Child Support in an Economic Downturn: Changes in Earnings, Child Support Orders, and Payments

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The number of single parent families, especially mother-child families, has increased dramatically since the 1970s, and prior research has found that these families are particularly vulnerable to poverty (Mather, 2010). With approximately 40 percent of single mother families living in poverty and close to one quarter of single father families with poverty-level earnings (compared to 8.3 percent of married families living in poverty; U. S. Census Bureau, 2010), policymakers and the public have grown increasingly concerned about the well-being of children residing in single-parent homes.

With growing numbers of children living in single-parent families and decreases in public aid for these families, child support has become an important source of income for single-parent families (Cancian, Meyer, and Park, 2003; Cancian and Meyer, 2006; Sorenson, 2010). This is especially the case for lower-income mothers as child support receipt is more crucial to their finances than it is for higher-income mothers (Sorensen and Zibman, 2000; Ha, Cancian, and Meyer, 2007). Nevertheless, researchers have found that child support receipts are often irregular and unstable in their timing and amounts (Ha et al., 2007). Multiple studies have revealed that many fathers, especially those living in poverty, either pay the support amount only in part or fail to make any support payments (Cancian and Meyer, 2004; Ha, Cancian, Meyer, and Han, 2008; Meyer et al., 2008; Sorensen and Zibman, 2001). For instance, in 1997, fathers with poverty-level earnings accounted for 26 percent of all noncustodial fathers. Fewer than 15 percent of poor noncustodial fathers paid child support in that year, while more than 40 percent of fathers with incomes above the poverty level paid (Sorensen and Zibman, 2001). More recent Wisconsin data reveals that approximately 50 percent of noncustodial fathers paid the full amount of child support owed, while about 15 percent paid no child support (Meyer, Ha, and Hu, 2008).

Child support payments are generally insufficient to enable families living in poverty to transition out of poverty. Often, fathers responsible for paying child support lack the financial means to do so (Cancian and Meyer, 2006). Particularly, fathers who have children on public assistance have lower incomes (e.g., Cancian and Meyer, 2004). A substantial amount of research has shown that many

noncustodial fathers of children on welfare have very low earnings and unstable employment, limiting their earning potential and their ability to pay child support (e.g., Cancian and Meyer, 2004; Garfinkel, McLanahan, Meadows, and Mincy, 2009; Rich, 2001).

The economic downturns have led to substantially increased unemployment rates (from 4.6 percent in 2006 to 9.3 percent in 2009; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010a), decreased earnings, unstable jobs, and long-term unemployment (e.g., Mendenhall, Kalil, Spindel, and Hart, 2008; Wu and Eamon, in press). Single parent families are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of an economic recession, both because they generally have only one adult earner in the household, and because single parents often have higher unemployment rates. The current economic downturn was associated with particularly large increases in unemployment for men. The unemployment rate for single fathers increased from 8.6 percent in 2006 to 16.3 percent in 2009, while married men experienced relatively smaller rises in unemployment from 2.4 percent in 2006 to 6.6 percent in 2009. Moreover, the increase in unemployment for single mothers (7.7 percent in 2006 to 12.0 percent in 2009) is substantially higher compared with that for married women (2.9 percent in 2006 and 5.5 percent in 2009; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010b).

Examining the relationships between changes in earnings and changes in child support orders and payments is particularly important because of the increasing number of single-mother families and the important role of child support payments to their financial health support. This, in conjunction with the most recent recession and decline in the level and consistency of fathers' earnings, highlights the importance of such research. Substantial research has documented the level of child support ordered and amount of child support paid (e.g., Bartfeld, 2003; Ha et al., 2007), and the factors that affect noncustodial fathers' ability to pay child support (Cancian and Meyer, 2004; Hanson, Garfinkel, McLanahan and Miller, 1996; Holzer, Offner and Sorensen, 2005; Robertson, 1997; Sorensen and Zibman, 2001; Sylvester and Reich, 2002). However, few studies have examined the extent to which noncustodial fathers' ability to pay support changes over time (Ha et al., 2007, 2010). Even fewer studies have explored the relationships between changes in earnings and changes to child support orders, and

ultimately, child support payments (Ha et al., 2010). To address gaps in prior research, this study uses recent Wisconsin data for the 2006 to 2009 period, and examines not only patterns of changes in earnings among noncustodial fathers, but also patterns of changes in child support orders and payments. Furthermore, by examining the relationship between changes in noncustodial fathers' earnings and child support during this period, this study begins to address the question of how changes in earnings due to the economic downturn affect child support orders and payments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior research has examined the effects of child support on resident parents' labor force participation and earnings, as well as the effects of child support enforcement actions on various outcomes such as child support orders and receipt (e.g., Freeman, and Waldfogel, 2001; Meyer et al., 2008), payers' labor force participation and earnings (e.g., Klawitter, 1994; Rich, Garfinkel and Gao, 2007; Holzer and Offner, 2004), family and child well-being (e.g., Amato and Gilbreth, 1999), and child poverty (e.g., Brien and Willis, 1997). However, relatively very few studies have examined the effects of changes in the earnings of non-resident fathers on child support orders and payments. Research that has examined the pattern of changes in earnings, changes in child support orders and payments, as well as the relationships between changes in earnings and changes in child support orders and payments, is discussed in the following subsections.

Pattern of Changes in Earnings among Noncustodial Fathers

While several studies have investigated noncustodial fathers' earnings (e.g., Cancian and Meyer, 2004; Garfinkel et al., 2009; Rich, 2001; Rich, Garfinkel, and Gao, 2007), limited research has examined earnings of noncustodial fathers over an extended period of time and the relative changes that unfold as time progresses (Ha et al., 2010). Prior research that focused on noncustodial fathers' earnings found that a substantial proportion of fathers had very low earnings and unstable incomes (e.g., Cancian and

Haveman, 2001; Cancian and Meyer, 2004; Sorensen, 1997), irregular earnings and employment in the underground economy (e.g., Garfinkel et al., 2009; Rich, Garfinkel, and Gao, 2007; Rich, 2001).

Compared to earlier available research, that documented significant earnings increases of noncustodial parents after separation or divorce (e.g., Phillips and Garfinkel, 1993; Meyer, 1995), the most recent study that examined changes in noncustodial fathers' earnings found that a quarter of their sample had close to no change in earnings and 37 percent of fathers had earnings decreases. The remaining 38 percent experienced income increases (Ha et al., 2010). Most prior studies mentioned in this subsection were conducted during time periods characterized by economic stability or growth. Replicating these analyses over periods during which the economy declined may yield different results (Ha et al., 2010).

Pattern of Changes in Child Support Orders

Few studies have examined changes in child support orders. A comparative analysis of studies in six states, conducted by Kost et al. (1996), revealed that 10 to 14 percent of child support orders were revised over a three-year period. Similarly, Meyer (1995) found that approximately 7 percent of child support cases in Wisconsin were modified by more than $100 per month within two years of paternity establishment. Interestingly, modification in the child support payments did not typically coincide with income changes (Meyer, 1995). Despite extremely limited recent research on this topic, two studies have used more current data and found increases in the frequency of child support order changes. The first, Rothe (2004), concluded that approximately 25 percent of Wisconsin child support orders were changed during a three-year time period beginning in 1997. Similarly, Ha et al. (2010), found that 18 percent of child support cases received increases and 14 percent had decreases within a five-year time period from 2000 to 2005. While these previous studies have provided valuable contributions, additional research is needed, particularly given the recent changes in the economic climate.

Pattern of Changes in Child Support Payments

Some researchers have examined compliance with child support orders through studying the receipt of payments over extended periods of time (Meyer and Bartfeld, 1998; Cancian and Meyer, 2005). Research has revealed that compliance rates are stable over time, and that both earnings and order amounts are strongly associated with payments (Bartfeld and Meyer, 2003; Ha et al., 2006, 2008). More specifically, Ha et al. (2008) found that the average compliance rate ranged from 64 percent to 67 percent in each year with increasing numbers of noncustodial fathers making both full payments (9 percent increase) and no payments (3 percent increase) over the six year period. Partial payments declined by 12 percent from 41 percent in Year 1 to 29 percent in Year 6. Little is known as to whether these changes are connected to changes in fathers' earnings.

When reviewing the past three decades of child support, approximately half of all mothers reported full receipt of child support payments between 1978 and 1991. However, by 1993, while a higher proportion of demographically eligible mothers had an order, just over a third (37 percent) of mothers reported full receipt, and in 2001 only 32 percent of poor mothers received child support payments in full. In the mid-2000's, the rate rebounded to approximately 45 percent of mothers receiving full payments (Cancian and Meyer, 2006). Again, there is extremely limited existing research as to whether these changes are related to economic conditions (Ha et al., 2010).

Relationship between Changes in Earnings and Changes in Child Support Orders

Meyer (1995), Cancian and Meyer (2006), and Ha et al. (2010) are unusual in examining the relationships between economic conditions, fathers' earnings and changes in child support orders. Meyer (1995) found that few child support orders changed and most of order changes were unrelated to earnings changes. Similarly, Cancian and Meyer (2006) studied earnings and child support orders up until 2003 and found that the overwhelming majority of cases (about 75 percent) remained unchanged. Interestingly, for the cases that reported an increase in fathers' earning by 25 percent or more, order amounts decreased

for 11 percent of these fathers and only 15 percent of these fathers were given order amount increases. Of fathers who experienced declines in earnings of at least 25 percent, 16 percent were given order amount decreases and 8 percent received order amount increases.

Similarly, Ha et al. (2010) found that child support orders remained relatively the same, despite changes in income over a six-year study period. They also found the expected positive relationship between earnings changes and order changes only in the case of large changes in earnings. However, the probability of orders changing was not strongly tied to the magnitude of changes in earnings. In addition, their findings suggest that order changes are more likely to decrease with decreased earnings than they are to increase with increased earnings.

In a companion study to this report, Kaplan (2010) conducted interviews of child support staff and family court commissioners in five different Wisconsin counties and examined: (1) how initial child support orders are set when the noncustodial parent is unemployed; (2) whether and how existing orders are changed after employment loss or earnings declines; and (3) whether and how child support agencies and courts have modified their actions in light of the economic recession. He found that little has changed in the procedures of determining initial orders and enforcement as a result of the recession, despite noncustodial fathers having experienced changes in their financial circumstances. However, Kaplan found evidence of more frequent order modifications since the recent economic downturn. In addition, in cases of unemployment, orders may be based on imputation of income, with lower expected incomes (for example, assuming 30 or 35 hours rather than 40 hours of work per week). County officials were found to empathize with economic hardships of noncustodial parents; and expressed more willingness to change orders.

Relationship between Changes in Earnings and Changes in Child Support Payments

Prior research has documented a positive relationship between noncustodial fathers' earnings and payments of child support (e.g., Cancian and Meyer, 2004; 2006; Sorensen and Zibman, 2001). More specifically, Cancian and Meyer (2004) found that fathers who fell within the lowest class of earnings

were also the least likely to pay child support. Surprisingly, they found that the likelihood of paying child support only increased up until the $30,000 income range. However, low-income fathers who were compliant with payments had a larger proportion of their earnings paid to child support (Cancian and Meyer, 2004). Similar to the reported findings above, Ha et al. (2008) found that economic conditions and employment opportunities of noncustodial fathers affected the payments of child support.

Very limited research has examined the effects of change in earnings of noncustodial fathers as a result of unemployment or underemployment on child support payments. One exceptional study conducted by Ha et al. (2006) not only examined the relationship between child support payment changes and earnings changes, but also between payment changes and changes in the owed amount. Strong relationships were found between decreased earnings and decreased payments as well as between increased earnings and increased payments. Changes in owed amounts were also found to have a strong relationship with payments in that cases with amount owed decreases also had amount paid decreases and cases with owed amount increases had increased payments. Overall, they found that in contrast to income changes, changes in orders were a better predictor of changes in payments.

Cancian and Meyer (2006) examined how the economy affected child support payments and suggested that the degree to which noncustodial parents maintain formal employment should be the primary economic-related factor related to child support payment compliance. This is because the system of automatic withholding results in automatically deductions from a father's check when he is formally employed (Bartfeld and Meyer 2003).

This study builds on previous analyses during a period of non-recession (Ha et al., 2010), as well as the companion report based on interviews with county administrators that document variation in policies in the recessionary period (Kaplan, 2010). I examine (1) patterns of changes in earnings among non-custodial fathers; (2) patterns of changes in child support orders and payments; and (3) the relationships between changes in earnings and changes in child support orders and payments, using more recent Wisconsin data from the period between 2006 and 2009.

METHODS

Data

This study used data drawn from three Wisconsin administrative data systems for the period from January 2006 to December 2009: Kids Information Data System (KIDS), Unemployment Insurance (UI) system, and Client Assistance for Reemployment and Economic Support (CARES) system. The KIDS data contain information on paternity establishment, child support orders and payments, and demographic information on custodial and noncustodial parents and children. UI data includes records of covered workers' quarterly earnings. CARES includes information on participation in W-2 (Wisconsin's TANF program), food stamps/SNAP, Medicaid, and subsidized child care, as well as welfare history and demographic information. These data were merged to measure changes in noncustodial fathers' earnings, changes in child support orders, changes in child support payments, demographic characteristics, and local characteristics.

Sample

The study sample included all cases statewide in which the noncustodial father had a fixed-dollar amount child support order for at least one child age fourteen or less in 2006 (N=106,118). Because child support orders are given in fixed-dollar amounts in more than 95 percent of all cases, and given the complications involved in calculating the owed amount, as well as differences in defining a change in order for percentage-expressed orders (Ha et al., 2008), I focused on fixed-dollar order cases. I excluded cases with a percentage-expressed or mixed order during the study period. I also excluded 10,750 noncustodial fathers who moved to another state during the study period and 843 fathers for whom we did not have social security numbers, without which I was unable to identify earning information when merging different data. Consistent with Ha et al. (2010), I also excluded 3,537 cases that experienced changes in custody or changes in the number of children during study period, because these changes may have resulted in changes in orders. This resulted in a final sample of 90,988 noncustodial fathers in this

study. I followed these noncustodial fathers for four years between 2006 and 2009, during the recent economic downturn.

Measures

The key variables in this study include changes in earnings, changes in the amount of child support orders, and changes in child support payments.

Changes in Earnings. The level of annual earnings in each year was categorized as the following: no earnings, less than $10,000, $10,000 to $19,999, $20,000 to $29,999, $30,000 to $39,999, and $40,000 and more. Similar to Ha et al. (2010) study, I considered percentage change instead of absolute dollar change in earnings, and measured earnings (and orders and payments) in nominal dollars, adjusting for inflation. Changes in earnings between 2006 and 2009 were categorized into the following five categories: large decrease (greater than 50 percent); small decrease (16 to 50 percent); little or no change (less than 15 percent in either direction); small increase (16 to 50 percent); and large increase (greater than 50 percent).

Changes in Child Support Orders. Similar to the Ha et al. (2010) study, I examined the current child support order amount and excluded additional orders that addressed the past child support amount owed, medical support owed, lying-in (birth) costs owed, etc. I examined the amount of current child support in each year (2006 to 2009). I then categorized change in child support orders between 2006 and 2009 using the same five categories used for changes in earnings. As previously stated, most states use percentage thresholds to determine any changes made to child support orders and most orders are based on a percentage of income; thus, I focus on percentage changes for the base analysis (Ha et al., 2010). I used 15 percent as a cut-off between small and large changes in orders in part because Wisconsin's standard for order changes is 15 percent.

Changes in Child Support Payments. I examined the amount of child support payments that noncustodial fathers paid, as well as compliance rates, during each year from 2006 to 2009. The compliance rate was defined as the proportion of the amount owed that was paid (Ha et al., 2008). I

divided the sample into three groups based on the level of compliance in the first year: (1) no payment; (2) partial payment (paid less than 90 percent of the owed amount); and (3) full payment (paid at least 90 percent of the owed amount) (Ha et al., 2008). I then examined compliance changes between 2006 and 2009. Specifically, I focused on those who were full payers in the first year and examined the proportion of cases that became nonpayers and partial payers in the latter years. I also examined how this differs by whether the noncustodial father had various changes in earnings and orders.

Control Variables. I utilized four sets of control variables associated with child support orders and payments from prior research (e.g., Cancian and Meyer, 2004; Ha et al., 2008, 2010; Rich et al., 2007): (1) individual characteristics, including fathers' age, race, initial earnings, and mothers' age; (2) family characteristics, including number of children, age of youngest child, divorced versus paternity cases, whether the father also owed support to a different mother; and (3) changes in unemployment rates in the county of residence.

Data Analysis

Descriptive Analysis of Changes in Earnings among Noncustodial Fathers. I began with descriptive analyses of the level of annual earnings in each year and changes in earnings between the first year and fourth year. I gave special attention to those cases with declines in earnings to determine whether the declines were experienced mostly by low earners and if there were specific types of cases that were at heightened risk for experiencing declines in earnings. Specifically, I considered differences in changes in earnings for different levels of initial earnings of noncustodial fathers, and differences for fathers living in counties with more and less severe economic declines.

*Descriptive Analysis of Changes in Child Support Orders***.** Descriptive analyses were also conducted to examine the level of child support orders in each year, and changes in orders between 2006 and 2009 among all noncustodial fathers. I then evaluated whether and how the changes in child support orders differed by changes in fathers' earnings. More specifically, I examined the distribution of changes in child support orders by the categories of earnings changes and distinguished five categories of changes

in earnings (large decrease, small decrease, little or no change, small increase, and large increase) as defined above.

Descriptive Analysis of Changes in Child Support Payments. I examined the amount of child support that noncustodial fathers paid and changes in payments. I also examined the compliance rates in each year (2006 to 2009), with the compliance rate defined as the proportion of the amount owed that is paid. I divided the sample into three groups based on the level of compliance in the first year: (1) no payment; (2) partial payment; and (3) full payment, defined as having paid at least 90 percent of the owed amount. I then examined compliance changes between 2006 and 2009. I focused first on those who were full payers in the first year and examined the proportion of cases that became nonpayers and partial payers in the latter years. I also examined how this differed by whether the noncustodial father had changes in earnings and changes in orders. Next, I examined the proportion of cases that began to pay something or pay in full among those who were nonpayers in the first period.

Multivariate Analysis of the Relationship between Changes in Earnings and Changes in Child Support Orders. A multinomial regression model, controlling for a variety of other variables, was used to examine whether changes in fathers' earnings are associated with changes in child support orders. The dependent variable included categories related to increases and decreases in child support orders compared to little or no change in child support orders. The multinomial logistic model estimates the effects of each independent variable on the log odds of the likelihood of several mutually exclusive outcomes relative to the likelihood of the reference category. In this study, two sets of coefficients were derived from the multinomial analysis. One set of coefficients produced an estimate of the relative odds of child support order increases compared with little or no change in odds. The other set projected the odds of decreases in child support orders compared with little or no change in odds.

RESULTS

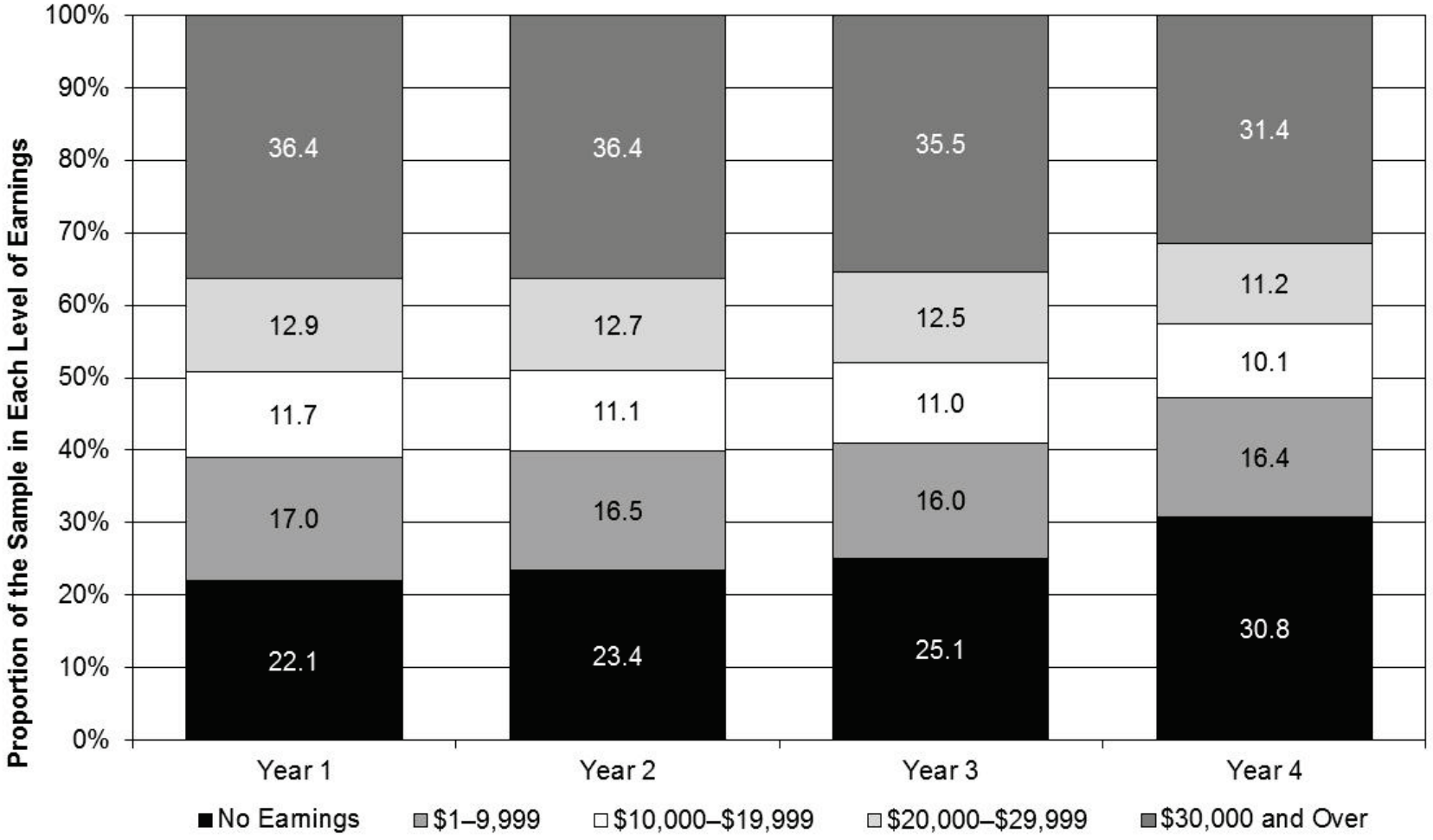
Pattern of Changes in Earnings

Figure 1 shows the level of annual earnings over the four-year period among all non-custodial fathers (those with and without earnings). A substantial portion of noncustodial fathers had very low earnings, and earnings decreased over time. Specifically, the proportion of fathers who earned less than $10,000 increased from 39.1 percent in Year 1 to 47.2 percent in Year 4. The proportion with earnings over $30,000 decreased from 36.4 percent in Year 1 to 31.4 percent in Year 4. In the first year, 77.9 percent had earnings, with a median among those with earnings of $28,030. In the fourth year, 69.2 percent had earnings, with a median of $27, 215.

Table 1 shows changes in earnings between Year 1 and Year 4. About two-fifths of fathers had little or no change in earnings (less than a 15 percent increase or decrease). More than one fourth of the sample experienced a large decrease in earnings of over 50 percent and 11.6 percent had a small decrease in earnings (16 percent to 50 percent). On the other hand, only 14.7 percent of fathers experienced a large increase in earnings (more than 50 percent) and 7.6 percent had a small increase in earnings of 16 percent to 50 percent. Comparing these results to those of Ha et al (2010), I see relatively fewer increases in earnings and greater declines in this recessionary period than they found during 2000 to 2005.

The second panel in Table 1 indicates changes in earnings by initial earnings of fathers. The results show substantial instability in earnings, particularly for fathers with low earnings in the first year. Earnings instability decreases with initial earnings of fathers. More than half (56.1 percent) of fathers who earned less than $10,000 had large earnings declines, compared to 43.3 percent of those with initial earnings between $10,000 and $19,999, 33.5 percent of those with initial earnings between $20,000 and $29,999, and 19.4 percent of those earned more than $30,000. Fathers with higher initial earnings (more than $30,000) had a high proportion (47.7 percent) of little or no change in earnings. However, 19.4 percent of these fathers with higher initial earnings experienced a large decrease in earnings, and another

Figure 1: Level of Annual Earnings



Sample: 90,988 noncustodial fathers had a child support order for at least one child age 14 or less in 2006.

Table 1
Changes in Earnings between Year 1 and Year 4 among Noncustodial Fathers

	N	Large Decrease (>50%)	Small Decrease (16–50%)	Little/No Change (<15%)	Small Increase (16–50%)	Large Increase (>50%)
All Noncustodial Fathers	90,988	26.9	11.6	40.2	7.6	14.7
By Initial Earnings of Fathers						
No earnings	20,086	0.0	0.0	76.4	0.0	23.6
$1–$10,000	15,483	56.1	5.2	4.7	3.7	30.4
$10,000–$19,999	10,601	43.3	11.6	13.5	11.0	20.6
$20,000–$29,999	11,714	33.5	15.9	27.9	14.7	8.1
$30,000 and more	33,104	19.4	20.1	47.7	10.5	2.4
By Change in County Unemployment Rates between Year 1 and Year 4						
Increase by < 3 points	3,567	36.3	10.7	25.5	6.3	21.4
Increase by 3–3.99 points	12,051	35.8	10.2	27.3	6.4	20.3
Increase by 4–4.99 points	5,029	36.9	11.9	26.5	6.1	18.6
Increase by > 5 points	3,015	40.9	9.9	23.9	5.8	19.5

20 percent experienced a small decrease in earnings. More than three-fifths of fathers with no reported earnings at baseline continued without earnings, and 23.6 percent had some earnings in the fourth year.

The third panel in Table 1 shows changes in earnings by changes in county unemployment rates between Year 1 and Year 4. A high proportion (40.9 percent) of fathers living in counties with the most severe economic declines had a large decrease in earnings, about 10 percent experienced a small decrease in earnings percent, and approximately one-fourth had a large increase in earnings percent.[1] The pattern of changes in earnings was qualitatively similar by different levels of changes in county unemployment rates, but fewer fathers living in counties with the least severe economic declines experienced a large decline in earnings.

Pattern of Changes in Child Support Orders

The level of child support orders slightly decreased over time from $4,661 in the first year to $4,386 in the four year among all non-custodial fathers who had fixed-orders in the first year. The first panel in Table 2 shows changes in child support orders over the four-year period. The majority (63.5 percent) of fathers experienced little or no change (less than a 15 percent increase or decrease) in their orders. Thirteen percent had a large decrease (more than 50 percent) in the amount of their orders, and 7.5 percent had a small decrease (16 to 50 percent). A relatively low proportion of fathers experienced a small (6.5 percent) or large (9.2 percent) increase in their orders. Ha et al. (2010) found smaller proportions of fathers with large decreases or increases in the amount of their orders (2 percent and 6 percent respectively).

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[1]Those who lived in Burnett, Kenosha, Lincoln, Marinette, Oconto, Rock, Rusk, Sheboygan, and Taylor Counties experienced the most severe economic declines (unemployment rates increased by more than 5 percentage points between 2006 and 2009). Those who lived in Clark, Crawford, Dodge, Fond du Lac, Green, Green Lake, Jefferson, Juneau, Langlade, Manitowoc, Marathon, Marquette, Polk, Rice, Racine, Shawano, Walworth, Washington, Waupaca, and Waushara Counties had unemployment rate increases of 4 to 4.99 percentage points between 2006 and 2009. Those who lived in Bayfield, Dane, Dunn, Eau Claire, La Crosse, Menominee, and Portage Counties had the least severe economic declines (unemployment rates increase in less than 3 points between 2006 and 2009). The remaining counties had modest economic declines (unemployment rates increased by 3 to 3.99 percentage points between 2006 and 2009).

Table 2
Changes in Child Support Orders over the Four-Year Period among Noncustodial Fathers

	N	Large Decrease (>50%)	Small Decrease (16–50%)	Little/No Change (<15%)	Small Increase (16–50%)	Large Increase (>50%)
All Noncustodial Fathers	90,988	13.4	7.5	63.5	6.4	9.2
By Changes in Earnings of Fathers						
Large Decrease (>50%)	23,616	17.1	8.7	60.1	5.6	8.6
Small Decrease (16–50%)	10,535	12.9	8.2	62.7	6.9	9.3
Little or No Change (<15%)	36,547	11.9	6.6	66.5	6.5	8.5
Small Increase (16–50%)	6,947	10.5	6.5	62.8	8.5	11.7
Large Increase (>50%)	1,3343	12.8	7.5	62.1	6.5	11.1

Table 2 also shows changes in orders by changes in earnings of fathers. The results from the bivariate analysis indicate that orders were likely to be changed when significant changes in earnings occurred. Moreover, the orders are more likely to decline with reductions in earnings than they are to increase with higher earnings. However, the relationship between changes in earnings and changes in orders was not consistent. Specifically, among fathers with a large decrease in earnings, only 17 percent had a large decrease in orders, and about three-fifths had little or no change in orders. Surprisingly, about 14 percent of fathers with a large decrease in earnings had either a large (8.6 percent) or small (5.6 percent) increase in orders. When I focused on those with a large increase in earnings, I found that the majority (62 percent) of these fathers had no change in orders, only 11 percent had a large increase in orders, and 13 percent had a large decrease in orders. When I examined changes in orders among fathers with little or no change in earnings, I found that more than two-thirds had little or no change in orders, 19 percent had small or large decreases in orders, and 15 percent had small or large increases in orders.

Pattern of Changes in Child Support Payments

The proportion of fathers who paid any child support decreased from 86 percent in the first year to 76 percent in the fourth year. The amount of child support paid among fathers who paid remained relatively stable (about $3,950 to $4,100 in each year). Table 3 shows changes in child support payments and indicates that more than two-fifths of noncustodial fathers had little or no change in payments between the first and fourth years. About 21 percent of fathers had a large decrease in payments, and another 10 percent had a small decrease in payments. On the other hand, only 7 percent had a small increase in payments and 18 percent had a large increase.

Table 3 also shows the extent to which payment changes are related to earnings changes and order changes. The results of a bivariate analysis reveal that changes in earnings are strongly associated with change in payments. This relationship is particularly strong among those with a large change in earnings. More specifically, about 42 percent of fathers who experienced a large decline in earnings had a large decline in payments. Similarly, 45 percent of those had a large increase in earnings had a large

Table 3
Changes in Child Support Payments over the Four-Year Period among Noncustodial Fathers

	N	Large Decrease (>50%)	Small Decrease (16–50%)	Little/No Change (<15%)	Small Increase (16–50%)	Large Increase (>50%)
All Noncustodial Fathers	90,988	21.3	10.3	42.6	7.4	18.4
By Changes in Earnings						
Large Decrease (>50%)	23,616	42.1	14.1	25.4	5.3	13.1
Small Decrease (16–50%)	10,535	16.2	16.0	47.2	7.6	13.0
Little or No Change (<15%)	36,547	14.2	8.2	57.1	6.8	13.7
Small Increase (16–50%)	6,947	11.6	7.9	49.9	12.3	18.3
Large Increase (>50%)	13,343	12.9	6.3	25.6	10.1	45.1
By Changes in Child Support Orders						
Large Decrease (>50%)	12,192	77.3	3.6	14.4	0.6	4.1
Small Decrease (16–50%)	6,782	20.1	46.9	16.0	4.1	12.9
Little or No Change (<15%)	5,7737	12.9	9.2	58.4	5.9	13.5
Small Increase (16–50%)	5,871	9.0	4.6	23.0	40.5	22.9
Large Increase (>50%)	8,406	6.8	2.2	9.5	7.0	74.5

increase in payments. Moreover, those who had little or no change in earnings were more likely to have little or no change in payments.

The third panel in Table 3 shows changes in payments by order changes. As expected, there is a strong relationship between changes in orders and changes in payments. Among those who experienced a large decrease in orders, 77 percent had a large decrease in payments and only 4 percent had a large increase in payments. About third-fifths of fathers who had a large increase in orders had a large increase in payments, and only 7 percent had a large decrease in payments. Overall, of the results for changes in child support payments were similar to those in Ha et al. (2006) study.

I next turn to child support compliance rates. Similar to previous studies, I found that compliance rates (the average proportion of the amount owed that was paid) remained fairly stable (about 65 to 66 percent) over the four-year period. As shown in Table 4, the proportion of fathers who paid nothing remained stable (about 14 percent in Year 1 to 15 percent in Year 4); the proportion who paid in full increased slightly over time (from 46 percent to 48 percent); and the proportion of partial payment decreased slightly from 40 percent in Year 1 to 37 percent in Year 4.

Focusing on those who were full payers in the first year, the proportion of full payments decreased to 83 percent in Year 2, 80 percent in Year 3 and 77 percent in Year 4, as shown in the first panel of Table 5. In the fourth year, 2 percent of these initial full payers paid nothing, and 21 percent paid less than 90 percent of the amount of child support owed. On the other hand, when focusing on those who were nonpayers in the first year (the second panel in Table 5), I found that an increasing proportion of nonpayers came to pay some support in the following years (26 percent in Year 2; 28 percent in both Year 3 and Year 4). A small percentage of these nonpayers became full payers in the later years (2 percent in Year 2; 5 percent in Year 3; and 7 percent in Year 4).

Does this pattern of child support compliance differ by different groups of earnings changes and order changes? The first panel of Table 6 shows changes in compliance rates by changes in earnings among those who were full payers in the first year. The results indicate that there is a strong association between changes in earnings and changes in compliance. Among fathers who were full payers in the first

Table 4
Compliance Rates over Time among Noncustodial Fathers

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
N	90,988	90,837	8,6332	83,084
Mean compliance rates (%)	66.1	66.3	66.4	64.9
Proportion of cases with:				
Nonpayment	14.0	14.0	14.2	15.3
Partial payment	40.2	39.5	38.1	37.4
Full payment (90% or more)	45.8	46.5	47.7	47.3

Table 5
Change in Compliance Rates among Noncustodial Fathers

	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
N	41,661	3,9837	3,8317
Among those who were full payers in first year			
% of nonpayment	0.2	1.0	1.6
% of partial payment	17.0	18.7	21.4
% of full payment	82.8	80.3	77.0
N	12,691	11,939	11,459
Among those who were nonpayers in first year			
% of nonpayment	72.3	66.3	65.0
% of partial payment	25.8	28.4	28.3
% of full payment	1.9	5.2	6.7

Table 6
Change in Compliance Rates by Changes in Earnings and Changes in Orders among Those Who Were Full Payers in the First Year

	Year 2			Year 3			Year 4		
	Non-Payers	Partial Payers	Full Payers	Non-Payers	Partial Payers	Full Payers	Non-Payers	Partial Payers	Full Payers
By Changes in Earnings									
Large Decrease (>50%)	0.4	32.7	66.9	2.8	42.5	54.7	5.7	48.6	45.7
Small Decrease (16–50%)	0.1	16.5	83.4	0.7	18.3	81.0	0.7	24.6	74.7
Little or No Change (<15%)	0.2	10.0	89.8	0.5	10.0	89.5	0.7	11.7	87.6
Small Increase (16–50%)	0.1	13.3	86.6	0.3	10.7	89.0	0.4	9.8	89.8
Large Increase (>50%)	0.2	26.4	73.4	1.1	25.0	73.9	1.0	23.0	76.0
By Changes in Orders									
Decrease (>15%)	0.8	21.2	78.0	2.1	24.2	73.6	3.3	26.2	70.5
Little or No Change (<15%)	0.1	15.3	84.6	0.8	17.1	82.0	1.4	20.0	78.6
Increase (>15%)	0.1	19.0	80.9	0.7	19.9	79.4	1.2	23.7	75.1

year and had a large decrease in earnings between Year 1 and Year 4, 67 percent paid the full amount of support ordered in Year 2. This proportion declined to 55 percent in Year 3 and 46 percent in Year 4. About half of the full payers in the first year who had a large decrease in earnings became partial payers in Year 4, and 6 percent paid nothing in Year 4. In contrast, about three-quarters of the full payers with a large increase in earnings continued paying the full amount of child support ordered in the latter period. Only about 1 percent became nonpayers and about one-fifth became partial payers over the four-year period. Overall, the results suggest declines in compliance for those with large decreases or increases in earnings, among those with initial full compliance.

The second panel of Table 6 shows changes in compliance rates by changes in orders among those who were full payers in the first year. As expected, when fathers with initial full compliance experienced decreases in orders of more than 15 percent , the proportion of full payers decreased from 78 percent in Year 2 to 70.5 percent in Year 4, and the proportion of partial payers slightly increased from 21.2 percent in Year 2 to 26.2 percent in Year 4. However, when fathers with full compliance experienced increases in orders of more than 15 percent, the proportion of full payers also decreased from 80.9 percent in Year 2 to 75.1 percent in Year 4, and the proportion of partial payers slightly increased from 19.0 percent in Year 2 to 23.7 percent in Year 4. The results suggest declines in compliance for both decreases and increases in orders among those with initial full compliance.

Relationship between Changes in Earnings and Changes in Child Support Orders

Table 7 presents the multivariate analysis of the relationship between changes in earnings and changes in child support orders, controlling for other factors associated with child support orders. The multinomial logistic regression model contrasts those who had little or no change in orders with those who experienced decreases and increases in orders. The results demonstrate a strong relationship between earnings changes and order changes. Compared with noncustodial fathers who had little or no change in earnings, fathers with a large decrease in earnings (over 50 percent) were 1.75 times more likely to experience decreases in orders and had a lower probability of increases in orders. Similarly, fathers with a

Table 7
Multinomial Logistic Analysis of Changes in Orders (Compared to Little or No Change)

	Decreases in Orders			Increases in Orders		
Variables	Coeff.	S.E.	Odds Ratio	Coeff.	S.E.	Odds Ratio
Changes in Father's Earnings (compared to little or no change)						
Large Decrease (>50%)	0.56***	0.02	1.75	-0.11***	0.03	0.89
Small Decrease (16–50%)	0.26***	0.03	1.29	-0.12***	0.03	0.89
Small Increase (16–50%)	0.07	0.04	1.07	0.11**	0.04	1.11
Large Increase (>50%)	0.22***	0.03	1.25	0.27***	0.03	1.30
Father's Initial Earnings (compared to no earnings)						
<$10,000	-0.32***	0.03	0.73	0.18***	0.04	1.20
$10,000–$19,999	-0.29***	0.03	0.75	0.43***	0.04	1.53
$20,000–$29,999	-0.28***	0.03	0.76	0.58***	0.04	1.79
$30,000 and more	-0.17***	0.03	0.85	0.66***	0.03	1.92
Age of Father at Baseline (compared to 24 and under)						
25–29	-0.07	0.04	0.93	-0.14***	0.04	0.87
30–39	-0.14	0.04	0.94	-0.07***	0.04	0.84
40+	0.04	0.04	1.04	-0.11*	0.05	0.90
Race of Father (compared to White)						
Black	-0.32***	0.02	0.73	-0.28***	0.03	0.76
Hispanic	-0.24***	0.04	0.78	-0.28***	0.05	0.76
Other	-0.09	0.06	0.92	-0.01	0.07	0.99
Age of Mother at Baseline (compared to 24 and under)						
25–29	-0.09**	0.04	0.91	-0.09*	0.04	0.91
30–39	-0.08	0.04	0.93	-0.06	0.04	0.94
40+	0.05	0.05	1.05	-0.07	0.05	0.93
Material Status at Baseline (compared to paternity cases)						
Divorce	-0.09	0.05	0.91	0.10	0.06	1.11
Number of Children (compared to 1)						
2	0.30***	0.02	1.35	0.34***	0.02	1.40
3 and more	0.46***	0.03	1.59	0.44***	0.04	1.55
Age of Youngest Child at Baseline (compared to 0–1)						
2–5	-0.43***	0.03	0.65	-0.09***	0.03	0.41
6–10	-0.71***	0.03	0.49	-1.25***	0.03	0.29
11 and more	-0.44***	0.04	0.64	-1.36***	0.04	0.26
Multiple Orders for a Different Mother at Baseline (compared to no)						
Yes	-0.12***	0.03	0.88	-0.39***	0.04	0.67
% of Changes in County Unemployment Rates (compared to increase in 5 percentage points and more)						
Increase in < 3 points	0.10	0.06	1.11	0.12	0.07	1.13
Increase in 3–3.99 points	-0.19***	0.05	0.83	-0.09	0.06	0.91
Increase in 4–4.99 points	-0.09	0.06	0.91	0.04	0.06	1.04
Intercept	-0.50***	0.06		-0.59***	0.07	

Note: The sample consisted of 90, 988 noncustodial fathers had a child support order for at least one child age 14 or less in 2006. The model also controlled for unknown race, unknown marital status, and unknown location (missing value on county unemployment rates).

* p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

small decrease in earnings (between 16 percent and 50 percent) were 1.29 times as likely to experience decreases in orders and had a lower probability of increases in orders, compared to fathers with little or no change in earnings. Those who had a large increase in earnings (50 percent or more) were about 30 percent more likely to experience increases in orders and, surprisingly, also 25 percent more likely to have decreases in orders, when compared to fathers with little or no change in earnings.

The results of multinomial logistic regression model presented in Table 7 also show that several control variables were significantly associated with changes in orders. One notable finding is that increases in county unemployment are only weakly associated with changes in orders. There was no significant difference in the odds of a change in order associated with county unemployment rates with one exception: fathers living in counties in which unemployment rates increased by between 3 and 3.99 percentage points were less likely to have decreases in orders, compared to fathers living in counties with the most severe economic declines (unemployment rates increased by 5 or more percentage points).

I also found that fathers who had higher initial earnings were more likely to have increases in orders and less likely to have decreases in orders than those with no earnings. Fathers with more children were more likely to have changes in orders. On the other hand, fathers who were older were less likely than fathers who were 24 years old and under to experience increases in orders. Mothers who were between age 25 and 29 at baseline were less likely than younger mothers to have either decreases or increases in orders. Black and Hispanic fathers were less likely to have either decreases or increases in orders compared to white fathers. Fathers whose youngest child was age 2 or older were less likely to have changes in orders compared to those with younger children. Moreover, fathers who had multiple orders for a different mother were less likely to have either a decrease or increase in order.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION FOR POLICY

This study examined patterns of changes in earnings, changes in child support orders, and changes in child support payments over a four-year period. Similar to prior research described in the literature review section, the results indicate that a substantial portion of noncustodial fathers had very

low earnings. In contrast to earlier findings from other economic periods (e.g., Phillips and Garfinkel, 1993; Meyer, 1995; Ha et al., 2010), this study shows that earnings decreased over time. Moreover, a significant proportion of noncustodial fathers experienced large changes in earnings. This problem is especially critical given the current economic crisis and high unemployment rates. Most child support orders remained unchanged over the study period, though orders were more likely to be changed when significant changes in earnings occurred. Moreover, orders were more likely to decline with reductions in earnings than they were to increase with increases in earnings. The proportion of fathers who paid any child support decreased over time, but the amount of child support paid among fathers who paid remained relatively stable during the four-year period. Moreover, compliance was greater for those with stable or increasing earnings, compared to those with declining earnings.

By examining the relationship between changes in earnings, orders, and payments, this study also began to address the question of how changes in the earnings of noncustodial fathers, potentially as a result of unemployment or underemployment during a period of economic downturn, are related to changes in child support orders and payments. The results indicate a strong relationship between earnings changes and order changes. Specifically, large decreases in earnings were associated with large decreases in orders. However, a large increase in earnings did not lead to a large increase in orders. For example, only 11 percent of fathers who experienced a large increase in earnings had a large increase in order amount. Earnings and order changes were also strongly associated with change in payments and compliance rates, particularly among those with large change in earnings and orders. In addition, this study examined the relationship between county level measures of unemployment and child support outcomes. The results suggest that increases in county unemployment rates were only weakly associated with declines in individual earnings and changes in orders, though additional analysis, with more extensive measures of the economic situation, are needed.

Compared to non-recession period analyses in Ha et al. (2010), a higher proportion of noncustodial fathers experienced larger reductions in earnings and fewer increases in earnings during the recession period. Furthermore, a higher proportion of fathers had large decreases or increases in orders

than was found in the Ha et al. (2010) study. This is especially the case for those with large changes in earnings. For example, this study found that 17 percent of fathers who had a large decrease in earning experienced a large decrease in orders, compared to only 4 percent in the Ha et al. (2010) study. The results in this study also indicate a stronger relationship between changes in earnings and changes in orders than was found in the Ha et al. (2010) study. The pattern of change in child support payments and compliance rates were similar to those found by Ha et al. (2006, 2010). They also found high compliance rates among those who had either decreases or increases in orders, and that both changes in earnings and changes in orders were significantly related to changes in child support payments.

This study has potentially important implications for policy and practice. The findings point to the importance of advocating for social policies that provide additional income and employment supports for single-parent families, since child support receipts are likely to decline at a time when they may be facing their own unemployment. Moreover, the findings suggest the importance of providing and extending work support and related services (e.g., job training programs, transitional jobs or subsidized employment, and case management) to noncustodial fathers because many of fathers had low earnings and unstable employment (Cancian and Meyer, 2006; Ha et al., 2008; Sorensen, 2010). Finally, the findings highlight the extent to which child support orders remain stable, even in the face of noncustodial fathers' earnings changes and unemployment during economic downturns.

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