. For more information about the study, visit the Web site of The Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm> or email the CRCW at [rcrw@opr.princeton.edu](mailto:rcrw@opr.princeton.edu)

This research brief was adapted from "Child Support Enforcement and Domestic Violence Among Non-Cohabiting Couples" by Angela Fertig, Sara McLanahan and Irwin Garfinkel. To download a copy of the paper on which this brief was based, visit <http://crcw.princeton.edu>, go to the *Fragile Families* link, click on *Publications*, then click on *Working Papers Series*.

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## Recent Working Papers

The following comprises a list of the most recent Working Papers authored by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) faculty and research associates. A complete list of Working Papers is also available for viewing and downloading on the CRCW Web site:

[crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm](http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.htm)

2002-23-FF Pinka Chatterji, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn Dec 2002 "Does WIC Participation Improve Maternal Investments in Infant Health?"

2002-17-FF Angela Fertig, Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel Dec 2002 "Child Support Enforcement and Domestic Violence Among Non-Cohabiting Couples"

2002-22-FF Bruce Western, Leonard Lopoo, Sara McLanahan Dec 2002 "Incarceration and the Bonds Among Parents in Fragile Families"

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Conceptualizing and Measuring Father Involvement. Randal Day and Michael Lamb, editors. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

2001-06-FF Marcia Carlson, Sara McLanahan, Paula England Nov 2002 "Union Formation and Dissolution in Fragile Families"

2002-14-FF Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel Oct 2002 "Strengthening Fragile Families"

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2002-18-FF Maureen Waller, Amanda Bailey Sept 2002 "How Do Fathers' Negative Behaviors Shape Relationships with Their Children?"

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2002-15-FF Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel Jul 2002 "Unwed Parents: Myths, Realities, and Policymaking"

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