Myths about custodial fathers

Child support in the United States used to be straightforward: mothers were given custody of the children, and fathers, who normally had higher incomes, were ordered to pay child support. The situation may be growing more and more complex, however, as men increasingly receive custody of their children. Daniel R. Meyer, an IRP affiliate, and Steven Garasky, an economist at Iowa State University, have examined current trends in male custody and find that the reality differs in many respects from the common conceptions about custodial fathers. This article is based on their paper (see box, p. 14) exploring the myths about male custody.

Much has been written about the explosion in the number of single mothers and its detrimental effects on children, on economic security, and, indeed, on society. Very little, however, has been written about single fathers. Much has also been written about child support policies, but almost all discussions assume that it is the mothers who have custody of their children and that it is the fathers who are absent. Indeed, the major data source on child support—the Current Population Survey–Child Support Supplement—will finally include fathers beginning this year. Meyer and Garasky find that whenever the lack of attention on custodial-father families is mentioned, several reasons are given to explain why they do not need to be studied as extensively as female-headed families. These reasons are no longer valid. Among the myths that Meyer and Garasky dispel are the following: (1) custodial fathers always have high incomes; (2) there are not many custodial fathers; (3) most custodial fathers have remarried; (4) most custodial fathers are widowers, and all were married at some time; and (5) custodial fathers primarily receive custody of older boys.

Myth #1: Custodial fathers[1] have high incomes

A significant percentage of father-only families live in poverty. More than 18 percent of all father-only families are poor, and almost half of these have incomes that are less than 50 percent of the poverty line. Another 21 percent have incomes that are no more than twice the poverty line.[2] Even the poverty rate among fathers who are married but have custody of children from a previous relationship is high. Estimates based on data from the 1985 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) indicate that nearly 12 percent of the families of these fathers are impoverished, and another 26.6 percent have incomes that are between 101 percent and 200 percent of the poverty line.

Still, as is well known, an extremely high percentage of mother-only families (43 percent) live in poverty,[3] and the average income of father-only families is substantially higher than that of mother-only families. According to Meyer and Garasky, data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) indicate that in 1989 single fathers earned on average $24,178, whereas the average for single mothers was only $12,959. Never-married fathers earn 2.3 times as much as never-married mothers, and divorced fathers earn 1.5 times as much as divorced mothers.

Myth #2: There are not many custodial fathers

Many people think that the number of custodial fathers is so small that it is insignificant. In fact, some researchers use the terms "single-parent families" and "female-headed families" interchangeably, as if only women head one-parent families.[4] At one time, female-headed families made up such a large percentage of one-parent families that researchers could safely assume that they were representative of all single-parent families. Today, however, this may no longer be the case. According to data from the CPS, in 1989, there were 1.4 million father-only families, compared with 7.4 million mother-only families and 25.5 million two-parent families.[5] And although father-only families do constitute the smallest number of families with children in the United States, they have been growing at a faster rate than mother-only families and two-parent families. As indicated in Figure 1, between 1959 and 1989, the number of father-only families increased by almost 300 percent, with most of this increase occurring after 1973. The number of mother-only families increased by almost 200 percent during this same period, while the number of two-parent families remained the same.[6]

Myth #3: Most custodial fathers have remarried

Most custodial fathers are *not* currently married, although the percentage of custodial fathers who have remarried (41) is substantially higher than the percentage of custodial mothers who have done so (23).[7] What Meyer and Garasky could not determine from the SIPP data, however, was whether remarried custodial fathers obtained custody of their children before or after they married again. It is possible that many fathers wait until they have remarried and have a more "stable" home before they take custody of their children.

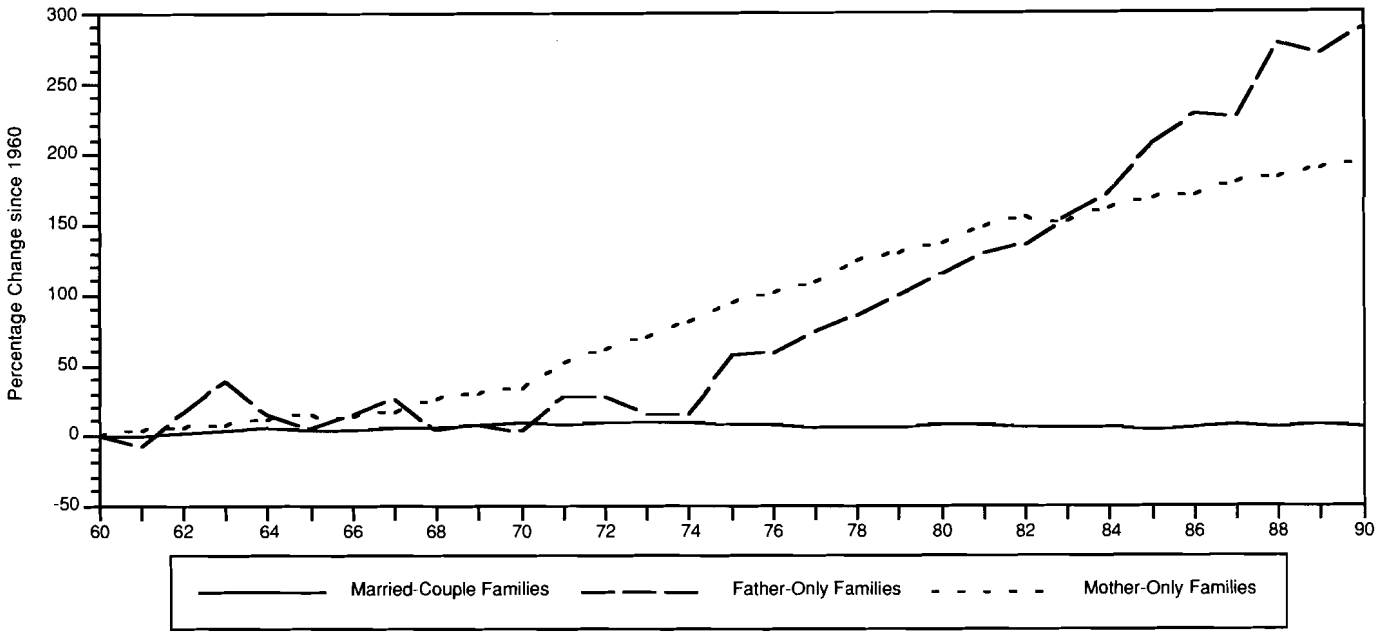

Figure 1. Growth among Family Types: Families with Children under 18.

Note: The figure includes the following: married-couple families with children under age 18; male householder, no wife present, with children under age 18; female householder, no husband present, with children under age 18. Widows and widowers are included. From 1979 on, unrelated subfamilies are not included.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P–60, No. 168, *Money Income and Poverty Status in the United States: 1989* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1990).

Myth #4: Most custodial fathers are widowers, and all were married at some time

At one time, many custodial fathers were widowers and most had once been married. In 1970, about a third of all children in father-only families lived with widowers, and only a few lived with fathers who had never been married.[8] But the number of children living with widowers decreased from 262,000 in 1970 to 150,000 in 1990, while the number living with never-married fathers increased dramatically, from 32,000 in 1970 to 488,000 in 1990.[9] The number of children living with divorced fathers has also risen substantially over this same period, from 168,000 to over 1 million.[10] Currently, of the children living in single-parent families headed by fathers, approximately 7.5 percent are in households headed by widowers, and 24.5 percent live in households headed by never-married fathers.[11]

Myth #5: Custodial fathers primarily receive custody of older boys

This myth really has two parts: first, that fathers primarily obtain custody of older children and, second, that fathers are more likely to receive custody of boys. It is true that the children living in father-only families are older than those living in mother-only families; still, 17.5 percent of single-father families include children younger than three, and about one-third contain a preschooler.[12] Similarly, although the children in father-only families are somewhat more likely to be boys, 44 percent of all children in such families are girls.[13]

Policy implications

Child support policies are often based on two assumptions: that the mother always receives custody of the children and that the noncustodial parent always has the higher income. While these assumptions are still true for most child support cases, they simply do not hold for a growing number of other cases. In light of the evidence presented here, Meyer and Garasky believe that child support policies should be reexamined to ensure equity when the custodial parent is the father or when the custodial parent has a higher income than the noncustodial parent. Rather than recommend new policies, Meyer and Garasky list the following areas of current policy that may need further scrutiny.

Setting the amount of child support awards

The states establish their own rules for determining the amount of child support awards. Currently, there are two approaches to setting award amounts. One approach maintains that noncustodial parents should share their income with their children; accordingly, states should order noncustodial parents to pay an amount in monthly child support that is equal to what they spent on their children per month when they were living with them. The other approach holds that the amount of a child support award should equal the cost of raising a child, and that if the custodial parent earns enough income to meet that cost, then the noncustodial parent should not be required to pay any child support. These two approaches have different

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implications when the noncustodial parent's income is lower than the custodial parent's: making noncustodial parents share their income with their children would lead to a positive award, even if the income of a noncustodial parent was small; making award amounts equal to the cost of raising a child could lead to no award at all if the custodial parent's income were deemed high enough to meet that cost.

Almost all states use the first approach and order noncustodial parents to share their income, however small, with their children. However, evidence indicates that the application of this approach varies with the gender of the noncustodial parent.[14] Specifically, regardless of how little a noncustodial father earns, he may be expected to provide some minimal amount of support for his children. Not all low-income, noncustodial mothers, however, are required to pay child support. Although at least one group of researchers argues that this is justified to offset the unfair treatment (e.g., lower wages for the same work) women otherwise receive at the hands of society,[15] Meyer and Garasky recommend that the decision concerning the amount of a child support award be made without respect to the gender of the noncustodial parent.

Establishing paternity

Until fairly recently, paternity could only be established through the courts, by legal proceedings. Today, however, in several states paternity can be established without the involvement of the judicial system; in fact, some states only require that a man sign a notarized document acknowledging that he is the father of the children in question; no further "proof" is needed. Because more and more fathers are receiving custody of their children, Meyer and Garasky commend these new policies that make it quick and easy to establish paternity and suggest that *all* states adopt procedures that enable paternity to be established in a simple and straightforward manner.

Future research on child custody issues

Currently, the United States does not have a federal child custody policy, and Meyer and Garasky do not believe one is needed. Most people believe that the courts are predisposed to giving custody to mothers. However, as the data that dispel the myths surrounding custodial fathers suggest, courts no longer automatically award sole physical and legal custody to mothers. Whether this benefits or harms families is under debate. What cannot be debated is the fact that further research is needed on the effects of different custody arrangements on the well-being of children. In particular, researchers should investigate the impact that particular custody arrangements have on the behavior, school performance, and health of children in one-parent families.[16]

Conclusion

Many child support policies were established under the assumption that women would always have sole physical and legal custody of their children. This assumption is no longer valid, however. Since 1973, the number of father-only families has increased at a faster rate than has the number of mother-only families, and today 15 percent of all single-parent families are headed by a father. In light of these developments, Meyer and Garasky argue that child support policies must be reexamined to ensure that they are appropriate for *all* the diverse custody arrangements that now exist. ■

[1]"Custodial fathers" refers to fathers who are not widowers and who have sole custody of their children; they live with their children, either alone or with a partner who is not the mother of the children. In this article, "father-only families" and "single-father families" are families that include only a father and the children he has custody of; "custodial-father families" are families that include a father, the children he has custody of, and an adult partner who is not the mother of the children. Custodial fathers may be in either type of family.

[2]Meyer and Garasky base these percentages on data from the 1990 Current Population Survey, which provides information that was current as of 1989. In 1988, the poverty line for a family of three was $9435.

[3]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 175, Table 4, *Poverty in the United States: 1990* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1991).

[4]For an example, see David T. Ellwood, *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). Also, Sara McLanahan and Karen Booth, in "Mother-Only Families: Problems, Prospects, and Politics" (*Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51 [August 1989], 557–580; available as IRP Reprint no. 611), state that their review of single-parent families focuses only on mother-only families because "the number of [father-only families] is still small—less than 10% of all one-parent families."

[5]U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Poverty in the United States: 1990*. Thus, father-only families make up 15 percent of all one-parent families.

[6]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 168, *Money Income and Poverty Status in the United States: 1989* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1990).

[7]Meyer and Garasky's tabulations based on SIPP data.

[8]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 212, *Marital Status and Family Status: March 1970* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1971); and Current Population Reports, Series P-20, Nos. 287, 365, 410, and 450, *Marital Status and Living Arrangements* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1975, 1981, 1986, and 1991).

[9]Ibid. In the CPS, the number of father-only families headed by men who have never been married is, surprisingly, much larger than anticipated. The SIPP estimate of the number of never-married fathers who head families is much smaller, about 100,000 in 1986, compared to 350,000 in the CPS in 1990. One reason for this discrepancy is that the number of never-married single fathers has grown rapidly during this time period: from the 1987 to the 1990 CPS the number increased from 209,000 to 345,000, a 65 percent increase in three years. Although some of this increase may be due to the increase in children living with parents who cohabitate, even in 1990 only one-third of all never-married fathers had a female partner living with them, and in some of these instances that partner may not have been the children's mother.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Meyer and Garasky's tabulations based on 1987 CPS data.

[13]Meyer and Garasky's tabulations based on 1990 CPS data.

[14]See Donna Hendrickson Christensen, Carla M. Dahl, and Kathryn D. Rettig, "Noncustodial Mothers and Child Support: Examining the Larger Context," *Family Relations*, 39 (1990), 388–394.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Nicholas Zill has begun to study these questions; see Zill, "Behavior, Achievement, and Health Problems among Children in Stepfamilies: Findings from a National Survey of Child Health," in E. M. Hetherington and J. D. Arasteh, eds., *Impact of Divorce, Single Parenting, and Stepparenting on Children* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1988).