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The Effects of Race and Marital Status on Child Support and Work Effort

RICHARD K. CAPUTO

This study used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experience (NLSLME), Young Women's Cohort, to assess the influence of race and marital status on levels of child support and work effort of recipients of child support in 1978, 1983, 1988, and 1991. Controlling for the number of children and highest completed grade of education, the study found that race exerted no effect on either level of child support payments or work effort in any of the study years. Marital status influenced level of child support in each study year and work effort only in 1983. Formerly-married mothers had the highest levels of child support as a part of total family income in each study year, while married and never-married recipients of child support had similar lower levels. Also, formerly-married mothers had the greatest work effort only in 1983. Implications for child support policies are discussed.

Since the late 1970s, public officials and scholars have acknowledged the deteriorating economic position of children in America (e.g., Levy, 1995; Plotnick, 1989; Garfinkel, 1985) while others have noted the economically disadvantaged position of female-headed single-parent families (e.g., Thompson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994; Caputo, 1993; Nichols-Casebolt, 1988; Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; Bergmann, 1981). For these reasons and others discussed below, provisions for child support and child support research received a high priority in the 1980s when Congress enacted the Child Support Enforcement Amendments of 1984 (P.L. 98-378) and the Family Support Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-485) (Kelly & Ramsey, 1991). In the 1990s, child support again became a focus of concern, reflecting the family values ethos that fueled public debates and informed policy options about welfare reform, increased numbers of single-parent households, and the like (Zill & Nord, 1994; Popenoe, 1990).

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Addressing the increased importance of understanding the dynamics of child support, scholars and others enriched the child support knowledge base in regard to: 1) the extent, levels, and types of child support awards (Albelda & Tilly, 1992; Seltzer, 1992; Paasch & Teachman, 1991; Waddell, 1985); 2) the impact of specific new provisions in federal and state laws to strengthen child support services, like expediting paternity establishment (Adams, Landsbergen, & Cobler, 1992; Danziger & Nichols-Casebolt, 1990), withholding income (Garfinkel & Klawitter, 1992), and using guidelines or formulas to determine level of child support awards (Garfinkel, Oellerich & Robbins, 1991); 3) compliance with court-ordered child support payments (Arditti, 1991; Dudley 1991); 4) demonstration projects, particularly in Wisconsin (Garfinkel, McLanahan, & Robins, 1992; Nichols-Casebolt, 1986); and 5) more general family policies (Kamerman and Kahn, 1989 & 1988a).

For the most part, with notable exceptions (e.g., Beller & Graham, 1993; Albelda & Tilly, 1992; Garfinkel, Meyer, & Sandefur, 1992; Danziger & Nichols-Casebolt, 1990 & Furstenberg, 1988), race and family type (other than mother-only, single-headed families) received little attention. In addition, many studies relied on cross sectional data, whether obtained by survey, court records, or local or state government data bases, and many of these studies were case studies. Until very recently, few researchers used longitudinal data bases, (e.g., Beller & Graham, 1993). Longitudinal studies also had limitations. They tended to focus on a specific geographic area like a county or state, and when national, they used data bases that drew random samples from the population in each survey year rather than follow the same cohort of individuals over time.

Kamerman and Kahn (1988b) noted from their review of the preponderance of cross sectional case studies that black women received low support awards, as did women who were divorced a long time (compared to recent divorcees), women who lived in no-fault divorce states, employed women, women with several children and with older children. In contrast, marital status had no effect on child support awards.

In more recent work, Beller and Graham (1993) used 1978 - 1985 Current Population Survey (CPS) data and showed that child support receipt varied little according to racial and marital status subgroups. On average, three of four mothers - both ever-married and never-married - received support. Receipt rates increased slightly for ever-married mothers between 1978 and 1985 and for never-married mothers beginning in 1981. As with child support award rates, black mothers made the most progress starting from the lowest base, with most progress concentrated among the separated and remarried. In regard to amount or level of child support receipt, never-married mothers received roughly half as much as the ever-married over the entire period. Black mothers' receipts relative to those of nonblack mothers varied between 59 and 77 percent. Among nonblacks, child support receipts deteriorated more than average for separated and never-married mothers, whereas among blacks they deteriorated about the same for all marital status categories except the remarried, for whom they remained the same. Such findings suggested that black recipients of child support had a higher female/male income ratio than whites, thereby reflecting changes in employment opportunities that occurred in the 1970s and 1980 (Caputo 1995).

Graham and Beller (1989) also used the 1979 and 1982 CPS data to assess the effect of child support payments on welfare participation and annual hours worked by divorced and separated mothers in 1978 or 1981. They found that both welfare and child support payments reduced hours worked, but the effect of child support was about one-third that of welfare. Graham and Beller speculated that women who received child support payments used this income to purchase child care services, thereby allowing them to increase their hours of work somewhat, but not to the point of offsetting complications induced by the welfare system.

Finally, Veum (1992) used data from the 1988 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to examine the interrelation of child support, visitation, and hours of work. Young child support recipients were more likely to work than non-recipients and were apt to work longer hours and have higher earnings if their children

were visited by the father. Of all categories of single mothers Veum examined, mothers of children whose fathers visited spent the most on child care services. Veum reasoned that fathers might be willing to pay more knowing that child support offset child care costs, thereby supporting Graham and Beller's findings and speculations. Veum, however, did not disaggregate annual hours of work by either race or marital status.

In the present study I used nationally representative, longitudinal data to examine the effects of race and marital status on level of child support and work effort between 1978 and 1991. Study samples included only those mothers who received child support. I thereby examined the effects of race and marital status on actual amounts of support awards received, not awards granted. Between 1978 and 1985, the real value of child support awards declined by 22 percent, from \$3,680 to \$2,877. By 1989, average awards increased to \$3,293, still 10 percent lower than awards in 1978. A shift in the composition of those eligible for child support contributed to this decline. In 1978, unmarried mothers accounted for 19 percent of mothers eligible for support; by 1989, they constituted about 30 percent of the eligible population. Furthermore, earnings of divorced mothers increased substantially over the past two decades, as did women's income in general, while men's wages remained stagnant or declined (*Economic Report*, 1995). Because most courts take the mother's earnings into account when setting child support awards (Garfinkel & Melli, 1992), the increased earnings of divorced women contributed to a reduction in the value of the average awards. Despite levels of awards set by the courts, actual awards were lower than they should have been in the 1980s. Noncustodial fathers paid about \$7 of every \$10 they owed (Garfinkel, Melli, & Robertson, 1994).

As noted, in the present study I focused on the level of child support paid to the entitled mother. Actual payments reflected the non-custodial parent's ability and/or willingness to pay in light of his own resources and those of the mother (whether actually known or perceived by the non-custodial parent), regardless of level awarded by the court. Beller and Graham (1993) had found that child support receipt and level were more a function of the

noncustodial parent's ability to pay than of the mother's race or marital status.

In the present study I controlled for the number of children and highest grade of education completed because both these factors distinguish in the aggregate whites from blacks. To the extent findings showed that race affected levels of child support and work effort independently of children and education, certain policy prescriptions appeared more appropriate than others. In particular, I was interested in the extent to which additional empirical evidence could supplement ideological or moral justifications for race neutral or more costly universal policies vis-a-vis relatively less expensive race-sensitive programs. To the extent that race and/or marital status influenced levels of child support, for example, modifications of child support enforcement provisions in the Family Support Act of 1988 might make sense. Strengthening provisions to establish paternity in return for state assistance could be deemed a worthwhile, albeit controversial, strategy for never-married mothers who are disproportionately black. On the other hand, to the extent that race and/or marital status was less likely to influence the level of child support receipt, a more universal, albeit more expensive (and hence less politically viable) strategy, like a child support assurance program or child allowances, might be more appropriate.

Data and Methods

Subjects

In this study of child support I used data obtained from the National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experience (NL-SLME), Young Women's Cohort. In 1968 initial interviews commenced with a group of 5,159 women ages 14-24 who were living in their parental homes, making initial career and job decisions, and beginning families of their own. These women were interviewed on a regular basis between 1968 and, most recently, in 1991. Documentation can be found in the *NLS Handbook 1991* (Center for Human Resource Research, 1991). Selected survey years for this study were 1978, the first year child support data

were obtained, 1983, 1988, and 1991, the most recent year of available data. I included in this study only women who received child support, which yielded the following subsamples: in 1978, $N=224$; in 1983, $N=233$; in 1988, $N=286$; in 1991, $N=263$.

Measures

The independent variables in this study were race and marital status, controlling for number of children and level of education. I focused on blacks and whites because of the small number of respondents in other racial categories. Marital status included married, formerly-married (divorced & separated), and never-married women. Number of children included those under 22 years old in the household. Level of education signified the highest grade completed during the survey year.

The dependent variables were the ratio of child support to total family income and work effort. Child support comprised the nominal dollar amount reported for both child support and alimony payments reported in each survey year. Total family income was the nominal dollar amount of family income computed by staff at the Center for Human Resource Research, Ohio State University, who produced and distributed the data files. It accounted only for the income from specific survey questions, thereby ensuring comparability of what constituted total family income across years. In the multivariate analysis, I used the ratio of child support to total family income. This ratio indicated the extent to which levels of child support varied by the economic circumstances of both custodial and non-custodial parents. (No data was available regarding the father's income). Finally, as a measure of work effort, I used the number of weeks worked between survey years. For 1978, this variable represented the number of weeks worked between the 1977 and 1978 survey years; for 1983, between the 1982 and 1983 survey years; for 1988, between the 1987 and 1988 survey years; and 1991, between the 1988 and 1991 survey years.

Hypotheses and related rationale

The works of Beller and Graham (1993) and Kammerman and Kahn (1988b) suggested that 1) the effects of race and marital status on child support and work effort would remain constant

over time and 2) no differences in levels of child support by race or marital status would be found. In the present study, I tested both hypotheses. Caputo (1995) and others (e.g., Hacker, 1992) have noted the deterioration of income for black males throughout the 1980s. While the income gap between men and women who were employed full time narrowed between the 1970s and 1980s, it did so more for blacks than for whites. Hence, in contrast to one of Beller and Graham's (1993) findings, I hypothesized that black fathers would contribute proportionately less child support relative to the custodial mothers' total income than white fathers.

Graham and Beller (1989) and Veum (1992) examined the effects of child support on work effort. Whereas Graham and Beller examined only divorced and separated mothers, Veum accounted for neither race nor marital status. Veum, however, corroborated to some extent, Graham and Beller's (1989) findings and speculations that fathers might be willing to pay more knowing that child support offsets child care costs, thereby enabling mothers to work more. While assessing the impact of race and marital status on the work effort of child support recipients, I also hypothesized that formerly-married recipients would work more than both their married and never-married counterparts, regardless of race. On one hand, married recipients of child support might have had less need to work since they were likely to have had spousal income. On the other hand, never-married mothers were more likely to be poorer than married and formerly-married recipients of child support, but they were also less likely to be in the work force due to lack of education and job skills (McLanahan & Casper, 1995).

Limitations

The use of the NLSLME, Young Women's Cohort, limited this study in the following ways. First, although the data file was longitudinal and followed the same group of young women, I used it cross-sectionally. That is, I treated each of the four reported survey years independently. I chose this procedure because no surveys were conducted between 1988 and 1991. As a result, the subsample for any given year had varying degrees of overlap

with those of other years, i.e., the N for each survey year may have included recipients of child support who may or may not have received child support in any other given survey year. Also, of the independent variables, only race remained constant within and between survey years. Marital status and number of children may have changed between survey years and again during the survey year, but were reported only for the survey year. The components of the child support/family income ratio also may have changed between survey years and again during the survey year, but were reported only for the survey year.

In light of these caveats, interpretations about causality should be made cautiously. Findings should be subject to future inquiry using other nationally representative data sets such as the Current Population Survey - Child Support Supplement (CPS-CSS), the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), and the National Survey of Families and Households among others, each of which has its own limitations.

Procedures

For each of the four survey years examined in this study, I used multivariate analysis of covariance (MANACOVA) to determine the effects of race and marital status on child support and work effort of young women, and to control for the effects of the number of children and level of education. Because the variable marital status had three levels (married, formerly-married, and never-married), I subjected significant main effects to LSMeans post hoc analysis.

Results

I found no interaction effects. Table I shows that only the multivariate tests of the main effects for marital status were significant for each survey year and that for race none were significant.

Regarding marital status, follow-up univariate analyses of variance show some similarities between 1978-1983 and 1988-1991, as Table I also indicates. Controlling for the effects of number of children and level of education, I found significant differences based on marital status on the ratio of child support to family

income in each of the survey years and on the numbers of hours worked only in 1983. In 1978 and 1983, formerly-married recipients of child support had the highest ratio of child support to total family income. Their ratios were nearly three times those of both married and never-married mothers whose ratios were remarkably similar. In 1988 and 1991, formerly-married mothers still had the highest ratio of child support, exceeding however only that of married mothers to a statistically significant degree. The ratio of child support to total family income for never-married mothers had climbed to its highest level by 1991, while that of formerly-married mothers declined to its lowest level, thereby narrowing the gap between them.

Regarding work effort, marital status made a difference only in 1983 when formerly-married recipients of child support worked a statistically significant greater number of weeks between surveys than their married counterparts. In 1978, 1988, and 1991, recipients of child support worked roughly equivalent amounts of time when controlling for number of children and level of education.

Discussion

I tested three hypotheses: 1) the effects of race and marital status on child support and work effort remain constant over time; 2) black fathers contribute proportionately less child support relative to the custodial mothers' total income than white fathers; and 3) formerly-married recipients of child support work more than both their married and never-married counterparts. Results partially confirmed the first hypothesis. Controlling for number of children and level of education, race had no effect on either the ratio of child support to total family income or work effort in any of the survey years. Hence, the influence of race remained constant over time, a finding consistent with Beller and Graham (1993). This finding suggested that black and white fathers who paid child support moderated their payments, in part, in response to economic fluctuations affecting both their earnings and those of the custodial parents in a like manner. The finding also suggested that policies and programs to increase levels of child support payments should be developed with race-neutral

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations(), Multivariate,¹ Univariate and Post Hoc⁰ Results*

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables			
	Race		Marital Status	
	White	Black	Married	Formerly Married Never Married
Child Support As % of Family Income	N = 162	N = 62	1978 N = 63	N = 149
	18.1 (21.3)	13.0 (14.2)	6.7 (4.0)	21.5***(>NM,M) (22.4)
Number of Weeks Worked Between Surveys	39.8 (21.2)	35.9 (22.5)	32.8 (22.9)	40.4 (19.5)
	Wilks' = .90; associated F = 5.23; p ≤ .001.			
Child Support As % of Family Income	N = 175	N = 58	1983 N = 76	N = 142
	12.4 (11.6)	13.1 (16.1)	7.4 (7.6)	16.2***(>NM,M) (14.6)
Number of Weeks Worked Between Surveys	42.6 (16.7)	35.4 (22.2)	35.9 (21.8)	43.3***(>M) (16.4)
	Wilks' = .87; associated F = 7.40; p ≤ .001.			

Note: M = Married; NM = Never Married.
 p ≤ .01; * p ≤ .001.

Table 1 Continued

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables					
	Race		Marital Status			
	White	Black	Married	Formerly Married	Never Married	
			1988			
Child Support As % of Family Income	N = 217 15.0 (17.8)	N = 69 13.6 (18.2)	N = 87 6.8 (8.1)	N = 188 18.6***(>M) (20.3)	N = 11 8.8 (7.7)	
Number of Weeks Worked Between Survey	59.8 (21.5)	49.2 (31.6)	56.4 (24.2)	58.6 (24.5)	48.1 (31.9)	
			¹ Wilks' = .92; associated F = 5.58; $p \leq .001$.			
			1991			
Child Support As % of Family Income	N = 187 14.4 (18.1)	N = 76 09.9 (13.2)	N = 76 7.5 (9.0)	N = 177 15.7***(>M) (19.1)	N = 10 11.6 (13.8)	
Number of Weeks Worked Between Survey	129.4 (53.1)	115.6 (57.7)	115.9 (55.2)	124.8 (53.3)	104.8 (63.1)	
			¹ Wilks' = .97; associated F = 1.93; $p \leq .10$. Roy's = .03; associated F = 3.91; $p \leq .05$.			

Note: M = Married

*** $p \leq .001$

or universal strategies which can buffer the effects of economic downturns.

Also in regard to the first hypothesis, marital status exerted a similar influence on level of child support in 1978 and 1983, when the ratio of child support to total family income for formerly-married women exceeded their married and never-married counterparts. This pattern differed slightly in 1988 and 1991 when the child support/family income ratio for formerly-married women exceeded only that for married women to a statistically significant degree. This finding suggested that the Child Support Enforcement Amendments of 1984 and the Family Support Act of 1988 might have increased the child support award prospects of never-married, low-income mothers. These mothers were more likely than married and formerly-married recipients of child support to have contact with state agencies and other programs responsible for child support enforcement. The additional finding that in three of the four survey years marital status exerted no influence on work effort, which changed uniformly across marital categories over time, further corroborated the child support award prospects of never-married, low-income mothers.

Study results warranted rejection of the second hypothesis. Non-custodial black and white men behaved about the same in regard to child support. Controlling for number of children and level of education, I found that non-custodial fathers contributed roughly equivalent amounts of child support proportionate to the custodial parent's total family income regardless of race. This finding suggested that non-custodial black and white fathers paid child support within a circumscribed range of total income available to custodial mothers. To the extent that payments remained at insufficiently low levels, non-custodial black fathers deserve no more condemnation than absent white fathers. Furthermore, this finding suggested that attempts to increase actual payments beyond a certain level may exact costs society is not willing to pay at the present time. Such costs would include those incurred with enforcement procedures that cannot benefit from scale. A national policy of garnishing wages and revoking drivers' or professional licenses might be more socially acceptable and cost effective than

legislation that leaves entitled women at the arbitrary discretion of individual states or court judges.

Controlling for number of children and level of education, I also found that never-married mothers received roughly the same proportionate amount of child support to total family income as did married mothers. This finding was somewhat inconsistent with those of Beller and Graham (1993) who when reporting child support and total family income combined separated, divorced, and never-married mothers into one category. My finding suggested that never-married mothers might be less like formerly-married mothers than initially anticipated. Since married recipients of child support had far greater levels of total family income than never-married recipients, this finding also suggested that these women were somewhat class bound. That is, on one hand, upper income women married men who could afford greater levels of child support, as indicated by their actual child support awards. On the other hand, lower class women who established paternity had children by men who might be at best a little better off than themselves economically, if they were employed at all, as indicated by their low level of award. These findings further suggested that efforts to increase child support payments to low-income women would have only a marginal impact on poverty reduction and increased self-sufficiency. Increasingly, however, support awards made up a greater proportion of income for recipients of child support who were never married. Hence, federal government intervention to enhance states' child support enforcement capacities appears critical for low-income women, particularly those never married.

Readers should also note that formerly-married child support recipients lose economic status as a result of divorce or separation, as they set up independent households. Hence, for these women, child support awards from the non-custodial parent made up a larger share of their total income, indicating that women who leave households to which they were formerly attached by marriage managed to get proportionately higher child support payments from the non-custodial parent regardless of how much or how little they dropped in economic status. This finding underscored a "spillover effect" that marriage has on the economic

status of women. On one hand, it reaffirmed contemporary efforts to discourage unwed child births because of their deleterious economic effects on women. On the other hand, this finding need not imply marriage as a prescription to enhance the economic prospects of women. Although the finding underscored the extent to which many women's economic status was tied to men's, it suggested that more universal programs like child support assurance or child allowances might be critical at this particular time to enhance the prospects for greater gender equality.

For the most part, study results warranted rejection of the third hypothesis, namely that formerly-married recipients of child support work more than both their married and never-married counterparts. Work effort among all subsamples of the study population was remarkably similar when controlling for number of children and level of education. With the exception of 1983 when formerly-married recipients of child support worked more than their married counterparts, neither race nor marital status influenced work effort. For the most part, work effort increased for all subgroups between 1978 and 1988, before declining slightly on average over the next three years for all subgroups regardless of race and marital status.

This finding in part supported Veum's (1992) and Graham and Beller's (1989) speculations that fathers might be willing to pay more knowing that child support offsets child care costs, thereby enabling mothers to work more. Throughout the 1980s, employment opportunities increased for women in general and for married women with children in particular (Caputo, 1995). Non-custodial male parents in effect rewarded mothers who worked with child support payments. This correlation between working mothers and child support paying fathers suggested that government policies making child care more readily available might increase the likelihood of child support payments by non-custodial fathers. Government support for day care would enable custodial mothers to pursue work and thereby earn money, which non-custodial fathers might supplement to the extent their support further enables working mothers to offset additional day care costs.

On the whole, the study findings also suggested that extension of current child support enforcement provisions is likely to affect most favorably never-married recipients of child support. This was consistent with findings of Beller and Graham (1993). Since this group of child support recipients has the lowest family income, more rigorous enforcement of current enforcement procedures seems required. To the extent that legislators and others want to ensure that child support enforcement results in both greater compliance and increased levels of payments among the more affluent middle class, a more universal program appears appropriate.

The particulars of a universal program, such as a child allowance or a child support assurance program, are beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, Garfinkel (1985), Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Robins (1992), and Kamerman and Kahn (1989) have explored the possibilities of such approaches for well over a decade. Although the contemporary climate of opinion about government responsibility and the emphasis given to deficit reduction and a balanced Federal budget preclude the likelihood of establishing another entitlement program at the present time, the public may benefit from a debate with child support allowance and assurances as potential options. Such a debate would invariably entail discussion regarding the extent to which universally spreading the cost of child support is likely to relieve both parents of responsibility, e.g., of non-custodial fathers from child support payments, of custodial mothers from work. In today's political climate, state-level pilot projects assessing the effects of a government-sponsored child support allowance, a child assurance program, or increased provisions for day care on mothers' work efforts and non-custodial fathers' child support payment seem both warranted and viable.

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