

GAO

Fact Sheet for  
Congressional Requesters

January 1992

# INTERSTATE CHILD SUPPORT

## Mothers Report Receiving Less Support From Out-Of-State Fathers



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Human Resources Division

B-246557

January 9, 1992

The Honorable Bill Bradley  
United States Senate

The Honorable Marge Roukema  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Barbara Kennelly  
House of Representatives

This fact sheet responds to your request for information on interstate child support cases—those in which one of a child's parents lives in a state different from that of the parent living with the child. In the Family Support Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-485), the Congress directed the U.S. Commission on Interstate Child Support to identify ways to improve all aspects of interstate child support and make recommendations to the Congress by May 1992. Your letter pointed out that a lack of reliable data on interstate cases has hindered the Commission in estimating the potential impact of its recommendations. As members of the Commission, you asked GAO to estimate the proportion of all child support cases that are interstate and to compare certain characteristics of such cases to those of in-state cases.

The only readily available source of nationwide statistics on both publicly and privately handled interstate child support cases is the child support and alimony supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS). Conducted by the Bureau of the Census and sponsored by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), this CPS supplement surveys a sample of mothers age 15 and above living with their own children under 21 whose father lives in a different household.

In addition to questions about child support awards and the receipt of payments, the supplement asks custodial mothers to specify the residence of their children's noncustodial father as the same state (as her and their mutual children), a different state, or "other."<sup>1</sup> We used this information from the 1990 CPS supplement to designate in-state, interstate, and "other" child support cases.<sup>2</sup> (See sect. 1.)

<sup>1</sup>This category largely includes cases in which mothers did not know or specify noncustodial fathers' residence.

<sup>2</sup>We count as child support cases only those with custodial mothers and their children from the mothers' most recent marriage or partner. Some estimate that families in which the father is the custodial parent may constitute 10 to 15 percent of all custodial parent families where one parent is not living with the other parent and child.

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In this fact sheet, we present the information and estimates you requested on

- the percentage of all child support cases that are interstate;
- the extent to which custodial mothers reported having child support awards<sup>3</sup> and expected and received support payments and health insurance;
- the mean amounts of child support expected and received;
- reasons cited by custodial mothers for not having support awards;
- the number of mothers who reported seeking or receiving child support enforcement services under title IV-D of the Social Security Act; and
- other child support and socioeconomic characteristics of the mothers, such as income and race.

We compare these case characteristics among in-state, interstate, and "other" child support cases. Estimates are for the nation as a whole, not for individual states.

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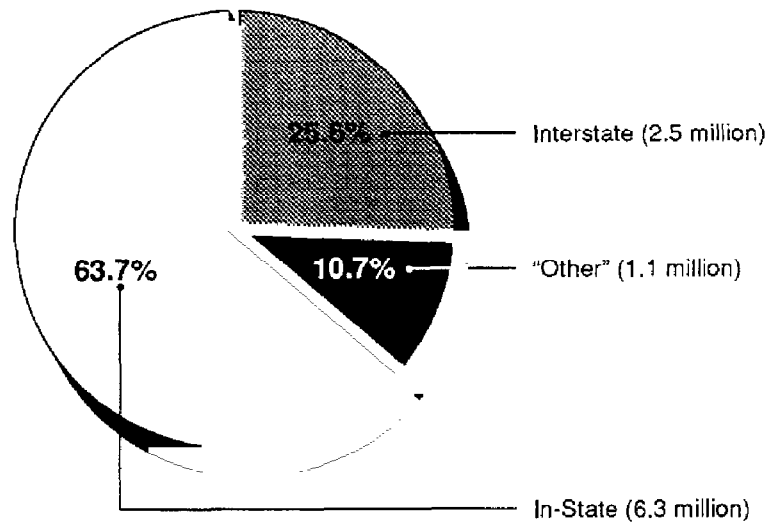
## Results of the Analysis

In spring 1990, interstate child support cases represented at least one-quarter of all child support cases in the United States, as figure 1 shows. In-state cases approximated 64 percent of all cases, and the other 11 percent were largely cases in which the noncustodial fathers' residence was unknown. (See sect. 2.)

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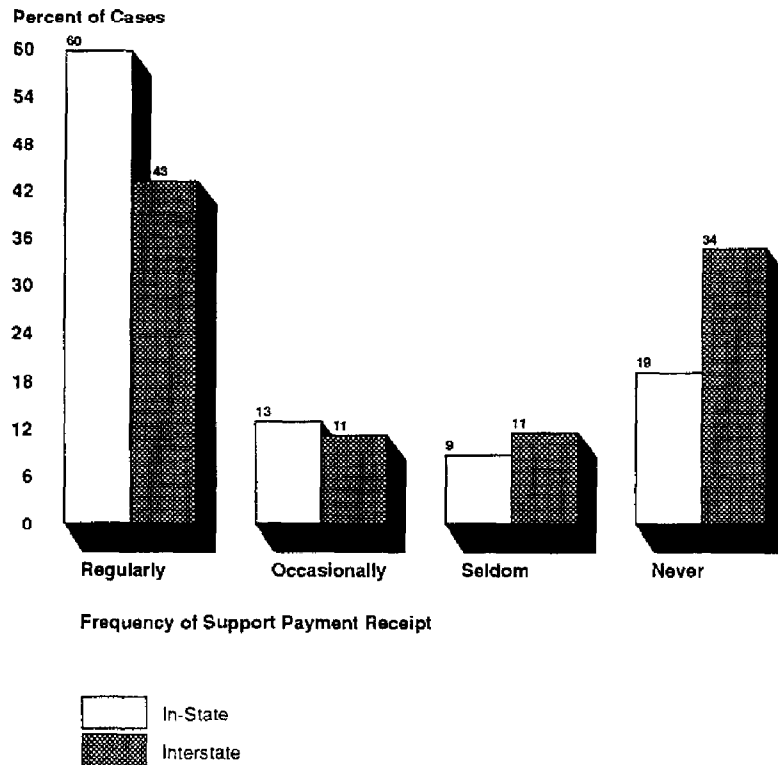
<sup>3</sup>That is, child support payments were agreed to or awarded through either a voluntary written agreement, a court order, or some other arrangement.

**Figure 1: Child Support Cases, by Noncustodial Fathers' Residence** (Spring 1990)



Mothers in interstate cases were less likely to receive support payments than those in in-state cases, even though about the same proportion of each (60 percent) reported having support awards (see fig. 2). Thirty-four percent of mothers in interstate cases said they never received support payments during 1989, compared with 19 percent of those in in-state cases. Only 43 percent of custodial mothers in interstate cases reported receiving support payments regularly in 1989, compared with 60 percent of those in in-state cases. (See sect. 3.)

**Figure 2: Frequency of Support Payment Receipt in 1989, by In-State and Interstate Cases** (Spring 1990)



Note: Cases with awards but not expecting payments in 1989 and those without awards are excluded.

Most of the custodial mothers in the other 11 percent of child support cases reported not having child support awards, receiving payments, or knowing the residence of their children's noncustodial father. (See sect. 4.)

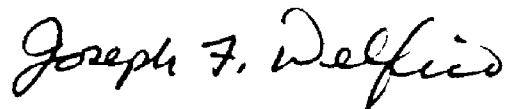
Over 41 percent of all custodial mothers who did not have child support awards reported that they did not want child support or did not pursue an award. One-half to three-quarters of all custodial mothers who had support awards reported that they did not receive health insurance coverage from the noncustodial father. (See sect. 5.)

Other child support and socioeconomic characteristics of custodial mothers did not differ materially by noncustodial fathers' residence. Similar proportions of mothers in in-state, interstate and other child support cases received public assistance and sought title IV-D child support services. The income, education, and race of custodial mothers also did not differ materially by type of support case. (See sect. 5.)

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We present tables summarizing overall child support award and receipt status by numbers and percentages of mothers in all three types of cases in appendix I. Important additional information about the CPS methodology and the statistical reliability of this data appears in appendix II.

As agreed with your office, we did not obtain written comments on this fact sheet. We are sending copies to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and other interested parties. Should you wish to discuss its contents, please call me on (202) 275-6193. Major contributors are listed in appendix III.



Joseph F. Delfico  
Director, Income Security Issues

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**Abbreviations**

ACF	Administration for Children and Families
AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
CPS	Current Population Survey
GAO	General Accounting Office
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
OCSE	Office of Child Support Enforcement



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# Introduction

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## Background

In 1975, the Congress under title IV-D of the Social Security Act established the Child Support Enforcement Program to strengthen state and local government efforts to help persons obtain child support awards and payments. State and local child support enforcement agencies (IV-D agencies) help locate noncustodial parents, establish paternity, obtain child support awards, and collect support payments. At the federal level, the IV-D program is administered by the Office of Child Support Enforcement within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Initially, the primary focus of the IV-D program was on providing child support enforcement services to families who receive cash assistance from the Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) program. Now, state agencies are required to make such services available to anyone requesting them.<sup>1</sup>

Enforcing child support when the noncustodial parent lives in a different state than the custodial parent and children, is complex and difficult. Staff from multiple agencies in two or more jurisdictions must coordinate a variety of activities, communicate detailed information, and understand the varying laws, policies, and procedures followed by jurisdictions throughout the nation.

Since the inception of the IV-D program, the Congress has passed various laws aimed at improving interstate child support activities. For example, the Child Support Enforcement Amendments of 1984 (P.L. 98-378) made federal incentive payments for collections available to both the state in which the custodial parent and children live and the state in which the noncustodial parent lives. More recently, the Family Support Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-485) established the Commission on Interstate Child Support and directed it to identify ways to improve interstate child support enforcement. The Commission is required to report its findings and recommendations to the Congress by May 1, 1992. Reform of interstate child support enforcement could impact federal, state and local laws, regulations and agencies, and private and public cases.

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<sup>1</sup>Cooperation with child support enforcement agencies is now mandatory for all current and former recipients of AFDC, Medicaid, and foster care services under title IV-E of the Social Security Act.

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## Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

By letter of March 20, 1991, the three congressional members of the Commission informed us that a lack of data on interstate child support hindered the Commission in its attempts to estimate the impact of potential reforms. The members asked us to estimate the proportion of all child support cases that are interstate and compare their characteristics with in-state cases.

There is no governmental or private source of nationwide data on all interstate child support cases. Data from federal and state child support enforcement agencies or private sources are not inclusive enough to reliably estimate the size of the interstate versus total child support caseload. Government agency data, for example, does not include cases handled by private parties. Data collected from states counts only inquiries sent or received on interstate cases. Because OCSE totals quarterly reports to arrive at annual figures, its data excludes open cases for which no activity occurred during a year and counts some cases more than once.

For both publicly (IV-D) and privately handled child support cases, the best source of nationwide statistics is a combined record of two supplements to the Current Population Survey,<sup>2</sup> conducted by the U. S. Bureau of the Census:

- The income supplement, conducted every March, questions households about the economic situation of individuals and families for the previous year.
- The child support and alimony supplement, conducted every 2 years in April, questions mothers age 15 and above who are custodial parents of their own (including adopted) children under age 21 whose father does not live with them. It asks mothers about their current child support award status and receipt of support payments during the previous calendar year for children from their most recent marriage, husband, or partner. OCSE sponsors the supplement.

Using the results of the two supplements, the Bureau of the Census constructs a data file, which it makes available on machine-readable tape

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<sup>2</sup>The CPS is the source of official government statistics on employment and unemployment.

for purchase by the public.<sup>3</sup> We used this file, which contains both projected and raw numbers, for our analysis. Our estimates in this report are based on Bureau of the Census projections.

In 1988, the child support and alimony supplement for the first time asked custodial mothers about the residence of their children's non-custodial father.<sup>4</sup> Answers to this question gave us a means to designate interstate child support cases.

Mothers in the child support and alimony supplement report the non-custodial father's residence as the same state, a different state, or "other." Using this variable, we identified child support cases as follows:

- In-state cases—those in which custodial mothers said a noncustodial father lived in the same state.
- Interstate cases—those in which mothers said a noncustodial father lived in a different state.
- "Other" cases—those in which custodial mothers did not know the whereabouts of the father or said he lived in a foreign country or the continental United States, had returned to the mother's house, or was deceased, and cases in which no residence was specified.

As agreed, we analyzed data and estimates from the 1988 and 1990 income and child support and alimony supplements of the CPS by non-custodial fathers' residence. On June 4 and June 13, 1991, we briefed your staff and Commission staff on the preliminary results of our analysis of the unpublished 1988 CPS data. Our fact sheet presents estimates derived from the 1990 CPS child support and alimony supplement. Appendix II discusses additional information about the CPS' methodology and the statistical reliability of this data.

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<sup>3</sup>Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March/April 1990 Match File: Child Support and Alimony (machine-readable data file) (Washington, D.C.: 1991). The Census Bureau also publishes a summary report in hard copy: Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 173, Child Support and Alimony: 1989 (Washington, D.C.: 1991). See this report also for an explanation of the sampling, weighting, imputation, and estimation procedures used by the Census Bureau.

<sup>4</sup>The Census Bureau did not publish this data in its written report on the 1988 CPS.

# Interstate Cases Represent at Least One-Fourth of All Child Support Cases

In spring 1990, an estimated 2.5 million mothers reported that the noncustodial father of their children lived in a different state. This represented 25.6 percent of all 9.9 million mothers with their own children under 21 whose father was not living with them, as figure 1 shows.<sup>1</sup> About 63.7 percent of custodial mothers reported the noncustodial father living in the same state, and the remaining 10.7 percent reported his residence as "other."<sup>2</sup>

Interstate cases may represent at least an estimated 25.6 percent of all child support cases and perhaps as much as 37 percent. The latter would be true if all the noncustodial fathers in the 10.7 percent "other" cases lived in a different state. But even if the other 10.7 percent cases were in-state, interstate cases would still represent 25.6 percent of all cases.

The noncustodial father's residence was unknown in over half of the cases in which the custodial mother reported his residence as "other." Of all the 1990 Current Population Survey child support and alimony supplement questionnaires on which the noncustodial father's residence was listed as "other," 15 percent lacked an entry specifying the nature of the "other" response. Over half of a sample of the remaining questionnaires that did have such an entry indicated that the mother did not know the noncustodial father's residence.

Although the questionnaire instructs CPS interviewers to specify the nature of "other" responses given for the noncustodial father's residence by writing in a blank space, the machine-readable data tape of the CPS omits written-in information. Accordingly, to determine if noncustodial fathers' residences were specified in these cases, we reviewed a sample of microfilmed copies of 1990 CPS questionnaires for mothers who reported the noncustodial father's residence as "other."

Of 446 questionnaires completed for the 1990 supplement that specified the noncustodial father's residence as "other," no further information was entered on this matter for 66 (14.7 percent). In examining a random sample (63) of the remaining 380 other questionnaires that did have an entry, the interviewer entered "don't know" as the mother's response

<sup>1</sup>An estimate of 25 percent as the proportion of child support cases that are interstate is consistent with other estimates based on samples that are very small compared with the CPS. See *Interstate Child Support: Case Data Limitations, Enforcement Problems, Views on Improvements Needed* (GAO/HRD-89-25, Jan. 27, 1989), pp. 11 and 12.

<sup>2</sup>The "other" group includes many mothers who responded that they did not know the residence of the noncustodial father as well as those who identified residences they considered neither in-state nor interstate. See sect. IV of this report for further discussion of the "other" category.

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**Section 2**  
**Interstate Cases Represent at Least One-**  
**Fourth of All Child Support Cases**

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for 39 (61.9 percent) . Thus, we estimate that in over half of all 446 cases with "other" listed for the noncustodial father's residence, the residence is unknown.

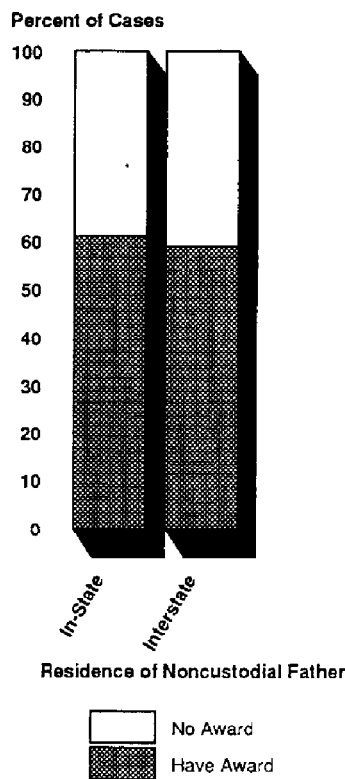
Other situations listed for noncustodial fathers' residence on the questionnaires we reviewed included a foreign country, deceased, and returned to the mother's residence. None of these categories constituted more than 14 percent of the questionnaires reviewed.



# Interstate Cases Less Likely Than In-State to Receive Support Payments; Similar Proportions With Awards

Almost identical percentages of mothers in in-state and mothers in interstate child support cases reported they had support awards in spring 1990—61 and 59 percent respectively (see fig. 3.1). But significantly fewer of the mothers in interstate cases reported actually receiving support payments (see fig. 2). Of the mothers in interstate cases who had child support awards and were due payments in 1989, only 43 percent reported that they received payments regularly;<sup>1</sup> but 60 percent of mothers in in-state cases did. Fifty-seven percent of mothers in interstate cases reported they received payments only occasionally, seldom, or never during 1989.

**Figure 3.1: Child Support Award Status of In-State and Interstate Cases (Spring 1990)**



<sup>1</sup>Eleven percent of the mothers in interstate cases who had awards were not expecting payments during 1989.

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**Section 3**  
**Interstate Cases Less Likely Than In-State to**  
**Receive Support Payments; Similar**  
**Proportions With Awards**

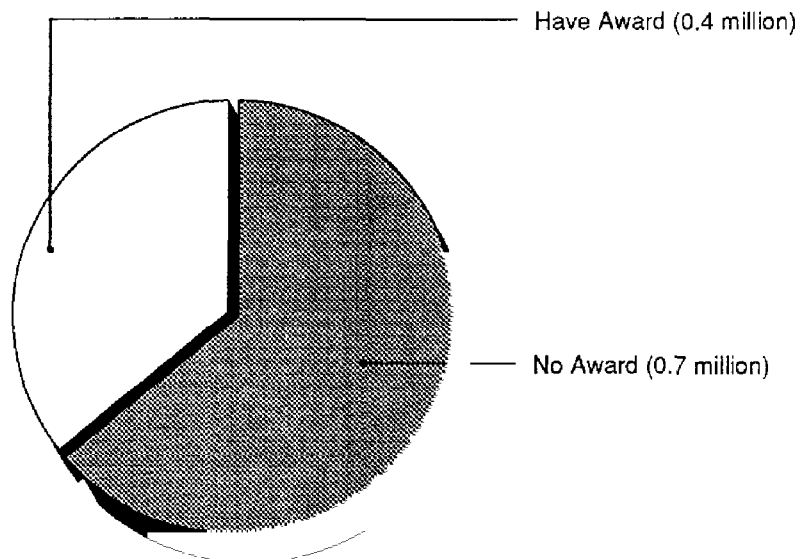
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In total, mothers in interstate cases reported they were expecting an estimated \$4.0 billion in child support in 1989 but actually received only \$2.4 billion or 60 percent of what they were expecting. Mothers in in-state cases, on the other hand, reported receiving 70 percent of the support they expected during 1989 (\$7 billion of \$10 billion expected).

# Mothers Reporting Fathers' Residences as "Other" Least Likely to Have Awards, Receive Payments

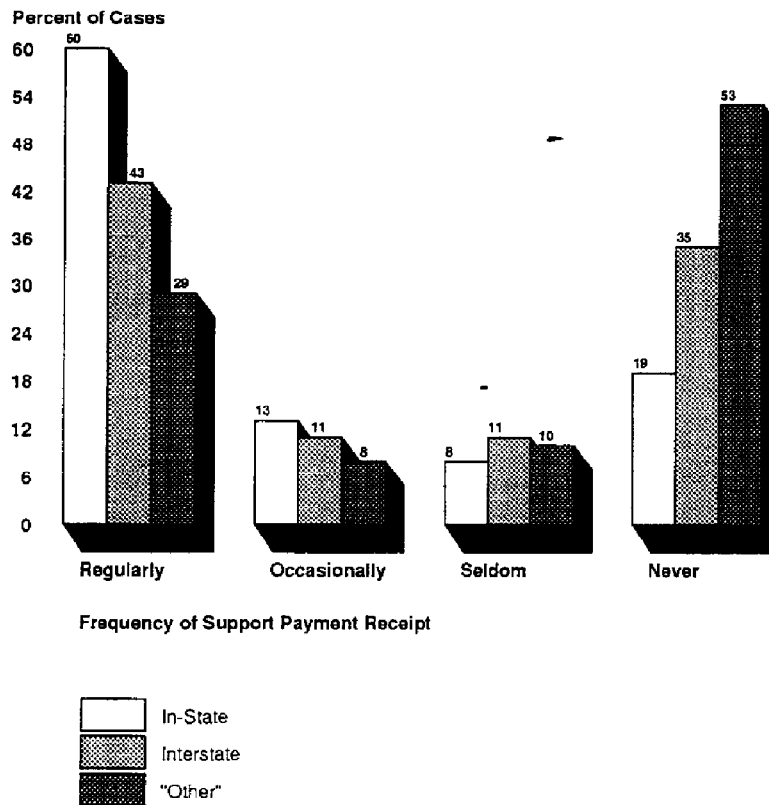
Only 36 percent of custodial mothers who reported noncustodial father's residence as "other" reported having child support awards in spring 1990 (see fig. 4.1), compared with 61 and 59 percent, respectively, of mothers in in-state and interstate cases (shown in fig. 3.1). Of mothers in these "other" cases who had support awards and were expecting payments, 53 percent reported receiving no payments during 1989, compared with 19 and 35 percent, respectively, of similar mothers in in-state and interstate cases (see fig. 4.2).

**Figure 4.1: Support Award Status of "Other" Cases (Spring 1990)**



**Section 4**  
**Mothers Reporting Fathers' Residences as**  
**"Other" Least Likely to Have Awards,**  
**Receive Payments**

**Figure 4.2: Frequency of Support Payment Receipt, by In-State, Interstate, and "Other" Cases (Spring 1990)**



Note: Cases with awards but not expecting payments in 1989 and those without awards are excluded.

In total, mothers in "other" cases reported that they were expecting \$0.5 billion in child support in 1989 but received only \$0.2 billion or just 37 percent of what they were expecting. This compares with 70 and 60 percent of the in-state and interstate cases respectively.

# Selected Characteristics of Custodial Mothers in In-State, Interstate, and “Other” Child Support Cases

In this section, we provide information on the reasons given by custodial mothers for not having support awards, for not receiving regular support payments, and for receiving public assistance, IV-D child support services, and health insurance. In addition to comparing child support characteristics of mothers in IV-D and non-IV-D cases, we present selected socioeconomic and child support characteristics of all custodial mothers by noncustodial fathers' residence.

## Some Mothers Do Not Want or Pursue Support; Some Fathers Refuse to Pay or Cannot Be Located

A surprisingly high percentage of custodial mothers indicated that they did not want or pursue support, and a fairly high percentage indicated that fathers refuse to pay. A much higher percentage of the custodial mothers who reported noncustodial fathers' residence as “other” (compared with mothers in both in-state and interstate cases) cited an inability to locate the noncustodial father as the reason for not having a child support award and not receiving support payments regularly (see table 5.1).<sup>1</sup>

**Table 5.1: Reasons Cited by Custodial Mothers for Not Having Child Support Awards and Not Receiving Regular Support Payments, by Noncustodial Fathers' Residence (Spring 1990)**

Reasons for lack of award	Noncustodial fathers' residence		
	In-state	Interstate	“Other”
Final agreement pending	6%	7%	2%
Other financial agreement made	7	4	3
Wanted support but:			
Did not pursue award	21	19	13
Father financially unable to pay	17	12	10
Unable to locate father	7	17	34
Unable to establish paternity	3	2	2
Other	17	15	17
Did not want support	22	24	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Reasons not receiving payments<sup>a</sup></b>			
Father refused to pay	66%	66%	49%
Unable to locate father	5	16	38
Other	29	18	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%<sup>b</sup></b>

<sup>a</sup>Includes only mothers who were expecting payments.

<sup>b</sup>Numbers do not add due to rounding.

<sup>1</sup>This is not surprising considering the high percentage of these mothers who indicated that they did not know the residence of the noncustodial father.

**Section 5  
Selected Characteristics of Custodial Mothers  
in In-State, Interstate, and "Other" Child  
Support Cases**

Reasons suggested in the child support and alimony supplement questionnaire for nonaward of child support and nonreceipt of regular payments are not mutually exclusive and limited, as the table shows. The possible reasons for not receiving support awards overlap and could be understood differently. For example, mothers who reported being unable to locate a noncustodial father also may have been unable to establish paternity for that reason. Similarly, mothers may not have pursued awards because they were unable to locate the noncustodial father or knew he would be financially unable to pay. Mothers responding could choose among only two responses and other as reasons for not receiving regular payments.

## Most Mothers Do Not Receive Health Insurance

Most mothers reported that health insurance was not included as part of their support award and was not provided by noncustodial fathers in 1989 (see table 5.2).

**Table 5.2: Custodial Mothers Reporting Receiving Health Insurance, by Noncustodial Fathers' Residence (Spring 1990)**

Mothers' response to questions on child support and alimony supplement	Noncustodial fathers' residence		
	In-state	Interstate	"Other"
Is health insurance now included as part of the child support agreement? <sup>a</sup>			
Yes	44%	34%	28%
No	56	66	72
Did the children's father actually provide health insurance in 1989 for the children? <sup>b</sup>			
Yes	37	25	17
No	63	75	83

<sup>a</sup>As of spring 1990

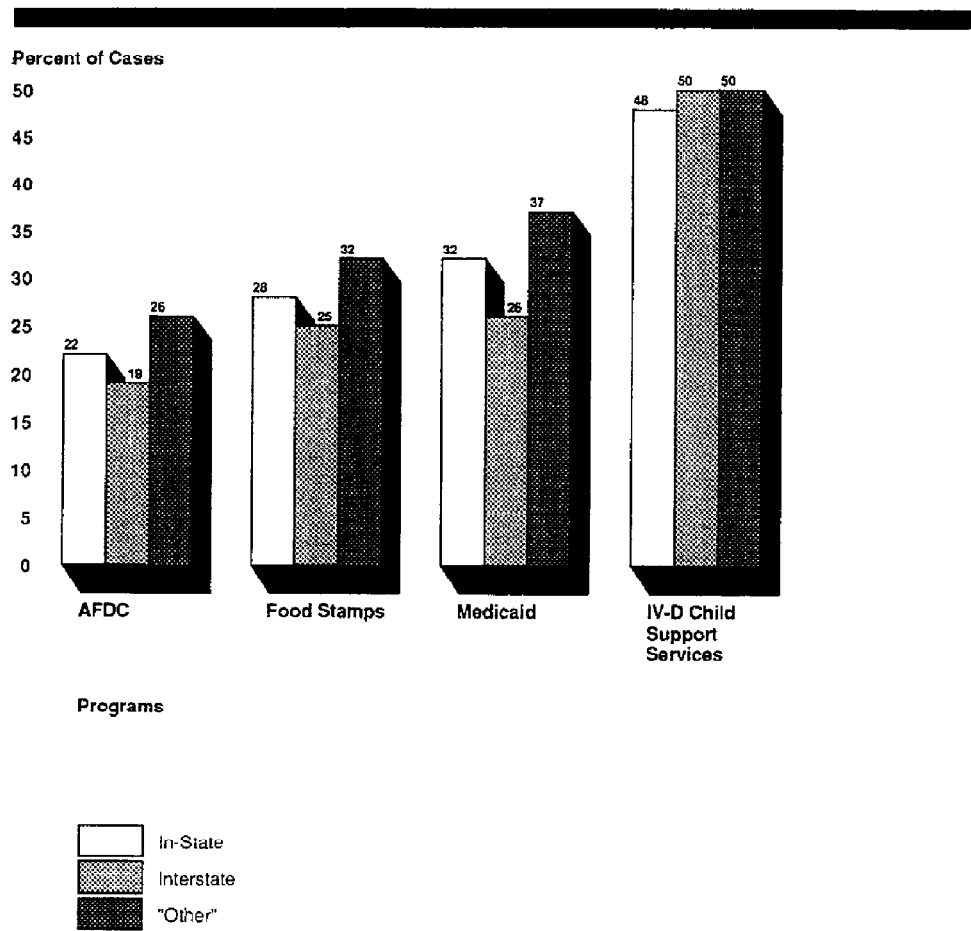
<sup>b</sup>This question was asked of all custodial mothers, not just those who answered yes to the previous question

## Receipt of Public Assistance and Title IV-D Services Did Not Differ by Noncustodial Fathers' Residence

Receipt of public assistance benefits and IV-D child support enforcement services did not differ by residence reported for noncustodial fathers(see fig. 5.1). We considered about half of all child support cases to be IV-D or public cases and the other half non-IV-D or private.

**Section 5**  
**Selected Characteristics of Custodial Mothers**  
**in In-State, Interstate, and "Other" Child**  
**Support Cases**

**Figure 5.1: Receipt of Public Assistance and Title IV-D Child Support Enforcement Services, by In-State, Interstate, and "Other" Cases (Spring 1990)**



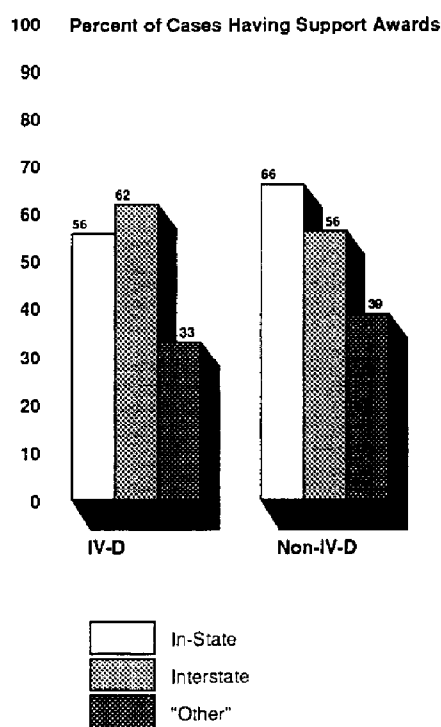
Note: This chart includes the percent of cases where mothers reported in 1990 that any persons in their households received assistance under these programs at any time during 1989. Title IV-D cases here include any where mothers reported ever having contacted a government agency for help in obtaining child support or any persons in their household receiving AFDC or Medicaid at any time during 1989. Some persons may not realize or recall that they received assistance under these programs. In addition, the CPS does not identify former AFDC and Medicaid recipients who automatically continue to receive IV-D services. See app. II for further explanation of the limitations of this data.

**Award Status and Payment Receipt of Title IV-D and Non-IV-D Cases**

With the exception of mothers in interstate cases, more mothers in non-IV-D cases reported having support awards than mothers in IV-D cases (see fig. 5.2). Among mothers in interstate cases, more mothers in IV-D cases reported having awards.

Section 5  
Selected Characteristics of Custodial Mothers  
in In-State, Interstate, and "Other" Child  
Support Cases

Figure 5.2: Child Support Award Status  
of IV-D and Non-IV-D In-State, Interstate,  
and "Other" Cases (Spring 1990)



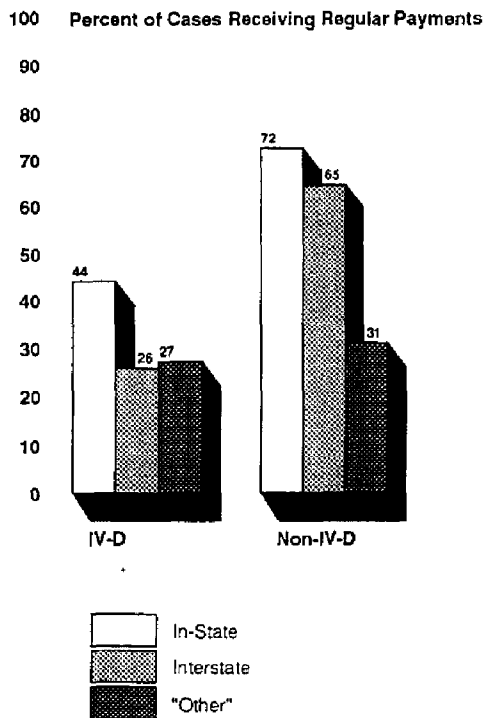
Note: Here, IV-D cases include any where mothers reported ever having contacted a government agency for help in obtaining child support or persons in their household who received AFDC or Medicaid at any time during 1989.

Mothers in non-IV-D cases were more likely (regardless of noncustodial fathers' residence) to receive regular payments than mothers in IV-D cases (see fig. 5.3). This contrast is particularly noticeable among the mothers in in-state and interstate cases.



**Section 5**  
**Selected Characteristics of Custodial Mothers**  
**in In-State, Interstate, and "Other" Child**  
**Support Cases**

**Figure 5.3: Receipt of Regular Support Payments in 1989, by IV-D and Non-IV-D In-State, Interstate, and "Other" Cases (Spring 1990)**



Note: Cases where mothers had awards but were not expecting payments in 1989 and those where mothers had no awards are excluded. Here, IV-D cases include any where the mother reported ever having contacted a government agency for help in obtaining child support or persons in the household who received AFDC or Medicaid at any time during 1989.

**Other Selected Socioeconomic and Child Support Characteristics of Custodial Mothers**

Most other socioeconomic and child support characteristics of custodial mothers did not differ by noncustodial fathers' residence (see table 5.3). Similarly, mean amounts of support received by custodial mothers who received support did not differ dramatically by noncustodial fathers' residence.

**Section 5**  
**Selected Characteristics of Custodial Mothers**  
**in In-State, Interstate, and "Other" Child**  
**Support Cases**

**Table 5.3: Selected Socioeconomic and Child Support Characteristics of Custodial Mothers, by Noncustodial Fathers' Residence (Spring 1990)**

Characteristic	Noncustodial fathers' residence		
	In-state	Interstate	"Other"
<b>All custodial mothers</b>			
Median family income	\$15,100	\$20,120	\$14,333
Median age	33	35	35
Percent completed high school	76%	80%	66%
Percent by race:			
White	69	73	67
Black	29	24	30
Other	2	3	3
<b>Mothers with child support awards</b>			
Median family income	\$21,000	\$26,021	\$20,600
Median age	35	36	36
Percent completed high school	84%	87%	79%
Percent by race:			
White	81	82	83
Black	17	15	15
Other	2	3	2
Mean amount of support received in 1989 <sup>a</sup>	\$1,898	\$1,620	\$508
Excluding those who reported "0"	\$2,673	\$2,813	\$1,657
<b>Mothers without child support awards</b>			
Median family income	\$8,653	\$12,525	\$11,550
Median age	30	33	34
Percent completed high school	63%	71%	58%
Percent by race:			
White	49	60	58
Black	48	36	38
Other	3	4	4

Note: Award status and residence as of spring 1990; income and payments for 1989

<sup>a</sup>To compute mean amounts of child support received, we used the figures custodial mothers reported in April in response to question 56, "How much in child support payments did you actually receive in 1989?" The Bureau of the Census, in arriving at its published mean amounts, used for each mother either the amount she reported in the April survey or that reported in the March survey, whichever was higher. (A question asked in the March survey was similar to question 56 asked in April.) Source: Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March/April 1990 Match File, Child Support and Alimony (machine-readable data file) (Washington, D.C.: 1991). The summary report in hard copy is "Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 173, Child Support and Alimony: 1989 (Washington, D.C.: 1991)." )



# Estimated Numbers and Percentages of Cases Awarded and Receiving Child Support (Spring 1990)

**Table I.1: Cases Awarded and Receiving Child Support, by Noncustodial Fathers' Residence (Spring 1990)**

Award and receipt category <sup>a</sup>	Noncustodial fathers' residence			Total
	In-state	Interstate	"Other"	
No award	2,477,000	1,048,000	682,000	4,207,000
Award	3,868,000	1,502,000	379,000	5,748,000
<b>Totals<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>6,345,000</b>	<b>2,549,000</b>	<b>1,061,000</b>	<b>9,955,000</b>
<b>Award</b>				
Not supposed to receive payments	483,000	182,000	130,000	795,000
Supposed to receive payments	3,385,000	1,319,000	249,000	4,953,000
<b>Award and supposed to receive payments</b>				
<b>Received payments</b>				
Regularly	2,018,000	568,000	71,000	2,658,000
Occasionally	431,000	146,000	20,000	598,000
Seldom	294,000	151,000	24,000	469,000
Subtotals	2,744,000	865,000	116,000	3,725,000
Never	641,000	455,000	133,000	1,228,000

<sup>a</sup>Award status and residence of noncustodial father as of spring 1990; support payment receipt for the year 1989

<sup>b</sup>Numbers may not add due to rounding

Source: Tabulations from Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March/April 1990 Match File: Child Support and Alimony (machine-readable data file) (Washington, D.C.: 1991). The summary report in hard copy is Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 173, Child Support and Alimony: 1989 (Washington, D.C.: 1991).

**Appendix I**  
**Estimated Numbers and Percentages of Cases**  
**Awarded and Receiving Child Support**  
**(Spring 1990)**

**Table I.2: Cases Awarded and Receiving Child Support, by Noncustodial Fathers' Residence (Spring 1990)**

Award and receipt category <sup>a</sup>	Noncustodial fathers' residence			Total
	In-state	Interstate	"Other"	
No award	39%	41%	64%	42%
Award	61	59	36	58
<b>Totals<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Award</b>				
Not supposed to receive payments	12%	12%	34%	14%
Supposed to receive payments	88	88	66	86
<b>Award and supposed to receive payments</b>				
<b>Received payments</b>				
Regularly	60%	43%	29%	54%
Occasionally	13	11	8	12
Seldom	9	11	10	9
Subtotals <sup>b</sup>	81	66	47	75
Never	19	34	53	25

<sup>a</sup>Award status and residence of noncustodial father as of spring 1990, support payment receipt for the year 1989.

<sup>b</sup>Numbers may not add due to rounding.

Source: Tabulations from Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March/April 1990 Match File: Child Support and Alimony (machine-readable data file) (Washington, D.C.: 1991). The summary report in hard copy is: Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 173, Child Support and Alimony 1989 (Washington, D.C.: 1991).

# More About the Current Population Survey and Our Analysis

This appendix presents information about (1) the sample and data imputation for the Current Population Survey and the child support and alimony supplement, (2) our use of CPS data to identify title IV-D child support cases, (3) limitations of CPS data for determining income and child support cases, and (4) limitations of government agency data on child support cases.

## CPS Sample and Data Imputation

The CPS scientifically samples households in the United States on the basis of area of residence to represent the nation as a whole. Its universe is the civilian noninstitutional U. S. population and members of the Armed Forces living in civilian housing units or on a military base.

The CPS income and the CPS child support and alimony supplements each use two sets of questions, the basic CPS and a separate set of supplementary questions for each of the two months. The child support and alimony supplement questions used in April are asked only of women who were also interviewed for the previous March's income supplement.

Households interviewed for the March 1990 income supplement contained 43,018 women over age 14 who were considered then eligible for the April child support and alimony supplement. Of these 43,018 women, 39,474 were interviewed again in April 1990. The Bureau of the Census imputed data on marital status, income, and the presence of own children for the remaining 3,544 women.<sup>1</sup>

Of the 43,018 women age 15 and above considered eligible for the April child support and alimony supplement, 4,355 were mothers living with their own children under 21 whose father was not also living with them. Only these women were considered "custodial mothers" eligible to be asked the detailed child support questions. Of these 4,355 custodial mothers, 3,873 were interviewed and the Census Bureau imputed responses to child support questions for the remaining 482.

Of the 3,873 custodial mothers asked detailed questions on child support, 3,233 provided responses to the question about the noncustodial father's residence. The Census Bureau imputed residence data for the remaining 1,122 women. Thus, our estimates presented in this report on the number of in-state, interstate, and "other" child support cases are derived from (1) the actual responses of at most the 3,233 women who answered the child support and alimony supplement question about the

<sup>1</sup>Of these, 482 were imputed to be women with children under 21 from a noncustodial father.

noncustodial father's residence and (2) the data Census imputed for 1,122 women. Estimates we present on individual child support characteristics of interstate cases, in-state, or "other" cases, such as receipt of payments or award of child support, are based on fewer actual responses and more imputed responses. The ratio depends on the number of women who provided answers for each particular CPS question.

This magnitude of imputation rate is considered high. In its written report on the child support and alimony supplement the Bureau of the Census cautions, "For the estimates obtained from this microdata file, the nonsampling error due to imputing values may be particularly severe."

The CPS child support and alimony supplement is not designed specifically to capture representative samples of individual state populations of custodial mothers with children under 21 from absent fathers. For most states, the survey sample size is not large enough to provide usable state-level data on child support.

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## Title IV-D Cases Identified Through Several Responses

To distinguish between public (title IV-D) and private (non-IV-D) child support cases, we combined data from the CPS income and child support and alimony supplements:

- The income supplement questions mothers about receipt of public assistance benefits, including Aid to Families With Dependent Children and Medicaid, during the previous year by any persons in the household.
- The child support and alimony supplement asks mothers whether they ever contacted any government agency for aid in obtaining child support.

We considered IV-D child support cases to be any in which a mother reported that either (1) at any time she contacted a government agency for help in obtaining child support or (2) during the past year any persons in her household received AFDC or Medicaid.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The requirement that Medicaid recipients cooperate with and accept public child support enforcement services took effect July 1, 1988. Therefore such persons are included as IV-D cases in our analysis.

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## Use of CPS Data May Understate Child Support Cases and Amounts

Using CPS data to identify child support cases may understate their number, as well as amounts of income and child support. CPS child support data is not equivalent to cases as reported by government agencies and private attorneys for statistics on the child support enforcement workload. The child support and alimony supplement questions mothers; it does not question custodial fathers, ask about the child support status of all children in the household of the sampled mothers, or identify former AFDC and Medicaid recipients considered title IV-D child support cases. Also, the CPS is thought to underreport income and child support amounts, particularly of title IV-D cases.

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## CPS Does Not Count All Child Support Cases

The child support and alimony supplement of the CPS questions mothers age 15 and above with their own children under 21 from the mothers' most recent marriage, husband, or partner. Each mother is counted once, regardless of the number of children she is living with or different noncustodial fathers these children may have. Furthermore, in cases where mothers are living with children under 21 that they bore from different noncustodial fathers, the CPS data is limited to the child support award and payment status pertaining to children from only one noncustodial father, depending upon the mother's marital status, as follows:

- If a custodial mother is divorced or separated, she is asked child support questions about only children from her most recent spouse.
- If the mother is married or widowed when interviewed for the child support and alimony supplement, she is asked child support questions about only children from her previous partner.
- If the mother has never been married and has children from more than one man, the child support and alimony supplement questionnaire does not specify for which children or noncustodial father the mother should report child support data.

In contrast, private attorneys generally count "clients" as cases for workload statistics, while government child support agencies count noncustodial parents. For example, to a private attorney, two custodial mothers who had children by the same man would represent two clients, even though the same noncustodial father is involved. There could be two separate child support awards, one each for the children with each mother. On the other hand, when the noncustodial father is the client, he may represent one case for workload statistics even if there are awards for children by different mothers. Further complicating the differences between CPS and government agency and attorney statistics, in OCSE statistics a mother with children from more than one father has a



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different title IV-D case for each father.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, some jurisdictions establish separate child support cases for each child for whom paternity must be established, depending upon whether the children's father is different or not identified.

Another limitation of CPS data is that cases may be counted as "in-state" even though interstate enforcement actions are involved. This could occur where both the custodial mother and noncustodial father live in the same state but the noncustodial father works in another state. In these cases, an employer in a state different from both parents' residence may need to be served with a wage withholding order on the noncustodial father's wages. In another example, parents may live in the same state but the support order may have been originally issued in a different state from where both parents currently reside.

Our use of CPS data to identify title IV-D child support cases likely also understates the number of such cases. Most researchers agree that the CPS undercounts AFDC participation. This is because some persons in the CPS may not realize they received AFDC benefits and the CPS does not ask persons if they received benefits in prior years. Seemingly, the question on contacting a government agency for help in obtaining child support is the best indication available in the CPS of whether a mother is part of the IV-D program. But mothers may not realize or recall that they received government child support enforcement services. This is particularly true if they were enrolled in the IV-D program automatically while on AFDC or Medicaid or through an application when they filed divorce papers.

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### CPS Respondents' Income May Be Understated

In addition, the CPS is generally thought to underreport receipt of income and public assistance benefits. Answers to questions about income often depend on the memory or knowledge of one person in the household. Recall problems can cause underestimates of income in surveys because people can easily forget minor or irregular sources of income. From an analysis of independently derived income estimates, the Bureau of the Census determined that wages and salaries tend to be much better reported than such income types as public assistance, Social Security, and net income from interest, dividends, rents, and the like.

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<sup>3</sup>OCSE defines a child support enforcement case as "every absent parent who is now or may eventually be obligated under law for the support of one or more dependent children."

Also, CPS reporting likely understates the amounts of child support payments because mothers receiving AFDC do not receive all the child support collected on their behalf. Monthly child support payments collected on behalf of a child receiving AFDC are paid to the child support enforcement agency rather than directly to the family. When the child support collection is insufficient to disqualify the family from receiving AFDC, the family receives its full monthly AFDC grant plus the first \$50 of the child support payment. The remainder of the monthly child support payment is distributed to reimburse state and federal governments in proportion to their assistance to the family. Accordingly, AFDC mothers in the CPS may be unable to distinguish what portion of their AFDC check represents a child support collection from the noncustodial father and what portion represents an AFDC benefit.

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## Government Statistics Also Have Limitations

Government child support enforcement statistics could overstate the number of interstate IV-D child support cases while understating total cases. In title IV-D interstate cases, state agencies for IV-D child support enforcement report quarterly to OCSE the number of cases with requests for assistance sent to and received from other states. Every situation involving a mother with children from a father who lives in another state is counted twice in these statistics; once by the requesting or sending state and once by the receiving or responding state. In addition, OCSE sums the quarterly numbers reported by states to arrive at yearly figures for total requests received and sent during the year. Thus, if requests are sent or received in more than one quarter during the year, some cases may be counted more than twice. On the other hand, this possible overcount is mitigated by the fact that these statistics do not include open interstate cases for which no requests for assistance were made during the year.

Moreover, the total child support caseload is undercounted in statistics from government child support enforcement agencies simply because privately handled cases are not included.

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# Related GAO Products

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Interstate Child Support Enforcement: Computer Network Contract Not Ready To Be Awarded (GAO/IMTEC-92-8, Oct. 23, 1991).

Child Support Enforcement: A Framework for Evaluating Costs, Benefits, and Effects (GAO/PEMD-91-6, Mar. 5, 1991).

Children's Issues: A Decade of GAO Reports and Recent Activities (GAO/HRD-90-162, Sept. 21, 1990).

Child Support Enforcement: More States Reporting Debt to Credit Bureaus to Spur Collections (GAO/HRD-90-113, July 31, 1990).

Interstate Child Support: Better Information Needed on Absent Parents for Case Pursuit (GAO/HRD-90-41, May 24, 1990).

Child Support: State Progress in Developing Automated Enforcement Systems (GAO/HRD-89-10FS, Feb. 10, 1989).

Interstate Child Support: Case Data Limitations, Enforcement Problems, Views on Improvements Needed (GAO/HRD-89-25, Jan. 27, 1989).

Child Support: Need to Improve Efforts to Identify Fathers and Obtain Support Orders (GAO/HRD-87-37, Apr. 30, 1987).

Child Support: States' Progress in Implementing the 1984 Amendments (GAO/HRD-87-11, Oct. 3, 1986).

Child Support Collection Efforts for Non-AFDC Families (GAO/HRD-85-3, Oct. 30, 1984).

U.S. Child Support: Needed Efforts Underway to Increase Collections From Absent Parents (GAO/HRD-85-5, Oct. 30, 1984).

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