

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Child Support Unpacked:

Examining the Factors Associated with Order Establishment and Compliance in the Texas Child Support System

Child Support is an integral part of the U.S. social welfare landscape, providing billions of dollars to families annually and lessening the depth of poverty for many. Given the vast scale and significance of the U.S. child support system, it is increasingly important to understand the characteristics of parents who enter the system, and further, the characteristics of those who comply with their orders. A deeper understanding of parents' characteristics and challenges helps to explain system entry and order non-compliance, and in turn, inform the types of supports and services that might be used to improve compliance. To address these topics, this brief draws on a unique dataset combining Texas parents' obligation and payment histories from administrative child support records with a bank of rich survey data collected by the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP). Together, these data help paint a detailed portrait of unmarried parents who enter into, and comply with, the Texas child support system.

Overall, 20 percent of unmarried parents who establish paternity at the birth have a child support order for their child by age 3½. On average, these parents obtain an order for the child approximately 20 months after the birth, implying that many may apply for services within a few months of the birth itself. Fathers in the sample with a child support order only meet the full non-arrears obligation one-third of the time, though as a group they pay an average of 62 percent of their non-arrears obligation each month. In addition to providing support through the formal child support system, approximately 32 percent of fathers with an order also provide informal financial or in-kind support to the mother and child. Among fathers without a child support order, 82 percent provide informal financial or in-kind support to the family—and most provide both.

A review of the characteristics of parents in different support arrangements reveals a host of risk factors that tend to accompany parents who enter the child support system, fail to comply with their support obligations, or fail to provide informally outside of the child support system. In each case, these fathers are significantly more likely than their counterparts to have trouble maintaining a job, substance abuse problems, and a history of incarceration. Ultimately, ensuring that children receive adequate support may hinge on addressing these more fundamental issues underlying system entry and order non-compliance. The OAG-CSD should consider partnering with other state agencies to expand access to job training and placement services, substance abuse counseling, and prisoner re-entry programs. For parents in the child support system, these services have the potential to improve compliance on existing orders. For parents outside of the system, similar services have the ability to strengthen informal support and co-parenting quality, helping parents to raise their children without the aid of a formal system.

Introduction

The U.S. child support system is notable both for the scale and reach of its operations, especially in comparison to the more conventional slate of social programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The number of children in the child support system surpasses 16 million, a figure that dwarfs the number of children in programs such as TANF or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).¹ Altogether, the child support program serves nearly 1 in 4 children in the U.S. and transfers more than \$26 billion to families each year.² Among families receiving support, the average family collects \$314 per month in formal cash support, more than the monthly average received by families through SNAP, WIC, or the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).³ The scale of the child support system in Texas is similarly vast, including nearly 1.6 million children^a and transferring an annual sum of \$3.4 billion.⁴

Research also shows that, for low-income families who receive it, child support can act as an important buffer against poverty. In fact, child support payments account for more than half of the average income of poor custodial families who receive it.⁵ In FY2012 alone, child support payments lifted nearly one million people out of poverty, more than TANF or WIC.⁶ Collectively, these statistics point not only to the extensive scope of child support operations, but also to child support's ability to notably improve the lives of the families it serves.

Given the importance of child support payments to families today, it is increasingly critical to understand the characteristics of families who enter the system, and further, the characteristics of those who meet their obligations. Drawing on a statewide sample of nearly 600 Texas mothers who gave birth outside of marriage in 2009, this brief presents original analyses of the factors associated with entry into, and compliance with, the Texas child support system. Survey data were collected approximately 3½ years after the child's birth as part of the Texas AOP Signers Study (TASS), and includes only mothers associated with a father who voluntarily established paternity at the time of the child's birth.^b To improve both the accuracy and detail of child support payment information, this analysis pairs individual-level survey data with monthly obligation and payment histories from administrative child support records collected by the Texas Office of the Attorney General Child Support Division (OAG-CSD).^c The result is a unique dataset that includes verified payment information alongside a host of qualitative details about the parents' relationship quality, demographic characteristics, and risk factors. In addition to examining the characteristics of those in the child support system, this brief investigates the nature of in-kind and informal contributions among parents outside the formal system.

^a According to OAG Administrative Records, there are nearly 1.4 million active child support cases including 1.6 million children under the age of 18. In 2012, 26.8% of Texas's population of 26.06 million was under the age of 18. Of the nearly 7 million Texans under the age of 18, 1.6 million—or 23%—are in the child support system.

^b A small number of mothers in the original sampling frame were noncustodial parents (<1%); for the sake of simplicity, these mothers were removed from the pool prior to random sampling. As a result, this report only details cases in which the father is the noncustodial parent.

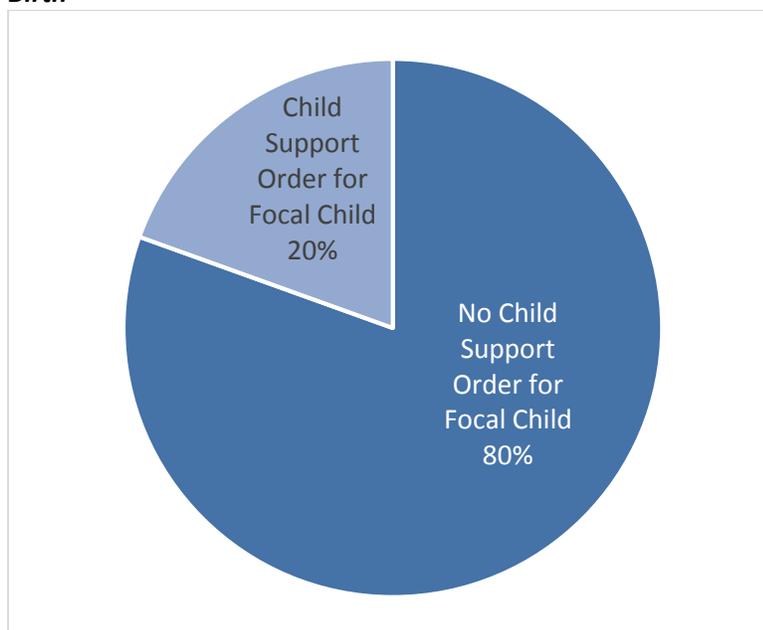
^c OAG administrative data files include DEMO, CASE, CAUS, OBLE, PYMT, and ORDER. All case and order information sampled up to January 2014; child support entry, obligation, and payment information limited to the period from June 2009 (child birth) to March 2013 (survey collection).

Importantly, the data presented here reflect the trends and characteristics of parents in the TASS study, a representative sample of unmarried parents who voluntarily establish paternity at the birth. Compared to fathers with court-ordered paternity establishment, those who voluntarily establish paternity are both less likely to have a child support order *and* more likely to comply with the child support orders they do have.⁷ Further, fathers who establish paternity in the hospital are more likely to be involved in their children's lives through frequent contact and overnight visits.⁸ Because the TASS sample includes only those who establish paternity in the hospital voluntarily, this brief chronicles the characteristics and experiences of fathers who are likely to be more supportive and involved than fathers in the child support population overall. Ultimately, this brief aims to provide a richer portrait of these fathers in the hope that this information can aid in future policy decisions and enforcement efforts.

Findings

In Texas, approximately 7 in 10 unmarried parents sign an Acknowledgement of Paternity (AOP) form in the hospital at the time of the child's birth, formalizing the symbolic and legal connection between father and child. Beyond conferring a host of legal rights and responsibilities, establishing paternity also lays the legal groundwork for child support, should it become necessary. Three and a half years after signing an AOP in the hospital, 2 in 10 Texas parents have a child support order for their child [Figure 1]. Approximately 21 percent of parents with a child support order for their 3½-year-old also have additional children on the order [not shown]. Though these parents share multiple children on a single order, the remainder of this brief focuses on their child born in 2009 (who is 3½ years old at the time of the survey), referred to as the "focal child" going forward.

Figure 1: Percentage of AOP-Signing Parents with a Child Support Order for Focal Child, 3 ½ years After Birth



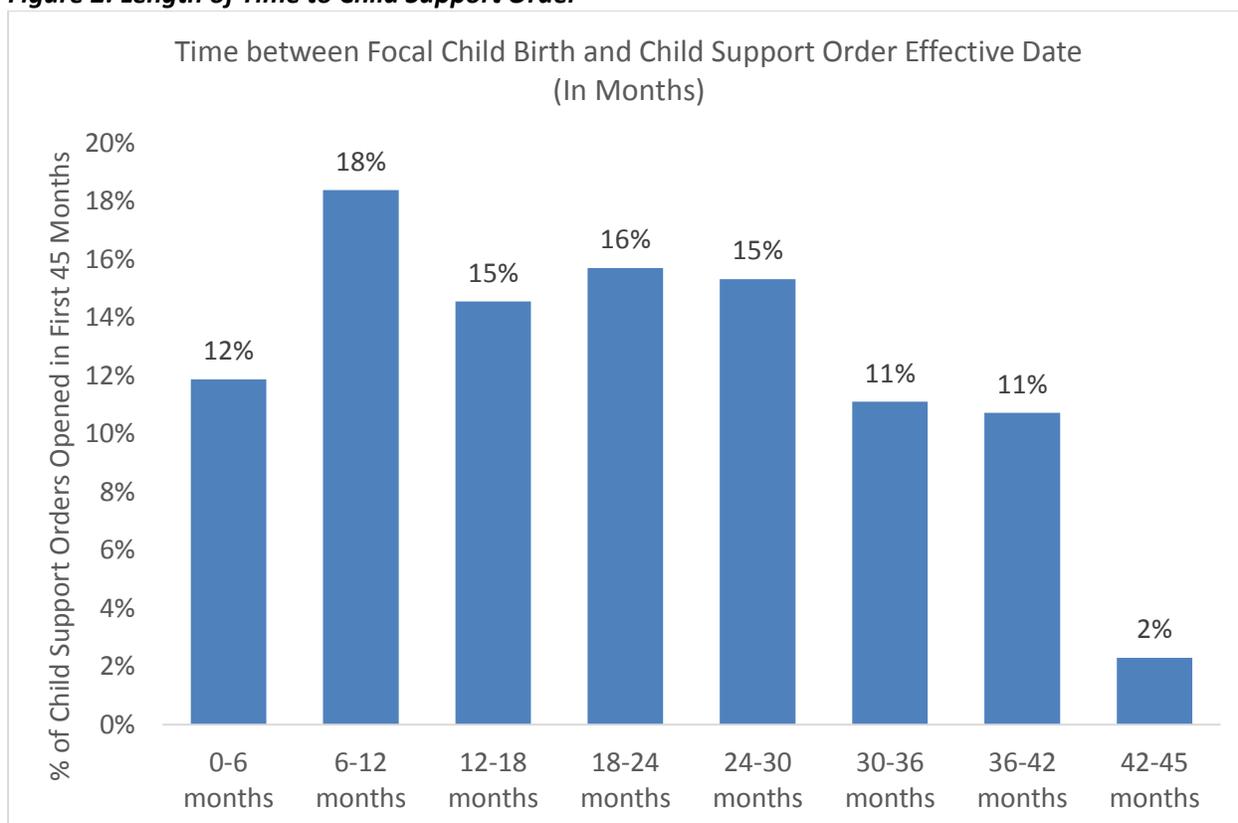
Source: TASS Mothers at 3½ years, weighted; OAG-CSD administrative data files. (N=540)

Establishing a Child Support Order

Unmarried parents can enter the child support system for a variety reasons. In general, most parents apply for child support services voluntarily. However, families can also enter the child support system automatically if the parent or child is receiving certain forms of public assistance (e.g., Medicaid or TANF). In this section, we examine the length of time it takes for a child with paternity established at the birth to become a dependent on a child support order, regardless of reason.

Though a small number of parents in the sample had an existing child support order for previous children when the focal child was born in 2009, the vast majority did not share a child support order together for any children. As noted above, however, 20 percent of parents acquired a child support order for the focal child by the time the child was 3½ years old. On average, child support orders were established 20 months after the child’s birth. This period includes the time from case initiation to the point of order establishment, implying that many parents apply for services well before 20 months. The first child support order was established 1 month after the birth, while the most recent was acquired at the end of the study period, approximately 45 months after the birth. Figure 2 shows that the number of AOP-signing parents obtaining a child support order peaks between 6 and 12 months after the birth; due to the length of time required to establish an order, parents in this group likely applied for services shortly after the birth itself. Given the relatively persistent stream of new orders throughout the study period, it seems likely that additional children in the sample will enter the child support system in the years ahead.

Figure 2: Length of Time to Child Support Order



Source: TASS Mothers at 3½ years, unweighted; OAG-CSD administrative data files. (N=264)

Note: Data presented in this brief reflect the time period from the child’s birth in June 2009 to survey collection in March 2013. Child support orders opened after the survey collection period are not included.

Characteristics of Parents Who Establish a Child Support Order

Table 1 below compares the characteristics of AOP-signing parents with and without a child support order for their 3½-year-old who was born outside of marriage in 2009. In general, the data show that parents who enter the child support system are among the most difficult to serve—even when they voluntarily establish paternity at the birth. Perhaps unsurprisingly, parents with a child support order are significantly less likely to be in a relationship with one another than their counterparts without an order; 8 in 10 parents with an order report having no relationship, compared to just 2 in 10 of those without an order. Fathers with a child support order also appear to be largely disconnected from the family; more than three-quarters fail to participate in effective co-parenting, and 7 in 10 are not involved with the child 3½ years after the birth.^d

Compared to their counterparts without an order, fathers with a child support obligation are also significantly more likely to have a history of incarceration, employment instability, substance abuse, and family violence. An astonishing 50 percent of AOP-signing fathers with a child support order for the focal child have spent time behind bars. Fathers with a child support order are also almost twice as likely as fathers without an order to have children with other partners. Finally, parents in the child support system are significantly less likely to have a college degree than AOP-signing parents outside of the system.

^d “Poor co-parenting” is defined as cases in which the mother reports that the father does not look after the child when she needs to do things, that he is not the father she wants for her child, and that she cannot trust the father to look after the child for a week. “Not involved” is defined as cases where the father does not live with the mother, does not see the child at least 5 days a month, and does not score at least 7 points on a 13 point scale of parental responsibility.

Table 1: Characteristics of AOP-Signing Parents With and Without a Child Support Order for Focal Child

	No Child Support Order for Focal Child (N=276)	Child Support Order for Focal Child (N=264)	Significance Test
<i>Mother's Race</i>			
White	27%	25%	
Hispanic	59%	50%	
Black	8%	23%	***
Other	2%	3%	
Not Reported	4%	0%	**
<i>Mother's Education Level</i>			
Less than High School	12%	13%	
High School Diploma	34%	38%	
Some College	16%	21%	
College (BA or Associates)	34%	24%	*
Not Reported	4%	3%	
<i>Father's Race</i>			
White	27%	18%	*
Hispanic	53%	53%	
Black	13%	27%	***
Other	4%	2%	
Not Reported	4%	0%	**
<i>Father's Education Level</i>			
Less than High School	30%	28%	
High School Diploma	36%	46%	*
Some College	12%	9%	
College (BA or Associates)	16%	8%	**
Don't know	2%	5%	
Not Reported	4%	3%	
<i>Multipartner Fertility</i>			
Father has child(ren) with other partner	26%	46%	***
Has 2 or more children with other partner	11%	19%	*
Mother has child(ren) with other partner	29%	31%	
Has 2 or more children with other partner	9%	14%	
<i>Paternal Risk Factors</i>			
Ever Incarcerated	28%	50%	***
Employment Instability	22%	39%	***
Health Problems Limiting Work	5%	6%	
Substance Abuse	8%	30%	***
Family Violence	18%	32%	***
<i>Relationship Status at 3 Years</i>			
Cohabiting	71%	13%	***
Dating	8%	9%	
No Relationship	21%	78%	***
<i>Co-parenting and Father Involvement</i>			
Poor Co-parenting	32%	77%	***
Not Involved	16%	71%	***

Source: TASS Mothers at 3½ years, weighted; OAG-CSD administrative data files. (N=540)

Note: Significance testing shows where columns are statistically different at the following levels: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

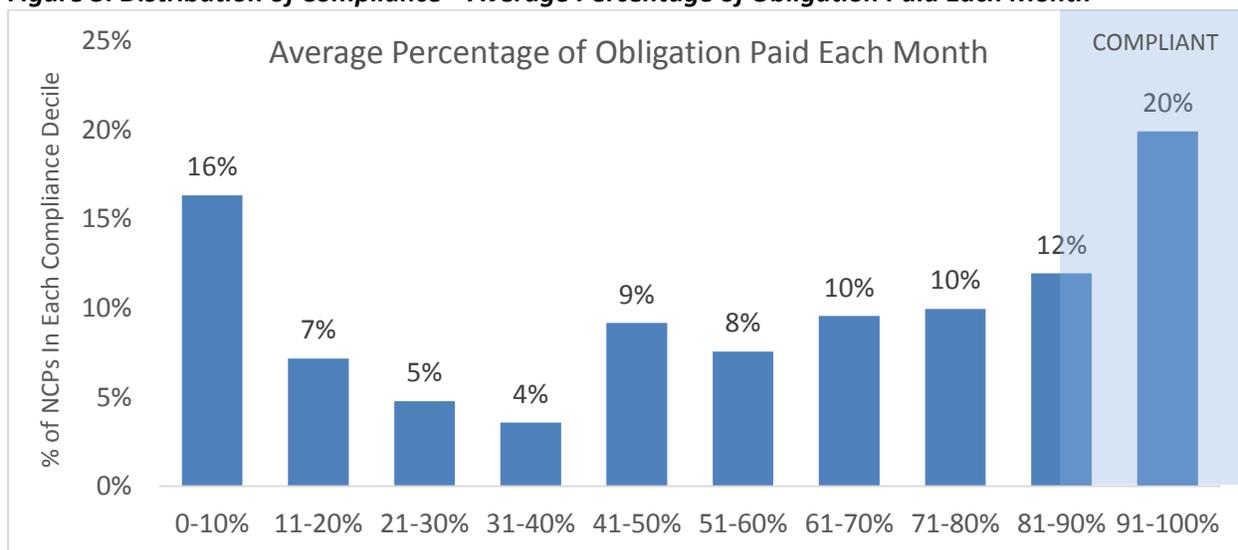
Compliance with Child Support Obligations

Each month, noncustodial parents (NCPs) are expected to meet a specified obligation to remain in compliance with their child support order. Because many NCPs pay child support through automatic wage withholding, their monthly payment is automatically deducted from their paycheck and disbursed to the custodial parent. Wage garnishment may not be possible, however, if the NCP is unemployed, imprisoned, or employed outside of the formal labor market.

In this section, we examine the compliance of Texas fathers who established paternity and later acquired a child support order for their child born in 2009. On average, these fathers meet the full amount of their monthly non-arrears obligation^e just 31 percent of the time [not shown]. Put differently, the average father pays in full approximately one out of every three months that an obligation is owed. Though many fathers fail to make the full payment each month, most manage to pay something towards their obligation, as shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 plots the average percentage of the obligation paid each month by fathers with an order that includes the focal child.^f The graph shows a bimodal distribution with one distinct peak at each end. Compliant fathers fall toward the right end of the graph, whereas those who fail to meet their obligations fall toward the left end. At the compliant end, approximately 20 percent of fathers pay between 91 and 100 percent of their obligation each month, on average [Figure 3]. Meanwhile, 16 percent of fathers pay less than 10 percent of their monthly obligation, on average. Taken as a whole, fathers in the sample pay an average of 62 percent of their monthly obligations [not shown].

Figure 3: Distribution of Compliance—Average Percentage of Obligation Paid Each Month



Source: TASS Mothers at 3½ years, unweighted; OAG-CSD administrative data files. (N=251)

Note: A small number of child support cases were closed or had a pending cause. These cases had no obligation or payment information and are therefore not reported in compliance statistics.

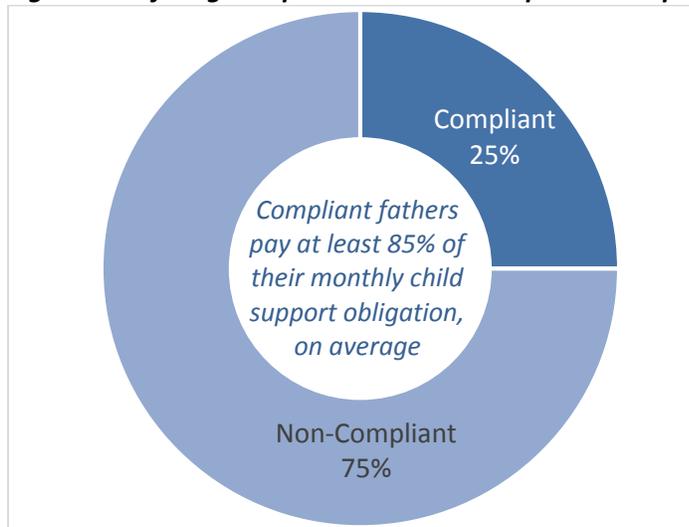
^e For purposes of this analysis, non-arrears obligations include monthly regular and special payments for child support and medical support. In addition, this amount includes attorney fees, genetic fees, and spousal support regular payments. It does not include arrears or lump sum payments of any kind.

^f Compliance was calculated as the monthly amount paid divided by the non-arrears obligation owed. This value was then averaged across the total number of months that an NCP had a positive non-arrears obligation. Months in which the father paid more than was owed were recoded to reflect full payment, or 100% compliance.

Characteristics of Compliant and Non-Compliant Parents

To better understand the traits and circumstances associated with compliance on child support orders, we divide fathers with a monthly obligation into compliant and non-compliant groups. A father is deemed compliant if he paid an average of 85 percent of his non-arrears obligation each month. Under this definition, 25 percent of fathers are considered compliant [Figure 4].

Figure 4: Defining Compliant and Non-Compliant Groups



Source: TASS Mothers at 3½ years, unweighted; OAG-CSD administrative data files. (N=251)

Table 2 below details the characteristics of child support cases with compliant and non-compliant fathers. Compared to their compliant counterparts, non-compliant fathers are significantly more likely to have been incarcerated, and nearly half have trouble holding down a job. Moreover, fathers who routinely come up short on their monthly obligations are more likely to have problems with drug or alcohol abuse. In comparison to compliant fathers, those who don't meet their obligations are also significantly more likely to be Black and have less than a high school education. Mothers differ across compliance groups as well; compared to mothers who receive the bulk of what they are owed, mothers receiving insufficient payments are significantly more likely to have 2 or more children with another partner [Table 2].

Somewhat paradoxically, however, non-compliant fathers appear to perform better on some measures, including co-parenting and involvement with the child [Table 2]. Those who fail to meet their monthly obligations are also less likely than compliant fathers to have children with other partners, or to have a history of abusive behavior with the mother, though none of these differences are significant. One reason for these trends may be that non-compliant fathers are slightly more likely to be in a relationship with the mother [Table 2]. Parents in a relationship are more likely to share resources informally, which may explain why some non-compliant fathers fail to provide support through the formal system. Others in this group may have even entered the child support system involuntarily due to the receipt of public assistance. Finally, it's possible that some non-compliant fathers may be trying to compensate for an inability to pay by contributing in other ways, such as responsible co-parenting and involvement with the child.

Table 2: Characteristics of Parents with a Child Support Order for Focal Child, by Compliance

	Compliant (NCP pays > 85% of obligation on average; N=64)	Non-Compliant (NCP pays < 85% of obligation on average; N=187)	Significance Test
<i>Mother's Race</i>			
White	34%	22%	
Hispanic	50%	50%	
Black	13%	25%	*
Other	3%	3%	
<i>Mother's Education Level</i>			
Less than High School	11%	14%	
High School Diploma	34%	39%	
Some College	20%	20%	
College (BA or Associates)	31%	23%	
Not Reported	3%	4%	
<i>Father's Race</i>			
White	25%	16%	
Hispanic	56%	52%	
Black	17%	31%	*
Other	2%	2%	
<i>Father's Education Level</i>			
Less than High School	16%	31%	**
High School Diploma	52%	45%	
Some College	13%	8%	
College (BA or Associates)	9%	8%	
Don't know	8%	5%	
Not Reported	3%	4%	
<i>Multipartner Fertility</i>			
Father has child(ren) with other partner	53%	44%	
Has 2 or more children with other partner	16%	20%	
Mother has child(ren) with other partner	27%	33%	
Has 2 or more children with other partner	6%	18%	**
<i>Paternal Risk Factors</i>			
Ever Incarcerated	30%	56%	***
Employment Instability	14%	46%	***
Health Problems Limiting Work	5%	6%	
Substance Abuse	20%	34%	*
Family Violence	34%	29%	
<i>Relationship Status at 3 Years</i>			
Cohabiting	9%	11%	
Dating	5%	11%	
No Relationship	86%	78%	
<i>Co-parenting and Father Involvement</i>			
Poor Co-parenting	84%	77%	
Not Involved	78%	70%	

Source: TASS Mothers at 3½ years, unweighted; OAG-CSD administrative data files. (N=251)

Note: Significance testing shows where columns are statistically different at the following levels: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Accuracy of Mothers’ Survey Responses Regarding Child Support

This brief relies on a combination of survey data and administrative child support data to produce a more detailed portrait of parents in various support arrangements. In this section, we compare mothers’ survey responses about child support to case-level child support data from the Texas Office of the Attorney General Child Support Division (OAG-CSD). As shown in Table 3 below, Texas mothers are remarkably accurate in their self-assessments of what they are owed and paid in child support. On average, mothers reported that they were owed a total monthly obligation of \$350, just \$20 shy of the corresponding number in OAG-CSD administrative records. When asked how much they actually received in child support each month, mothers reported an average of \$220, roughly \$24 less than the average payment recorded for these mothers in OAG-CSD data. Through self-reports of obligation and payment information, mothers estimated that they received 64 percent of their monthly obligation, on average. Corresponding data from the OAG-CSD indicates that the same mothers receive an average of approximately 58 percent of their monthly obligation [Table 3].⁸

Finally, mothers were asked how often the father pays the full amount of the obligation. On this topic, mothers were rather generous in their assessment of the father’s efforts. Data from the OAG-CSD indicate that mothers who reported receiving the full order amount “all” or “more than half” of the time actually only received the full payment 36 percent of the time. Mothers reporting that they never received the full payment, however, were mostly on target; according to OAG-CSD administrative data, these mothers only received the full obligation 8 percent of the time [Table 3].

Table 3: Comparison of Mothers’ Survey Responses to OAG-CSD Administrative Data

	Mothers’ Reports of Obligations and Payments for Focal Child Support Order	OAG-CSD Administrative Data of Obligations and Payments for Focal Child Support Order	N
<i>Obligation/Payment/Compliance</i>			
Total Avg. Monthly Obligation (including child support, medical support, arrears, etc.)	\$349.96	\$370.62	204
Total Avg. Monthly Payment Received	\$220.63	\$244.93	207
Avg. Percentage of Monthly Obligation Received	64%	58%	183
<i>Consistency of Payment</i>			
	<i>How often does father pay the full amount he owes you each month?</i>	<i>Percentage of months the total obligation amount was received</i>	
	All of the time	36%	106
	More than half the time	36%	22
	About half the time	22%	12
	Less than half the time	24%	30
	Never	8%	58

Source: TASS Mothers at 3½ years, unweighted; OAG-CSD administrative data files. (N=228)

Note: Data shown for cases with full information on both survey and administrative measures only.

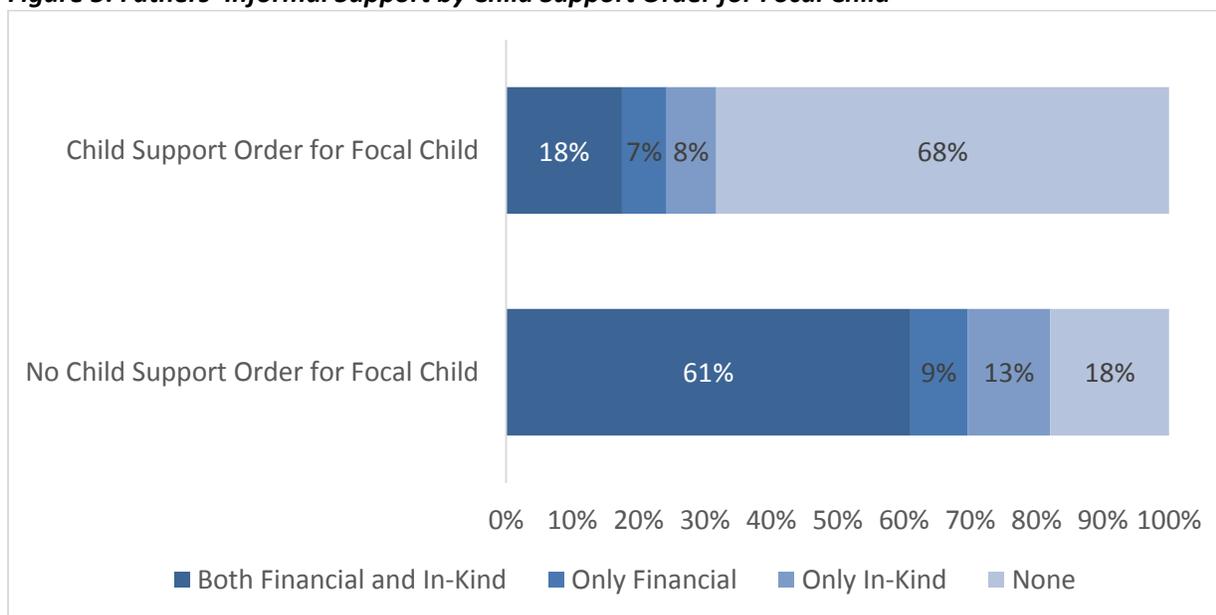
⁸ Earlier in this brief, the average monthly obligation paid by fathers was reported as 62%. The discrepancy between 62% and 58%, as reported in this section, is due to the use of a slightly different sample. In this section, analyses were limited to mothers with full information on both survey and administrative measures.

Informal Support

Apart from child support, many unmarried fathers provide informal support to the mother in the form of money, diapers, clothes, food, and childcare. In a recent study of poor noncustodial fathers living apart from the mother, researchers found that in-kind support—that is, non-cash goods and services—makes up about one-quarter of the overall support they provide, and totals an average of \$60 per month in value.⁹

Though informal support is provided by fathers both in and out of the child support system, it is much more common among parents outside of the formal system. As shown in Figure 5, 61 percent of fathers without a child support order for the focal child provide both financial and in-kind support 3½ years after the birth. Only 18 percent of fathers outside the formal system provide nothing to the mother. Among fathers with a child support order, the opposite is true; 3½ years after their child’s birth, 68 percent of fathers with an order provide no informal support of any kind. Approximately 18 percent, however, provide both financial and in-kind support beyond their child support obligation.

Figure 5: Fathers’ Informal Support by Child Support Order for Focal Child



Source: TASS Mothers at 3½ years, weighted; OAG-CSD administrative data files. (N=540)

To better understand the characteristics of those without a child support order, we divide parents into two groups according to fathers’ provision of informal support—cases in which the father provides any informal support (82%) and cases in which he provides nothing (18%). Table 4 below details the characteristics of parents in each group. Compared to fathers providing informal support, those who provide nothing are significantly more likely to have children with other partners, a record of incarceration, unstable employment, substance abuse problems, and a history of domestic violence with the mother. A staggering 43 percent of unsupported mothers are victims of emotional or physical abuse, and 35 percent say the father has problems with drug or alcohol use. Fathers who do not provide informal support are also significantly more likely to have no relationship with the mother, a history of poor co-parenting, and low levels of involvement with the child [Table 4]. Roughly two-thirds of these fathers appear to be effectively disconnected from the mother and child. Finally, unsupportive fathers are more likely to be White and not have a bachelor’s degree.

Table 4: Characteristics of Parents Without a Child Support Order for Focal Child, by Informal Support

	Any Informal Support from Father (N=210)	No Informal Support from Father (N=68)	Significance Test
<i>Mother's Race</i>			
White	25%	37%	
Hispanic	61%	49%	
Black	9%	6%	
Other	2%	3%	
Not Reported	3%	5%	
<i>Mother's Education Level</i>			
Less than High School	13%	11%	
High School Diploma	36%	29%	
Some College	14%	24%	
College (BA or Associates)	34%	31%	
Not Reported	4%	6%	
<i>Father's Race</i>			
White	24%	43%	*
Hispanic	55%	42%	
Black	13%	10%	
Other	4%	0%	**
Not Reported	3%	5%	
<i>Father's Education Level</i>			
Less than High School	30%	27%	
High School Diploma	36%	40%	
Some College	11%	14%	
College (BA or Associates)	19%	5%	***
Don't know	1%	8%	
Not Reported	3%	6%	
<i>Multipartner Fertility</i>			
Father has child(ren) with other partner	21%	50%	***
Has 2 or more children with other partner	9%	21%	*
Mother has child(ren) with other partner	28%	33%	
Has 2 or more children with other partner	10%	7%	
<i>Paternal Risk Factors</i>			
Ever Incarcerated	25%	43%	*
Employment Instability	19%	34%	*
Health Problems Limiting Work	5%	7%	
Substance Abuse	2%	35%	***
Family Violence	13%	42%	***
<i>Relationship Status at 3 Years</i>			
Cohabiting	81%	25%	***
Dating	8%	10%	
No Relationship	11%	66%	***
<i>Co-parenting and Father Involvement</i>			
Poor Co-parenting	24%	69%	***
Not Involved	6%	61%	***

Source: TASS Mothers at 3½ years, weighted; OAG-CSD administrative data files. (N=278).

Note: Significance testing shows where columns are statistically different at the following levels: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Conclusion

The Texas child support system includes nearly 1.6 million children. For many families in the system, child support makes up a substantial portion of family income and notably improves the lived experience of the child. Still, other families fail to receive adequate support, circumstances that jeopardize the development and long-term prospects of the child. This brief set out to detail the characteristics of those who do and do not enter the child support system, as well as those who do and do not meet their obligations, in hopes of offering the OAG-CSD a richer portrait of its caseload. A deeper understanding of the characteristics and challenges of parents in different circumstances, then, provides insight into the factors driving system entry and order non-compliance. Three and a half years after establishing paternity in the hospital, 20 percent of Texas parents have a child support order for their child. Many obtain an order within the first year, and half have acquired an order by the time the child is 20 months old. The average father with an order for his 3½-year-old pays 62 percent of his monthly non-arrears obligation, and only meets the full obligation one out of every three months.

Approximately one-third of fathers with a child support order also provide some form of informal support, though informal support provision is considerably higher among parents without a child support order for the child. As a group, parents outside of the formal child support system appear to be doing relatively well. Most are still in a relationship, and fathers outside the system are largely involved and supportive of their children, obviating the need for formal support. A small number of mothers outside the child support system, however, receive nothing from the father of their child and would likely benefit from the assistance of the OAG-CSD. Like many of those already in the formal system though, these parents present a host of challenges. Indeed, it seems that those most in need of child support services are also the most difficult to serve. Throughout this brief, a slate of risk factors appear to accompany fathers who enter the child support system, fail to comply with their orders, or remain outside of the formal system but fail to provide support. Chief among these are employment instability, substance abuse issues, and a history of incarceration.

Though complex social problems like these may lie beyond the purview of the Child Support Division, the task of addressing their fallout—made manifest in order non-compliance—inevitably falls to the OAG-CSD. Ultimately, additional resources may be needed for the agency to expand access to peripheral services such as job training and placement programs (e.g. NCP choices), substance abuse programs, and prisoner re-entry programs. One way to expand access to these services might be to partner with other state agencies who already administer such programs. Connecting noncustodial parents with additional opportunities to navigate the more fundamental challenges in their lives has the potential to not only improve order compliance, but also to put them on a path toward greater financial stability and a healthier relationship with the family. Without addressing the challenges underlying order non-compliance, it seems clear that noncustodial parents will continue to lack the resources and personal wellbeing to carry their share of their cost, thereby frustrating collection efforts and continuing to drain agency resources through ongoing enforcement actions.

More broadly, the state should continue to take advantage of federal funding for Responsible Fatherhood programs, as well as TANF and state MOE funds, which can be used for services aimed at fathers under the broad goals of the TANF program. Programs offered through these venues frequently target employment stability, parenting skills, and healthy relationships, and share significant overlap with the goals of the Child Support Division. To the extent that such programs can

promote healthy co-parenting between partners, regardless of relationship status, and aid in the attainment of stable employment, they may be able to help parents outside of the child support system arrive at workable informal arrangements, thereby reducing the need for child support services. Ultimately, parents who struggle to support their children both in and out of the child support system face many of the same challenges. A cross-agency effort to address the root causes of inadequate support—employment instability, substance abuse, and involvement with the criminal justice system—has multiple benefits, strengthening the payments of those in the system and ensuring that those outside of it maintain the financial stability and co-parenting skills to raise their children without the aid of a formal system.

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.

Endnotes

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