

## Do low-income noncustodial fathers “trade” earlier families for newer ones?

Lawrence M. Berger, Maria Cancian, Angela Guarin, and Daniel R. Meyer

### TAKEAWAYS

**We find no evidence for the idea of “trading” families**—that noncustodial fathers stop providing financial resources to earlier families in favor of newer ones.

**Fathers may prioritize their newer families** by providing slightly more informal support to them compared to earlier families.

**The formal child support system appears to be working as intended** in terms of ensuring support to all noncustodial children.



**Institute for  
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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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**In the United States, it is becoming increasingly common for parents to have children with more than one partner.** This type of family complexity raises issues for any social policy that relies on family structure, including social security, income taxes, and child support; in this article, we look in particular at the implications for the child support system. One important challenge is specifying the rights and responsibilities of parents who live apart from their children, and whether these change in the event that one parent has children with a new partner. We focus on noncustodial fathers who have had children with more than one mother, and determine how support they provide to children from an earlier relationship compares to support provided to their youngest child (from a newer relationship). Our study is one of the few that includes measures of the total amount of economic support (not only formal child support and informal cash support, but also informal in-kind support) that noncustodial fathers provide to their nonresident children.<sup>1</sup>

Our research questions include:

- Were fathers more or less likely to report providing formal or informal support to their oldest or youngest nonresident child from different relationships?
- Did the amount of formal or informal support that fathers report providing differ between their oldest and youngest nonresident child from different relationships?

### Complex families and child support

Over the past 50 years, American families have changed dramatically, as more people are having children outside of marriage, more unmarried couples are living together, and many parents have children with more than one partner. In the study described here, we consider the implications of this last type of complexity—specifically, noncustodial fathers with nonresident children in multiple families—for child support.

#### Formal child support

The child support system is intended to ensure that noncustodial parents contribute financially to the upbringing of their nonresident children. Each state must develop a set of child support guidelines that specify how child support order amounts are to be calculated. When noncustodial parents (usually fathers) have children in multiple families, determining the appropriate amount to be paid to each child presents a particular challenge.<sup>2</sup> One approach is to treat multiple families as an ordered series of simple families, calculating the amount owed by a father to his children with his first partner, without regard to any later children, and then continuing to calculate orders for each subsequent family sequentially. Because any income allocated to the first partner in the form of a child support order is not considered as income in calculated orders to subsequent families, this strategy generally leads to larger orders for older children (see example A). An alternative approach is to require equal obligations to all children, regardless of birth order (see

## Two approaches to calculating orders for parents with multiple families

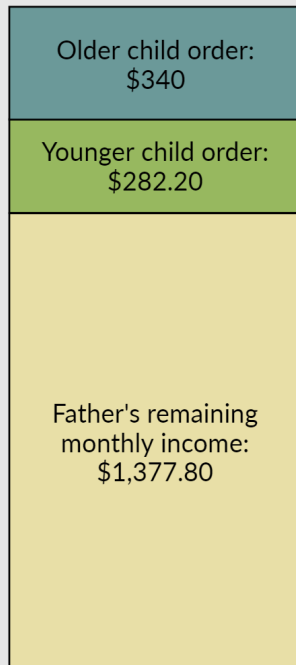
A father has two children, each with a different mother.

He has a monthly income of \$2,000.

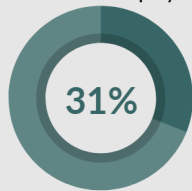
Each mother is owed 17% of his income.

### Example A: Serial Child Support Orders

Father pays oldest child 17% of \$2,000. The younger child's payment is calculated based on the father's remaining income.



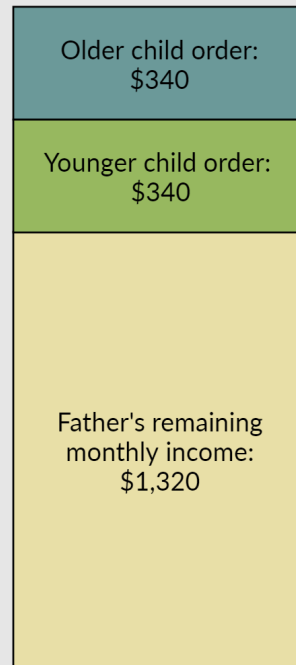
The father pays



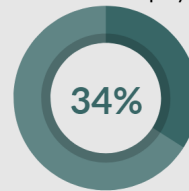
of his income in child support.

### Example B: Equal Orders to all Children

Each child's payment is calculated as 17% of the father's \$2,000 monthly income.



The father pays



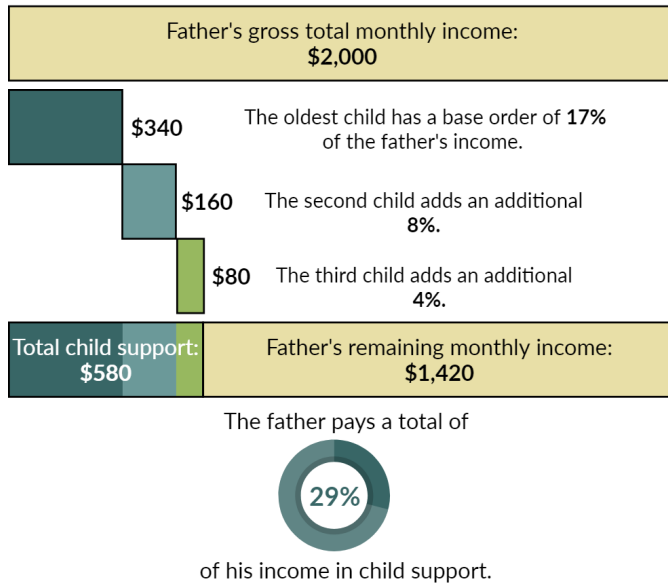
of his income in child support.

example B). With either of these approaches, the distribution of child support payments is out of the noncustodial father's hands. The formal child support system does not account for noncustodial parent preference—for example, if a noncustodial parent feels more connected to their more recently born children and thus wants to provide more to them.

State child support guidelines generally specify that the amount of child support is larger when there are more children included in a single order, though the amount added to the order declines for each additional child (see example C). So, for example, the amount a father owes for two children with the same mother would be less than twice what he would have owed for a single child. This approach assumes economies of scale—that some costs, such as housing, do not increase proportionally with each additional child—for fathers providing support for children who live in the same household.<sup>3</sup> This approach is relatively straightforward when a father has children with only one partner, but becomes more complicated when children live in multiple households, some of which may include

### Example C: Single order for multiple children

A father has three children, all with the same mother.  
He has a monthly income of \$2,000.



children of other resident or nonresident fathers. In these cases, it is harder to determine whether and how economies of scale apply.

While family complexity clearly poses considerable challenges for the child support system, both in terms of providing adequate support to each child and ensuring equity across custodial parents, noncustodial parents, and children, formal child support is only one of the ways that noncustodial parents can provide for their children. In addition to formal child support, they may also provide informal cash or in-kind support—that is, providing items such as food, diapers, clothing, or school supplies. (See text box for definitions of terms.) Some research has been done on the interaction between formal and informal child support, and other dimensions of involvement such as father-child contact.<sup>4</sup> For example, when children are born outside marriage, having a stronger child support enforcement system is associated with a higher probability that mothers will receive formal child support, but a lower likelihood that they will receive informal cash support.<sup>5</sup> Research in this area has also considered whether formal and informal support are substitutes or complements, taking into account that informal child support is discretionary while formal support is not; there is some evidence that when fathers provide informal support, they pay less towards formal child support obligations.<sup>6</sup> However, little is known about the provision of formal and informal support when fathers have obligations to multiple families.

#### Providing support to multiple families

Overall, fewer than half of custodial mothers who are owed formal child support receive the full amount due in any given year. The total amount of support provided by noncustodial fathers—formal

#### Definitions of child support terms:

**Formal support:** Financial support mandated by the courts.

**Informal support:** Any other support provided by the noncustodial parent to the custodial parent, including:

- Informal cash support
- In-kind support (provision of items such as food, diapers, clothing, or school supplies)

support, informal cash, and in-kind contributions—depends primarily on fathers’ ability and willingness to provide resources. Current evidence suggests that a significant number of fathers have limited financial ability to support their nonresident children.<sup>7</sup> Because economically disadvantaged men are disproportionately likely to have children with more than one partner and, as noted above, economies of scale are less straightforward when children are in multiple families, few fathers have sufficient resources to provide adequate levels of economic support to all of their children when they are in multiple households.<sup>8</sup> Noncustodial fathers’ willingness to provide for their children also matters. While noncustodial fathers’ incomes increase over time on average, the provision of informal support tends to decline.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, informal and in-kind support are most common during the first few months after a couple separates, and then decline over time. This may be because noncustodial fathers are more likely than resident biological fathers to experience ambiguity about being a parent, and the expectations and responsibilities that come with that role.<sup>10</sup> This ambiguity may increase over time, particularly if parents re-partner and have new children, perhaps reducing the extent to which fathers interact with their children and participate in decision making. Thus, fathers might have less sense of responsibility for the financial support of their older children.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, provision of formal support tends to increase over time, most likely as a result of both increasing involvement with the child support enforcement system and increases over time in fathers’ means to provide support.<sup>12</sup>

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Some fathers may feel that they must choose between providing inadequate resources to all of their children, or else prioritizing some children over others.

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Researchers have hypothesized that when fathers or mothers re-partner and have new children, noncustodial fathers have a reduced sense of connection and obligation to nonresident children, and thus their willingness to provide support, particularly informal support, declines. The limited research that has been done to date supports this hypothesis.<sup>13</sup> When mothers begin a new relationship, noncustodial fathers may expect or assume that the new partner will take on responsibility for supporting the mother and all of her children. This may particularly be the case when the mother and her new partner have a child together. When fathers have children with a new partner, their sense of responsibility may shift towards the new family, both because their new partner and child are more present in their life, and because of their new partner’s expectations of them.

Given these patterns and the fact that many fathers with multiple families lack the resources to provide full support to all of their nonresident children, some may feel that they must choose between providing inadequate resources to all of their children, or else prioritizing some children over others. Some researchers have examined whether fathers prioritize their children from more recent relationships to the extent that they “trade” families—stop providing resources to earlier families in favor of new ones. There are, in fact, a few recent studies suggesting that, to some extent, noncustodial fathers do contribute greater financial resources to the children of their most recent relationship.<sup>14</sup> There may, however, be explanations for unequal contributions other than trading families. In particular, more recent families by definition include younger children, and parents tend to spend more on younger compared to older children.<sup>15</sup> Thus, any analysis of whether or not noncustodial parents trade families must account for differences in child age—as we discuss below.

## Methods

In order to examine how noncustodial fathers distribute formal, informal cash, and in-kind support to children across multiple families, and the extent to which levels and types of support differ for nonresident children from more and less recent relationships, we use data from the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED), described in the previous articles in this issue. Our sample is 2,765 noncustodial fathers who are behind in their child support payments and have at least two minor children from different families. We use data from a baseline survey administered to all participants prior to random assignment and program participation.<sup>16</sup> For each father, we use data for his youngest and oldest nonresidential children from different families. Our outcome measures are self-reported formal child support, informal child support, in-kind support, and total support (the three types added together) paid in the month preceding the baseline survey. For each type of support, we take note of whether support was provided, and if so, how much.

Our main analyses use logit and ordinary least squares regressions, and we incorporate sensitivity tests to check the robustness of our results. Because we are interested in assessing differences in support provided by noncustodial fathers to their oldest and youngest child from different relationships, we control for a variety of factors associated with noncustodial fathers' investments in children, including fathers' socioeconomic and background characteristics. We also control for demographic and other characteristics specific to each child. A particular challenge is how to control for child age. We are interested in whether a father provides different support to a child from his more recent relationship, but this child is, by definition, younger than a child from a less recent relationship. As noted above, parents tend to spend more on younger children, and in particular, previous research suggests that older children in lower-income families are less likely to receive in-kind support compared to younger children.<sup>17</sup>

If we do not control for the age of each child, we could find more support provided for the youngest nonresident child simply because the child is younger, and not because the child is from the most recent relationship. We use a series of indicator variables to control for child age, with an additional indicator for whether a child is from the most recent relationship. In our sensitivity tests, we use different approaches.

### Do low-income noncustodial fathers trade families?

Characteristics of the noncustodial fathers in our sample are shown in the text box. Overall this is a disadvantaged sample, which is expected as all participants were behind in their child support payments, had employment difficulties, and had children with more than one partner. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the provision of formal, informal cash, in-kind, and total support reported by our analysis sample. We find that both the likelihood of formal payment and the amount paid increase with a child's age. For example, fathers provided formal support to 25 percent of children age 3 or younger, averaging \$50 per month, compared to 36 percent of teenagers, averaging \$71 per month. Some of this difference has to do with the existence and amount of formal child support orders; fathers owed support to 61 percent of the youngest children, averaging \$127 per month, compared to 83 percent of teenagers, averaging \$184 per month. In contrast to the results for formal

### Characteristics of noncustodial fathers in the sample:

- They had, on average, four children with three different mothers;
- Average age was 35 years;
- They generally had low levels of educational attainment—more than one-quarter had less than 12 years of education, and only 29 percent had more than a high school diploma or a GED;
- Forty-four percent had not worked in the prior month, and only 18 percent had earned more than \$800 in that month;
- More than three-quarters had been convicted of a crime;
- One-fifth had experienced depression;
- Fifty-seven percent identified as non-Hispanic black or African American, 24 percent as non-Hispanic white, and 13 percent as Hispanic or Latino; and
- More than half had never been married, while only 11 percent were currently married.

**Table 1. The likelihood and amount of formal child support increase with child's age, while the likelihood and amount of informal cash and in-kind support decrease.**

Variable	Child Age 0-3	Child Age 4-6	Child Age 7-12	Child Age 13+
	Mean/Percent	Mean/Percent	Mean/Percent	Mean/Percent
Paid formal cash support in last month	24.5%	32.3%	33.6%	35.9%
Average amount of formal support paid last month	\$49.70	\$68.70	\$69.90	\$70.50
Paid informal cash support in last month	52.7%	39.8%	37.1%	34.2%
Average amount of informal support paid last month	\$71.50	\$55.00	\$47.20	\$43.70
Provided informal in-kind support in last month	60.6%	50.4%	45.9%	35.6%
Average amount of informal in-kind support provided last month	\$72.10	\$63.60	\$57.20	\$47.50
Paid formal, informal or in-kind support in last month	75.1%	70.0%	66.6%	61.9%
Average amount of total (formal, informal and in-kind) support paid last month	\$193.40	\$187.20	\$174.30	\$161.70

payments, we find that both the likelihood and amount of informal cash and in-kind support decline with child's age.

The variation in payment with age of child further highlights the importance of adjusting for age, among other factors. Table 2 shows regression results for the probability and amounts of support paid to the youngest and oldest child, with all control variables included. For formal support, we find that the youngest and oldest child are about equally likely to receive support, and to receive similar amounts. For informal and in-kind support, however, we find consistent evidence that fathers are more likely to provide support to their youngest child. The probability that fathers provide informal cash support to their youngest child is 6 percentage points higher than the probability that they provide it to their oldest child, and the probability that they provide in-kind support is 4 percentage points higher. The differences in the amounts provided, however, are small and statistically nonsignificant. When we consider all types of support together, we find that the probability that fathers provide any support to the youngest child is 5 percentage points higher, but again we detect no statistically significant difference in the total amount.

Looking at other factors that affect payment (that is, the variables included in the regression analysis as controls), we find that, consistent with prior research, fathers are less likely to

**Table 2. After controlling for child age and other factors, fathers are more likely to pay informal cash or in-kind support (but not formal support) to their youngest child, but there is no difference in the amounts paid.**

	Probability of payment (marginal effect)	Amount of payment (coefficient)
Formal child support	0.00	-9.16
Informal cash	0.06***	5.84
In-kind	0.04**	6.07
Any support	0.05***	2.51

**Notes:** Table shows regression results for youngest child relative to oldest. Each estimate is from a separate regression model. \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001.



provide informal or in-kind support to a custodial parent with a new partner, but are no less likely to provide formal support. This may suggest that fathers do not want to support other men's children.<sup>18</sup> Fathers who report a poorer quality relationship with the child's mother are more likely to pay formal support, but much less likely to provide informal or in-kind support. A more negative assessment of the quality of co-parenting is associated with less informal or in-kind support. These results are consistent with fathers having little discretion in directing formal support to particular children, but more discretion when it comes to informal and in-kind support.

Our sensitivity tests for the most part indicate that our results are robust. However, using some alternate approaches to considering child age, we find that children in the most recent family are not only more likely to receive informal support, but also to receive a greater amount of support.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusions and policy implications

Prior research has identified a pattern of “serial fatherhood,” with men having close contact with children from their most recent relationship, but little contact with children from earlier relationships.<sup>20</sup> Our result that fathers favor younger children over older children in their provision of informal support is consistent with this fathering pattern. It is possible that over time, relationships between noncustodial fathers and children tend to become less strong. Since fathers can choose whether or not to provide informal support to a given child (while the distribution of formal support is out of their hands), they may opt to direct that informal support to more recent children with whom they have stronger relationships.

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Although fathers are more likely to provide informal support to their youngest nonresident child, the average amounts provided do not vary greatly between youngest and oldest children.

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Overall, however, our findings do not provide support for a literal version of trading families, in which nonresident fathers stop providing any resources to earlier families in favor of the newest one. In fact, we do not even find very strong support for a less extreme version of family trading, in which fathers provide substantially more resources to their youngest child. Although fathers are more likely to provide informal support to their youngest nonresident child, the average amounts provided do not vary greatly between youngest and oldest children.

This study does have several limitations, which should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, the data used are cross-sectional, meaning they capture information for our sample at a single point in time rather than following the fathers over time. While these data do allow us to assess whether and how much support fathers provide to oldest and youngest children at a point in time, they do not permit us to identify cause and effect. Second, we use fathers' self-reports of support payments, which may be exaggerated to cast them in a better light. Third, our sample includes fathers who are behind in paying child support. While this does limit the extent to which we can generalize these results to other groups of fathers, this population is of particular policy interest, and it is unusual to have a sample of such fathers that is of sufficient size to allow the identification of statistically significant differences.

Despite these constraints, our results have several policy implications. First, they suggest that the child support enforcement program, through which formal payments are channeled, and which is generally intended to ensure support to all noncustodial children, is indeed working as planned. Fathers appear to be choosing to prioritize more recent children through the only payment stream which allows discretion, informal support. If the distribution of formal child support also relied on parental preference, our results suggest that older children might be disadvantaged therein. Thus, given a policy goal of equitable parental responsibility for all nonresident children, our results caution against moving to a child support system such as that adopted in the United Kingdom that allows a greater degree of parental discretion in where child support payments are directed.<sup>21</sup>

Another important finding is that the amount of informal support reported by fathers—whether cash or in-kind—is substantial. The total amount of cash and in-kind informal support reported—\$122 to the youngest child and \$98 to the oldest child—greatly exceeds the \$62 to \$71 that fathers report paying through the formal child support system. If these self-reports are accurate, perhaps the child support system should look for ways to credit fathers for at least a portion of informal support provided.

Our findings also suggest several possible directions for future research. First, similar research could be done on the smaller population of noncustodial mothers, to identify the extent to which payments to multiple families differ from those of fathers. It would also be very helpful to know, given the high levels of informal (including in-kind) support reported by fathers in our sample: (1) how accurate these reports are; (2) what types of in-kind support are being provided; and (3) how these types of support affect child well-being. Future work could also examine the role of state guidelines for the amount of monthly child support ordered, use of enforcement tools, and other policies that are intended to support low-income fathers in the provision of formal child support payments and to promote involvement with their children.

Our study examines a very disadvantaged sample of low-income noncustodial fathers who are behind in their child support payments and tend to have spotty employment histories, low education levels, and criminal backgrounds. It is possible that the number and types of barriers that fathers face matter for the provision of formal and informal child support; we do not specifically test for such differential effects of cumulative disadvantage. Moreover, while we considered only the youngest and oldest nonresident children in this study, future work should also look at the effect on payments of intervening children. Finally, while this study looked solely at financial contributions, an examination of how and how often fathers interact with their children in different families could help us gain a better understanding of how fathers' behaviors affect child well-being. ■

*Lawrence M. Berger is director of IRP and Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor of Social Work at the University of Wisconsin–Madison; Maria Cancian is Dean of the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University and an IRP Affiliate and former director; Angela Guarin is a Graduate Student in the school of Social Work at the University of Wisconsin–Madison; Daniel R. Meyer is Professor of Social Work at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and an IRP Affiliate.*

<sup>21</sup>This article draws on L. M. Berger, M. Cancian, A. Guarin, and D. R. Meyer, “Do Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers Trade Families? Economic Contributions to Children in Multiple Families,” *Social Service Review* 93, No. 2 (June 2019): 183–217.

<sup>22</sup>M. Cancian and D. R. Meyer, “Who Owes What to Whom? Child Support Policy Given Multiple-Partner Fertility,” *Social Service Review* 85, No. 4 (2011): 587–617.

<sup>23</sup>Cancian and Meyer, “Who Owes What to Whom?”



<sup>4</sup>For example, see S. Garasky, E. Peters, L. Argys, S. Cook, L. Nepomnyaschy, and E. Sorensen, “Measuring Support to Children by Nonresident Fathers,” in *Handbook of Measurement Issues in Family Research*, eds. S. L. Hofferth and L. M. Casper (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>L. Nepomnyaschy and I. Garfinkel, “Child Support Enforcement and Fathers’ Contributions to their Nonmarital Children,” *Social Service Review* 84, No. 3 (2010): 341–380.

<sup>6</sup>Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel, “Child Support Enforcement and Fathers’ Contributions.”

<sup>7</sup>R. B. Mincy and E. J. Sorensen, “Deadbeats and Turnips in Child Support Reform,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 17, No. 1 (1998): 44–51.

<sup>8</sup>D. R. Meyer and M. Cancian, “I’m Not Supporting His Kids’: Nonresident Fathers’ Contributions Given Mothers’ New Fertility,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 74, No. 1 (2012): 132–151; M. Sinkewicz, Marilyn and I. Garfinkel, “Unwed Fathers’ Ability to Pay Child Support: New Estimates Accounting for Multiple-Partner Fertility,” *Demography* 46, No. 2 (2009): 247–263.

<sup>9</sup>Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel, “Child Support Enforcement and Fathers’ Contributions.”

<sup>10</sup>L. M. Berger and S. H. Bzostek, “Young Adults’ Roles as Partners and Parents in a Context of Family Complexity,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 654, No. 1 (2014): 87–109.

<sup>11</sup>L. M. Berger, M. Cancian, and D. R. Meyer, “Maternal Re-Partnering and New-Partner Fertility: Associations with Nonresident Father Investments in Children,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 34, No. 2 (2012): 426–436.

<sup>12</sup>Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel, “Child Support Enforcement and Fathers’ Contributions.”

<sup>13</sup>Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel, “Child Support Enforcement and Fathers’ Contributions”; Meyer and Cancian, “I’m Not Supporting His Kids.”

<sup>14</sup>Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel, “Child Support Enforcement and Fathers’ Contributions”; Berger, Cancian, and Meyer, “Maternal Re-Partnering and New-Partner Fertility”; L. Tach, K. Edin, H. Harvey, and B. Bryan, “The Family-Go-Round: Family Complexity and Father Involvement from a Father’s Perspective,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 654, No. 1 (2014): 169–184.

<sup>15</sup>M. Lino, K. Kuczynski, N. Rodriguez, and T. Schap, “Expenditures on Children by Families, 2015,” Miscellaneous Publication No. 1528–2015, United States Department of Agriculture Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion: Washington, DC, 2017.

<sup>16</sup>We use data from seven of the eight CSPED states: California, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. The eighth state, Texas, used a shorter version of the survey that does not include many of the measures used in our analysis.

<sup>17</sup>Garasky et al., “Measuring Support to Children by Nonresident Fathers.”

<sup>18</sup>Meyer and Cancian, “I’m Not Supporting His Kids.”

<sup>19</sup>See full paper for more detail: Berger, Cancian, Guarin, and Meyer, “Do Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers Trade Families?”

<sup>20</sup>K. Edin and T. J. Nelson, *Doing the Best I Can: Fatherhood in the Inner City* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); Tach et al., “The Family-Go-Round.”

<sup>21</sup>In the United Kingdom parents make their own arrangements about child support, including the level to be transferred and how it will be transferred; parents can thus come to their own agreements whether children from one family should be treated differently from children in another family. The child support agency only becomes involved if parents cannot come to agreement, and then they must pay to use the services of the agency.

**Type of analysis:** Logit and ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions

**Data source:** Baseline survey from the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED), which collected information on noncustodial parents’ demographic and socioeconomic characteristics; economic stability; children and relationships; and other background measures.

**Type of data:** Survey

**Unit of analysis:** Father-child pairs

**Sample definition:** Two observations (of support provided for youngest and oldest nonresidential children from different families) for each of 2,765 noncustodial fathers who:

- Had children with more than one partner;
- Had at least two nonresident children of different ages from different partners; and
- Had complete information on all key variables.

**Time frame:** Surveys were administered at CSPED randomization during the October 2013 through September 2016 enrollment period. Data on formal and informal child support cover the 30 days prior to survey administration.

**Limitations:**

- Survey data on in-kind support do not identify whether and how the types of in-kind support provided to children vary by age;
- Cross-sectional data (data collected at a particular point in time) limit causal inference;
- Fathers’ report of payments may be exaggerated; and
- Results are for a sample of disadvantaged noncustodial fathers and may not be generalizable to disadvantaged noncustodial mothers or other populations.