Understanding Child Support Trajectories

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ABSTRACT

Fathers’ financial contributions to nonresident children are a key focus of policy and research and have been found to improve children’s economic circumstances and well-being. However, little is known about how fathers’ contributions change as children age and by parents’ relationship histories. This study, using longitudinal data on children from birth to age 15, examines the trajectories of formal, informal, and total cash support that mothers receive from nonresident fathers. Using the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, patterns of child support payments for never-cohabiting, previously cohabiting, and previously-married parents are analyzed for up to 15 years since parents’ separation. Analyses are based on 11,886 repeated observations (3,331 unique observations). Preliminary results indicate similar trajectories by relationship history in the short-term, but differences emerging in the longer-term, with decreases in total support among the previously-married (consistent with prior research) and increases among the unmarried.