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Parents Behind in Child Support Payments Suffer Higher Rates of Mental Health Problems

A recent study published in the [*Children and Youth Services Review*](#) explored the

association between mental health and substance use problems among non-custodial parents and their association with the payment of child support. For the study, surveys of 633 noncustodial parents (NCPs) were completed in a mix of rural and urban counties in the state of Michigan. The surveys measured anxiety, depression, and substance use, and looked for the relationship with payment history and employment. Among the survey respondents, approximately 46% were compliant in child support payments, 57% were employed, 36% received public assistance, and 14% had ever been in prison. Thirty eight percent had a high school education, 15% did not graduate from high school, and the rest had a post-high school education or a college degree. Key findings include:

- The presence of mental health problems was found to be significantly related to lower compliance with child support payments. The relationship was partially explained by employment: mental health problems were higher with unemployment, and unemployment was associated with lower rates of child support compliance. Thus, employment partially mediated the relationship between the mental health problems studied in the report and child support payments.
- Depression, generalized anxiety, social anxiety and substance use problems among surveyed NCPs were present at a much higher rate than was the case for the general population. NCPs were more than twice as likely as general

population to experience depression, more than eight times as likely to experience generalized anxiety, six times as likely to experience social anxiety, and more than three times as likely to have a substance use disorder.

- Among NCPs in the study, depression was present in 19% (compared to 8% for the general population), generalized anxiety disorder was present in 26% (compared to 3%), social anxiety disorder was present in 18% (compared to 7%) and substance use disorder was present in 14% (compared to 4%).
- The average monthly income of NCPs in the sample was \$2,173, but there was significant variation due to the high portion of the sample that was unemployed. Among the NCPs, 36% received some form of public assistance.

The findings suggest that NCPs who are not current in their child support payments, particularly those who are also unemployed, may experience clinically significant mental health conditions that contribute to unemployment and potentially to payment noncompliance. The authors suggest that a tailored intervention that has the potential to increase employment levels and subsequent support payments, while at the same time improving emotional well-being among unemployed NCPs, could yield substantial benefits not only for NCPs but also for CPs and their dependent children.

The following set of report summaries relates to the disproportionate impact of state and federal policy on people of color as a function of where they live. The summaries are followed by a list of some other related reports, with links to the stories.

Environmental Cuts Have Disproportionate Impact on Communities of Color

A [short video](#) featuring Vann Newkirk, a staff writer for *The Atlantic* magazine, makes the

case that environmental racism is the new Jim Crow. Environmental racism refers to the systemic structures that place disproportionate environmental burdens and hazards on people based on race and ethnicity. The video, along with a separate report in [The Guardian](#), makes the following key points:

- More than half of all people who live close to hazardous waste are people of color.
- Black children are twice as likely to suffer lead poisoning as white children.
- Black children are twice as likely to have asthma as their white counterparts.
- Nearly half of America's Latino population lives in counties that do not meet EPA air quality standards.
- Pollution and environmental disaster are higher risks for people of color. Non-Hispanic whites have been found to have the lowest exposure rates for 11 of the 14 pollutants monitored in one study. Hispanics had the highest exposure rates for 10 out of the 14 pollutants, and African Americans had higher exposure rates than whites for 13 out of the 14 pollutants.
- Patterns of segregation mean that wealthier communities can upgrade their water pipes and other local infrastructure to shield them from environmental

hazards, avoiding such dangers as the contaminated water that caused the Flint water crisis.

- Blacks are more likely to die from environmental causes than whites.

Even in the years preceding the Trump administration, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) dismissed nine out of 10 complaints from communities plagued by pollution, yet the agency has never found a business in breach of the Civil Rights Act's Title VI provisions against discrimination on environmental grounds.

The Trump administration budget is proposing a 25% reduction in the EPA's budget, eliminating nearly 3,000 jobs and several programs, including the agency's Environmental Justice Office. The office addresses the disparity between the pollution experienced by black, Hispanic and low-income communities and wealthier white neighborhoods, and provides grants to communities to clean up areas with toxins and to rehabilitate abandoned industrial facilities that are found in poorer neighborhoods. According to Sierra Club Campaign Director John Coequyt: "To cut the environmental justice program at EPA is just racist. I can't describe it in any other terms than a move to leave those communities behind. I can't imagine what the justification would be, other than racism."

States with Greater Minority Populations Provide Lowest TANF Benefits

A recent report from [the Urban Institute](#) looks at the cash support available to families by state,

finding that states with the largest minority populations provide the lowest benefits under the TANF program. With its minimal restrictions, TANF allows states to determine the mission, design, and benefits of their version of the program. As a result, the cash support available to families and the TANF eligibility requirements vary widely across states. The maximum monthly benefit for a family of three with no other income averages \$436 and ranges from \$170 in Mississippi to \$923 in Alaska. New Hampshire offers the second-largest monthly benefit, up to \$675. Thirty-nine states offer maximum monthly benefits under \$550. The report explores the variation in state TANF policies and factors that might explain these variations. Key findings include:

- Just 23 percent of families living in poverty receive cash assistance, a proportion that has fallen dramatically in the last 20 years.
- The cash support available to families and the conditions under which they can receive it largely depend on where they live. African American people are disproportionately concentrated in states with the least generous policies.
- State TANF policy decisions are significantly related to race. States with larger African American populations, all else equal, have less generous and more restrictive TANF policies.
- A larger share of African American people in a state's population is generally associated with less generous and more restrictive policies. A 5-percentage

point increase in the African American share of the population is associated with an average decrease in the maximum monthly benefit of over \$25, more than \$325 over a full year, or about 6 percent of the average maximum benefit across all states.

- States with larger African American populations also tend to have income eligibility limits and harsher initial sanctions, all else being equal.

Gun Violence Harms Economic Health of Communities

Another Urban Institute report, from its Justice Policy Center's series on the economic impact of gun violence, [*Gun Violence Affects the Economic Health of Communities*](#), looks at the impact of surges in gun violence on the health of local economies. The report analyzed newly available business establishment and credit score data, along with gunshot and sociodemographic data, by census tract, as well as gun homicide data (when available), for Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Oakland, California; Rochester, New York; San Francisco, California; and Washington, DC, and assesses the impact of gun violence beyond the personal toll it takes on individuals and families. Among the report's findings:

- Gun homicide surges in neighborhoods reduced the growth rate of new retail and service establishments by 4 percent. In Minneapolis, for example, each additional gun homicide in a census tract in a given year was related to 80 fewer jobs the next year.
- Every 10 additional gunshots in a census tract in a given year were related to one less new business opening, one more business closing, and 20 fewer jobs in new establishments the same year.
- Gun violence surges in neighborhoods slowed home value appreciation by approximately 4 percent. Every additional gun homicide in a census tract was associated with a \$22,000 decrease in average home values in Minneapolis; a \$24,621 decrease in Oakland; a 20-point decrease in average credit score in Minneapolis; a 9-point decrease in Oakland; a 3 percent decrease in homeownership rates in Washington, DC, and a 1 percent decrease in Baton Rouge.
- Business owners, home owners, and community stakeholders reported that gun violence led to costs that include camera systems, Plexiglas, bulletproof windows, motion sensor lights, bars on doors, and extra security staff. Business owners and residents described the coping mechanisms that they incorporated into their daily lives, such as businesses closing early, business owners and managers keeping the doors locked at night during operating hours, business owners increasing investments in security systems, residents avoiding shopping during night hours, and employees who work night shifts avoiding public transit.
- Residents, business owners, and stakeholders reported feeling that gun violence hurts housing prices, drives community members to relocate, and causes people to avoid moving to affected neighborhoods.

Some important additional reports related to the impact of neighborhood location on residents are listed below:

- An [Urban Institute report](#) highlights research about the effect of blight—substandard housing, abandoned buildings, and vacant lots—on the health of individuals and neighborhoods.
- A special report in the [Financial Times](#): *Poverty, open sewers and parasites: 'America's dirty shame'*, describes how tropical parasites are thriving in the hot, humid US south, where the poorest areas face new healthcare budget cuts.
- [An analysis of car insurance premiums and payouts](#) in California, Illinois, Texas, and Missouri shows that some major insurers charge minority neighborhoods as much as 30 percent more than other areas with similar the same risk. One [Illinois state senator has proposed legislation](#) to bar insurance companies from using a person's zip code when setting auto insurance premiums in order to address the practice.
- An [article on race and assisted housing](#) finds that the location and quality of the housing has a bigger influence on life outcomes than race. Black children who lived in assisted housing in neighborhoods with better services and resources had better outcomes than those in public housing in more economically distressed areas.

**Thousands of Laws in Southern States
Prevent Post-Incarceration Survival**

[The Southern Poverty Law Center](#)

(SPLC) has written a letter to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that

addresses the laws that often prevent people released from jail, prison, or probation from finding employment, housing or services based on their criminal records. The letter concerns laws in five southern states: Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, and Georgia. The letter makes the following points:

- More than half of the prison population in the five southern states is black. Since 1980, the country's prison population has quadrupled, and the South accounts for nearly half of that increase.
- Florida, Alabama, and Georgia have some of the most restrictive laws in the country that operate to limit employment, benefits, and access to basic services to returning citizens, known as collateral consequence laws. Collectively, the states have 5,283 collateral consequence laws in place. Louisiana alone has 1,494 such restrictions.
- The five states have almost 1.3 million people in the criminal justice system and are disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration compared to the rest of the nation.
- Despite being disproportionately poorer than non-incarcerated residents of the five states, those convicted of felonies or controlled substances offenses

can be rendered ineligible for food stamps, whether permanently or for a period of ten years as a result of collateral consequence laws.

- In Louisiana, any individual convicted of any misdemeanor or any felony may be denied public housing benefits. If that person chooses to live or stay with family members who reside in public housing, he or she may be denied housing based on a criminal background check. Disclosing the fact that one member of the family has a criminal conviction may render the whole family ineligible for public housing.
- Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi also restrict access to public housing benefits for people with certain types of criminal convictions.
- The five states collectively have 3,781 laws in place that restrict employment, occupational licensing, and business licensing opportunities for people convicted of a crime. Many of the restrictions are permanent and automatically triggered with even a misdemeanor conviction.
- Public fees and fines are a common and debilitating form of debt. These include traffic violation payments, motor vehicle licensing, child support, court fees, and restitution for victims. Many of the fees continue to accrue while in prison despite the incarcerated person's lack of income to make a payment. Once out of prison, a person is required to visit separate government agencies or courts to contend with the debt.

Stanford Poverty Center Produces State of the Union on Poverty, Inequality, and Labor Market Outcomes

[The Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality \(CPI\)](#) has produced its fourth annual report examining the “state of the union” on poverty,

inequality, and labor market outcomes. The focus of the most recent report is on racial and ethnic gaps in poverty and inequality, examining the gaps in terms of employment, poverty, safety-net use, housing, education, incarceration, health, earnings, wealth, and mobility. The report consists of articles on each category by scholars with a particular focus on that category. The report outline provides the following key conclusions from each author:

- Employment: *Even after the recovery, 1 in 9 African Americans and 1 in 6 Hispanics fear a job loss within one year.*
- Poverty: *We remain two Americas: A high-poverty America for blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans, and a (relatively) low-poverty America for whites and Asians.*
- Safety Net: *The safety net, which is supposed to serve an equalizing function, sometimes works to exacerbate racial and ethnic inequalities within the low-income population.*
- Housing: *Whereas 1 in 6 black and Hispanic households dedicate at least half of their income to housing costs, only 1 in 12 white households do.*
- Education: *Between 1990 and 2015, average academic performance improved for students of all racial and ethnic groups, but grew fastest among black and*

Hispanic students. The result: White-black and white-Hispanic achievement gaps declined by 15 to 25 percent.

- *Incarceration: Did you think that all that talk about criminal justice reform has brought about a sea change in racial inequalities in incarceration? Think again.*
- *Health: Large and persistent racial gaps in health are not the product of our genes but the consequences of our policies and history.*
- *Earnings: Between 1970 and 2010, the earnings gap between whites and other groups has narrowed, but most of that decline was secured in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement.*
- *Wealth: African-Americans have less than 8 cents and Hispanics less than 10 cents of wealth for every dollar amassed by whites.*
- *Intergenerational Mobility: The persistence of poverty has long been stronger for blacks than whites. However, beginning with generations that came of age in the mid-1960s, the white-black gap in the chance of escaping poverty has closed significantly.*

Among the conclusions that can be reached from a review of this broad spectrum of research, CPI suggests that “much of the inequality that shows up later in the life course is due to the one-two punch of (a) profound disparities in family background (e.g., racial-ethnic differences in parental wealth, education, and income), and (b) profound disparities in neighborhood conditions (e.g., racial-ethnic differences in such neighborhood amenities as high-quality schooling, low crime rates, or the absence of environmental hazards). These very unequal starting conditions are of course then reinforced by subsequent exposure to educational, labor market, and criminal justice institutions that are riddled with discriminatory practices.”

STATE POLICY AND PRACTICE

- Federal Judge Myron Thompson has ruled that **Alabama's [psychiatric care of state inmates](#)** is so "horrendously inadequate" that it violates the US Constitution's ban on cruel and unusual punishment. Thompson has ordered the state to overhaul its system of mental health care.

Alabama inmates sued the state's Department of Corrections (ADOC) in 2014, claiming that untreated conditions and lengthy lockdowns were leading to more symptoms, violence and suicides. Thompson, in a “scathing” 302-page order, wrote that Alabama had failed to identify and treat prisoners with mental illnesses, provide adequate mental health staff and services, and adequately identify and monitor suicidal inmates. "The skyrocketing suicide rate within ADOC in the last two years is a testament to the concrete harm that inadequate mental-health care has already inflicted on mentally ill prisoners," Thompson wrote in his order.

In 2016, the plaintiffs settled the first phase of the three-phase lawsuit regarding violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act. In that settlement, the ADOC committed to provide services and fair treatment to incarcerated people with disabilities. The third phase in the lawsuit will determine whether the prison system's poor medical services violate the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment. The lawsuits were filed in 2014 by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, and the law firms Baker Donelson, and Zarzaur Mujumdar & Debrosse.

Similar lawsuits have been filed in other states, including California, South Carolina, and Arizona, which led to court orders and settlement agreements to improve conditions or reduce crowding.

- [Three men from Detroit, Michigan](#) found a way to draw attention to the state's "Dad by Default" law, walking from their homes in Detroit to the state capital in Lansing. The law provides that if a man is named by the mother as a father at the child's birth or if a couple is married at the time of the birth, and if he fails to appear at a paternity hearing, he is declared the child's father. A deadline for submitting a DNA test that could prove paternity can easily be missed if the mother is no longer in contact with the father, because the state will not share her location due to confidentiality concerns. In addition to creating confused relationships with the children, the law results in men becoming responsible for any child support owed on behalf of the child whether or not a DNA test reveals that he is not the biological father. According to one of the fathers, "I am getting garnished. I am getting thrown in jail. I am getting felony charges." The men hope that representatives will pass legislation that would protect men from being forced to pay for another man's child. A bipartisan group of lawmakers are now working on the issue.
- A new law in **Illinois**, the [Bail Reform Act](#), seeks to end a requirement that people charged with relatively minor crimes post cash bail as a condition of their release. Under previous state law, many nonviolent, low-level offenders were spending from weeks to months in jail because they were unable to pay the 10-percent down payment required for release. In 2015, for example, more than 1,000 inmates in the Cook County Jail had served more time in custody for lack of payment than they were ultimately sentenced to serve. The new law specifies that cash bail is not necessary for people who are in custody for a nonviolent misdemeanor or low-level felony, such as theft, prostitution, driving under the influence or drug possession.
- A [recent investigation](#) has found that the **Maine** Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is using the savings it has accrued from cutting low-income families off of TANF to cover long-term state spending obligations such as shelters for homeless young people and transportation for families involved in the child protective system. Out of the \$102 million in TANF funds DHHS says

it plans to spend in the upcoming fiscal year, an estimated \$34.5 million, more than a third of the total, will represent spending on programs and services previously paid for using other state funds. Most of the programs and services were already accounted for in the budget proposal Governor Paul LePage released earlier this year. By using TANF to pay for them instead, DHHS is, according to the investigation, creating its own cash pool from TANF funds and thereby avoiding legislative scrutiny.

- Beginning July 1, **Illinois** will become the 40th state to adopt an [“income shares” model](#) when determining child support obligations. The state’s new legislation means that if the non-primary residential parent, or non-primary custodial parent spends 146 nights or more a year with a child, the child support obligations are reduced and shared between the two parents.

OF NOTE

- Beginning July 1, [the accuracy of reporting by credit bureaus will be improved](#) because each citation in a credit report will be required to include the subject’s name, address and either their Social Security number or date of birth. Most civil judgments and at least half of tax lien records do not meet the new standards, and will be eliminated from consumer credit reports. This will result in approximately 12 million people seeing their credit scores rise. Credit bureaus will also be required to update their public records information at least once every 90 days.
- A documentary on the experience of fathers with the child support enforcement system, [“Where’s Daddy?”](#), is set to be released soon. According to the film’s website, the film provides “perspectives on the child support system and the specific effect and consequences to black families. Emphasis is on the experience of fathers as participants in the system. Examining the legal challenges, social implications, cultural issues and emotional impact of navigating the child support system.” The trailer for the upcoming documentary is available [here](#).
- A new series from the [Guardian online](#), in conjunction with the [Economic Hardship Reporting Challenge](#), seeks to provide a representation of inequality in rural communities and to support reporters on the ground in their own communities. The series is called *On the Ground: Reporting from All Corners of America*.
- A new book, [African American Men and the Labor Market during the Great Recession](#), by Michelle Holder, analyzes the status and position of African American men in the US labor market prior to, during, and after the recent recession. The book outlines how the representation of African American men in major occupational categories almost universally declined during the recession even as white non-Hispanic men were able to maintain their occupational

representation in the face of staggering job losses. It also illustrates how African American men sought to insulate themselves from devastating job losses by increasing their educational attainment in a job market where employers exercised more leverage in hiring. However, this strategy was unable to provide protection from disparate job losses as African American men became further marginalized in the workforce during the recession. Policy approaches to address high African American male unemployment are outlined in the final chapter.