

Nonresident fathers and formal child support

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Research Article

**Nonresident fathers and formal child support:
Evidence from the CPS, the NSFG, and the SIPP**

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1300
1.1	Background	1302
1.2	Current investigation	1304
2	Method	1305
2.1	Surveys and samples	1305
2.2	Sampling design: Direct versus indirect reporting	1306
2.3	Questionnaire design	1307
2.4	Analytic strategy	1309
3	Results: Estimating nonresident fathers	1311
3.1	Results: The composition of nonresident fathers	1312
3.2	Gauging the effects of identifying nonresident fathers	1314
4	Discussion	1317
5	Acknowledgments	1321
	References	1322
	Appendix	1327

Nonresident fathers and formal child support: Evidence from the CPS, the NSFG, and the SIPP

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Since the beginning of the 1980s, researchers have been raising concerns that surveys underestimated nonresident fatherhood due to sampling and questionnaire effects. Consequently, federal data collection efforts focused resources on reports from custodial mothers rather than from nonresident fathers. Recent data from three national sources provide researchers with an opportunity to estimate the prevalence of nonresident fathers.

OBJECTIVE

Our goals were to provide estimates of contemporary nonresident fatherhood and of formal child support payments in the U.S., and to examine the consistency of these estimates across surveys.

METHODS

We presented descriptive results for the proportion of men (aged 15-44) who reported having a nonresident child, and the proportion of nonresident fathers who reported having provided some formal support in the last year, using three nationally representative surveys: the Current Population Survey (CPS), the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG).

RESULTS

The NSFG produced higher estimates of nonresident fatherhood, whereas both the CPS and the SIPP produced lower estimates of nonresident fatherhood. The findings on the composition of the nonresident father population by race/ethnicity and educational attainment also differed across the surveys. The results further demonstrated that the

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nonresident fathers identified in the NSFG were less likely to have been providing formal support, and that the racial/ethnic and educational differences found in the provision of formal support varied across the surveys.

CONCLUSIONS

Three nationally representative U.S. surveys produced substantively different estimates of the nonresident father population, and of the extent to which these fathers were providing formal child support. Ultimately, this study illustrates that we lack robust estimates of nonresident fatherhood in the U.S.

1. Introduction

Given the growing number of children who are living apart from their fathers, it is essential that social scientists accurately measure the prevalence of nonresident fatherhood. Research has shown that nonresident fathers can have positive influences on the well-being of their children (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Carlson 2006). As two out of five children in the United States do not live with their biological father (Kreider and Ellis 2011), this has become an increasingly critical issue.

The quality of the data collected on nonresident fathers in the 1980s and 1990s has been extensively scrutinized by a number of prominent scholars, who concluded that household surveys underestimated the presence of nonresident fathers (Cherlin, Griffith, and McCarthy 1983; Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998; Seltzer and Brandeth 1994; Sorenson 1997). Marsiglio et al.'s (2000) review of research on fatherhood in the 1990s noted that the household surveys conducted during the decade produced low estimates of nonresident fatherhood, largely because nonresident fathers were more likely to have been institutionalized, and often simply were not included in the household surveys. Others also suggested that men were less likely to have reported having nonresident children than women, who readily reported having a child whose father was living elsewhere (Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998; Sorenson 1998). Although some researchers have called for the collection of data from both custodial mothers and nonresident fathers (Smock and Manning 1997), many family scholars have suggested that limited resources should be focused on collecting reports of child support from custodial mothers rather than from nonresident fathers (Sorenson 1998). Indeed, from 1987 through the 1990s, no survey of the entire non-institutionalized U.S. population asked questions that would have identified nonresident fathers (Sorenson 1998).

However, new federal data collected at both the household and individual levels provide us with an opportunity to reassess the quality of the data on nonresident fathers.

Recent cycles of both the CPS and the SIPP have re-introduced items identifying nonresident fathers at least 20 years after the quality of these measures was first called into question. In addition, recent rounds of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) provided an individual-level, nationally representative survey of men that included data on fertility histories and parenting. As nonmarital childbearing (Martinez, Daniels, and Chandra 2012; Ventura 2009) and family complexity (Cherlin 2010) have become increasingly prevalent, nonresident fathers might be more willing to report the presence of nonresident children because their circumstances are now more normative and are effectively less stigmatized. In light of these changes in contemporary families and the availability of new data, we decided to revisit the debate about household surveys and the extent to which these surveys are able to identify nonresident fathers.

Using data from the 2011 CPS March Supplement, the Wave 4 Poverty Topical Module from the 2008 SIPP panel, and the 2006–2010 NSFG, we compared estimates of the nonresident father population and examined the socioeconomic characteristics of nonresident fathers identified in these surveys. Our project extended prior research in three ways. First, we provided an update to Sorenson's (1997) estimates for the nonresident fathers identified in household surveys. Second, we expanded on Sorenson's (1997) analyses by comparing estimates of the nonresident father population in both household surveys (CPS and SIPP) and an individual-based survey (NSFG). Finally, we considered the effects of survey measurement by comparing the findings regarding the likelihood that a nonresident father was providing formal child support across three nationally representative surveys.

By studying multiple recent surveys, we are able to provide timely, rigorous estimates of the prevalence of nonresident fathers, and of the extent to which these fathers are paying formal child support. Given the current political and economic climate, estimating nonresident fatherhood has important policy implications. A recent issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* focused on the Great Recession and its impact on young, economically disadvantaged men. Specifically, several articles in this 2011 issue addressed key policy implications that were designed to benefit the well-being of children by encouraging and facilitating the involvement of nonresident fathers (Smeeding, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2011). Our analyses provide a first step in the evaluation of recent surveys and of their ability to identify nonresident fathers. Further, by comparing estimates across multiple datasets, we highlight the differences in the estimates produced by various data sources, and suggest that the NSFG provided more accurate estimates of the nonresident father population than the CPS or the SIPP. This assertion is based on prior research, which indicated that surveys undercounted nonresident fathers, as there were no external sources that could be used to conduct validity checks on the findings regarding the

prevalence of nonresident fathers. Finally, we find that there were differences in the estimates of formal child support payments across the surveys.

1.1 Background

Several researchers have raised concerns about the underreporting of the nonresident father population in household surveys (e.g., Cherlin, Griffith, and McCarthy 1983; Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998; Seltzer and Brandeth 1994; Sorenson 1997). Cherlin, Griffith, and McCarthy (1983) demonstrated that the 1980 CPS had undercounted nonresident fathers, and strongly recommended that this limitation be acknowledged when discussing results related to nonresident fathering and child support from the CPS. Seltzer and Brandeth (1994) found similar underreports of the nonresident father population in Wave 1 of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). Finally, Sorenson (1997) examined both the SIPP and the NSFH, and concluded that these surveys underestimated the nonresident father population by 22% and 44%, respectively.

Several factors might have contributed to these low estimates. For instance, household surveys typically exclude non-institutionalized populations (e.g., individuals living in correction institutions, military barracks, etc.), who are predominately male. Research has shown that past household surveys frequently undercounted young, disadvantaged men (Martin 2007), which suggests that these surveys likely undercounted nonresident fathers as well (e.g., Berger and Langton 2011; Marsiglio et al. 2000; Nelson 2004; Rendall et al. 1999; Pettit 2012; Sorenson 1997). Since disadvantaged men are also underrepresented in the U.S. Census, weighting procedures failed to correct for these undercounts in surveys (see Rendall et al. 1999). Finally, men were less likely to have reported having children who lived elsewhere, whereas women were more likely to have reported having a child whose father was living elsewhere (Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998; Sorenson 1997).

In 1997, a large group of researchers, policy analysts, and public officials convened at the Conference on Fathering and Male Fertility to discuss methods for improving the quality of the data on men and fertility. This conference was sponsored by the NICHD, the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, and the NICHD Family and Child Well-being Research Network. The *Nurturing Fatherhood* (1998) report synthesized the findings that were presented and the discussions that took place at this conference. In particular, Sorenson (1998) outlined strategies for improving the quality of the data on nonresident fathers. First, she suggested that probes might be used in household surveys to identify more disadvantaged men with nonresident children (Sorenson 1998). Martin (2007) found that probing was successful

in identifying men with weak ties to households, and that these men were more likely to be nonresident fathers (Berger and Langton 2011; Marsiglio et al. 2000; Nelson 2004; Randall et al. 1999; Petit 2012; Sorenson 1997). Some recent household surveys (e.g., 2004 and 2008 SIPP panels) used probes to identify more disadvantaged individuals with weaker ties to households. Indeed, the technical papers concerning the SIPP survey design suggested that the probes included in the 2004 SIPP reduced within-household underreporting by identifying individuals with weaker ties to households (Chan 2007). However, the CPS technical documentation suggested that the CPS did not include probes intended to identify household members (US Census Bureau 2006a). Sorenson (1998) also suggested that questionnaire design might have influenced the estimates of the number of nonresident fathers. To the best of our knowledge, no one has rigorously assessed the questionnaire effects of the measures used to identify nonresident fathers. However, studies (Joyner et al. 2012; Lindberg et al. 1998) have demonstrated that the quality of male fertility data is influenced by questionnaire design. For instance, linking questions about fertility to previous romantic partners has been shown to have significantly improved the quality of male fertility data (Joyner et al. 2012; Lindberg et al. 1998). Although these studies did not specifically consider the quality of the data on nonresident fathers, we suggest that the quality of male fertility data is linked to estimates of nonresident fatherhood. If referencing previous romantic partners increased estimates of fatherhood, a similar strategy should have also increased estimates of nonresident fatherhood, as it is likely that more men would have recalled any children they had (both coresident and nonresident).

The different ways that nonresident fathers are identified may have implications for the assessments of fathers' reports of child support payments, which have been considered an important factor in the well-being of children (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Bartfield 2000; Greene and Moore 2000; Hofferth, Forry, and Peters 2010). Prior studies compared fathers' and mothers' reports of child support payments (see Smock and Manning 1997), relied on custodial mothers reports (Grall 2011; Seltzer, Schaefer, and Charng 1989), and used administrative records (Ha, Cancian, and Meyer 2011) to inform discussions of child support. The results of these studies indicated that black and Hispanic fathers were less likely to have been making formal child support payments than white nonresident fathers (Huang, Mincy, and Garfinkel 2005; Smock and Manning 1997). Similarly, fathers with lower educational attainment were shown to have been providing less formal child support than their better educated counterparts (Huang, Mincy, and Garfinkel 2005; Rangarajan and Gleason 1998; Smock and Manning 1997).

We compared the reported levels of formal child support payments, and examined variation in payment levels based on racial/ethnic characteristics and education. Moreover, some studies have demonstrated that surveys often underestimate additional

sources of income. Meyer, Mok, and Sullivan (2009) compared estimates of the receipt of public assistance from household surveys such as the ACS, the CPS, and the SIPP with administrative data, and found that underreporting varied across both programs and surveys. Specifically, the CPS captured 50% of workmen's compensation benefits, which was actually higher than the share captured by the SIPP; however, the SIPP provided better estimates of the receipt of AFDC/TANF than the CPS (Meyer, Mok, and Sullivan 2009). With respect to formal child support, Meyer, Ha, and Hu (2008) examined administrative court data, and found that the median amount of child support nonresident fathers provided was approximately \$3,000, with only 13% of nonresident fathers not providing any financial support during the first year of their court order. Administrative data for Wisconsin provided higher estimates than Sorenson's (1997) estimates, which were based on survey data: \$2,312 (SIPP) and \$2,739 (NSFH). In addition, the survey data suggested that a higher percentage of nonresident fathers were not paying formal child support. However, the estimates from the administrative data were based on only the nonresident fathers who had a formal child support order issued in Wisconsin in 2000 (Meyer, Ha, and Hu 2008). Thus, we have no administrative data that include nonresident fathers *without* a formal child support agreement in calculations of the amount of financial support nonresident fathers provided.

1.2 Current investigation

This paper provides updated estimates of the share of men who are nonresident fathers. In addition, we consider differences and similarities in how individual- and household-based surveys identified nonresident fathers and asked them about their payment of formal child support. Ultimately, this study makes at least four contributions to the field. First, we assess the role of sampling by comparing two household surveys (the CPS and the SIPP) and an individual-based survey (the NSFSG). Both the NSFSG and the SIPP made extensive use of probes to confirm that all of the persons living in the household were either considered as potential respondents (the NSFSG) or included in the household roster (the SIPP), whereas the CPS did not make use of probes to provide more complete household rosters (e.g., Chan 2007; Lepkowski et al. 2010; US Census Bureau 2006a). In addition, the NSFSG, an individual-based survey, identified nonresident fathers by asking men to report *their own* nonresident children, whereas the household surveys (like the CPS and the SIPP) required a "knowledgeable" household head to report whether anyone in the household had a nonresident child. By using this approach, we expand on Sorenson's (1997) prior work, which relied on two household surveys (the NSFH and the SIPP), and which could not address the differences in household-based versus individual-based sampling designs. We expect to find that

individual-based sampling designs produce better estimates of nonresident fatherhood, as direct or self-reports (obtained in an individual-based survey) tend to be more accurate than indirect reports (obtained in a household survey). Second, our comparison of the surveys provides us with an opportunity to assess questionnaire strategies. In the method section, we discuss both the context of the questions in the surveys and the questionnaire strategies used to identify nonresident fathers and the amount of support they provided across surveys. Ultimately, we anticipate that a more complex questionnaire strategy using multiple questions to ask men about the residency status of each child ever fathered (used by the NSFG) produces higher estimates than the single-question strategy (used by the CPS and the SIPP). Third, we provide a descriptive profile of nonresident fathers using each of these nationally representative surveys. We expect to find that the prevalence and composition of nonresident fathers identified in each survey varied somewhat due to differences in sampling design and questionnaire strategies. Finally, we assess the implications of differences across these data by comparing estimates of formal child support payments across the data sources.

2. Method

This section presents detailed descriptions of the sampling and questionnaire strategies used by the CPS, the SIPP, and the NSFG, emphasizing the variation across these surveys and the possible effects such variation might have on estimates of nonresident fatherhood. After discussing the samples and questionnaires in detail, we describe our analytic strategy.

2.1 Surveys and samples

Table 1 presents the years of the survey rounds along with the time frame of reference for the questions used to identify nonresident fathers in the 2011 March Supplement of the CPS, the Wave 4 Poverty Topical Module of the 2008 SIPP panel, and the 2006–2010 NSFG. Although prior CPS cycles (such as the 2008–2010 cycles) provided more comparable estimates in terms of survey timing, the earlier cycles did not include questions that allowed us to identify nonresident fathers. Ultimately, our three data sources covered roughly comparable time periods, with the differences across surveys never exceeding four years. Therefore, we assume that any substantial differences in the estimates of nonresident fathers resulted from the survey and questionnaire design, rather than from changes in the prevalence of nonresident fatherhood over time.

Table 1: Time comparisons for the CPS, SIPP, and NSFG

	CPS	SIPP	NSFG
Period of data collection	March 2011	August – October 2009	June 2006 – June 2010
Question's frame of reference	"In 2010"	"In the last 4 months"	Currently
Time difference across surveys (years)			
NSFG	0–4	0–3	--
SIPP	1	--	0–3
CPS	--	1	0–4

Next, we ensured that the samples were as comparable as possible. The CPS and the SIPP both interviewed respondents who were aged 15 and older. In contrast, the NSFG sample was limited to individuals aged 15–44. So that all three samples had identical age ranges, we limited the CPS and the SIPP samples to men aged 15–44.

2.2 Sampling design: Direct versus indirect reporting

The most relevant difference in these datasets is the sampling unit. The CPS and the SIPP are household surveys that collect information at the household level. In the CPS, the respondents were “knowledgeable” household heads (aged 15 or older) who provided information for all of the individuals currently living in the household. If the household head had a nonresident child, then this nonresident father was identified through direct reporting. However, if the household head reported that someone else living in the household had a nonresident child, then the nonresident father was identified through indirect, or proxy, reporting. The SIPP, another household survey, relied on a slightly different sampling strategy. SIPP survey administrators attempted to interview each individual currently living in the household (aged 15 or older). If a household member could not be interviewed directly, then a “knowledgeable” household member (similar to the CPS household head) served as a proxy respondent. Again, nonresident fathers who reported on their own nonresident children were identified directly, whereas nonresident fathers identified by a proxy respondent were identified indirectly. Ultimately, the SIPP’s sampling strategy should have identified more nonresident fathers directly than that of the CPS. Supplemental analyses confirmed that 58% and 61% of the nonresident fathers were identified directly in the CPS and the SIPP, respectively. While these two surveys relied on a household

sampling design, the NSFG sampled individuals. Respondents in the NSFG were men aged 15–44 who provided information on their own behaviors and attitudes. In effect, all of the nonresident fathers identified in the NSFG were identified directly.

For two reasons, we expected to find that the individual-based sampling strategy produced higher estimates of nonresident fatherhood. First, respondents are arguably more knowledgeable about their own fertility histories and the living arrangements of their children, and are thus more likely to provide more accurate information. A household head (proxy respondent) with close ties to the “other” household members (such as a parent or a spouse/partner) might have been cognizant of their nonresident child(ren). However, household heads (proxy respondents) with weaker ties to other household members (such as a roommate or a boarder) might have been unaware of their nonresident children. Second, Martin (2007) demonstrated that disadvantaged men were often overlooked in household surveys, and Sorenson (1997) suggested that household surveys (specifically, the 1987–88 NSFH and the 1990 SIPP panel) underestimated the number nonresident fathers by omitting the most disadvantaged men from their sampling frames. Although the SIPP included probes to capture these individuals, we expect to find that the CPS underestimated the number of nonresident fathers by omitting those men who were typically disadvantaged and had weak ties to households.

2.3 Questionnaire design

The surveys used unique questions to identify nonresident fathers and their provision of formal child support, which might have influenced the estimates. The CPS and the SIPP had similar methods for identifying nonresident fathers. Both surveys focused on the sources of income and expenditures within and across households, as well as labor force participation (U.S. Census Bureau 2012; U.S. Census Bureau 2006b). To assess the amount of economic support provided to nonresident children and to create supplemental measures of poverty which took formal child support into account, these surveys first sought to identify the nonresident fathers. In contrast, the NSFG was concerned with producing reliable estimates of family living arrangements by exploring factors that included, but were not limited to, fertility histories and parenting (CDC/National Center for Health Statistics 2012). In other words, the CPS and the SIPP arguably identified nonresident fathers in order to collect information on child support, whereas the NSFG identified nonresident fathers in order to provide accurate information on men’s fertility histories. The appendix presents the detailed questions that identified fathers and determined the levels of support they provided (in the order of their appearance) for all three of the surveys.

Both the CPS and the SIPP relied on a single question to identify nonresident fathers (see the appendix). Minimal differences existed between the questions included in the CPS and the SIPP. However, the SIPP had more stringent criteria for identifying nonresident fathers. The CPS asked men whether they had a child who had been living elsewhere with the other parent or another guardian in the past year (2010), whereas the SIPP asked men whether they had a child who had been living elsewhere with the other parent in the last four months. Therefore, based on the question design, we expected to find that the CPS produced slightly higher estimates of the number of nonresident fathers than the SIPP.

We coded respondents who were male, aged 15–44, and replied “yes” to these questions into a dummy variable, *nonresident father* (1). Other respondents who were male, aged 15–44, and replied “no” to these questions were coded as not being nonresident fathers (0).

The NSFG used a more elaborate method to identify nonresident fathers that involved placing questions in the context of previous sexual partners. First, the NSFG asked men, “Have you and [woman’s name] ever had a child together?” This question was asked in relation to each woman with whom the respondent reported having had sexual relations. Next, the NSFG asked, “Where does [child’s name] usually live now?” Again, this question was asked in relation to each child the respondent had ever fathered. Based on these questions, the NSFG provided a computed variable that counted the number of nonresident children aged 18 or younger that each respondent reported having fathered. Since we were concerned with identifying nonresident fathers, we recoded the NSFG variable into a dummy variable that distinguished nonresident fathers (1) from other men aged 15–44 (0).

The NSFG also used a different series of questions than the CPS/SIPP to assess the extent of the financial support provided to nonresident children. After identifying the nonresident fathers, the NSFG first asked the fathers whether they provided financial support. If the fathers indicated they did provide support, the NSFG then asked them whether the support was provided on a regular basis. Next, the NSFG asked the fathers about the total amount of support they had provided in the last 12 months. Finally, the NSFG asked whether any of this financial support was the result of a court order (see appendix). In contrast, after identifying the nonresident fathers, both the CPS and the SIPP asked the fathers whether they were required to pay child support. The CPS and the SIPP then asked the fathers with a court order how much financial support they provided to their nonresident children (see appendix). Differences in the contexts of the questions have implications for the identification of nonresident fathers, as well. Survey methodologists have documented the importance of survey context in responses to attitude questions (see Sudman, Bradburn, and Schwarz 1996). Moreover, we suggest that the survey contexts likely influenced the more “objective” answers as well. Indeed,

research has shown that responses regarding formal child support payments were influenced by social desirability biases, and that the ordering of questions had implications for the effects of social desirability (see Schaeffer, Seltzer, and Klawitter 1991). For instance, both the CPS and the SIPP included questions that identified nonresident children following a series of questions about annual expenses (including, but not limited to, the costs of child care). In contrast, the NSFG included questions about the child(ren)'s place of residence following questions about the previous partners. After identifying the nonresident fathers, the NSFG asked about the amount of support provided, followed by a question about whether there was a court order; whereas the CPS/SIPP asked whether there was a court order, and then about the amount of support provided.

We suggest that the CPS and the SIPP likely underestimated nonresident fatherhood by systematically omitting some of the most disadvantaged nonresident fathers, because both of the surveys asked about the child(ren)'s place of residence after inquiring about the household expenditures. In addition, we expect to find that the CPS/SIPP produced higher estimates of the amount of formal child support provided by asking whether there was a court order before asking about the amount of financial support provided to nonresident children, as this would have led to a greater degree of social desirability bias.

2.4 Analytic strategy

Our analyses proceeded in three steps. First, we addressed the prevalence of nonresident fatherhood by reporting the proportions of men (and fathers/fathers with minor children) who were nonresident fathers. Considering the proportion of fathers who had nonresident children might seem to have been more intuitive. However, we determined that these estimates would have presented additional biases, as fathers were identified differently across surveys (see Joyner et al. 2012). Second, we explored the characteristics of nonresident fathers across surveys by reporting the distributions of the socioeconomic characteristics of the nonresident fathers identified in each survey. Finally, we compared the estimates of the prevalence of formal child support provision across the surveys.

The primary analyses were designed to identify the proportion of men who were nonresident fathers. In addition to providing estimates of nonresident fatherhood, we conducted two other types of analyses related to the prevalence of nonresident fatherhood. The first considered different subpopulations in computing the proportion of nonresident fathers. By changing the denominators, we also presented the *proportion of fathers* (men who had ever fathered a child) with a nonresident child, as well as *the*

proportion of fathers with minor children (men with at least one child under 18) with a nonresident child. Then, we documented the composition of the nonresident fathers identified in each of the three surveys by examining the distributions of nonresident fathers across race/ethnicity, educational attainment, formal marital status, and age. *Race/ethnicity* was coded as four mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories: white non-Hispanic, black non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and other (including multi-racial). *Educational attainment* was coded into four mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories: less than high school, high school graduate (including GED), some college, and a bachelor's degree or higher. *Formal marital status* (marital status) was coded as five mutually exclusive, exhaustive categories: married, divorced, separated, widowed, and never married. *Age* was coded into three mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories: 35–44, 25–34, and 15–24.

We conducted additional analyses on formal child support paid in order to assess the implications of inconsistent estimates of nonresident fatherhood. Both the CPS and the NSFG collected data on the annual amount of formal child support paid⁴. The SIPP collected data on the amount of formal child support paid in the previous four months. To make the estimates comparable, we assumed that the levels of nonresident fathers' payments in the SIPP were evenly distributed across the previous year, and then multiplied the total amount of support (in the last four months) by three⁵. We acknowledge that we were making an assumption, but this was necessary to ensure that the estimates comparable across the data sets. The measure of child support paid in the NSFG was categorical (e.g., "None, doesn't pay," "Under \$3,000 per year," "\$3,001–\$5,000 per year," "\$5,001–\$9,000 per year," and "More than \$9,000 per year"). For ease of comparison across the surveys, we recoded the actual dollar amounts of support from the SIPP into the same categories. We also considered the differences in the levels of formal child support by racial/ethnic group and educational attainment.

⁴ Our analyses of the amount of formal child support paid omitted the CPS because all of the nonresident fathers with a formal order reported providing at least \$1 of support in the previous year. This seems unlikely, and we cannot resolve this issue using the CPS technical documentation. We expect that the CPS overestimated the extent to which nonresident fathers paid formal support.

⁵ Although the Wave 6 topical module asked about support in the previous year, 18.4% of the nonresident fathers identified in Wave 4 were not interviewed again in Wave 6. Moreover, Wave 6 only identified nonresident parents who provided financial support, so this wave could not be used to identify the percentage of men who were nonresident fathers.

3. Results: Estimating nonresident fathers

Table 2 presents the proportions of nonresident fathers identified in each dataset for three subpopulations: men aged 15–44, fathers aged 15–44, and fathers aged 15–44 with minor children. The NSFG produced considerably higher estimates of the proportions of nonresident fathers than either the CPS or the SIPP. According to the NSFG, 12.0% of all men aged 15–44 had at least one nonresident child. Meanwhile, the CPS and the SIPP indicated that 4.1% and 6.3%, respectively, of men aged 15–44 had a nonresident child. Differences in the sampling strategies suggested that the SIPP should have produced higher estimates of nonresident fatherhood, whereas differences in the questionnaires suggested that the CPS should have produced higher estimates. However, we found minimal differences in the estimates of nonresident fatherhood in the CPS and the SIPP. More substantial differences in estimates emerged when we compared the NSFG with the CPS and the SIPP, which was consistent with our expectations.

Based on our synthesis of the methodological concerns surrounding the identification of nonresident fathers in household surveys (i.e., Sorenson 1997) and of the discussions of high levels of family complexity (i.e., Cherlin 2010), we might expect that the higher NSFG estimates were more accurate than the estimates of the CPS and the SIPP. However, unlike for fertility data, no external source exists that can be used to check the validity of the estimates of the shares of nonresident fathers. In effect, it is possible that either the NSFG overestimated the prevalence of nonresident fathers or the CPS and the SIPP underestimated the prevalence of nonresident fathers. To generate an approximate benchmark for making comparisons, we examined the percentage of women with a child whose father was living outside of the household (i.e., custodial mothers). These data did not allow us to match custodial mothers with the nonresident fathers of their children. Yet the percentage of custodial mothers should have approximated the percentage of nonresident fathers in each data source. Supplementary analyses (results not shown) demonstrated a higher degree of consistency in estimates of the shares of custodial mothers than in estimates of the shares of nonresident fathers across the CPS, the NSFG, and the SIPP. Among women aged 15 to 44, 19.3% had at least one child with a nonresident father according to the NSFG, compared with 17.8% according to the CPS and 18.9% according to the SIPP. These supplemental analyses suggested that the NSFG's estimates of nonresident fatherhood (12%) were likely more accurate than those of the CPS and the SIPP. Moreover, these findings were consistent with the results of Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson (1998), and illustrated that nonresident fathers continued to be a more difficult target population to measure than custodial mothers.

Estimates of the proportion of fathers who had nonresident children followed similar patterns. The NSFG yielded the highest estimates: the survey found that 26.8% of fathers (aged 15–44) with minor children had at least one nonresident child under age 18. The comparable figures were 8.2% for the CPS and 12.2% for the SIPP. The results consistently showed that the NSFG produced higher estimates of nonresident fathers than the CPS and the SIPP. It was also noteworthy that the CPS and the SIPP yielded comparable estimates of the share of nonresident father among all of the men surveyed. Additional analyses (not shown) demonstrated that 58% and 61% of nonresident fathers identified in the CPS and the SIPP, respectively, were identified directly. Thus, a considerable share of nonresident fathers in the CPS and the SIPP were identified by another member of the household.

Table 2: Estimating nonresident fatherhood: The percentages of nonresident fathers in the CPS, the SIPP, and the NSFG

	2011 CPS Direct and Proxy Reports		2008 SIPP Direct and Proxy Reports		2006 – 2010 NSFG Direct Reports	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Men	1,612	4.1	1,067	6.3	1,324	12.0
Fathers with minor children	1,612	8.2	NA	NA	1,324	26.8
Fathers	NA	NA	1,067	12.2	1,324	26.8

Source: 2011 Current Population Survey ASEC Supplement; 2008 SIPP Wave IV Poverty Module; 2006–2010 NSFG Male Data File.

Notes: This table presents unweighted frequencies and weighted percents.

3.1 Results: The composition of nonresident fathers

Table 3 presents the distributions of race/ethnicity, educational attainment, marital status, and age for nonresident fathers in the three surveys. Additional results (not shown) confirmed that these samples were comparable in terms of race/ethnicity, education, formal marital status, and age. We found minimal variation in the racial/ethnic, marital status, and age compositions of the three samples. However, the SIPP sample had slightly higher levels of educational attainment than the CPS and the NSFG samples. Ultimately, these findings demonstrated that the three surveys were relatively comparable in terms of men’s racial/ethnic, educational, marital, and age statuses.

Table 3: Demographic and sociodemographic distributions of nonresident fathers (15–44)

	2011 CPS		2008 SIPP		2006–2010 NSFG	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Race/Ethnicity						
White	920	58.5	670	57.5	426	40.8
Black	264	19.4	176	17.4	404	23.3
Hispanic	321	17.5	149	19.0	397	28.9
Other	107	4.6	72	6.1	97	7.0
Educational Attainment						
Less than high school	250	15.3	134	11.9	492	37.3
High school/GED	622	38.5	413	38.4	449	32.0
Some college	497	30.9	388	36.9	296	24.7
At least a bachelor's	243	15.3	132	12.8	87	6.0
Marital Status						
Married	594	32.6	382	34.1	357	37.8
Divorced	432	26.8	288	27.5	286	20.1
Separated	145	11.2	92	9.0	132	8.1
Widowed	7	0.4	3	0.3	9	0.5
Never married	434	29.0	302	29.1	540	33.5
Age						
35–44 years old	963	57.9	592	56.2	678	53.4
25–34 years old	537	35.1	361	34.3	516	37.3
15–24 years old	112	7.0	114	9.5	130	9.3
N	1,612		1,067		1,324	

Source: 2011 Current Population Survey ASEC Supplement; 2008 SIPP Wave IV Poverty Topical Module; 2006–2010 NSFG Male Data File.

Notes: This table presents unweighted frequencies and weighted percents.

In spite of these similarities, Table 3 reveals considerable variation in the distributions of race/ethnicity and educational attainment, whereas the differences in marital status and age were less pronounced. Consistent with our expectations, we found that the nonresident fathers identified in the CPS and the SIPP were, on average, more advantaged and more likely to be white than the nonresident fathers identified in the NSFG. For instance, the majority of the nonresident fathers identified in the CPS and the SIPP (58.5% and 57.5%, respectively) were white, compared with just 40.8% of the nonresident fathers identified in the NSFG. Although the NSFG yielded higher proportions across all minority groups, this difference was most pronounced for

Hispanics: the share of the nonresident fathers classified as Hispanic was 28.9% according to the NSFG, 17.5% according to the CPS, and 19.0% according to the SIPP.

The distribution of educational attainment among nonresident fathers followed similar patterns (Table 3). One in seven (15.3%) of the nonresident fathers identified in the CPS (11.9% in the SIPP) reported having less than a high school degree. In contrast, over one-third (37.3%) of the nonresident fathers identified in the NSFG reported having less than a high school degree. The educational distribution of the nonresident fathers in the CPS and the SIPP exhibited a U-shaped pattern, whereas the distribution of the nonresident fathers in the NSFG followed a strong, negative education gradient, with higher proportions of the nonresident fathers reporting lower levels of education. Although differences in marital status were less stark, larger shares of the nonresident fathers in both the CPS and the SIPP were divorced. Depending on the survey, approximately one-fourth (26.8% and 27.5% in the CPS and the SIPP, respectively) to one-fifth (20.1% in the NSFG) of the nonresident fathers were divorced. Similarly, larger shares of the nonresident fathers in the NSFG were either married (37.8%) or never married (33.5%) than in the CPS and SIPP (see Table 3). As Table 3 shows, minimal age differences emerged for the nonresident fathers across the surveys.

3.2 Gauging the effects of identifying nonresident fathers

The data sources we considered all asked fathers about the financial support they provided to their nonresident children, although each of the surveys used a different strategy, which could introduce some bias into the estimates of the levels of formal support provided. For instance, the NSFG asked the nonresident fathers whether they provided financial support to their nonresident children. After establishing the amount of support provided, the NSFG then asked them whether any of the financial support provided was the result of a formal child support order. In contrast, after identifying nonresident fathers, the CPS and the SIPP asked these fathers whether they were required to pay child support, and then asked them how much support was paid. As a result, we expect to find that the NSFG produced higher estimates of informal support, whereas the CPS and the SIPP produced higher estimates of formal support. Detailed analyses of the CPS indicated that all of the nonresident fathers in the CPS who indicated that they had a formal court order reported providing at least \$1 in financial support in the previous year. It is unlikely that all of the nonresident fathers with formal support orders were paying child support. Thus, the CPS might have overestimated the levels of formal support payments. We therefore took the results on formal child support payments from the NSFG and the SIPP, but not from the CPS, into account in our discussion.

Table 4 reports estimates of the amount of formal child support provided in the previous year. Less than half (43.1%) of the nonresident fathers in the NSFG provided formal support to their nonresident children whereas more than half (56.0%) of the nonresident fathers in the SIPP provided formal child support. In terms of the amount of child support paid, nonresident fathers in the SIPP reported paying more child support, on average, than nonresident fathers in the NSFG. Supplemental analyses demonstrated that 3.9% of nonresident fathers in the SIPP had a child support order, but had not provided support in the last four months. This estimate was considerably lower than the estimate of Meyer, Ha, and Hu (2008), which suggested that 13% of nonresident fathers with a court order did not provide support in the first year. We see this as evidence that surveys are more likely to overestimate the payment of formal child support than administrative data.

Table 4: Amount of formal support provided (all nonresident fathers)

	NSFG		SIPP	
	N	%	N	%
None	783	56.9	475	44.0
\$1–\$3,000	115	9.1	155	14.8
\$3,001–\$5,000	147	13.0	150	13.1
\$5,001–\$9,000	149	11.8	167	16.3
More than \$9,000	130	9.2	120	11.8
Total	1,324		1,067	

Source: 2008 SIPP Wave IV Poverty Module; 2006–2010 NSFG Male Data File.

Notes: The SIPP only asked respondents about child support paid over the last four months whereas the NSFG asks about yearly child support provided. In response we multiply the total amount of support provided for all four months by three. This table presents unweighted frequencies and weighted percents.

Table 5 explores the racial/ethnic and educational variation in the provision of formal child support in the NSFG and the SIPP. The results showed significant variation across racial/ethnic groups. We did not consider differences in the nonresident fathers' provision of support according to marital status and age, because Table 3 shows fewer differences in the distribution of these characteristics across the surveys. The SIPP results showed that white fathers were more likely than black or Hispanic fathers to have provided any formal support. In contrast, the results from the NSFG suggested that white and black fathers were more likely to have provided any formal support than Hispanic fathers. Furthermore, the differences in the estimates of the shares who paid child support across the surveys were greatest among Hispanics. For example, only

21.9% of the Hispanic nonresident fathers in the NSFG reported providing financial support which was at least in part the result of a court order, versus 47.9% in the SIPP.

Table 5: Percentage of nonresident fathers who provided some formal child support by race/ethnicity and education

	NSFG		SIPP		
	N	%	N	%	
Race/Ethnicity					
White	239	60.0	409	62.5	b,c
Black	161	39.0	78	46.2	a
Hispanic	98	21.9	72	47.9	a
Educational Attainment					
At least a bachelor's	44	48.0	86	68.9	e,g,h
Some college	154	53.6	226	58.1	f,h
HS/GED	200	52.9	233	56.3	f,h
Less than high school	143	27.1	47	34.6	e,f,g

Source: 2008 SIPP Wave IV Topical Module; 2006–2010 NSFG Male Data File.

Notes: a denotes a significant difference from white, b denotes a significant difference from black, c denotes a significant difference from Hispanic, e denotes a significant difference from high school/GED, f denotes a significant difference from At least a bachelor's, g denotes a significant difference from some college, h denotes a significant difference from less than high school.

Table 5 also demonstrates that better-educated nonresident fathers were more likely to have provided formal support (with the exception of nonresident fathers with a bachelor's degree in the NSFG, which has a small N). For instance, the shares of the least educated fathers who provided formal support ranged from 27.1% (NSFG) to 34.6% (SIPP). The differences across the surveys were less pronounced among those with a high school diploma (or GED), as the shares ranged from 52.9% (NSFG) to 56.3% (CPS). Similarly, the differences in the provision of formal child support among those with some college ranged from 53.6% (NSFG) to 58.1% (SIPP). The estimates of the SIPP were higher than those of the NSFG, as the NSFG consistently reported lower estimates of the shares of men who were providing formal child support across all levels of education. We are hesitant to interpret the results among those who reported having at least a bachelor's degree due to the small cell sizes in the NSFG. Moreover, the SIPP results suggested that there were substantial differences across levels of education, whereas the NSFG findings indicated that there were no significant differences among the better educated (those who had earned at least a high school diploma/GED) nonresident fathers.

4. Discussion

Monitoring change in the numbers and composition of nonresident fathers is important for policies targeted at the well-being of children and parents. Newly released data provide researchers with an opportunity to incorporate the nonresident father's perspective on complex family dynamics, such as child support and multiple partner fertility. However, to date, no one has examined the quality of these recent data on nonresident fathers. Given the concerns about the quality of the data collected on nonresident fathers in the 1980s and 1990s, this oversight merits attention.

Our study yielded two key conclusions. First, we found considerable inconsistencies in the estimates of the prevalence of nonresident fathers across surveys. The CPS and SIPP generated comparably modest estimates of the prevalence of nonresident fathers, whereas the NSFG produced considerably higher estimates. Since prior research has found consistent evidence that household surveys underestimated the prevalence of nonresident fathers (e.g., Cherlin, Griffith, and McCarthy 1983; Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998; Sorenson 1997), we suggest that the NSFG's estimates of nonresident fathers were likely to have been more accurate than the CPS' and SIPP's estimates. Further, we found variation in the types of nonresident fathers identified in household-based surveys and in individual-based surveys. Prior research has noted that the demographic characteristics of the nonresident fathers found in two of the household surveys, the NSFH and the SIPP, were remarkably similar (Sorenson 1998). However, we documented substantial variation in the distributions of race/ethnicity and educational attainment for the nonresident fathers identified in the household- and the individual-based surveys. In general, larger shares of the nonresident fathers identified in the NSFG belonged to minority racial/ethnic groups and reported lower educational attainment than in the CPS and the SIPP.

Second, differences in the distributions of the nonresident fathers' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics (most notably race/ethnicity and education) across the surveys likely contributed to some of the variation we documented in the provision of formal child support. Less than half of the nonresident fathers in the NSFG provided formal support to their nonresident children, compared to over half of the nonresident fathers in the SIPP. We did not compare estimates from the CPS due to substantial differences in the survey's questionnaire strategies for child support. As economically disadvantaged fathers tend to be less likely to pay child support, we speculate that analyses using samples of nonresident fathers who are more disadvantaged, such as in the NSFG, will result in lower reported levels of formal child support payments than analyses using samples of more advantaged nonresident fathers, such as the SIPP. Alternatively, if the estimates of the prevalence of nonresident fathers from the SIPP are more accurate, then the analyses of the NSFG will underestimate the provision of

formal support from nonresident fathers. In both circumstances, the differences in the measurement of nonresident fatherhood across these surveys will most likely influence estimates of related variables that are relevant to policy and to the well-being of children. The ordering of questions may also contribute to differences in the NSFG's and the SIPP's estimates of formal child support payments. The SIPP questions about formal child support orders were posed before questions that asked respondents to specify the amount of support provided. In contrast, the NSFG first asked respondents about the amount of support provided to nonresident children, and then asked whether this payment was at least in part due to a court order. Research that contrasted administrative and survey data found evidence of some social desirability in fathers' responses to questions regarding formal child support, which could be influenced by the ordering of questions (see Schaeffer, Seltzer, and Klawitter 1991). If this is the case, we anticipated that the SIPP would show that fathers were providing higher levels of formal child support, as the respondents might have felt greater pressure to report that they were providing more financial support after they had said they had a formal court order. Although our discussion was limited to formal child support, additional analyses (not shown) demonstrated that 86% of the nonresident fathers (identified in the NSFG) had provided some support, either formal or informal, in the previous year. Thus, our findings showed that many of the nonresident fathers who were not providing formal support were still providing some financial support to their children, but this is less relevant for policies geared toward child support. Consistent with our expectations, we found that direct reports from individual men (rather than from the household head) produced higher estimates of the nonresident father population. Recall that all of the nonresident fathers identified in the NSFG were identified directly. In contrast, just over half (58% and 61%) of the nonresident fathers identified in the CPS and the SIPP (respectively) were household heads, and were thus identified directly. Relying on direct reports in the CPS and the SIPP may eliminate one type of error (indirect reports may be less accurate), but this would mean that only heads of household would be included in the survey. Such analyses would focus on more advantaged respondents (excluding subfamilies or individuals living with family or friends). The NSFG's public data file did not provide the respondent's household head status, so we could not discern how headship status might have influenced our findings. However, this topic merits further investigation. The similarity of the estimates from the CPS and the SIPP was considered additional evidence of the importance of survey design. Both of the household surveys (the CPS and the SIPP) used similar questions to identify nonresident fathers. Although the SIPP attempted to interview all of the household members directly, this strategy did not work as well in targeting nonresident fathers. By introducing this additional step, the SIPP only directly identified 3% more nonresident

fathers than the CPS, which suggests that nonresident fathers continue to be an elusive survey population (see Sorenson 1997).

In addition to these insights into survey design, the results provided evidence that supported our expectations regarding the importance of questionnaire strategy. The NSFG arguably produced higher estimates because it used a detailed series of questions to identify men with nonresident children. Further, we expected that the context of the questions posed in the survey introduced biases as well. The CPS and the SIPP both posed the question used to identify nonresident children directly following questions concerning annual expenses. This approach may have systematically discouraged nonresident fathers who did not (or could not) provide economic support to their children from reporting having them. The results indicated that special attention should be paid to the questions used in identifying nonresident fathers, because the estimates of the shares of nonresident fathers varied substantially across the surveys. In addition, the findings regarding the sociodemographic characteristics of the nonresident fathers (notably race/ethnicity and educational attainment) differed across the surveys.

In this study, we have provided notable contributions to current research on nonresident fathers. However, there are some limitations worth pointing out. First and foremost, the CPS, the SIPP, and the NSFG all underestimated the prevalence of nonresident fatherhood by excluding institutionalized men. Several longitudinal surveys (such as the NLSY79, the NLSY97, and Fragile Families) continued to interview respondents after they entered institutions. However, to our knowledge there is no nationally representative survey that allows researchers to present estimates of the prevalence of nonresident fathers for the entire U.S. population, including those who are institutionalized. This is unfortunate, as multiple scholars have demonstrated that specific subgroups of men (who are also more likely to be nonresident fathers) are more likely to experience incarceration (Pettit and Western 2004; Wildeman 2009). Second, we presented a number of expectations concerning sampling and questionnaire effects, which were supported by our results. But we cannot clearly state which expectations are the most consequential for identifying nonresident fathers, since the expectations are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the findings of this paper should serve as a note of caution that national surveys produce very different estimates of the nonresident father population and of the levels of formal child support these fathers provide. Third, it is reasonable to expect that the definitions of residence might vary across surveys. For instance, the CPS and the SIPP might have counted fathers who had part-time custody of their children (or whose children briefly lived elsewhere with another parent/guardian) as nonresident fathers, whereas the NSFG identified nonresident fathers as men who had children who *usually* lived elsewhere. However, teasing out the effects of part-time custody was beyond the scope of our study. Finally, we cannot truly assess the validity of estimates across surveys. Based on previous concerns about data

quality, we suggested that the NSFG likely produced more accurate estimates. Alternatively, the CPS/SIPP could have provided more accurate estimates, while the NSFG overestimated nonresident fatherhood. Due to data limitations, we have no external source for checking the validity of the estimates of the nonresident father population.

As families are becoming increasingly complex, identifying nonresident fathers is a critical task for research on father involvement, child support, and child well-being. For instance, research on complex ties across households draws attention to multiple-partner fertility, which has been measured using a variety of methods and data sources. Scholars have relied solely on men's fertility histories (e.g., Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007; Manlove et al. 2008), have used reports of fertility histories with data from both men and women (Harknett and Knab 2007; Sinkewicz and Garfinkel 2009; Turney and Carlson 2011), and have merged administrative data on men and women (Meyer, Cancian, and Cook 2005) in order to identify fathers who have had children with multiple women. If the quality of the data on fathers varies across datasets, with some data sources being more likely than others to have identified the most disadvantaged nonresident fathers; then our estimates of other complex family behaviors, such as multiple-partner fertility, and the implications of these behaviors, will be affected as well. As contemporary families are quite complex, family scholars must develop valid survey instruments that can produce accurate estimates reflecting diversity in family dynamics. Moreover, recent scholarship has discussed policy reforms and programs geared toward facilitating more involvement of young, disadvantaged fathers in the lives of their children (Cancian, Meyer, and Han 2011; Heinrich and Holzer 2011; Mincy, Klimpin, and Schmidt 2011; Smeeding, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2011). Unfortunately, researchers cannot gauge policy use or evaluate the success of policy reforms if the population of interest is systematically undercounted in the data. Attention to differences in sampling and questionnaire strategies is important in producing accurate estimates of nonresident fatherhood. We urge family scholars and policy makers to consider these implications when interpreting the results on nonresident fathers when using these survey data.

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Appendix

Exact questionnaire wording (taken from questionnaires).

Current Population Survey

CHILD SUPPORT PAID (which followed a section on child care arrangements and costs of child care)

CSPCHILD

Does anyone in this household have any children who lived elsewhere with their other parent or guardian at any time during 2010?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No [*if no, we suspect the respondent was not asked the following questions*]

CSPWHO

Who had children who lived elsewhere? Anyone else?

Enter line number Enter all that apply, separate using the space bar or a comma.

CSPREQ

In 2010, (was/were) (name/you) required to pay child support?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No

CSPAMT

How much child support did (name/you) pay in 2010?

Enter dollar amount

National Survey of Family Growth

{ ASKED ABOUT ALL CHILDREN

OBCLIVEX

FA-14. Please look at Card 61. Where does (CHILD) usually live now?
ENTER all that apply.

If child lives with R part-time, PROBE: Where else does this child live?

In this household full-time	1
In this household part-time	2
With his/her mother	3
Away at school or college	4
Living on own	5
Living with other relatives .	6
Deceased	7
Placed for adoption or adopted	8
Placed in foster care	9
Someplace else	10

RANGE CHECK: 1,7,8,9 CANNOT BE COMBINED WITH ANY OTHER RESPONSES.

{ SET UP LOOP TO ASK ABOUT EACH CHILD

{ NEXT SERIES OF QUESTIONS ASKED ONLY IF R HAS ANY BIOLOGICAL OR ADOPTED CHILDREN AGED 18 OR YOUNGER WHO LIVE ELSEWHERE

Noncoresidential children -- Financial Support (GC)

NCMONEY

GC-1. Now I have a few questions about your financial support of (this child/these children).

In the last 12 months, that is, since (INTERVIEW MONTH, INTERVIEW YEAR - 1), did you contribute money or child support for (this child/ either of the children/any of the children)'s upbringing?

Yes 1
No 5 (GO TO SECTION H)

GC-2. Did you do this on a regular basis, or once in a while?

Regular basis 1
Once in a while 2

NCAMOUNT

GC-3. In the last 12 months, how much did you give?

R can report weekly, monthly, or yearly amount.

If R says that the payments are not always the same, SAY:

How much do you "usually" give? OR How much did you give total?

Amount in dollars _____
ENTER "0" for none

NCAGREE

GC-4. Was any of (this/the) amount paid as the result of a child support order?

Yes 1
No 5 (GO TO SECTION H)

Survey of Income and Program Participation (which followed questions on costs of child care)

PV10

[DOES] [each person 15 or older] have any children who lived elsewhere with their other parent or guardian at any time during the past 4 months?

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

PV12

In the past 4 months- that is, since [fill MONTH1] 1st [fill WASWERE] [fill HESHE] required to pay child support ?

INCLUDE ANY PAYMENTS... ..MADE DIRECTLY TO THE OTHER PARENT/GUARDIAN; ...MADE THROUGH A COURT OR AGENCY; OR ...WITHHELD FROM THIS PERSON'S PAYCHECK

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

PV13

How much did you pay in child support: