



Measuring Financial Support Provided by Fathers in Fatherhood Programs

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Why Measure Financial Support?

A key outcome for fatherhood programs is to improve the employment, earnings, and economic mobility of program participants.¹ Growing up in poverty is associated with negative ratings on measures of intelligence, verbal ability, and achievement test scores; reduced likelihood of high school completion; greater reported problems on emotional and behavioral outcomes; and increased risk of teen out-of-wedlock childbearing.² Poverty and its attendant problems are particularly acute in single-parent households, where the poverty rate in 2014 was 42.6 percent. The payment of formal child support plays a key role in combating poverty in single-mother households. Next to mothers' earnings, it is the second largest income source for poor families. In 2014, when child support was received it represented 70.3 percent of the mean annual personal income for custodial parents below poverty.³ The payment of child support is estimated to remove an estimated one million people from poverty.⁴

Recognizing the importance of fathers' financial contributions to their children, most fatherhood programs offer economic stability services. Typically, these include education about the need to provide economic support for children, as well as employment services, such as classes on job readiness, résumé writing, and interview techniques, help with job search, case management, and placement assistance. Some programs provide financial education to help fathers engage in budgeting and sound financial behaviors. Many programs also provide fathers with information about the child support system, and some help them work with the child support agency to understand their child support situation, generate right-sized orders, and address non-payment problems.

For programs that provide financial education, employment, or child support services, measuring financial support and documenting changes in economic stability and financial support over time

¹In this document, we refer to fatherhood program participants and nonresident parents or fathers who live outside the household where the children reside and are typically the parent expected to provide financial support as "fathers." According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 18.3 percent of these individuals are actually mothers and the issues presented in this brief would apply to them, too.

²J. Brooks-Gunn, G.J. Duncan. "The Effects of Poverty on Children." *The Future of Children: Children and Poverty*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Summer/Fall 1997.

³Grall, T. *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2013*. Current Population Reports, U.S. Census Bureau. Issued 2016.

⁴Sorensen, E. "Policy Options for Low-Income Fathers Cost Relatively Little." *Analysis and Management*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 616-618 2010.

are critical elements of program evaluation. This brief considers ways to measure the provision of formal and informal child support and the challenges associated with the reliable collection and analysis of information on financial support. In a future brief, we will consider assessment of outcomes associated with employment, earnings, and financial stability.⁵

Defining Financial Support

Financial support involves the transfer of economic resources from one parent to another. There are three major types of financial support: in-kind support, informal support, and formal support. In-kind support is the provision of goods and services, such as giving the mother groceries, providing clothes for children, or providing babysitting services or auto or home repairs. Informal child support is a cash payment that is made outside of the legal child support system. Typically, informal support is made directly to the child's mother or caretaker, although it could also involve payments to third parties such as babysitters or daycare providers. Formal child support is set by a court or child support agency and paid through federally required centralized collection and disbursement units for processing child support and maintenance payments.

Issues in Measuring In-kind and Informal Support

Under current law, in-kind and informal support contributions that cannot be tracked through the centralized state disbursement unit are treated as gifts. Fathers who make such contributions do not get credit for them by the child support agency. Nor do such contributions reduce their requirements to pay their court-ordered support through the formal child support system.

Practitioners and researchers who advocate for including in-kind and informal support when measuring financial support of children point to studies that suggest that these contributions are common and may make a significant difference in mothers' abilities to care for their children. For example, a 2013 Current

Population Report from the U.S. Census Bureau notes that "nearly two-thirds (61.7 percent) of custodial parents received some type of noncash support from fathers on behalf of their children, the most common being gifts for birthdays or holidays, clothes, or food/groceries."⁶ A recent study of 367 low-income nonresident fathers in Philadelphia, Austin, and Charleston found that 46 percent provided in-kind support and 28 provided informal cash support.⁷ The in-kind contributions came to \$60 per month per child — a figure that is actually higher than the \$53 per month paid in formal support.

Measuring in-kind and informal cash contributions necessarily means relying on the self-report of one or both parents. Researchers will need to decide whether to collect information from fathers, mothers, or both, although access to mothers is often not feasible for fatherhood program researchers. Another measurement issue is determining the cash value of the in-kind contributions. One study of in-kind support relied on personal interviews with fathers that lasted between 90 minutes and four hours. Interviews lasting several hours may be impractical for most fathers and researchers. Further, it is difficult to craft appropriate questions because in-kind contributions may take many different forms and may not happen on any regular schedule. In a simple scenario, a father might provide groceries each week. More realistically, he might provide groceries some weeks, clothes for some of the children on occasion, childcare services during school holidays, and take everyone out to eat a few times a year.

When measuring in-kind support, researchers often add prompts to help the responding parent to think about the many different types of in-kind support that may have been provided (e.g., "How often in the past month has the father provided clothes, school supplies, groceries, or toys?"). Another way to generate information on in-kind support is to give the parent a scale on which to rate the frequency with which the contributions are made (such as "often, sometimes, rarely, or never"). Jacinta

⁵Thoennes, N., J. Pearson, "Measuring Employment, Income and Financial Stability Among Fathers in Fatherhood Programs." Fatherhood Research and Practice Network, May 2016 (www.frpn.org).

⁶Grall, T. Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2013. Current Population Reports, U.S. Census Bureau. Issued 2016.

⁷Kane, J.B., T.J. Nelson, K. Edin. "How Much In-Kind Support Do Low-Income Nonresident Fathers Provide? A Mixed-Method Analysis." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 77, No. 3, June 2015.

Bronte-Tinkew and Allison Horowitz⁸ offer a different approach in their Inventory of Measures for Use in Fatherhood Programs. They provide a table in which the respondent indicates who is primarily responsible for a variety of child-related expenses:

I am going to read you a list of things that children need. Please tell me if you pay for these for CHILD, if the mother pays for them, if you both pay for them, or if someone else is the main person who pays for them. Who pays for...

	Father	Mother	Both	Someone Else
Clothing				
Toys				
Medicine				
Household Items				
Food				
Babysitting				
Preschool				
Summer camp				
Extracurricular activities				
School supplies				
Anything else				

Issues in Measuring Formal Support Using Self Report Data

Although formal child support is more concrete than in-kind and informal support, measuring its payment turns out to be challenging, too. While the most reliable information about the amount of formal support due and the amount paid comes from the automated system maintained by the state child support agency, many programs and researchers will not have access to this

administrative data, necessitating the use of interviews or surveys with parents to gather information about obligations and payments. As was noted with respect to in-kind and informal support, relying on parental reports means deciding whether to use the mother’s or father’s report, unless only the father is available. One study compared administrative data on the amount of child support paid with mothers’ and fathers’ reports. The researchers found that mothers tend to underreport and fathers overreport child support payments, although mothers’ reports were more accurate.⁹

Undoubtedly, fathers feel the need to respond to questions about child support payment in a socially desirable manner. One way to help fathers feel more comfortable about reporting that they pay less than the full amount that they owe is to ask about the barriers they have experienced in making payments (e.g., having a new family to support). The following is an example of this type of question that the Center for Policy Research (CPR) used in telephone surveys conducted with fathers enrolled in the Tennessee Parent Support Program:¹⁰

I’m going to read a list of reasons why people might have problems with child support payments. For each option, please tell me if it is a reason you might have problems with child support payments.

Not being regularly employed	1- Yes	2- No
Being injured or disabled and not able to work	1- Yes	2- No
The child support order is too high	1- Yes	2- No
Having a new family or other child to support	1- Yes	2- No
Not being able to see the children	1- Yes	2- No
The other parent not needing the money	1- Yes	2- No
Are there any other reasons why you might have problems with child support payments that we have not already mentioned?	1- Yes	2- No
What are the other reasons? _____		

⁸Inventory of Measures for Use in Fatherhood Programs Compiled by Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew, Ph.D. and Allison Horowitz, B.A. March 6, 2009.
⁹Schaeffer, N.C., J.A. Seltzer, M.M. Klawitter. 1991. "Estimating Nonresponse and Response Bias: Resident and Nonresident Parents' Reports about Child Support." Sociological Methods and Research 20(1):30-59.
¹⁰Davis, L., J. Pearson, N. Thoennes, "Evaluation of the Tennessee Parent Support Program." Center for Policy Research, Denver, CO, November 2013.



Researchers have also suggested that questions about child support payment should focus on a relatively short time period, such as the past month, because parents are unlikely to remember the amount of child support they have paid during a long period of time. In their Inventory of Measures for Use in Fatherhood Programs, Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew and Allison Horowitz¹¹ include the following questions:

How much per month are you supposed to pay for the child's support?

_____ (amount in dollars) Don't know

How much did you pay for the child's support last month?

_____ (amount in dollars) Don't know

These researchers also offer sample questions to assess the regularity of child support payments:

How often do you pay on time? Is it...

- 1 **All of the time**
- 2 **More than half of the time**
- 3 **Half of the time**
- 4 **Less than half of the time or**
- 5 **Never?**

An alternate approach to collecting dollar amounts paid is to ask for estimates about the percentage of obligation that was paid. For example, parents might be asked to estimate what percentage of the child support that was due they actually paid, with prompts such as "None," "25 percent," "50 percent," "75 percent," or "100 percent." Similarly, parents might be asked if they received (or paid) "All," "Most but not all," "About half," "Less than half but something," or "Nothing."

To gauge whether child support payments change following participation in a fatherhood program, researchers will have to ask parents to assess whether payments have increased, decreased, or stayed the same. For example, CPR used the following question in its assessment of the Tennessee Parent Support Program:

Compared to six months ago, has the amount of child support that has been paid...

- 1 - Decreased a lot
- 2 - Decreased a little
- 3 - Stayed the same
- 4 - Increased a little
- 5 - Increased a lot
- 7 - Don't know/Not sure

Measuring Formal Support Using Administrative Data

Data from the child support enforcement system provide the most reliable and objective means of measuring financial support. Among the items readily available from the automated child support systems that every state maintains are the following:

- » The current monthly child support order (covering minor children);
- » The monthly amount due (which is the current monthly order plus a specific amount to be paid towards arrears);
- » The amount paid each month;
- » Arrears balances or the amount of unpaid child support; and
- » Payment sources (e.g., payment was made by the employer via an income assignment, an attachment of unemployment insurance, directly by the father, or through some other method).

¹¹Inventory of Measures for Use in Fatherhood Programs Compiled by Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew, Ph.D. and Allison Horowitz, B.A. March 6, 2009.



There are many different ways to calculate how well the father is meeting his child support obligation. Many researchers recommend calculating the amount of child support paid as a percentage of what was due. This is sometimes referred to as a compliance ratio.¹² This conforms to the performance measure that states must provide to the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement. Nationally, the percentage of child support paid relative to what is owed is 64 percent, although it is substantially lower for certain subgroups such as cases that involve TANF clients.¹³

Compliance can also be measured as the percentage of cases with any payment, the number of months with complete payments, the number of months with any payment, the number of months with no payments, the regularity of payment (the number of consecutive months with a payment), the average total dollar amount that is collected during a specified period of time, or the rate at which arrears grow.

The following compares several different measures of child support payment for a sample of fathers who enrolled in Parents to Work, a workforce program in Arapahoe County, Colorado:¹⁴

Child Support Payment Performance Before and Following Enrollment in Fathers to Work Program in Arapahoe County, Colorado (N=598)

	Pre-		Post-
Average amount of current monthly support obligation (MSO) due in the 12 months before and after project enrollment	\$3,206		\$3,342
Percentage paying nothing towards MSO in the 12 months prior to and following enrollment	18.9%	*	15.8%
Percentage of MSO that was paid in the 12 months prior to and following enrollment as a percent of the amount due	36.6%	*	41.3%
Average number of child support payments made in the 12 months prior to and following enrollment in program	5.3		5.7

*T-test between pre- and post-amount paid is significant at .09 or less.



¹²L. Nepomnyaschy, I. Garfinkel. "Child Support Enforcement and Fathers' Contributions to Their Nonmarital Children." Social Service Review, 84(3) 2010.

¹³Office of Child Support Enforcement, Preliminary Report: 2014.

¹⁴Pearson, J., Davis, L., Venohr, J. Parents to Work!: Program Outcomes and Economic Impact. Center for Policy Research, Denver, CO, February 2011.



Researchers who use administrative child support data face a number of complicated challenges, some of which are noted below:

How to access to child support information. There is no official policy directive concerning access to child support data for research purposes. In nearly every state, fathers have access to their child support payment history and order amount via the web. So, at a minimum, fatherhood programs should be able to get some child support administrative data by having fathers with a child support case sign up for a child support account and having him print his child support order and payment history at enrollment and again every few months. If additional information is needed, the father can sign a disclosure form that permits child support to share data with the program. Researchers who wish to use administrative data for a large number of cases will need to obtain an extract from the automated system or arrange for a manual look-up by child support workers. Manual look-ups by experienced current or retired child support workers retained on a contract or overtime basis are often feasible if the number of cases and the amount of information desired is not too extensive. Obtaining an automated extract will involve negotiating with the local child support agency to discuss the time and cost required to generate the extract, which of multiple possible orders are to be included, the identifiers that will be used to locate program participants in the child support system, and the specific data elements to be extracted.

How to treat unique, and sometimes large payments. Periodically fathers may make lump-sum payments to lift enforcement actions (such as a driver's license revocation) or the parent's account balance may show a "payment" that is actually a collection resulting from the attachment of a financial asset or an intercept of an income tax refund. Such actions happen automatically for parents who owe past-due child support. When calculating a compliance ratio, these large one-time payments may result in more than 100 percent of the obligation being paid. This can be avoided by considering the amounts due and paid for current monthly support, excluding child support debt obligations and payments towards arrears.

How to interpret payments that continue after current support obligations end.

Fathers may remain in the child support caseload although they are no longer required to pay current support if they owe child support arrears that the agency is attempting to collect or if the agency is receiving money to cover children's medical support. Child support records will show the date that the current monthly support order starts and ends. The payment ledger will show whether the payment is credited toward current support or arrears.

How to deal with changes in child support obligations.

If their circumstances change, fathers may request a modification and if successful their orders will be formally amended. These changes will be recorded in the child support system. It is more confusing for analysts when fathers obtain an informal adjustment of their monthly obligation as an incentive for them to participate in an employment program or a "step order" that gradually raises the monthly obligation to allow fathers time to "get on their feet." Any changes in the monthly amount due will affect the compliance ratio, which involves a comparison of the obligation and the payment that is made.





How to deal with historical information.

Payment records are preserved on state child support systems. Other items may be updated with more recent information and be impossible to recreate. For example, arrears balances may change continuously, and depending on the state system, there may not be an historical record showing a father's changing arrears balance. Researchers should check with data managers at the child support agency to learn which items will be available over time and which will be "overwritten" with fresh information.

How to interpret the "voluntariness" of formal child support payments and changes in payments over time.

Formal child support payments are typically withheld from the father's paycheck through income withholding orders that are required by law for all eligible employers—a requirement that reflects the challenges of obtaining regular payments directly from parents. Researchers should be cautious about attributing improvements in payment behavior prior to and following their participation in a fatherhood program solely to the program and the development of more responsible behaviors. Indeed, any changes in child support payments may simply reflect changes in the amount of support captured through wage assignments or through a number of other enforcement remedies that the child support agency may have initiated, such as suspending a driver's license, seizing assets and bank accounts, and imposing liens on property. Child support records indicate whether the agency has taken various enforcement actions and the date they were initiated.

Other Issues Common to All Measures of Financial Support

Researchers must decide how to handle situations where the father has children by more than one mother. One option is to simplify the assessment by focusing on financial contributions to a single household. However, rules must be in place to determine which household is to be considered the focal household (e.g., the household of his youngest child). It is also possible to gather data about contributions to multiple households. However, informal, in-kind support contributions to each household will probably be different, making such assessments difficult and time consuming. Formal support obligations will also be different for each household, and obtaining a complete picture of a father's formal contributions may involve collecting data from child support agencies in multiple counties or states.

Analyzing payment patterns over time, such as prior to and following participation in a fatherhood program, will be difficult in programs that serve new fathers since most will lack any formal child support obligation during the pre-program time period. If post-program data is the only information that is available, it will be difficult to attribute any changes to participation in the program unless there is also a control group of fathers who do not participate in the program. If information on payments pre- and post-program participation is available, the researcher will have to decide how many months of pre-program and post-program data to collect. For survey data, the decision should be based on a realistic assessment of how long post-program it will be possible to track fathers and on how well fathers can be expected to recall the level of financial support they provided over time. If administrative records are being consulted, it is advantageous to obtain payment information for at least six to 12 months prior to and following enrollment in the program, and longer if possible.

Implications for Fatherhood Programs

Fatherhood programs that have the goal of improving the financial support that participants provide to their children should plan to determine if formal child support orders are in place and to measure payment behaviors among enrollees. Minimally, they should ask fathers in their program who have a child support case to sign up with the state child support agency for an online

child support account and have him print his child support order and payment history at enrollment and again every few months. They should also ask program participants to sign a disclosure form that permits the child support agency to share data with the program.

Obtaining and analyzing child support information is complex, and fatherhood programs interested in this type of study should partner with researchers who are experienced in child support. Finally, fatherhood programs and their research partners should meet with representatives of their local child support agency to discuss the feasibility of obtaining payment information on program participants who provide appropriate consent using manual look ups and/or automated extracts. Programs and researchers should also develop specific ideas about what they would like to learn from child support records so that data managers at the agency can help them identify the appropriate data fields to extract or look up.

Since many fathers may not be in the formal child support system or may be unwilling or unable to obtain an online account with the state child support agency, fatherhood programs should also routinely ask participants at enrollment about whether they are legally required to pay child support, the number of child support cases they have, and the amount they are supposed to pay. At the same time, program staff and researchers should be aware that many fathers will be unable to answer these questions accurately. Fathers will be better equipped to respond to questions about the frequency and amount of payments they make, although to minimize inaccuracy due to memory errors or social desirability factors, programs should limit the inquiry to payment during the prior month and include the opportunity to provide reasons for nonpayment. Programs should also acknowledge the pervasiveness and importance of in-kind and informal payments and include in their intake forms questions on whether fathers make some common forms of financial contributions, such as those noted in the bi-annual survey of custodial mothers and fathers conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Implications for Researchers

Researchers will need to consider which types of financial support to study and how to measure each type. For all inquiries, they will have to frame their questions and/or administrative searches with

respect to a target household or child support case since financial contributions and payment behaviors are likely to vary across household for fathers who have multiple children by different mothers. In-kind and informal support can only be measured using questionnaires and self-report items. Researchers must design questions that minimize inaccuracies due to social desirability and memory factors. Formal child support can be assessed using self-report techniques, too, although they are subject to biases, lack of knowledge, and memory errors. More optimally, formal child support is assessed using information drawn from automated data systems maintained by the state child support agency. Relevant information can be generated manually through look-ups by experienced child support workers or through automated extracts provided by data managers at state child support agencies. Researchers will have to collaborate with child support workers or other child support experts to develop extract requests and/or manual data collection instruments that will capture the information needed for a reliable assessment of payment behavior. The ratio of the amount of child support paid relative to the amount due over a standard period of time is the most reliable and established measure of child support performance. Other useful measures include the average total amount of support paid during a period of time, the percentage making no payments, and the number of months with any payment. In the analysis of child support data, researchers will have to deal with how to treat lump-sum payments, arrears payments and balances, changes in child support order levels, and the frequency and timing of payments.

In the coming year, Parents and Children Together (PACT)¹⁵ and the Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration (ETJD)¹⁶, two large-scale evaluations of fatherhood and employment programs for fathers in the child support system, will be providing much needed information on many financial support, employment, earnings, and other economic security outcomes relevant to fatherhood programs. More to the point, they will afford the ability to contrast the outcome picture obtained from self-report data versus administrative records. This will help to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of different data sources, the value of different outcome measures, and the different pictures of financial support that they yield.

¹⁵ Mathematica Policy Research, Parents and Children Together (PACT). Funded by the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, 2011-2017.

¹⁶ MDRC, Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration (ETJD). Funded by the Department of Labor, 2011-2018.