Child-support programs that are race-neutral place low-income men of color and their families at a disadvantage

June 13 2022, by Greg Bruno

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Child-support policies that are color-blind or race-neutral put low-income men of color and their families at a disadvantage and lead to continued racial inequities, according to Rutgers research.

"Child-support policies were created to make sure a child who has a parent that doesn't live with the family got support," said Lenna Nepomnyaschy, associate professor at the Rutgers School of Social Work and co-author of the study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. "But in recent decades, economic changes such as the loss of manufacturing jobs and declining union power, increases in nonmarital births, and mass incarceration have made it much more difficult for lower-educated men of color to support their families. Child support policies, while not written with race in mind, today disproportionately harm lower-income and non-white families as they are over-represented in the system."

Nepomnyaschy used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS)—a multiyear survey that follows children born in the U.S. between 1998 and 2000 to primarily unmarried parents in urban areas—to examine whether child-support debt is a predictor of a father's well-being.

"We wanted to know if having child-support debt is associated with worse physical, emotional and economic well-being of fathers of color," said Nepomnyaschy, an early scholar of the FFCWS, a joint effort between Columbia and Princeton Universities. "The answer is an overwhelming 'Yes.'"

As part of the FFCWS, respondents were asked if they had experienced symptoms of depression—such as losing interest, feeling tired or thinking about death—for a period of two weeks or more during the past year; detailed the quality of their overall health; and indicated whether they experienced material hardship—such as food or housing insecurity or difficulty paying bills. Fathers in the study also reported on their child-support debt.

Twenty-three percent of the men reported having child-support debt,

with an average of $10,000 for those with any debt, and 11 percent had arrears greater than 16 percent of their household income. At the same time, 16 percent reported poor physical health, 14 percent reported depression and 45 percent reported experiencing at least one type of material hardship in the previous year.

To assess a possible connection between well-being and debt, Nepomnyaschy and her colleagues applied multivariate regression models to a FFCWS subsample of 1,614 fathers. They found that fathers who had any child support debt were approximately 50 percent more likely to report depression, poor overall health and material hardship, with even stronger results for fathers with higher levels of debt.

There are several reasons why child-support debt overburdens fathers of color.

Since the creation of the federal child-support program in 1975, outstanding child-support arrears have grown to about $113.5 billion and 77 percent of cases in the child-support enforcement system are in arrears, according to the U.S. Office of Child Support Enforcement.

In response, the child-support system has consistently turned to more punitive and harsh enforcement efforts—such as suspending fathers' driver's licenses, public shaming and incarceration. "Not surprisingly, these efforts make it even more difficult for fathers to support their children and are disproportionately harming lower-income, unmarried fathers of color and their families, who are over-represented in the system," Nepomnyaschy said.

More information: Nathan L. Robbins et al, Child support debt and the well-being of disadvantaged fathers of color, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2022). DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12841

Provided by Rutgers University

Citation: Child-support programs that are race-neutral place low-income men of color and their families at a disadvantage (2022, June 13) retrieved 24 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2022-06-child-support-race-neutral-low-income-men-families.html

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