

*Why Doesn't She Have A Child Support Order? : Personal Choice or Objective Constraint*

Press Release

Why do some mothers refrain from pursuing child support orders, often despite oppressive financial need? A study published in the latest edition of *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, considers this question. With an upswing in numbers of single-parent families in the U.S. over the past several decades, coupled with the rising incidence of poverty experienced by this group, this timely research invites even more attention.

Even though the federal Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program has been in effect since 1975, and Congress has passed subsequent laws intended to buck up the system almost every year since, more than one-third of all mothers who meet the legal criteria for receiving child support *do not have a child support order* (Current Population Survey, 1994-1998). Recognizing that lack of sufficient income can be a severely limiting factor when it comes to family well-being in single-mother-headed households, Dr. Chien-Chung Haung of Rutgers University School of Social Work wanted to understand why this should be so.

Due to the death of his father at age 5, Haung became personally familiar with some of the hardships such a family can face. "I know how important economic security is for children in single-parent families," he said. "Thus, any policy that can improve economic security for these families is of interest to me."

His review of public policy acknowledges the state and federal efforts intended to prevent non-resident fathers from failing to support their children. The federal CSE program, through the state offices it created, works with single mothers to establish their children's paternity, obtain legal support orders, and collect payments. Between 1981 and 1999, new supportive legislation has been passed regularly. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) of 1996 effectively enhances the system by making it easier to establish paternity, to locate non-paying fathers, and to aid in the enforcement of orders between states. However, despite the progress made

in so many areas during the past 20-plus years – not to mention the amount of effort and resources expended by federal and state governments – 36% of all eligible mothers do not avail themselves of these services.

And that raises a very pertinent question: why? With so much being done to ease and facilitate the process of obtaining a child supports order, why don't more women have one? Dr. Huang believes that obtaining a broader knowledge of what prevents or discourages these women may be the first step towards solving the problem. As stated in his study, "It is imperative that we more fully understand mothers' reasons for not having orders, and how the current child support approach can be improved to best achieve its core aim of supporting children."

The conceptual model used by Huang and his co-author, Hillard Pouncy of Princeton University, suggests that mother's reasons for not having obtained orders relate to personal choice (e.g.: didn't want the father to pay, or might not want contact with the father), objective constraint (e.g.: unable to locate the father, or maybe the mother believes he can't afford to pay anyway), or a blend of the two types. The researchers hypothesized these choices would be affected by various personal and circumstantial characteristics of the mother, including such things as race/ethnicity, age, educational levels, marital status, location of residence, number of children, and so forth.

From this base, an in-depth evaluation of data gleaned from three waves of the Current Population Survey – Child Support Supplement (CPS-CSS) was implemented. A random sample of 11,570 women was separated into groups as follows: those with a legal child support agreement; those with a pending legal agreement (in process); those with an informal agreement, and those with no agreement at all. Results were then compared and contrasted in respect to the characteristics and motivators mentioned above.

Although 11% of the women evaluated reported only personal choice reasons for not having orders, fully half of them (51%) cited solely objective constraints as the inhibitor. The rest combined reasons from both categories. Though too extensive to detail here, findings clearly

supported the original hypothesis that results would shift in response to differing social and economic variables.

The findings uncovered by the researchers point to the need for child support efforts that are in tune with the individual complexity of a client's life and situation. Dr. Huang recommends "holistic interventions" that will flatten the barriers to a woman's full participation in the program. He also considers the flip side of the story – the situation non-resident, low-income fathers find themselves in– and considers the need for policy making efforts "that will help them get jobs that will support not only themselves, but also their children."

Although this study sheds light on some of the reasons women fail to seek child support orders, further investigation may help us understand exactly why there should be such strong reticence to do so. Another possible track might be to question how responses would differ as each combination of unique socio-demographic particulars is applied. Huang projects the positive value such studies could have towards establishing more effective methods of intervention.

Dr. Huang holds the position of Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. The major focus of this and earlier research centers on issues surrounding the well being of single mothers and their children, with particular emphasis on the impact of child support enforcement on welfare dynamics and economic security. He has authored and co-authored many related studies. His co-author for this article, Hillard Pouncy, is a visiting lecturer at the School of Public Policy and International Affairs at Princeton University, Princeton, NJ. This current research is being supported by a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services. Dr. Huang can be contacted at the School of Social Work, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 536 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 (huangc@rci.rutgers.edu). Dr. Joyce A. Arditti is the editor of *Family Relations* and can be contacted at the Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 359 Wallace Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24061 (frjournal@vt.edu).

