

Love and money: How low-income dads really provide

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Deadbeat Dads?

Researchers studied 367 low-income noncustodial fathers. They found:

Percent of all fathers who contributed in-kind support: **46**

Average monthly value of the in-kind support: **\$60**

Amount spent on:

Clothing, shoes: **\$19**

Gifts: **\$13**

Food: **\$8**

Childcare: **\$7**

Baby products: **\$6**



Average monthly value of in-kind support by dads who avoided cash payments: **\$63**

Average amount of formal child support paid per month: **\$38**

A summary of the findings from a study of how low-income noncustodial fathers support their children. Credit: Royce Faddis/JHU

Low-income fathers who might be labeled "deadbeat dads" often spend as much on their children as parents in formal child-support arrangements, but they choose to give goods like food and clothing rather than cash, a Johns Hopkins-led study found.

In the first examination of the magnitude of in-kind child support, published this month in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, the team found many disadvantaged noncustodial fathers spend an average of \$60 a month on in-kind provisions, while [dads](#) paying formal child support spend about \$38 a month.

Men who were the most disadvantaged tended to give a higher proportion of their support in gifts, the study found.

"The most disadvantaged dads end up looking like they're completely distanced from their kids but they're actually giving quite a lot," said co-author Kathryn Edin, a Johns Hopkins Bloomberg Distinguished Professor of sociology. "I was really surprised by how much these disadvantaged guys, these truly marginally employed men, are putting all of this thought and what little resources they have into showing their children that they care."

Edin, along with Timothy J. Nelson, a Johns Hopkins sociologist, and Jennifer B. Kane, a postdoctoral scholar at the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina, studied 367 lower-income noncustodial fathers in three cities: Philadelphia, Austin, Texas; and

Charleston, South Carolina.

Nearly half of the fathers, 46 percent, contributed in-kind support to a child, while 23 percent of them gave formal support (through the court system), and 28 percent gave informal support (cash straight to the mother).

Fathers providing in-kind support gave each child items worth about \$60 a month—more per month, per child, than they spent on formal (\$53) or informal (\$40) support.

In-kind support included items like baby products (diapers, formula, strollers and cribs), clothing, shoes, school expenses, school supplies, after-school program costs, gifts and food.

Some fathers, 66 in the study with 95 children, avoided cash payments altogether—dads who would traditionally be considered "deadbeat." They gave \$63 per child a month through in-kind support—support that is currently unacknowledged in any government surveys or statistics.

Other notable findings:

- Fathers who did not visit their kids gave each child goods worth about \$48 a month while dads that spent at least 10 hours a month with their children gave them twice as much in-kind support—\$84. Each additional hour of visitation was associated with an increase of nearly \$1 of in-kind support per month.
- Fathers who were romantically involved with the mother offered 52 percent of their support through in-kind provisions, while dads not involved with the mother gave 36 percent in-kind.
- The value of in-kind support varied by the child's age with younger children getting the most in-kind support—an average of \$78 for children under 5—compared with \$41 for children 10

and up.

- The total value of in-kind support did not vary by race but the proportion of total support offered in-kind was higher among black fathers, 44 percent, than non-black [fathers](#), 35 percent.
- The researchers also learned what motivates men to give their children these tangible items rather than handing cash over to their mothers. Fathers see the gifts as a chance to bond with their children, they found.

"What we learned is that these dads are purchasing a relationship with their [children](#)," Edin said. "They want their kids to look down at their feet and say, 'My dad cares about me because he bought me these shoes.'"

The dads are trying to link love with money, she said.

"We need to respect what these guys are doing, linking love and provision in a way that's meaningful to the child," Edin said. "The child [support](#) system weakens the child/father bond by separating the act of love from the act of providing.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University

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