

The Regular Receipt of Child Support: 2017

Current Population Reports

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P70-176

January 2022

INTRODUCTION

Many parents and other guardians in the United States, primarily custodial mothers, find themselves caring for children whose other parent or parents live outside of their household. The financial support received from the nonresident parents can be an important source of income for these parents to help pay for the costs of raising their families.¹ This brief examines who received monetary child support, how much was received, and the degree to which it was received with regularity in 2017, as reported in the 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP).²

Alternate information about the receipt of child support is collected by the U.S. Census Bureau in the Current Population Survey—Child Support Supplement (CPS-CSS). This biennial survey differs from SIPP in that it produces information about amounts of child support received annually. The SIPP, in contrast, collects information about how much child support was received for each month of the year.

¹ Elaine Sorensen, "Child Support Plays an Increasingly Important Role for Poor Custodial Families," Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2005.

² The U.S. Census Bureau's Disclosure Review Board and Disclosure Avoidance Officers have reviewed this data product for unauthorized disclosure of confidential information and have approved the disclosure avoidance practices applied to this release. CBDRB Approval: CBDRB-FY22-POP001-0005.

Because of this difference, estimates from the SIPP can be used to determine if child support payments were received either regularly or sporadically, as well as how much was received annually.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Of parents with children under age 21 who had nonresident parents, just over one-quarter (27.5 percent) received child support payments in 2017.
- Child support receipt was strongly associated with having a child support agreement, with over half (56.8 percent) of parents with agreements receiving payments.
- About two-thirds (68.7 percent) of parents who received child support received regular payments from their child(ren)'s nonresident parents, while the remaining third received irregular or unequal payments.³
- Parents who had ever been married or who had higher levels of education were more likely to receive regular child support payments.
- Median annual child support received amounted to \$3,328 for parents receiving any support but

³ This brief defines the regular receipt of child support as either having received the same amount every month of the calendar year, or having received at least 90 percent of the initial monthly amount continuously throughout the remainder of the year.

was 33.1 percent higher for those who received it regularly (\$4,431).

CHILD SUPPORT RECEIPT

In 2017, 19.5 million parents were raising children under 21 years old whose other parent did not live in the same household. Just over one-quarter of these parents (27.5 percent or 5.4 million) received at least some financial child support payments from their child(ren)'s nonresident parents (Table 1).^{4, 5}

A child support agreement, whether formal/court-ordered or informal, was strongly associated with receiving child support, as 56.8 percent of parents with a child support agreement received some financial payments from the nonresident parents in 2017 (Table 1). Receipt of child support payments was three times more likely for mothers than it was for fathers: 32.8 percent of mothers of eligible children received at least some support, compared with 9.4 percent of fathers. Parents living in homes with household incomes above the poverty line were more likely to receive child support (28.8 percent) than those with

CHILD SUPPORT IN THE UNITED STATES

Child support is typically the private interhousehold financial transfer from one parent to another parent or guardian in order to help pay for the costs associated with raising and caring for the child or children that they share. When one parent no longer lives in the same household with his or her children, it often becomes an obligation for that parent to pay child support to the other parent or guardian on behalf of their child(ren). Since child support can be ordered by a court in some states until a child is 21 years old or completes college, this brief covers parents with children under 21.

The obligation for one parent to pay child support may be formal and legal—such as the product of a divorce decree or state-ordered enforcement, or it may be informal—such as an agreement directly between parents. Typically, the parent who pays support spends less time with the child and is oftentimes considered the noncustodial parent.

Some parents living outside their child(ren)'s household may also provide resources to help support their child(ren) that aren't monetary. This in-kind, noncash support may be in the form of such things as gifts, clothing, food, or direct payment for medical or childcare expenses. SIPP does not currently collect information about in-kind support other than health insurance, but estimates of the types of noncash support received are available in the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, April Child Support Supplement (CPS-CSS). More information about the CPS-CSS is available at <<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/techdocs/cpsapr18.pdf>>. In-kind support will be collected in the SIPP beginning in 2022.

household incomes at or below poverty (23.1 percent) (Table 1).⁶

REGULAR RECEIPT OF CHILD SUPPORT

Of the 5.4 million parents who received some child support

payments in 2017, about two-thirds (68.7 percent, or 3.7 million) received regular payments every month (Figure 1). The remaining third, or 1.7 million parents, could not rely on regular child support payments and received differing amounts of child support over the year, or received no support in some months of the year. This brief defines the regular receipt of child support as either having received the same amount every month of the calendar year or having received at least 90 percent of the initial monthly amount continuously throughout

⁴ Only parents of children under 21 years old with nonresident parents are included in the universe presented in this brief. Other guardians or relatives who might also receive support payments from nonresident parents are not included.

⁵ The 2018 CPS-CSS estimated 3.8 million custodial parents who received at least some child support payments in 2017. The CPS-CSS estimates differ from estimates in SIPP because of methodological differences between surveys and how questions about child support are asked in the respective surveys. More information about the CPS estimates can be found in P60-269, Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2017 at <www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-269.pdf>.

⁶ The Census Bureau uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty. The official poverty thresholds do not vary geographically, but they are updated for inflation using the Consumer Price Index (CPI-U). The official poverty definition uses money income before taxes and does not include capital gains or noncash benefits. More information can be found at <www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty/guidance/poverty-measures.html>.

the remainder of the year.⁷ For these parents, especially those who were low-income, the uncertainty of irregular monthly child support could have negative effects on the financial well-being of their families.⁸

The 3.7 million parents who received regular child support payments received a monthly average of \$604 and a monthly median of \$396 in 2017. These amounts were not statistically different for parents who received any child support, for whom the monthly average was \$598 and the monthly median was \$374.⁹ However, when all months of child support receipt throughout the year are examined, the median annual child support received was statistically higher for parents receiving regular support (\$4,431) than it was for those who received any support payments (\$3,328) (Table 1).

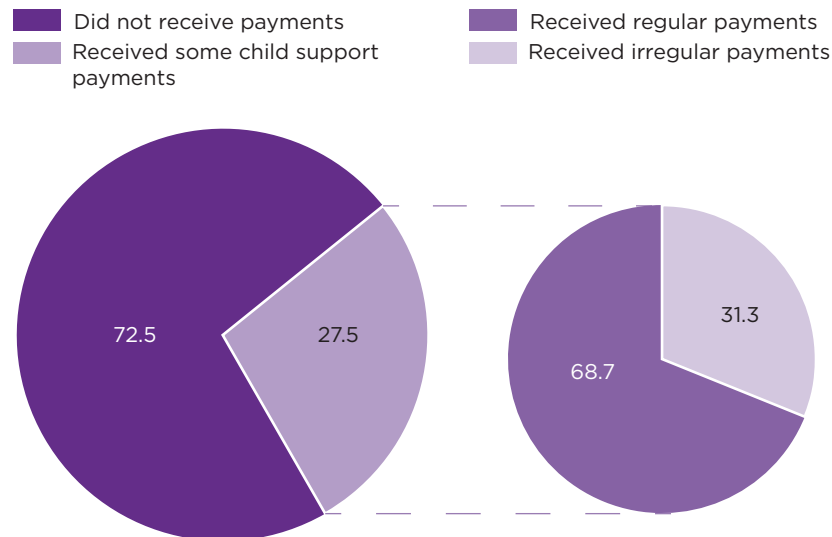
The receipt of regular child support was higher for parents who had ever been married, or who had higher levels of education. For instance, 58.1 percent of never-married parents who received support payments

⁷ This definition of “regular support” allows us to measure continuity and reliability of monthly child support payments for the recipient parent.

⁸ E. Sorensen and C. Zibman, “Child Support Offers Some Protection Against Poverty,” Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2000.

⁹ Months with no child support receipt are excluded from these monthly estimates. Recipients of regular child support are a subset of those receiving any support and these groups are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 1.
Parents With Children Under 21 Years Old With Nonresident Parents by Child Support Reciprocity: 2017
(In percent)



Note: Total universe is 19.5 million parents with children under the age of 21 with nonresident parent(s).
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2018 Panel.

received their payments regularly. However, among parents who had ever been married—which included those married, widowed, divorced, or separated at time of interview—73.1 percent received regular child support payments.¹⁰

Likewise, 61.5 percent of parents with a high school diploma or less and who received child support payments received them with regularity from the nonresident

¹⁰ The marital status of ever been married refers to the current marital status at time of interview, and does not necessarily mean that the parent was ever married, widowed, divorced, or separated specifically from their child(ren)’s other parent.

parents. This rate was higher for parents with more education; 72.7 percent of eligible parents with at least some college received regular child support payments (Table 1).¹¹

¹¹ The proportion of ever-married parents who received regular support (73.1 percent) and the proportion of parents with some college who received regular support (72.7 percent) were not statistically different from each other. The proportion of never-married parents who received regular support (58.1 percent) was not statistically different from the proportion of parents with a high school diploma or less who received regular support (61.5 percent).

Table 1.

Parents With Children Under the Age of 21 With Nonresident Parent by Child Support Reciprocity: 2017
(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Parents with a child under 21 and a nonresident parent									
	Parents who received some child support during year ²					Parents who received regular child support payments during year ³				
	Total	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Total	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Percent of all parents with children under 21 with nonresident parent who received some child support during year	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Total	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Percent of parents who received some child support payments during year	Margin of error ¹ (±)
TOTAL PARENTS	19,450	500	5,380	322	27.5	1.5	3,697	264	68.7	2.5
Mean annual child support received in 2017 (in dollars) ²	X	X	5,411	927	X	X	6,777	1,302	X	X
Median annual child support received in 2017 (in dollars) ²	X	X	3,328	93	X	X	4,431	249	X	X
Mean monthly child support received in 2017 (in dollars) ²	X	X	598	101	X	X	604	116	X	X
Median monthly child support received in 2017 (in dollars) ²	X	X	374	34	X	X	396	19	X	X
Had a Child Support Agreement (Formal or Informal) With Nonresident Parent	8,279	364	4,704	303	56.8	2.5	3,273	253	69.6	2.7
Sex										
Male	4,279	243	401	78	9.4	1.8	249	62	62.1	10.1
Female	15,171	421	4,979	299	32.8	1.7	3,447	255	69.2	2.6
Age in December										
Under 35	6,562	292	1,971	178	30.0	2.3	1,276	137	64.7	4.1
Under 25	1,181	135	232	58	19.6	4.2	175	52	75.4	12.0
25-34	5,382	267	1,739	164	32.3	2.5	1,101	124	63.3	4.2
35 and over	12,888	391	3,409	231	26.5	1.7	2,421	201	71.0	3.8
35-44	6,687	273	2,020	170	30.2	2.2	1,497	154	74.1	3.8
45-54	4,512	240	1,228	148	27.2	3.0	842	130	68.6	5.8
55 and over	1,689	166	160	45	9.5	2.6	81	33	50.5	15.4
Marriage and Fertility Markers										
Never married	6,483	298	1,574	143	24.3	1.9	914	110	58.1	5.0
Ever married	12,967	393	3,805	271	29.3	1.8	2,782	230	73.1	2.7
Married	5,414	273	1,479	158	27.3	2.5	1,058	121	71.5	4.4
Widowed	645	92	81	37	12.6	5.2	51	27	62.2	22.3
Divorced	5,412	288	1,898	182	35.1	2.8	1,409	155	74.2	3.6
Separated	1,495	143	347	70	23.2	4.1	265	63	76.5	8.0
Ever divorced	8,366	353	2,836	224	33.9	2.3	2,099	194	74.0	3.1
Married 2 or more times	4,335	264	1,317	146	30.4	2.8	969	120	73.6	4.7
Has children with more than one person	6,774	273	1,931	156	28.5	2.2	1,296	122	67.1	3.9

Footnotes available at end of table.

Table 1. **Parents With Children Under the Age of 21 With Nonresident Parent by Child Support Reciprocity: 2017—Con.**
(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Parents with a child under 21 and a nonresident parent									
	Parents who received some child support during year ²					Parents who received regular child support payments during year ³				
	Total	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Total	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Percent of all parents with children under 21 with nonresident parent who received some child support during year	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Total	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Percent of parents who received some child support payments during year	Margin of error ¹ (±)
Race and Hispanic Origin										
White alone	13,364	412	3,865	257	28.9	1.7	2,723	221	70.5	2.9
White, non-Hispanic	9,502	365	3,091	250	32.5	2.0	2,180	196	70.5	3.3
Black alone	4,656	236	1,120	146	24.0	2.7	703	121	62.8	6.2
Asian alone	507	78	151	52	29.8	10.1	121	47	80.1	12.0
All other race groups, race combinations	923	100	244	60	26.4	5.7	150	45	61.4	12.6
Hispanic (any race)	4,484	254	886	104	19.8	2.0	636	97	71.8	5.2
Non-Hispanic (any race)	14,966	460	4,494	295	30.0	1.6	3,061	240	68.1	2.8
Educational Attainment										
High school diploma or less	8,742	378	1,912	179	21.9	1.8	1,175	78	61.5	4.3
At least some college	10,708	438	3,468	259	32.4	2.0	2,522	121	72.7	3.0
Poverty Status⁴										
Annual household income at or below poverty ..	3,992	219	921	127	23.1	2.7	580	101	63.0	6.3
Annual household income above poverty	15,459	473	4,459	298	28.8	1.7	3,116	236	69.9	2.9
Receipt of Federal or State Benefits										
Supplemental Security Income	638	92	145	47	22.8	6.6	76	32	52.1	16.2
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program	5,100	251	1,442	144	28.3	2.6	815	105	56.5	4.5
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	913	116	286	64	31.3	5.7	193	51	67.4	11.1
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families	301	64	35	24	11.8	7.4	10	12	28.6	31.0
Medicaid	6,165	265	1,682	152	27.3	2.2	1,064	121	63.3	4.3
Social Security	1,041	111	196	51	18.9	4.3	124	43	63.2	13.3
Medicare	1,068	114	198	51	18.5	4.4	141	44	71.3	13.5
Received three or more programs	1,511	143	340	77	22.5	4.7	196	43	57.6	10.8
Child(ren)'s Health Insurance Coverage										
Paid for by someone outside the household	536	95	161	53	30.1	7.8	96	38	59.5	16.2

X Not applicable.

¹ A 90 percent confidence interval is a measure of an estimate's variability. The larger the confidence interval in relation to the size of the estimate, the less reliable the estimate. Information on sampling and nonsampling error can be found at <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/tech-documentation/source-accuracy-statements.html>.

² Mean and median monthly child support received amounts exclude months of zero receipt. Annual amounts include all months of the year, whether support was received or not.

³ The regular receipt of child support is either having received the same amount every month of the calendar year, or having received at least 90 percent of the initial monthly amount continuously throughout the remainder of the year.

⁴ Household poverty is determined by comparing total household pre-tax money income to a set of money income thresholds that vary by household size. If a household's total income is less than the household's threshold, then that household and every individual in that household is considered in poverty, regardless of the individuals' relationships to each other. For this reason, the estimates presented here are different from most official poverty estimates, which are generally based on family income and sum only the income of people related by birth, marriage, or adoption.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2018 Panel.

SUMMARY

Child support can be an important income source for many parents raising children whose other parents live elsewhere. Among parents who received any child support, two-thirds received regular child support payments while the remainder had months of no receipt or payments that varied over the course of the year. Parents who were ever married or with higher levels of education were more likely to receive regular child support.

SOURCE AND ACCURACY

Statistics from surveys are subject to sampling and nonsampling error. All comparisons presented in this report have taken sampling error into account and are significant at the 90 percent confidence level unless otherwise noted. This means the 90 percent confidence interval for the difference between the estimates being compared does not include zero.

Nonsampling errors in surveys may be attributed to a variety of sources, such as how the survey was designed, how respondents interpret questions, how able and willing respondents are to provide correct answers, and how accurately the answers are coded and classified. To minimize these errors, the Census Bureau employs quality control procedures throughout the production

ABOUT THE SIPP

The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is a nationally representative longitudinal survey administered by the U.S. Census Bureau that provides comprehensive information on the dynamics of income, employment, household composition, and government program participation. SIPP is also a leading source of data on economic well-being, family dynamics, education, wealth, health insurance, child care, and food security. SIPP interviews individuals for several years and provides monthly data about changes in household and family composition and economic circumstances over time. For more information, please visit the SIPP website at <www.census.gov/sipp>.

process, including the overall design of surveys, wording of questions, review of the work of interviewers and coders, and the statistical review of reports.

Additional information on the SIPP can be found at <www.census.gov/sipp/> (main SIPP website), <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/guidance/users-guide.html> (SIPP Users' Guides), and <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/tech-documentation/source-accuracy-statements.html> (SIPP Source and Accuracy Statements).

For technical documentation and more information about SIPP data quality, please visit the SIPP website's Technical Documentation page at <www.census.gov/programssurveys/sipp/tech-documentation.html>.

CONTACTS

For more information on the SIPP, including data and methodology, please contact the SIPP Coordination and Outreach staff at <census.sipp@census.gov> or 1-888-245-3076. For further information on the content of this report, please contact Timothy Grall <Timothy.Scott.Grall@census.gov> or Liza C. Valle <Liza.C.Valle@census.gov> of the Census Bureau's Social, Economic, and Housing Statistics Division. They may also be reached at 301-763-6685.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Grall, Timothy, and Liza C. Valle, "The Regular Receipt of Child Support: 2017" *Current Population Reports*, P70-176, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2021.