



NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
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# Child Support 101

An Introductory Course for Legislators

## Lesson One

Why Do We Need Child  
Support?

# WHY DO WE NEED CHILD SUPPORT?

## WE NEED CHILD SUPPORT BECAUSE...

- Approximately half of all children spend time in a single-parent home.
- Children with one uninvolved or absent parent tend to have more behavioral and emotional problems than children who are raised in two-parent families.
- Despite a healthy economy, millions of American children live in poverty, and most of these children are living in single-parent households.

## CHILD SUPPORT AFFECTS MARRIAGE AND FAMILIES...

- Strong child support programs have been shown to keep families together.
- Higher support awards can mean lower divorce rates. Parents are forced to consider the full ramifications of divorce or separation.
- Fathers who pay child support are more likely to remain involved in their children's lives.
- Payment of child support decreases conflict between parents.

## CHILD SUPPORT AFFECTS STATES...

- States become surrogate guardians for kids with problems; kids who receive child support have fewer problems.
- Immediate savings are realized as families become less reliant on TANF, food stamps and Medicaid.
- Savings also are realized on future costs of juvenile and criminal court processing, special education resources and mental health services.

## DOES THE AMOUNT OF SUPPORT PAID MATTER?

## WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL LONG-TERM BENEFITS OF A STRONG CHILD SUPPORT PROGRAM?

## HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE CHILD SUPPORT PROGRAM NATIONWIDE?

Call the Child Support Project at (303) 830-2200 or visit our website, <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/cs.htm> for the answers to these questions and more!

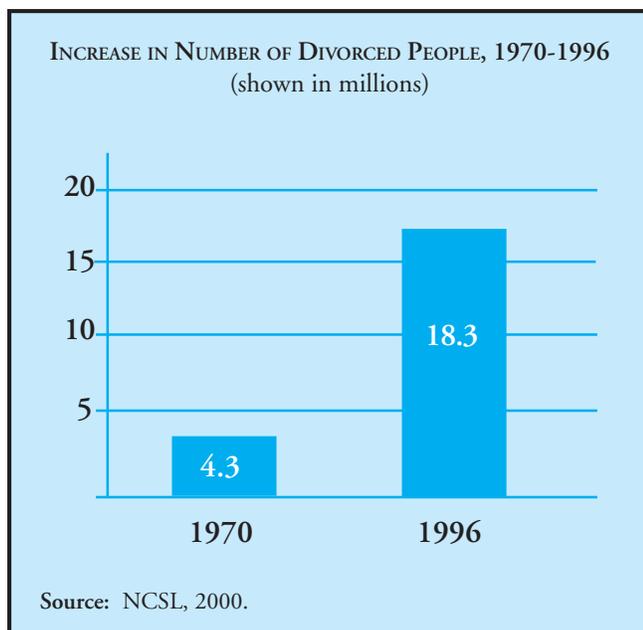
## Lesson One

# WHY DO WE NEED CHILD SUPPORT?

Approximately half of all children today will spend time in a single-parent home, evenly divided between those whose parents separated or divorced and those whose parents were never married.

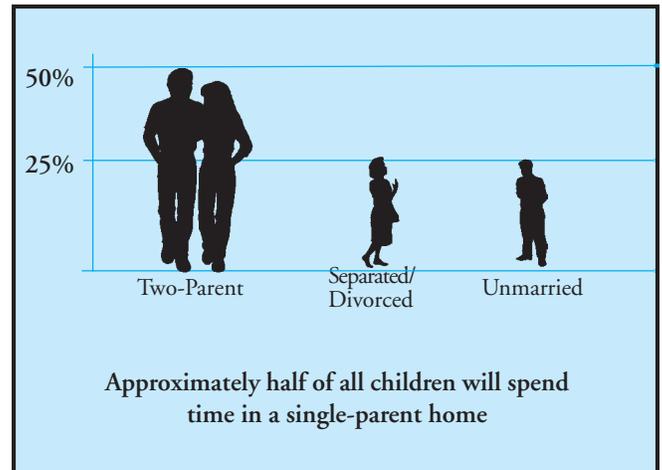
Between 1970 and 1996, the number of divorced people more than quadrupled, while the number of never-married adults more than doubled.

During the same period, the proportion of children under 18 years of age living with one parent grew from 12 percent to 28 percent.

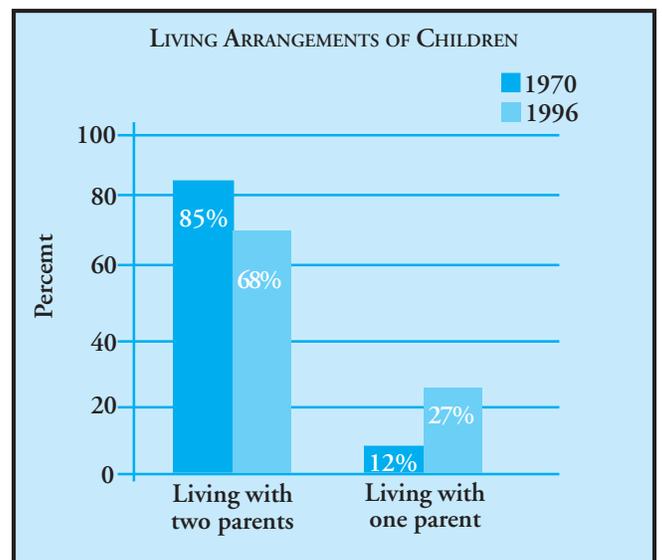


More than 3 million children under age 18 live only with their fathers; approximately 46 percent of these dads were *divorced*, 31 percent were *never married*, 19 percent were *separated*, and 4 percent were *widowed*.

The percent of single-parent families in 1995 ranged from 60 percent in Washington, D.C., to 14 percent in Utah. Most states have a rate of approximately 25 percent.



The marriage disruption rate nationally may be as high as 64 percent. Mothers head 80 percent of single-parent households nationwide. Although most custodial parents are mothers, a 1998 Census Bureau report shows single-parent households are increasingly headed by fathers.



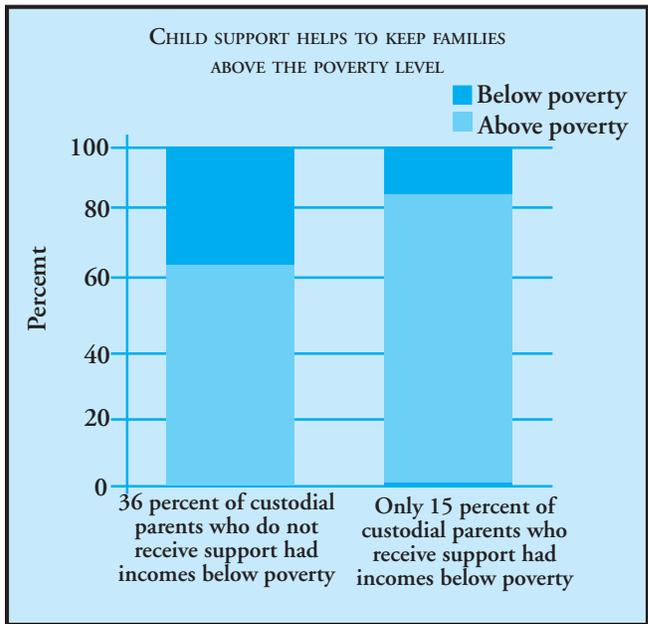
A recent California study found that more children in the state relied on the child support program than on any other state program, with the exception of the public school system.

Children from single-parent homes tend to have more behavioral and emotional problems than children raised in two-parent families. Analysis and summary of 92 studies of children found that parental divorce is associated with negative outcomes in academic achievement, psychological adjustment, personal conduct, self-esteem and social relationships.

Child support makes a big difference in the income of single-parent families. According to 1997 census data, the poverty rate for custodial parents due child support who did not receive any payments was 36 percent, but only 15 percent of custodial parents who received all the child support due to them had incomes below the poverty level.

**CHILDREN LIVING IN SINGLE-PARENT HOMES WITH ONE UNINVOLVED PARENT ARE:**

- *More likely to experience health and behavioral problems*
- *More likely to become teen parents*
- *Twice as likely to live in poverty*
- *More likely to run away from home*
- *Twice as likely to drop out of high school*
- *If boys: more likely to abuse drugs*
- *If girls: more likely to commit suicide*
- *If boys: twice as likely to commit a crime*



Despite a healthy economy, millions of American children live in poverty, and most of these children are living in single-parent households. Almost 20 percent of children were considered “poor” in 1998, and the proportion of families living in extreme poverty doubled from 5 percent in 1975 to 10 percent in 1992.

## HOW DOES A LACK OF CHILD SUPPORT AFFECT THE STATE?

The state becomes surrogate guardian for kids with problems. There are strong fiscal incentives for states to make a commitment to child support programs. States realize immediate cost-avoidance savings as families become self-sufficient and less reliant on other state programs such as TANF, food stamps and Medicare. States also realize savings on future costs of child well-being through lower juvenile and criminal court costs, special education resources and mental health expenditures.

One in four American children lives with only one parent.

One in five children receives food stamps.

## SAVINGS IN TWO STATES

- A **Michigan** study showed including medical support orders with child support orders resulted in Medicaid savings of \$1,550 per person in FY 1997, or \$228 million in federal and state savings.
- A **Washington** study showed investment in resources that led to good child support collections generated a cost-avoidance savings of \$5.5 million in reduced custodial parent welfare benefits over a three-year period.

## HOW DOES CHILD SUPPORT AFFECT MARRIAGE AND FAMILIES?

*Child support affects original families.* Strong child support programs have been correlated with a slight negative impact on family dissolution. Higher child support awards force parents to consider the full ramifications of any decision to divorce or separate.

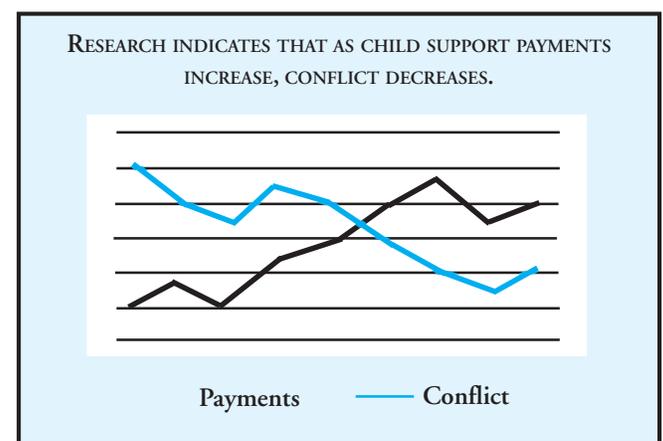
*Effects of child support on second families.* Among fathers who remarry, stricter enforcement of child support has no significant negative effects on the likelihood that they will father new children. Among women who married twice, 35 percent of total births to those women occurred in second marriages. Research indicates that child support creates no statistically significant economic effect on second families. A recent fatherhood study suggests that poor second families will continue to be poor, but that new poor families will not be created due to child support payments. If income-based guidelines are being properly applied, this should always be the case.

*Child support affects level of conflict between parents.* Fathers who paid no child support reported the least conflict, however, among low-income fathers, those paying at least some support are less likely to experi-

ence conflict. Among fathers who paid at least some child support, the amount of support paid was inversely related to the amount of conflict between the parents.

*Child support affects involvement and influence of non-custodial fathers.* Fathers who pay child support are more likely to visit their child, to see their child more frequently, and to influence how their child is raised, regardless of how much support they pay. Custodial parents accord greater legitimacy to non-custodial parents' participation in child-rearing decisions when they pay child support. Research shows that payment of child support has a greater influence on contact with children than contact has on payment of child support.

*Child support affects noncustodial parents differently.* Policymakers are increasingly distinguishing between those obligors who have the ability to pay child support but refuse to do so, and those obligors who are financially unable to meet their child support obligation. Almost 37 percent of young noncustodial fathers are impoverished, 30 percent did not work in 1990. More than half of them have not completed high school, and have never married. More common is the delinquent parent who is financially able but does not pay support. In 1990, more than 70 percent of delinquent obligors were working the entire year



and earned, on average, about \$20,000. Recognition of the differences in types of obligors has led policymakers to develop a variety of programs to encourage child support compliance and parental involvement.

## DOES IT MATTER HOW MUCH CHILD SUPPORT IS PAID?

Studies show a positive relationship between the amount of child support that noncustodial parents pay, and their children's behavior and school achievement. In addition to improving financial stability and emotional well-being, payment of child support may also have symbolic value for children, indicating a parent's concern and reinforcing the beneficial effects of the greater amount of time that parents who pay support spend with their children.

Research demonstrates that the amount of child support paid was positively correlated to the amount of influence the parent had in child-rearing matters, and to the frequency of visits with the child. Higher child support guidelines have not been shown to result in fewer child support collections.

## WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL LONG-TERM BENEFITS OF A STRONG CHILD SUPPORT PROGRAM?

*Payment of child support fosters better relationships between parents and children.* A strong child support program creates a disincentive for marriage dissolution. It creates role models for personal and parental responsibility for future generations. Studies have found a link between payment of child support and parental involvement. Payment of child support may decrease conflict between parents.

*Child support helps reduce the child poverty rate and associated future economic and social costs for children.*

Child support helps create and maintain family self-sufficiency. States are now reporting that regular, reasonable child support awards can make the difference between reliance on the state, and self-sufficiency. The key to self-sufficiency is consistent, reliable, reasonable support payments. Above a certain threshold, it is more important that payments are reasonable and regular than that they be large.

## HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE CHILD SUPPORT PROGRAM?

According to the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement preliminary data for fiscal year 1999, state agencies:

- Collected \$15.8 billion, an increase of 98.9 percent since 1992 and 10.4 percent since 1998.
- Provided services to customers in more than 16 million cases.
- Established paternity for more than 1.5 million children.

Current statistics are promising, but more needs to be done. Collection rates hover around 37 percent, and enforcement is especially difficult for low-income families in which the obligor may not have a steady income or additional assets. States and communities are experimenting with a variety of programs to assist low-income parents in meeting their child support obligations. Many new innovations—such as state-wide automated systems, new enforcement tools and programs to help low-income parents meet their obligations—are expected to result in improved performance in the years to come.

## SELECTED RESOURCES

Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Division, Bureau of the Census. *March 1996 Population Survey*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, March 1996.

Garfinkel, Irwin, et al. *Fathers Under Fire*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998.

Harper, Michelle, and Sharon Vandivere. *Research Brief: Poverty, Welfare, and Children: A Summary of the Data*, Child Trends: 1999.

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National Center for Children in Poverty. *Map and Track, State Initiatives to Encourage Responsible Fatherhood*. New York, N.Y.: National Center for Children in Poverty, 1997.

National Child Support Enforcement Association. "Deadbeats and Turnips," *Child Support Quarterly* (Summer 1998).

Sorensen, Elaine. *Child Support Is Working Better Than We Think*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1999.

Turetsky, Vicki. *Income Levels of IV-D Families*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy, 1999.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement. *Child Support Enforcement FY 1999 Preliminary Data Report*. Washington, D.C.: DHHS, 2000.

The Child Support Project is part of NCSL's Children and Families Program. For more information about child support and custody/visitation issues, call Christi Goodman or Stephanie Walton at (303) 364-7700, or e-mail them at [christi.goodman@ncsl.org](mailto:christi.goodman@ncsl.org)

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Visit NCSL's Child Support Project web site at <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/cs.htm>



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## The NCSL Child Support Project

NCSL's **Child Support Project** is a resource available to state legislators and staff nationwide. Project staff are available to provide **on-site technical assistance** to legislators, legislative staff, task forces, work groups, etc. This assistance can take many forms—from an educational presentation for legislators, staff and other state leaders, to testimony before a legislative committee, to assistance in drafting legislation, to a roundtable discussion with experts we've brought in to assist in understanding a particular issue. NCSL provides on-site technical assistance visits at no charge to your state and project staff work diligently to accommodate legislative calendars and legislators' schedules.

**Other services** provided by the project include:

Responding to **requests for information** or research on child support issues;

Publishing **new materials** such as *State Legislative Reports*, *Legisbriefs*, and an annual *Legislative Summary* on important and timely issues in child support;

Maintaining a **webpage** dedicated to child support issues and state legislation in this area. Visit us at [www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/cs.htm](http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/cs.htm).

Hosting the **Child Support Listserv**—an email exchange service that allows the NCSL Child Support Project to disseminate child support-related news and updates to listserve members. The listserve enables state officials and policymakers to share ideas, problems and solutions with one another easily and quickly. To subscribe to the Child Support Listserv, contact Mariquita Lucero by email: [mari.lucero@ncsl.org](mailto:mari.lucero@ncsl.org), or by phone: (303) 364-7700.

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