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*Child Support: An Overview of Census Bureau Data on  
Recipients*

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October 15, 2007

**Abstract.** The national Census Bureau data show that in 2005, 13.6 million parents had custody of children under age 21 while the other parent lived elsewhere, and the aggregate amount of child support received was \$24.8 billion. In 2005, 84% of custodial parents were mothers. Of all custodial parents, 56% were white, 25% were black, 22% were married, 35% were divorced, 30% were never married, 15% did not have a high school diploma, 15% had at least a bachelor's degree, 54% worked full-time year-round, 25% had family income below poverty, and 31% received some type of public assistance. In 2005, only 3.2 million (41%) of the 7.8 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 \$4,719 for mothers and \$4,691 for fathers. These full or partial payments represented 17% of the custodial mothers' total yearly income and 11% of the custodial fathers'. Compared to 1993 Census data, more child support was received by custodial parents in 2005, and a higher percentage of those owed child support actually received all that they were due.

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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 2005, 13.6 million parents had custody of children under age 21 while the other parent lived elsewhere, and the aggregate amount of child support received was \$24.8 billion. In 2005, 84% of custodial parents were mothers. Of all custodial parents, 56% were white, 25% were black, 22% were married, 35% were divorced, 30% were never married, 15% did not have a high school diploma, 15% had at least a bachelor's degree, 54% worked full-time year-round, 25% had family income below poverty, and 31% received some type of public assistance. In 2005, only 3.2 million (41%) of the 7.8 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 \$4,719 for mothers and \$4,691 for fathers. These full or partial payments represented 17% of the custodial mothers' total yearly income and 11% of the custodial fathers'. Compared to 1993 Census data, more child support was received by custodial parents in 2005, and a higher percentage of those owed child support actually received all that they were due.

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## Introduction

The United States 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. 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 2005,<sup>1</sup> is 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 age 21 living with them, while the other parent lives outside the household.

The Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program was enacted in 1975 as a federal-state program (Title IV-D of the Social Security Act) 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 FY2005, the CSE program collected \$23.0 billion in child support payments (from noncustodial parents) and served 15.9 million child support cases. The national Census Bureau data show that the aggregate amount of child support received in 2005 was \$24.8 billion, and that 13.6 million parents had custody of children under age 21 while the other parent lived elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

In 2005, 84% of custodial parents were mothers. Of all custodial parents, 56% were white, 25% were black, 22% were married, 35% were divorced, 30% were never married, 15% did not have a high school diploma, 15% had at least a bachelor's degree, 54% worked full-time year-round, 25% had family income below poverty, and 31% received some type of public assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2005*. Current Population Reports, P60-234, by Timothy S. Grall. August 2007 <http://www.census.gov/prod/2007pubs/p60-234.pdf>. To view detailed tables, see <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/childsupport/chldsu05.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

## Child Support Awarded and Received

**Table 1** summarizes several child support indicators from biennial survey data for selected years from 1993 through 2005. 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 has increased only modestly over the 13-year period from 1993 through 2005. In contrast, the percentage of noncustodial parents who received the full amount of the child support that they were owed increased by 27%, from 37% in 1993 to 47% in 2005.

**Table 1. Child Support Award and Receipt, 1993-2005**

	1993	1995	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	% Change (1993- 2005)
All custodial parents (numbers in thousands)	13,690	13,715	13,949	13,529	13,383	13,951	13,605	-0.6
Custodial parents awarded child support (thousands)	7,800	7,967	7,876	7,945	7,916	8,376	7,802	0.0
Percent awarded child support	57.0	58.1	56.5	58.7	59.1	60.0	57.3	0.5
Custodial parents due/owed child support (numbers in thousands)	6,688	6,958	7,018	6,791	6,924	7,256	6,809	1.8
Percent of those owed who received any payment	75.8	75.7	75.3	73.7	73.9	76.5	77.2	1.8
Percent of those owed who received full payment	36.9	42.3	46.2	45.1	44.7	45.3	46.9	27.1
Average child support due	\$4,765	\$5,175	\$5,032	\$5,572	\$5,564	\$5,418	\$5,584	17.2
Average child support received	\$3,102	\$3,409	\$3,353	\$3,270	\$3,486	\$3,714	\$3,643	17.4
<b>Aggregate Child Support Payments (in billions of dollars)</b>								
Child support due	\$31.8	\$36.0	\$35.3	\$37.8	\$38.5	\$39.3	\$38.0	19.5
Child support received	\$20.8	\$23.7	\$23.5	\$22.3	\$24.1	\$27.0	\$24.8	19.2
Child support deficit	\$11.0	\$12.3	\$11.8	\$15.5	\$14.4	\$12.3	\$13.2	20.0
Percent of amount due actually received	65.4	65.8	66.6	59.0	62.6	68.7	65.3	-0.2

**Source:** Table prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 1994-2006. All child support income amounts were adjusted to reflect 2005 dollars using the CPI-U-RS. Custodial parents include all persons living with their own children who are under age 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 2005, 7.8 million custodial parents were awarded child support, but only 6.8 million were due (or owed) child support. The 1.0 million-person difference was composed of persons who were no longer due child support because of the reasons listed above.)

In 2005, 57% of the 13.6 million custodial parents (with children under age 21) were awarded child support.<sup>3</sup> Of those who were actually *due* child support payments (6.8 million), a little more than 77% of them received at least one payment, and 47% received all that they were owed. In 2005, only 3.2 million (23%) of the 13.6 million custodial parents *eligible* for child support actually received the full amount of child support that was owed to them. In 2005, the average child support payment amounted to about \$3,642,<sup>4</sup> almost 18% higher than the average child support payment in 1993 (\$3,095).

In 2005, about 65% of the \$38 billion in aggregate child support due was actually paid. In 1993, 65% of the \$32 billion (adjusted for inflation, in 2005 dollars) in child support due was paid. Over the 13-year period 1993 to 2005, aggregate child support due increased 20%, total child support received increased 20%, and the amount left unpaid increased 19% (see **Table 1**).

## Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Custodial Parents Who Were Awarded or Who Received Child Support Payments in 2005

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 more than 1.5 times as likely to be awarded child support in 2005 as their male counterparts, among parents who were owed/due child support, both had at least a 70% chance of actually receiving child support payments. (See **Table 2**.) Moreover, in 2005, only one-half of black custodial parents were awarded child support compared with three-fifths of white custodial parents. Even so, nearly 70% of black custodial parents who were owed/due child support actually received child support payments, and 80% of white custodial parents who were owed child support actually received child support payments in 2005. Similarly, while only 48% of never-married parents were awarded child support in 2005, 75% of never-married parents who were owed child support actually received child support payments in 2005. Also, about 47% of custodial parents without a high school diploma were awarded child support, while 71% of custodial parents without a high school diploma who were owed child support actually received child support.

<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the reader should note that many custodial parents do not receive child support. This includes the 43% 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 2005, this number amounted to almost 7.4 million custodial parents. Some of the reasons given as to why there was not a legal child support obligation included the following: they did not feel the need to make it legal (34%); the other parent provided what he or she could (28%); the other parent could not afford to pay (24%); they did not want the other parent to pay (21%); the child stayed with the other parent part of the time (20%); they did not want to have contact with the other parent (17%); they could not locate the other parent (15%); and paternity was not legally established (8%).

<sup>4</sup> This amount reflects total child support payments received divided by the number of parents who were owed/due payments (\$24,800,000,000/6,809,000). **Table 2** shows an average child support payment of \$4,717 for custodial parents who actually received at least one child support payment in 2005 (\$24,800,000,000/5,259,000).

**Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Custodial Parents by Child Support Award and Receipt Status, 2005**

(numbers in thousands)

	Total	% Awarded Child Support	Total Due Child Support	Custodial Parents Who Received at Least Some Child Support in 2005		
				% of Those Due Child Support	Average Child Support (\$)	Average Income (\$)
All custodial parents	13,605	57.3	6,809	77.2	4,717	29,454
<b>Sex</b>						
Male	2,199	36.4	678	74.5	4,691	42,977
Female	11,406	61.4	6,131	77.5	4,719	28,018
<b>Race and Ethnicity</b>						
White (non-Hispanic)	7,570	63.2	4,167	80.2	5,169	32,689
Black	3,431	49.5	1,484	69.2	3,251	23,975
Hispanic	2,146	49.5	949	76.2	4,643	22,698
<b>Marital Status</b>						
Married	3,007	63.0	1,703	76.8	5,030	29,140
Divorced	4,795	64.6	2,727	79.5	5,343	35,550
Separated	1,506	49.8	638	75.2	4,819	28,948
Never married	4,130	47.8	1,663	74.9	3,322	19,187
<b>Educational Attainment</b>						
No high school diploma	2,062	47.3	791	71.2	3,414	14,559
High school graduate	4,880	57.0	2,457	75.5	4,032	22,830
Less than 4 years of college	3,090	62.3	1,689	74.7	4,888	26,810
Bachelor's degree or more	2,096	58.9	1,079	84.9	6,656	53,297
<b>Economic Characteristics</b>						
Family income below 2005 poverty level	3,406	52.7	1,502	72.6	3,372	7,799
Worked full-time, year-round	7,331	58.6	3,825	77.5	4,881	40,258
Received public assistance	4,273	56.2	2,032	72.1	3,378	14,129

**Source:** Table prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 2006.

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This pattern 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 2005, 53% of custodial parents with incomes below the poverty level were awarded child support, and 73% of those owed/due payments actually received child support payments. **Table 2** also shows that 59% of custodial parents who worked full-time year-round were awarded child support, while 78% of those owed received child support payments. Similarly, 56% of custodial parents who received public assistance were awarded child support, while 72% of those who were owed child support payments actually received child support payments.<sup>5</sup>

Of the categories of custodial parents presented in **Table 2**, custodial parents who were divorced followed by custodial parents who were white were the categories of parents most likely to be *awarded* child support. In 2005, 64.6% of divorced custodial parents and 63.2% of white custodial parents were awarded child support. The table also shows that custodial parents with at least a bachelor's degree who were owed/due child support were the category of parents most likely to *receive* child support payments in 2005. In 2005, 84.9% of custodial parents with at least a bachelor's degree who were owed payments actually received child support payments.

In 2005, the average yearly child support payment received by custodial parents with payments was \$4,719 for mothers and \$4,691 for fathers. These full or partial payments represented 17% of the custodial mothers' total yearly income and 11% of the custodial fathers'.

In 2005, for custodial parents with income below the poverty level, child support payments for those who received them made up 43% of their yearly income. In 2005, child support payments made up 23% 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 2005, child support represented 19% of the income of the 3.2 million custodial parents who received all of the child support that they were owed.<sup>6</sup>

The Census Bureau data also includes information on health insurance. In 2005, about 58% of the 7.8 million custodial parents with child support awards had awards that included health insurance. Nearly half (45.1%) of these health insurance provisos specified that the noncustodial parent was to provide the health insurance coverage.

Not surprisingly, the data show that custodial parents who are relatively better off generally get a higher amount of child support than custodial parents who are financially worse off. The exception was custodial fathers who, as noted above, received less child support than custodial mothers.

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> See Table 6 at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/childsupport/chldsu05.pdf> (p. 28).

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