

**Highlighting New
Poverty Research****by Robert Plotnick,
Irwin Garfinkel, Sara
McLanahan and
Inhoe Ku**

“The Impact of Child Support Enforcement Policy on Nonmarital Childbearing,” published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2006).

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The Impact of Child Support Enforcement Policy on Nonmarital Childbearing

Background. Researchers have focused considerable attention on how public policies affect women’s decision-making regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use, abortion and marriage. However, decisions about sexual relations and marriage involve two persons rather than one, and government policies may also influence men’s reproductive behavior. This new research by Robert Plotnick, Irwin Garfinkel, Sara McLanahan and Inhoe Ku measures how state child support policies may reduce nonmarital childbearing by creating economic disincentives to unwed fatherhood.

For women, better child support enforcement may lower the costs of unwed childbearing, creating an incentive to have children outside of marriage. Yet this incentive only exists for women who are not on welfare, since child support payments for women on welfare are used to offset the benefits they receive from the state. For a woman on welfare, better enforcement of child support laws does not improve her standard of living, and consequently is unlikely to influence her reproductive decision-making. For men however, the disincentive to become an unwed, nonresident parent may be compelling if better child support enforcement increases the expected costs of fatherhood.

Methods. Plotnick and colleagues use data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) for the period 1980 to 1993 to investigate the hypothesis that child support enforcement reduces incentives to nonmarital childbearing, particularly among women likely to use public assistance. They estimate a discrete time logit hazard model of whether a woman has a birth while unmarried at any time between the ages of 15 and 45, using a sample of 5,195 women who report 1,220 non marital births over the course of 22,107 observed years of risk. In addition to family and individual characteristics, the models include four measures of state level child support enforcement, two measures of restrictions on abortion, a measure of the size of welfare benefits, as well as state and time fixed effects.

Key Findings. The authors find that women living in states with more effective child support enforcement are less likely to bear children when unmarried, especially if they are young, never-married and black or Hispanic. This finding is consistent with expectations since these women are more likely (than older, divorced, and white women) to receive welfare if they become unwed mothers. Because of their status as welfare recipients, any economic incentive for childbearing resulting from child support enforcement is dwarfed by economic disincentives for their male partners. The potential impact of better enforcement is considerable. During the period of the study, if every state enforced child support at least as well as the state at the 70th percentile, the probability of an unmarried birth would have been 15% lower. Shifting more of the costs of childbearing from unmarried women to their partners by means of stronger child support enforcement may be an effective way to reduce nonmarital childbearing – an outcome that teen pregnancy and childbirth prevention programs have found difficult to generate and sustain.

Poverty Research Flash

The West Coast Poverty Center serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and effective approaches to reducing it in the west coast states. The Center, located at the University of Washington, is one of three regional poverty centers funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Education (ASPE). More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: www.wcpc.washington.edu

Poverty Research Flash 2007-03

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For more information about this study, see inside.