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Child Support Payment and Child Visitation: Perspectives from Nonresident Fathers and Resident Mothers

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the child support and visitation perspectives of nonresidential fathers and custodial mothers. The focus of the study was to present definitions of child support from both non-custodial fathers and custodial mothers, the barriers they experience that prevent child support and visitation, and suggestions the parents have for improvements in the child support system. The data suggest that although nonresidential fathers and custodial mothers have similar definitions of what characteristics define child support, they have vastly different views of what barriers prevent child support and visitation. Interparental hostility appeared to shape their perspectives about child support and visitation. Recommendations targeting the negative perceptions parents have of one another are presented.

The terms noncustodial father or nonresident father refer to men who do not live with their children due to separation from the mother, divorce or because the child was born out of wedlock (Fox & Blanton, 1995). Almost 30% of all children are currently being raised in single-parent homes and have a nonresident parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). The separation of parents from their children has received attention from policy makers in recent years, partly due to its impact on children. Children raised in single-parent homes are more likely to experience poverty than those raised in two parent households (Bianchi, 1995; Bowen, Desimone, & McKay, 1995). Increased emphasis on child support enforcement has been viewed as a means of decreasing poverty

rates for single-parent families and thereby lessening the negative effects of single-parenthood (Wolk, 1999). Thus, the reasons noncustodial parents pay child support and visit their children are important to understand. The predominant themes in the research literature for nonpayment of child support are insufficient income (Sorenson, 1997) and a poor relationship with the child's mother (Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994).

One of the primary reasons for the nonpayment of child support is the income level of the noncustodial parent. Studies focused on inner-city nonresident fathers have found that they have a limited ability to pay child support (Furstenburg, 1995; Kim & Mizell, 1997; Stier & Tienda, 1993). Young nonresident fathers have considerably lower earnings and higher poverty rates than other men in their age group (Lerman & Ooms, 1993; Pirog-Good & Good, 1995). Research conducted by Garfinkel and Oellerich (1989) found that never-married noncustodial fathers earn income that is less than half of divorced fathers.

In addition to low income levels, inconsistent child support has also been tied to the poor relationship between separated parents (Demo & Ganong, 1994). The nature of the relationship between the nonresident father and the custodial mother has been identified as the one factor that consistently hinders the relationship between the nonresident and his children (Fox & Blanton, 1995; Aldous, 1996). Since resident mothers act as gatekeepers who control access to their children, they have the power to dictate the child's relationship with the father (Fox & Blanton, 1995; Stier & Tienda, 1993). Unfortunately, the restricted access reduces the incentives for working fathers to invest in their children (Stier & Tienda, 1993).

Also to be considered is the remarriage of either parent. Since remarriage increases the complexity and strains of balancing old and new family relationships, parental involvement may decrease after the new union (Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). The limited studies available concerning the attitudes of fathers toward parenting suggest that these attitudes depend on their current family arrangements, relationships with their former spouses or partners and children, social background and involvement, including visitation, with nonresident children (Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994). Poor parental interaction, restricted access to children, and new

romantic relationships may greatly affect child support payments and visitation, since research has shown that motivating young men to fulfill their financial responsibilities may be as important as providing job training (Lerman & Ooms, 1993).

The barriers to child support of low-income levels and hostile interparental relationships are important to understand, since there is an enormous gap between child support payment guidelines and what single-parent families receive. According to the Wisconsin child support guidelines, if all nonresident fathers fulfilled their child support obligations in the period from 1990 to 1996, an estimated \$34 billion more in child support would have been paid (Sorenson, 1997). Kim and Mizell (1997) found fathers who do not encounter barriers to visitation are more likely to pay child support. Positive interaction and emotional support appear to have benefits for both the custodial mother and nonresidential father. Nonresident fathers seemed to gain confidence in their ability to provide for their children when they had social support, encouragement and assistance (Kim and Mizell, 1997). Moreover, when the nonresident father is more involved in child rearing, the resident mother has added support and is able to be a better mother (Aldous, 1996).

The cited research showing the benefits of visitation and supportive emotional relationships in the area of child support and parenting illustrates that policy makers and service providers would benefit from understanding what barriers prevent families from interacting supportively and thus receiving child support. Studies that included the perspectives of both nonresident fathers and resident mothers concerns over child support and visitation issues were not found in the literature. Previous research has been limited to definitions of fatherhood by parents, which included aspects of financial and emotional support for both mothers and fathers (Hamer, 1997).

In this study, both nonresident fathers and resident mothers specifically discuss their views about child support and visitation, which makes this investigation truly unique. The purpose of conducting these focus groups was to investigate attitudes and opinions of nonresident fathers and resident mothers in Georgia regarding child support, payments, visitation, and Child Support Enforcement. The scope of this study focuses exclusively on

the opinions of male noncustodial fathers and female custodial mothers, although it should be noted that parental custody in our society is not always restricted to a female parent. This study will outline areas in which noncustodial fathers and custodial mothers agree and disagree, and will show what problems emerge from their varying perspectives about child support and visitation. Possible solutions to bring parents' viewpoints together will be presented. The predominant themes are presented to inform future research and policymaking.

Method

Participants

Nonresident fathers. Participants were either current or former enrollees of the Georgia Fatherhood Program, a project designed to help unemployed or underemployed fathers find jobs. Group size ranged from three to 12 participants. All participants were African American with the exception of one rural group, which consisted of African American and White participants. An additional group of nonresident fathers not in the Georgia Fatherhood Program was conducted in Atlanta.

Resident mothers. Participants were recruited from names and addresses provided by the Child Support Enforcement Agency (CSE). Approximately 200 recruitment letters were mailed for each focus group site. A toll-free telephone number was set up for participants outside Atlanta to call if they planned to attend the group. Group size ranged from five to 12 participants. Similar to the nonresident fathers, all participants were African American with the exception of the rural group, which consisted of African American and White participants.

Eight focus groups were conducted by two research assistants in three locations in Georgia representing urban and rural areas. Each group was asked open-ended questions regarding the barriers to child support and child visitation. Three focus groups were conducted in Atlanta (nonresident fathers in the Georgia Fatherhood Program, nonresident fathers not participating in the Georgia Fatherhood Program, and resident mothers); three focus groups were conducted in Dublin (one group of nonresident

fathers in the Georgia Fatherhood Program and two groups of resident mothers), and two focus groups were conducted in Albany (nonresident fathers in the Georgia Fatherhood Program and resident mothers). Participants responded to a variety of questions regarding the payment of child support, nonresident parent visitation, and the impact of the parents' relationships on support and visitation.

Procedures

A list of questions was compiled by the principle investigator and the research staff. The group leaders asked the open-ended questions and allowed members of the groups to respond in a conversational style to issues raised by prompted questions. Each session lasted approximately two hours, and participants signed consent forms and were paid \$20 for their time. Sessions were recorded via audiotape and an ethnographic model of data transcription, analysis, and presentation was employed. Analyses included a comparative analysis among fathers at each site and mothers at each site, comparisons between fathers and mothers across sites, and comparisons between nonresident fathers in the Fatherhood Initiative Program and nonresident fathers not in the Fatherhood Initiative Program.

Results

Several themes emerged for both male and female groups during the focus sessions. There were both gender differences and similarities in the areas of child support definitions, barriers to paying child support, ways to increase support, visitation rights, and child support laws and policy. Differences in perspective are illustrated in quotes and summary statements provided. There were no differences in perspective for participant fathers and fathers who were not participants in the Fatherhood Initiative Program.

Fathers and Child Support. Nonresident fathers defined child support as a role activity in which fathers provide for their children financially and emotionally. The following are typical responses from fathers in the focus groups regarding their definitions of child support. "For me? Supporting my child is providing for

em. Being there for em." "Being there for em every day. Helpin them out at school. Going to PTA. You know, I do all of these but don't nobody consider it." ". . . I support child support. I also support a man being a man and taking care of his children and being a father. Being there, going to games. Going for walks." Fathers seemed to regard time spent with their children as the most important aspect of supporting their children.

Mothers and Child Support. Definitions of child support verbalized by mothers included aspects of child support cited by fathers, such as spending time with children and emotional support. One mother stated that child support was a father taking part in daily activities, such as taking the children to school and spending time with them. Another stated that child support involved helping the mother with her daily responsibilities of child rearing. A mother summarizing child support and its responsibilities stated the following: child support is "emotionally, socially, developing mentally, appropriate things for your children. It's not just money." The importance placed on spending time with children and supporting them was significant to these mothers, however, it did not negate the emphasis placed on financial support. When asked what came to mind when she thought about child support, one mother responded, "money, money, money."

Fathers' Perceptions of Child Support Barriers. Nonresident fathers gave numerous reasons why they failed to pay child support as ordered by the courts. Reasons included unemployment, physical disability, salary insufficient to pay child support and provide for self and current family, poor relationship with the resident mother, and a mistrust in the spending habits of the resident mother. Typical responses from nonresident fathers follow.

". . . there ain't no job guaranteed you. You workin' on the job and then all of the sudden you may be working today and they lay you off . . ." ". . . you go to McDonald's and you make a hundred dollars and you've got to pay sixty." ". . . I've got five kids by this one lady and I ain't makin but about \$6.00 an hour. I can't, you know, I can't, every time I turn around somebody needs something and I can't afford to pay child support. That's why I try to be interested and get a better job so I can make the money to get these folks off my back." ". . . we would like it better is if

there was some kind of accountability to the noncustodial parent in terms of what, exactly, was being done with the money."

Mothers' Perceptions of Child Support Barriers. The most common response women cited as a barrier to child support was fathers' new relationships. One woman stated, "I do not know where these men get these nerves at. They move in with more women with their children and leave us with they child." Another woman described the effects of a noncustodial father's new romantic relationship on child support. "When girls come in, they're like relationships . . . I tell her (the girlfriend) you've got 2 or 3 children, you know how it is on me. Why you're sucking up all the money, ask him nicely to buy his daughter some shoes or buy his daughter an outfit." There were several other issues mothers identified as barriers to child support, such as child support withholding laws, payment of wages under the table, and drug addiction.

Some mothers viewed strict child support withholding laws similarly as the noncustodial fathers surveyed. They regarded wage withholding as a deterrent for men to work, thus preventing any type of financial support. "He does not want to work. 'Cuz he knows that if he works, money will be taken from him."

Another reason mothers found noncustodial fathers would not pay child support is related to the fathers' wages being paid under the table. "He's beating the system like that. He's getting all these jobs which pay him cash money . . ." One mother described how payment under the table was a deliberate way to avoid child support payments. ". . . he was working before I put him up for child support. He kept a job. The time I put him up for child support, he stopped working. He was being paid under the table."

Drug addiction of the father was also cited as a barrier to child support for one of the mothers. She stated, "He has a lot of habits. He needs to put them down. If he could get rid of his habits then, I'm sure that he wants to take care of her [his daughter] and do for her. With all the habits he has, he cannot do that. He can not do his habits and want to take care of her too. It's not going to work."

Fathers' Suggestions to Improve Support. Many nonresident fathers argued that fathers should do whatever is necessary to provide the child with support funds. Some fathers even stated

that they knew of noncustodial fathers who would engage in illegal activities to raise money for their child support payments, to avoid missing payments and going to jail. However, none saw this as a good solution. The possibility of jail time was viewed as motivating for one father, who stated that it made him focus on paying child support. He said, "the jail is a good deterrent now. It makes you tighten up maybe when you need to tighten up. You might need to speed it up a little bit harder to avoid jail."

Many of the fathers had suggestions for what should be changed about both their employment status and that of their children's mothers in terms of improving child support levels. One suggestion was to work several jobs. One father stated, ". . . it's our responsibility to take care of these children . . . You've got to do what you've got to do. I did it for three years . . . worked two jobs out there. You do that to survive." Fathers were enthusiastic about participating in programs that would lead to better jobs. They described the current job training program they were enrolled in as one which "assist(s) you in bettering you skills. Getting over some barriers that's keeping you from obtaining good jobs that you can pay child support." Fathers also argued for a change in current child support laws, where the government withholds all of the fathers' tax returns when they are in arrears due to past unemployment. Many fathers felt the current policy was creating a large disincentive to work, that it created an environment in which "it's not worth working."

Fathers were vocal about the working status of their children's mothers and the accountability for paid child support. Many were in a position where they were paying child support and the mother was not working. This prompted many of the fathers to call for the end of welfare. More important to the fathers, however, was holding mothers accountable for the child support money they received. One father stated, "she's [the mother] is going to Red Lobster or whatever and you can't even go to Mickey D's or Burger King and get a ninety-nine cent hamburger." Another father said, "they should be able to show receipts once they get the check, what they spent our child's, show the receipt what they gonna do. Show the receipt."

Mothers' Suggestions to Improve Support. Some mothers favored incarceration as a means of increasing support compliance from

fathers. They stated that Child Support Enforcement should stop taking excuses from fathers and make them serve jail terms. The following is a typical response from mothers who favored incarceration: "If you don't pay, you got to jail . . . We have to sit here and suffer and take care of these kids by ourselves. They should get some of that suffering. As long as they're on the street, they are happy." One mother thought jail would appropriately punish fathers for working under the table. She stated, "lock them up when they do [receive wages under the table], lock them up." Although many of the women favored incarceration, some mothers recognized that jail would not improve their financial situation, nor would it adequately punish the fathers. One mother stated, "When they get locked up, you're still not going to get any money." Another woman described incarceration in the following way, "jail is easy. Jail is a piece of cake for them."

Another improvement in child support that mothers desire is more involvement by fathers in the daily activities of child rearing. One mother, who was in school, was frustrated that she had little assistance with the children from the father. "I go to school. He's in child care. I have to pay somebody to pick my two boys up from school and get them home, by the time I get home. Why can't he do that?" The barriers drug use created in paying child support was also something mothers felt could be addressed. One mother recommended that the state should send addicted fathers to drug rehabilitation. "Send them to rehab. If he don't go to rehab, send him to jail."

The viewpoints of fathers and mothers about child support are linked to their opinions on visitation and child support enforcement. In the next section, the perspectives of fathers and mothers regarding visitation and child support enforcement will be examined together.

Visitation conflicts and issues. The experiences of nonresident fathers in the area of visitation seemed dependent on the relationship they had with the child's mother. Some fathers were able to see their children regardless of whether or not they paid child support. One father stated, ". . . I haven't paid child support now in a while and she allows me, you know, to come and get my son or see him and spend time with him." Other fathers found this was not the case. One father stated the following: ". . . it's really

just the visitation part that [they] really, really control. I just want to see something better with the visitation. I ain't payin' all this money and I can't see him in all these months. You know, that's just not right." Too often, fathers found that even when a visitation schedule was established in court, it was left for the mother to decide whether or not the father would be allowed to see the child. One participant described his problems with visitation. ". . . we don't want you to see her nah, nah, we are busy tomorrow too. So what do you do? Even if the judge states like this visitation on Fridays at six o'clock until Sunday at six o'clock, 'if', and it says 'if', 'if' that's okay with time. She can always say nah, that ain't a good time. She can be difficult."

Mothers seemed to have equally varied experiences when it came to child visitation. Many mothers did not feel withholding visitation from fathers because they had not paid child support was the right thing to do. These mothers felt their children benefited from interaction with their fathers, and lack of financial support should not force these children to lose this benefit. One mother stated, ". . . my little, I let him go him daddy. Don't care if he don't give me any money. He gonna enjoy it. I let him." A few mothers viewed visitation as beneficial because it provided a break from the daily responsibilities they carried as the custodial parent.

However, the majority of the mothers had problems with the nonresident fathers and it influenced decisions about visitations. As indicated by the noncustodial fathers interviewed, many mothers directly tied visitation rights to child support payments. One mother stated, "No responsibilities, no visitation. If I put it where I am right now by myself, it would continue. If you don't hold up any responsibility, you're not seeing him." Overall, with the exception of the women who allowed their children to see their fathers, there was frustration that fathers could not or would not assist in the rearing of their children.

Ways to increase visitation. There were two primary suggestions made by fathers to increase visitation. The first suggestion was to mandate visitation rights for fathers who pay child support. One participant stated, "That's my thing, is child support without visitations. I think that the system should design if a man is made to pay child support, he should be able to visit or see

his child." Another father, who formerly had problems with his child's mother in the area of visitation, spoke of how he overcame the problem through improved communication. ". . . at first, I had that problem [not being able to see my child], you know, hey you know. I sat down and talked to her . . ." The visitation improved. Other fathers described talking to the mothers as "brown nosing" or "kissing butt." Many felt it was worth it to see their children, whereas others were adamantly opposed. Interestingly, only those fathers who "brown-nosed" cited improvement in their relationships with the mothers and fewer problems regarding visitations.

Mothers did not offer many improvements to visitation. Those who felt visitation was beneficial to their children and/or themselves were positive about their interaction with the noncustodial parent. However, for those parents who did not receive any kind of assistance from the noncustodial parent, they were adamant that without some type of responsibility shown by the fathers, the fathers would not be allowed to see their children. However, this "responsibility" was not limited to financial payments. Mothers indicated that assistance in the day-to-day responsibility of raising children would be acceptable. One mother stated, "I would change the way the system is. Just like we check in every month, they should check in every month. I feel as though with that child support payment, they should have visitation rights in there. Where they have to get their child every weekend, or every day off, two days a week or whatever. That's to give us a break. I feel if they're not doing anything else, if we pay daycare, they should pay that. I feel they should make these fathers be more responsible fathers and being part of that child's life."

Child support laws and policy. Fathers had numerous suggestions about how to improve child support enforcement. Many fathers felt that mothers should be held accountable for the money they received. A few fathers felt that mother should also be forced to work. However, the motivation behind this suggestion was varied. Some fathers made this suggestion because they felt it was the mother's duty to share in the financial responsibility for the child, and these fathers stated they would want to continue to pay child support if their child's mother was working. Other fathers were more self-serving in their motivation. One male

participant stated, "me, the first thing I would stop is welfare. With no welfare, she go to work. She go to work, she get a check and earn her money. And then you won't have to worry about child support."

Fathers were enthusiastic about the Fatherhood Initiative Program, and viewed it as a positive part of Child Support Enforcement. A typical response from one of the fathers is the following, "I've had good jobs before, but, you know, I think being here [in a job training program] and getting a good trade that's going to help . . . is great. So I'm kind of thankful for child support. Maybe not the way it all happened, but it happened and I could be in a better position to handle that kind of problem . . ."

Mothers had numerous suggestions about child support enforcement policies and procedures. Some mothers felt that child support enforcement was too lenient when dealing with non-paying fathers. They felt that child support enforcement workers should try harder to find fathers who were not paying child support. After finding these men, the mothers then recommended that fathers should be held accountable. If fathers were not making a genuine effort to find work, they should be put into jail. Female participants' feeling about programs such as the Fatherhood Initiative Program were mixed. A few mothers did not have information about the program. For those familiar with the work initiative, many were positive and felt that their families would benefit from the project. One mother said, "he tells me when he finishes this course and get these certificates, 'they say I can get a job making \$15 an hour. I can make \$2500 a week.' Okay, I can wait. I'm going to wait. March is coming. I can wait till then." Other mothers were skeptical about the program and felt it simply gave fathers the opportunity to avoid or delay child support payments. One mother stated, "They're not going to get no job. They're sitting over there free. They don't want to pay us anything."

Discussion

The focus groups revealed that a diverse range of perspectives exists among custodial mothers and nonresident fathers in the areas of child support, visitation and child support enforcement.

Both sets of parents were in general agreement about which components defined child support. However, when obstacles to child support were discussed, mothers listed numerous problems that they experienced beyond the employment obstacles described by fathers. The barriers of drug addiction, payment of wages under the table to avoid child support, and the belief that fathers are spending money on new relationships rather than their families, illustrates that the nonpayment of child support can not be explained solely by the financial ability of nonresidential parents.

These focus groups revealed that interparental relationships can define nonresidential financial and emotional involvement with children. Support for this theory can be found in both mothers' and fathers' descriptions of how visitation is often determined by either a nonresidential parent's payment of child support or his willingness to shoulder the responsibility of daily child rearing. There was evidence that many men were not permitted to see their children. Although there were parents participating in these focus groups that had positive relationships, many held negative views about their child's mother or father. The interviewed men maintained that women should be held accountable for the money they received, whereas women felt men were trying to avoid their responsibilities as fathers. There was an undercurrent of mistrust and hostility among these parents, which shaped each gender groups opinions of one another and their views of child support and visitation. Encouragingly, issues surrounding child support were very important for these parents. Participants eagerly took part in the sessions, and often could not wait for the audiotape to start before they offered their opinions about this complicated area of family life.

Recommendations

The information collected in these focus groups shows that many parental opinions of child support and visitation are intertwined with levels of mistrust and hostility. It appears that barriers to paying child support and visitation may result from or cause these negative perspectives, which can only compound problems faced by low-income fathers who are required to pay child support. Since previous research has shown that parents

who participate in post-separation counseling are able to lower hostility levels (Gray, et al., 1997), the following recommendations are suggested.

First, both noncustodial fathers and custodial mothers could benefit from information about the financial status of their coparent. Detailed information about the costs of the custodial parent could help assure nonresidential fathers that the support payments they contribute are going towards their children. Similarly, mothers may benefit from a clearer understanding of the financial limitations of the wages that fathers receive and the financial burdens they face. Additionally, mothers appear to need more information on the job training programs in which some nonresidential fathers participate, so that they do not view these programs as simply a way to avoid paying child support. Secondly, child support enforcement policy makers may want to consider the benefits that parental counseling programs may provide. Parental counseling could help eliminate the misconceptions these parents have of one another, as well as promote positive ways to interact. Finally, more research is needed on low-income, single-parent families and their feelings about child support and visitation. This article offers a beginning to understand the challenges mothers and fathers face and the barriers they work against in parenting their children.

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For the full list of focus group questions or any other inquiries, please contact Theresa Ann Sipe at (404) 651-2973, tsipe@gsu.edu, Suite 870 UL, CHHS, Georgia State University, University Plaza, Atlanta, GA 30303.

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