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Child Support: An Overview of Census Bureau Data on Recipients

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Summary

The national Census Bureau data show that in 2013, 13.4 million parents had custody of children under the age of 21 while the other parent lived elsewhere, and the aggregate amount of child support received was \$22.5 billion. In 2013, almost 83% of custodial parents were mothers. Of all custodial parents, 48% were white (non-Hispanic), 25% were black, 23% were Hispanic, 16% were married, 33% were divorced, 38% were never married, 13% did not have a high school diploma, almost 20% had at least a bachelor's degree, 50% worked full-time year-round, 29% had family income below poverty, and nearly 43% received some type of public assistance. In 2013, 2.6 million (40%) of the 6.5 million custodial parents with child support orders actually received the full amount of child support that was owed to them. The average yearly child support payment received by custodial parents with payments was \$5,181 for mothers and \$6,526 for fathers. These full or partial payments represented about 16% of the custodial mothers' total yearly income and 9% of the custodial fathers' yearly income. Compared to 1993 Census data, less child support was received by custodial parents in 2013 (\$24.8 billion in 1993 versus \$22.5 billion in 2013; in 2013 dollars). However, a higher percentage of those owed child support actually received all that they were due (36.9% in 1993 versus 45.6% in 2013).

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Introduction

The U.S. Census Bureau periodically collects national survey information on child support. By interviewing a random sample of single-parent families, the Census Bureau is able to generate an array of data that is useful in assessing the performance of noncustodial parents in paying their child support.¹ Although the Census Bureau has been collecting child support information in a special Child Support Supplement to the April Current Population Survey (CPS) biennially since 1978, the supplement survey has changed significantly over the years. According to the Census Bureau, the most recent data, from 2013,² are comparable only back to 1993. During the early years of the survey, information was collected only from custodial mothers. Beginning with the 1991 data, information was also collected from custodial fathers. This report presents unsegmented data with respect to custodial mothers and fathers (i.e., custodial parents' data). The survey population includes all persons who have their own children under the age of 21 living with them, while the other parent lives outside the household.

The Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program was enacted in 1975 as part of P.L. 93-647 (Title IV-D of the Social Security Act). It is a federal-state program whose purpose is to help strengthen families by securing financial support for children from their noncustodial parent on a consistent and continuing basis, and by helping some families to remain self-sufficient and off public assistance by providing the requisite CSE services. The CSE program is administered by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and funded by general revenues. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands operate CSE programs and are entitled to federal matching funds. The CSE program provides seven major services on behalf of children: (1) parent location, (2) paternity establishment, (3) establishment of child support orders, (4) review and modification of child support orders, (5) collection of child support payments, (6) distribution of child support payments, and (7) establishment and enforcement of medical child support. The CSE program is estimated to handle at least 50% of all child support cases; the remaining cases are handled by private attorneys, collection agencies, or through mutual agreements between the parents.

In FY2013, the CSE program collected \$28.0 billion in child support payments (from noncustodial parents) and served 15.6 million child support cases. The national Census Bureau data show that the aggregate amount of child support received in 2013 was \$22.5 billion, and that 13.4 million parents had custody of children under the age of 21 while the other parent lived elsewhere.³

In 2013, almost 83% of custodial parents were mothers. Of all custodial parents, 48% were white (non-Hispanic), 25% were black, 23% were Hispanic, 16% were married, 33% were divorced, 38% were never married, 13% did not have a high school diploma, almost 20% had at least a

¹ The 2013 data in this report are from the Child Support Supplement (CSS) to the April 2014 Current Population Survey (CPS). This supplement provides demographic information about custodial parents as of 2014, as well as child support and other income or program data for the 2013 calendar year.

² U.S. Census Bureau, "Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2013," *Current Population Reports*, P60-255, by Timothy Grall, January 2016, <http://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/cs13.html>. To view detailed tables, see <http://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/cs13.html> and click on 2013 detailed tables' icon.

³ Note that the OCSE defines a CSE "case" as a noncustodial parent (mother, father, or putative/alleged father) who is now or eventually may be obligated under law for the support of a child or children receiving services under the CSE program. If the noncustodial parent owes support for two children by different women, that would be considered two cases; if both children have the same mother, that would be considered one case. Thus, the CSE program caseload may be larger than the national number of custodial parents potentially eligible for child support payments.

bachelor's degree, 50% worked full-time year-round, 29% had family income below poverty, and nearly 43% received some type of public assistance (i.e., Medicaid, food stamps, public housing or rent subsidy, TANF, or general assistance).

Child Support Awarded and Received

Table 1 summarizes several child support indicators from biennial survey data for selected years from 1993 through 2013. The table shows that the likelihood of having a child support award, being legally entitled to a child support payment, and actually receiving at least one child support payment decreased over the 21-year period from 1993 through 2013. In contrast, the percentage of custodial parents (owed child support) who received the full amount of the child support that they were owed increased by almost 24%, from 37% in 1993 to 46% in 2013.

Table I. Child Support Award and Receipt, Selected Years, 1993-2013

	1993	1995	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	2013	Percentage Change (1993-2013)
All custodial parents (numbers in thousands)	13,690	13,715	13,949	13,529	13,383	13,951	13,605	13,743	13,672	14,440	13,418	-2.0%
Custodial parents awarded child support (thousands)	7,800	7,967	7,876	7,945	7,916	8,376	7,802	7,428	6,914	7,057	6,528	-16.3%
Percent awarded child support	57.0%	58.1	56.5%	58.7%	59.1%	60.0%	57.3%	54.0%	50.6%	48.9%	48.7%	-14.6%
Custodial parents due/owed child support (numbers in thousands)	6,688	6,958	7,018	6,791	6,924	7,256	6,809	6,375	5,897	6,262	5,697	-14.8%
Percent of those owed who received any payment	75.8%	75.7	75.3%	73.7%	73.9%	76.5%	77.2%	76.3%	70.8%	74.1%	74.1%	-2.2%
Percent of those owed who received full payment	36.9%	42.3	46.2%	45.1%	44.7%	45.3%	46.9%	46.8%	41.2%	43.4%	45.6%	23.6%
Average child support due per year (2013 \$s)	\$5,685	\$6,173	\$6,003	\$6,648	\$6,637	\$6,465	\$6,663	\$6,011	\$6,467	\$6,268	\$5,774	1.6%
Average child support received per year (2013 \$s)	\$3,712	\$4,068	\$4,000	\$3,902	\$4,158	\$4,432	\$4,347	\$3,768	\$3,947	\$3,906	\$3,953	6.5%

	1993	1995	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	2013	Percentage Change (1993-2013)
Aggregate Child Support Payments (in billions of constant 2013 dollars)												
Child support due	\$38.0	\$43.0	\$42.1	\$45.2	\$45.9	\$46.9	\$45.3	\$38.3	\$38.1	\$39.3	\$32.9	-13.4%
Child support received	\$24.8	\$28.3	\$28.1	\$26.6	\$28.8	\$32.2	\$29.6	\$24.0	\$23.2	\$24.4	\$22.5	-9.3%
Child support deficit	\$13.2	\$14.7	\$14.0	\$18.6	\$17.1	\$14.7	\$15.7	\$14.3	\$14.9	\$14.8	\$10.4	-21.2%
Percent of amount due actually received	65.3%	65.8%	66.7%	58.8%	62.7%	68.7%	65.3%	62.7%	60.9%	62.1%	68.4%	4.7%

Source: Table prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 1996-2014. All child support income amounts were adjusted by the Census Bureau or CRS to reflect 2013 dollars using the CPI-U-RS. Custodial parents include all persons living with their own children who are under the age of 21 while the other parent lives somewhere else.

Note: The difference between the number of custodial parents who were awarded child support and those who were due or owed child support is composed of persons who were no longer owed child support because their child was (or children were) too old, the noncustodial parent had died, the family lived together for part of the year before the survey interview, or some other reason. (To clarify, in 2013, 6.5 million custodial parents were awarded child support but only 5.7 million were due (or owed) child support. The 0.8 million-person difference was composed of persons who were no longer due child support because of the reasons listed above.)

In 2013, about 49% of the 13.4 million custodial parents (with children under the age of 21) were awarded child support.⁴ Of those who were actually *due* child support payments (5.7 million), about 74% of them received at least one payment and almost 46% received all that they were owed. In 2013, only 2.6 million (19%) of the 13.4 million custodial parents *eligible* for child support actually received the full amount of child support that was owed to them. In 2013, the average child support payment received by custodial parents amounted to \$3,953,⁵ 6.5% higher than the average child support payment in 1993 (\$3,712).

In 2013, 68% of the \$32.9 billion in aggregate child support due was actually paid. In 1993, 65% of the \$38 billion (adjusted for inflation, in 2013 dollars) in child support due was paid. During the 21-year period 1993 through 2013, after adjusting for inflation, aggregate child support due started at \$38.0 billion in 1993, fluctuated to a high of \$46.9 billion in 2003, and dropped to a low of \$32.9 billion in 2013. Over the entire period, aggregate child support due decreased by 13%, total child support received decreased 9%, and the amount left unpaid decreased 21% (see **Table 1**).

Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Custodial Parents Who Were Awarded or Who Received Child Support Payments in 2013

While sex, race, marital status, and education are significant factors in predicting whether a custodial parent will be issued a child support order, award rates tend to be significantly lower than receipt rates. For example, although female custodial parents were almost 1.7 times more likely to be awarded child support in 2013 as their male counterparts, among parents who were owed/due child support, both had at least a 73% chance of actually receiving child support payments. (See **Table 2**.) Moreover, in 2013, 37% of black custodial parents were awarded child support compared to 56% of white custodial parents. Even so, nearly 65% of black custodial parents who were owed/due child support actually received child support payments and 79% of white custodial parents who were owed child support actually received child support payments in 2013. Similarly, while 42% of never-married parents were awarded child support in 2013, almost 68% of never-married parents who were owed child support actually received child support payments in 2013. Also, 38% of custodial parents without a high school diploma were awarded

⁴ Conversely, the reader should note that many custodial parents do not receive child support. In 2013, this included 51% of custodial parents who were not awarded child support and 11% of custodial parents who did not receive any child support payments even though they had been awarded child support. In 2013, this number amounted to almost 8.4 million custodial parents. Some of the reasons given as to why there was not a legal child support obligation included the following: the other parent provided what he or she could (37%); the other parent could not afford to pay (36%); the custodial parent did not feel the need to make it legal (36%); the custodial parent did not want the other parent to pay (24%); the custodial parent did not want to have contact with the other parent (20%); the child stayed with the other parent part of the time (19%); the custodial parent could not locate the other parent (18%); and paternity was not legally established (9%). Source: See Table 3 (p. 4) and Table 4 (p. 5), respectively at <http://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/cs13.html> of the detailed tables for 2013.

⁵ This amount reflects total child support payments received divided by the number of parents who *were owed/due* payments ($\$22,500,000,000/5,697,000=\$3,949$ —total different because of rounding). See Table 1 at <http://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/cs13.html> (p. 2 of 50 of the detailed tables for 2013). Note that **Table 2** of this report shows an average child support payment of \$5,333 for custodial parents who *actually received* at least one child support payment in 2013 ($\$22,500,000,000/4,222,000=\$5,329$ —total different because of rounding).

child support, while almost 62% of custodial parents without a high school diploma who were owed child support actually received child support.⁶

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Custodial Parents by Child Support Award and Receipt Status, 2013
(numbers in thousands)

	Total	% Awarded Child Support	Total Due Child Support	Custodial Parents Who Received at Least Some Child Support in 2013		
				% of Those Due Child Support	Average Child Support (\$)	Average Income (\$)
All custodial parents	13,418	48.7	5,697	74.1	5,333	37,367
Sex						
Male	2,350	31.4	648	73.9	6,526	70,758
Female	11,069	52.3	5,049	74.1	5,181	33,096
Race and Ethnicity						
White (non-Hispanic)	6,454	56.4	3,167	79.3	5,884	39,347
Black	3,393	37.4	1,138	64.5	3,601	29,711
Hispanic	3,103	44.0	1,164	72.0	4,640	33,687
Marital Status						
Married	2,131	51.3	971	75.2	5,185	31,463
Divorced	4,469	57.7	2,281	79.9	6,518	46,624
Separated	1,552	40.9	530	70.2	5,100	31,977
Never married	5,117	42.2	1,863	67.6	3,752	29,336
Educational Attainment						
No high school diploma	1,799	38.1	568	61.6	3,853	28,690
High school graduate	4,274	46.0	1,690	70.4	4,593	29,669
Some college—no degree	3,025	50.4	1,331	71.8	4,959	30,877
Associate's degree	1,681	54.6	801	83.1	5,403	36,040
Bachelor's degree or more	2,640	54.3	1,306	81.2	6,945	55,553
Economic Characteristics						
Family income below 2009 poverty level	3,859	45.0	1,474	66.4	4,396	8,927

⁶ See Table 4 at <http://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/cs13.html> (pp. 5 and 8 of 50 of the detailed tables for 2013).

	Total	% Awarded Child Support	Total Due Child Support	Custodial Parents Who Received at Least Some Child Support in 2013		
				% of Those Due Child Support	Average Child Support (\$)	Average Income (\$)
Worked full-time, year-round	6,660	49.4	2,922	76.7	5,241	53,433
Received public assistance	5,715	47.0	2,327	66.7	4,290	17,026

Source: Table prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 2014.

The pattern of receipt rates being higher than award rates also held for the economic factors listed in **Table 2**—in that once a child support obligation was awarded, the probability of actually receiving payments rose significantly for all categories of custodial parents. In 2013, 45% of custodial parents with incomes below the poverty level were awarded child support, and nearly 66% of those owed/due payments actually received child support payments. **Table 2** also shows that 49% of custodial parents who worked full-time year-round were awarded child support, while almost 77% of those owed received child support payments. Similarly, 47% of custodial parents who received public assistance were awarded child support, while nearly 67% of those who were owed child support payments actually received child support payments.⁷

Of the categories of custodial parents presented in **Table 2**, custodial parents who were divorced followed by custodial parents who were white (non-Hispanic) were the categories of parents most likely to be *awarded* child support. In 2013, 57.7% of custodial parents who were divorced and 56.4% of white (non-Hispanic) custodial parents were awarded child support. The table also shows that custodial parents with an associate’s degree who were owed/due child support was the category of parents most likely to *receive* child support payments in 2013. In 2013, 83.1% of custodial parents with an associate’s degree who were owed payments actually received child support payments.⁸

In 2013, the average yearly child support payment received by custodial parents with payments was \$5,333; \$5,181 for mothers and \$6,526 for fathers. These full or partial payments represented (on average) 14% of the custodial parent’s yearly income, 16% of the custodial mothers’ total yearly income, and 9% of the custodial fathers’.⁹

In 2013, for custodial parents with income below the poverty level, child support payments for those who received them made up, on average, 49% of their yearly income. In 2013, child support payments made up 13% of the yearly income of custodial parents without a high school diploma who were owed child support and who actually received full or partial payments. In 2013, child support represented about 18% of the income of the 2.6 million custodial parents who received all of the child support that they were owed.¹⁰

⁷ Public assistance program participation includes receiving at least one of the following: Medicaid, food stamps, public housing or rent subsidy, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or general assistance.

⁸ See Table 4 at <http://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/cs13.html> (pp. 5 and 8 of 50 of the detailed tables for 2013).

⁹ See Table 5 at <http://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/cs13.html> (p. 11 of 50 of the detailed tables for 2013).

¹⁰ See Table 6 at <http://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/cs13.html> (p. 17 of 50 of the detailed tables for 2013).

The Census Bureau data also include information on health insurance. In 2013, 54% of the 6.5 million custodial parents with child support awards had awards that included health insurance. The noncustodial parent provided the health insurance coverage in 51.1% of the awards with health insurance provisos and in 10.4% of the awards without health insurance stipulations. Moreover, the noncustodial parent provided health insurance coverage for 19.4% of the nearly 6.9 million custodial parents who did not have a child support award.¹¹ Overall, 3.5 million noncustodial parents provided health care for their children in 2013.¹² This represented 26.1% of the 13.4 million children under the age of 21 who were living with a custodial parent while their other parent lived elsewhere.

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¹¹ See Table 8 at <http://www.census.gov/people/childsupport/data/cs13.html> (p. 35 of 50 of the detailed tables for 2013).

¹² In 2013, 1.8 million noncustodial parents provided health care insurance in cases where it was stipulated in the child support agreement, almost 0.4 million provided health care insurance in cases where it was not required by the agreement, and 1.3 million provided health care insurance in cases where there was no child support agreement.