# Predicting Mothers' Child Support Spending

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## Background

In the U.S., approximately half of all children have spent time living with only one biological parent (Lin & McLanahan, 2007). In separated families, most noncustodial parents are required by law to provide child support payments for their children. Yet, child support payments are a major point of contention between former partners in the US and across the globe (Dudova, 2006). Separated parents argue about the "proper" amount of child support, along with how it should be spent (Natalier & Hewitt, 2014). Yet, there is surprisingly little research on how custodial parents report spending the child support payments that they receive. The question of how child support is spent matters for two major reasons. First, because child support is paid on behalf of the child but mediated through the actions of the custodial parent. Those concerned with the wellbeing of children in separated families should be interested in how these payments are spent. Second, disagreement over how child support should be spent is a point of contention between separated parents that could damage the co-parenting relationship.

Drawing on a representative sample of nonmarital births in Texas, we examine three types of child support expenditures: spending on child-specific expenses, spending on household expenses, and spending on a mother's personal consumption. Both custodial and non-custodial parents agree that child support is appropriately spent on child-specific expenses (Natalier & Hewitt, 2014). However, there is less consensus on whether it is appropriate for custodial parents to spend child support on household expenses (Natalier & Hewitt, 2014). Spending child support funds on a custodial parent's own personal consumption is even more controversial. Using a multinomial logistic model, we examine how child support-specific variables predict these different categories of child support spending. There are four key variables of interest: whether the child support order is formal or informal; whether the mother agrees that the father provides enough for his children; how much the mother relies on child support payments to meet her monthly expenses; and how frequently the father pays child support. We expect that these factors will be key in explaining how a mother spends the child support that she receives.

## Data and Method

### Data Source

Our three research questions are as follows. (1) How do mothers spend the child support that they receive? Which categories of spending—and which combinations of categories—are most common? (2) How do these spending habits differ by child support-specific factors (formality, sufficiency, frequency, and degree of reliance)? (3) Do demographic, attitudinal, or economic factors account for differences in spending habits by child support-specific factors?

Data come from a stratified random sample of all nonmarital births to Texas mothers who established paternity in June 2009 (Osborne et. al 2013). Parents in this sample are surveyed when their children are around age three and a half. The full sample includes 597 mothers and 84 fathers. The analytical sample for this study consisted of 349 mothers who receive some type of support from their child's father, have available data on the spending variables, and conform to the four most common patterns of spending.

### Measures

The dependent variables are part of a series of questions asking how mothers spend any formal and informal child support payments that they receive. The wording of the question is as follows: "Including both formal and informal financial support, how do you spend the money

that you receive from [your child's father]?" The three response categories of interest in this study are personal spending (e.g., clothes, shoes, and hair care), household expenses (e.g., rent, utilities and home maintenance), and child-specific expenses (e.g., food, diapers, and clothing for children). Each category is a dichotomous variable (coded as 1 = "yes" and 0 = "no").

Dependent variables were recoded into eight mutually exclusive categorical variables (spending on none of these categories, spending on children's needs only, spending on household expenses only, spending on personal expenses only, spending on children's needs and household expenses only, spending on children's needs and personal expenses only, spending on household expenses and personal items only, or spending on all three categories). Of these categorical variables, only four have more than ten respondents. Fewer than ten mothers reported spending their child support payments on personal items only, household expenses only, the combination of child-specific needs and personal items, or the combination of household expenses and personal items. Because only a few participants did not fit within the overarching spending patterns, we omitted these exceptional respondents from the analysis. The outcome measures thus become: mothers who spend on none of the categories, those who spend on children's needs only, those who spend on children's needs and household expenses only, and those who spend on all three categories of children's needs, household expenses, and personal consumption.

The independent variables are divided into four major categories: child support-specific measures, demographic measures, attitudinal factors, and economic measures.

*Analysis*

Multinomial logistic regression models predicted membership in one of the above four mutually-exclusive categories of child support spending: spending on none of these three categories, spending on children's needs only, spending on children's needs and household expenses but not personal expenses, and spending on all three categories. To begin, Model 1 includes only the primary independent variables of interest—child support-specific factors. Next, Model 2 adds demographic variables, Model 3 adds attitudinal factors, and Model 4 adds in economic factors. In sum, after establishing a baseline association, we investigate whether demographic, attitudinal, or economic factors mediate the link between child support spending and child support specific factors.

Missing data were accounted for by the chained method of multiple imputation with 10 imputed datasets. Several data were imputed conditionally (e.g., the number of hours that mom works was imputed conditional on mom having a job).

**Findings**

Having a former partner who usually pays increases the odds of spending child support on child-specific expenses only, compared to those who spend on none of the expenses. Surprisingly, agreement with the sentiment that mother should spend child support on only child-specific expenses actually gives moms lower odds of spending on child-specific expenses.

Agreement that a child's father provides enough increases a mother's odds of spending child support on both child-specific and household expenses. Reliance on child support also increases these odds. Compared to those who have a college degree, those without a high school diploma have higher odds of spending on both household and child-specific goods. Agreement that mothers should only spend child support on child-specific goods works again in an unexpected direction: those who agree with this sentiment are have higher odds of spending on both household expenses and child-specific expenses, all else held constant. Also, material hardship increases the odds of spending child support on both household and child-specific expenses.

Agreement that a child's father provides enough raises a mother's odds of spending on all three categories. Those with a formal child support order have lower odds of spending on all three categories compared to child-specific and household expenses only.

**Conclusion**

Few studies have examined how custodial parents spend the child support payments that they receive. Separated parents tend to disagree about how to appropriately spend child support payments (Natalier & Hewitt, 2014) and separated fathers tend to distrust their former partners' priorities and assume that mothers will spend child support wastefully (e.g., Edin & Nelson, 2013). Yet, we find that less than a quarter of mothers report spending child support funds on personal expenses. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of these mothers spend on personal expenses only in addition to spending on household and child-specific needs. These data suggest that this documented distrust between former partners may be based more on cultural beliefs about how single mothers spend money than on empirically documented misspending of funds.

Child support spending seems to be very closely tied to scarcity and prioritization. Literature suggests that parents agree that child support payments should be spent on child-specific needs (Natalier & Hewitt, 2014). The data reflect this agreement; child-specific spending is the most frequent category of spending. Only those who have already spent on child-specific needs also spend on household needs. And, only those who have already spent on both child-specific and household needs spend child support payments on personal consumption. These data belie the belief of some separated fathers that mothers are spending their child support payments on their own personal consumption at the expense of their children's needs. Instead, it seems that spending child support on personal expenses will only happen once both children's needs and household expenses have been met.

As more children spend time living in separated households, it is important for social scientists and policymakers alike to investigate the subject of child support. Conflicts over child support may be a significant stressor in the lives of separated family members. Understanding how mothers spend the child support payments that they receive is an important piece of understanding conflict in separated families. Those who are concerned about the wellbeing of children with separated parents should also be interested in the ways that child support payments are spent. We demonstrate that child support spending patterns are a function of scarcity and prioritization: among the mothers in this sample, child-specific needs come first, followed by household expenses. Mothers only spend child support on personal consumption if these other expenses have already been met. This is in line with the scholarship on mothers' family budgeting behavior (e.g., Pahl, 1995). The belief that mothers will spend child support payments on their own personal consumption at the expense of their children is not borne out in the data.

**Works Cited**

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**Tables**

| Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics* | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dependent variables | | | |
| Spends child support on child-specific needs | 349 | 0.83 | 0.38 |
| Spends child support on household expenses | 349 | 0.51 | 0.5 |
| Spends child support on personal consumption | 349 | 0.22 | 0.41 |
| Spends child support on none of the above categories | 349 | 0.17 | 0.38 |
| Spends child support on child-specific needs only | 349 | 0.32 | 0.47 |
| Spends child support on child-specific and household needs only | 349 | 0.29 | 0.45 |
| Spends child support on all three categories of spending | 349 | 0.22 | 0.41 |
| Independent variables | | | |
| Has a formal child support order | 349 | 0.52 | 0.5 |
| Receives as much from former partner as she wants (scale) | 349 | 2.39 | 1.64 |
| Relies on child support | 349 | 0.33 | 0.47 |
| Former partner pays child support at least half the time | 349 | 0.38 | 0.49 |
| Has children from more than one father | 349 | 0.34 | 0.47 |
| Race | | | |
|     Black | 334 | 0.15 | 0.36 |
|     Hispanic | 334 | 0.56 | 0.5 |
|     Other | 334 | 0.02 | 0.15 |
|     White | 334 | 0.33 | 0.47 |
| Education | | | |
|     Less than high school | 349 | 0.15 | 0.36 |
|     High school/GED | 349 | 0.34 | 0.47 |
|     Some college | 349 | 0.17 | 0.38 |
|     College degree or more | 349 | 0.29 | 0.45 |
| Believes most moms spend child support selfishly | 349 | 0.75 | 0.44 |
| Believes moms should only spend child support on the child | 349 | 0.78 | 0.42 |
| Material hardship (scale) | 349 | 1.25 | 1.38 |
| Is employed | 349 | 0.61 | 0.49 |
| Number of hours worked (scale) | 349 | 1.57 | 1.38 |

Table 2. *Estimates from Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Spending on Child-Specific Marginal Needs Only (Versus Spe...*

| | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | | Model 3 | | | Model 4 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | e $^β$ | | SE | e $^β$ | | SE | e $^β$ | | SE | e $^β$ | | SE |
| Variable (reference category) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Formal ch | 0.86 | | 0.6 | 0.71 | | 0.51 | 0.72 | | 0.53 | 0.64 | | 0.47 |
| Agreemen | 0.91 | | 0.16 | 0.83 | | 0.16 | 0.79 | | 0.15 | 0.76 | | 0.14 |
| Relies on | 2.37 | † | 1.22 | 2.37 | | 1.31 | 2.26 | | 1.32 | 2.48 | | 1.45 |
| Dad pays | 4.39 | ** | 2.38 | 6.34 | ** | 3.96 | 6.69 | ** | 4.45 | 6.73 | ** | 4.54 |
| Multipartner fertility | | | | 1.06 | | 0.56 | 0.75 | | 0.43 | 0.78 | | 0.47 |
| Mother's race/ethnicity (White) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Black | | | | 1.82 | | 1.11 | 1.64 | | 0.97 | 1.54 | | 0.93 |
| Hispanic | | | | 2.43 | † | 1.28 | 2.74 | † | 1.47 | 2.57 | | 1.41 |
| Other | | | | 0.1 | * | 0.11 | 0.07 | * | 0.09 | 0.08 | † | 0.11 |
| Mother's education (college or more) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Less than high school | | | | 0.58 | | 0.5 | 0.64 | | 0.56 | 0.63 | | 0.55 |
| High school | | | | 0.94 | | 0.55 | 1.12 | | 0.65 | 1.13 | | 0.65 |
| Some college | | | | 0.5 | | 0.32 | 0.56 | | 0.37 | 0.56 | | 0.36 |
| Agree: Moms spend child support selfishly | | | | | | | 0.9 | | 0.51 | 0.89 | | 0.52 |
| Agree: Moms should spend child support on kids only | | | | | | | 0.25 | * | 0.17 | 0.23 | * | 0.16 |
| Material hardship | | | | | | | | | | 0.88 | | 0.17 |
| Work | | | | | | | | | | 1.54 | | 1.97 |
| Hours of work | | | | | | | | | | 0.78 | | 0.35 |
| Constant | 1.28 | | 0.8 | 1.14 | | 0.94 | 3.94 | | 4.15 | 6.4 | | 8.17 |

Table 3. *Estimates from Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Spending on Child-Specific and Household Expenses Only (Ve...*

| | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | | Model 3 | | | Model 4 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | $e^{\beta}$ | | SE | $e^{\beta}$ | | SE | $e^{\beta}$ | | SE | $e^{\beta}$ | | SE |
| Variable (reference category) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Formal ch | 0.34 | † | 0.2 | 0.25 | * | 0.17 | 0.24 | * | 0.16 | 0.26 | † | 0.18 |
| Agreemen | 1.33 | * | 0.17 | 1.36 | * | 0.2 | 1.4 | * | 0.2 | 1.5 | * | 0.24 |
| Relies on | 3.28 | * | 1.59 | 2.9 | * | 1.39 | 3.06 | * | 1.53 | 2.76 | * | 1.41 |
| Dad pays | 0.66 | | 0.35 | 0.84 | | 0.45 | 0.87 | | 0.48 | 0.95 | | 0.56 |
| Multipartner fertility | | | | 1.25 | | 0.52 | 1.62 | | 0.76 | 1.65 | | 0.78 |
| Mother's race/ethnicity (White) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Black | | | | 1.96 | | 1.17 | 2.1 | | 1.21 | 2.33 | | 1.36 |
| Hispanic | | | | 0.96 | | 0.45 | 0.86 | | 0.4 | 0.94 | | 0.45 |
| Other | | | | 2.42 | | 2.45 | 2.5 | | 2.64 | 2.11 | | 2.37 |
| Mother's education (college or more) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Less than high school | | | | 5.21 | | 3.57 | 4.85 | * | 3.38 | 4.67 | * | 3.24 |
| High school | | | | 1.32 | | 0.64 | 1.15 | | 0.56 | 1.16 | | 0.57 |
| Some college | | | | 2.04 | | 1.15 | 1.86 | | 1.05 | 1.83 | | 1.09 |
| Agree: Moms spend child support selfishly | | | | | | | 1.33 | | 0.62 | 1.31 | | 0.62 |
| Agree: Moms should spend child support on kids only | | | | | | | 2.38 | † | 1.23 | 2.72 | † | 1.44 |
| Material hardship | | | | | | | | | | 1.35 | † | 0.21 |
| Work | | | | | | | | | | 0.66 | | 0.64 |
| Hours of work | | | | | | | | | | 1.27 | | 0.43 |
| Constant | 0.72 | | 0.35 | 0.42 | | 0.28 | 0.18 | | 0.14 | 0.08 | | 0.08 |

Table 4. *Estimates from Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Spending on All Three Categories (Versus Child-Specific and*

| | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | | Model 3 | | | Model 4 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | $e^{\beta}$ | | SE | $e^{\beta}$ | | SE | $e^{\beta}$ | | SE | $e^{\beta}$ | | SE |
| Variable (reference category) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Formal ch | 0.29 | | 0.26 | 0.14 | * | 0.13 | 0.14 | * | 0.13 | 0.13 | * | 0.12 |
| Agreemen | 2 | * | 0.66 | 2.32 | * | 0.95 | 2.41 | * | 1.02 | 2.51 | † | 1.22 |
| Relies on | 1.55 | | 1.31 | 2.12 | | 2.3 | 2.01 | | 2.25 | 1.98 | | 2.3 |
| Dad pays | 0.54 | | 0.42 | 0.88 | | 0.95 | 0.89 | | 1.03 | 0.93 | | 1.13 |
| Multipartner fertility | | | | 0.79 | | 0.33 | 0.84 | | 0.37 | 0.85 | | 0.37 |
| Mother's race/ethnicity (White) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Black | | | | 0.55 | | 0.45 | 0.53 | | 0.47 | 0.56 | | 0.5 |
| Hispanic | | | | 0.75 | | 0.35 | 0.8 | | 0.38 | 0.81 | | 0.39 |
| Other | | | | 0.42 | | 0.52 | 0.42 | | 0.54 | 0.42 | | 0.54 |
| Mother's education (college or more) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Less than high school | | | | 0.86 | | 0.51 | 0.85 | | 0.53 | 0.82 | | 0.51 |
| High school | | | | 0.62 | | 0.31 | 0.57 | | 0.3 | 0.58 | | 0.3 |
| Some college | | | | 0.62 | | 0.38 | 0.58 | | 0.37 | 0.56 | | 0.36 |
| Agree: Moms spend child support selfishly | | | | | | | 2.32 | | 1.35 | 2.36 | | 1.37 |
| Agree: Moms should spend child support on kids only | | | | | | | 1.3 | | 0.74 | 1.26 | | 0.72 |
| Material hardship | | | | | | | | | | 1.06 | | 0.21 |
| Work | | | | | | | | | | 1.31 | | 1.28 |
| Hours of work | | | | | | | | | | 0.88 | | 0.3 |
| Constant | 0.13 | | 0.16 | 0.13 | | 0.21 | 0.05 | | 0.08 | 0.04 | | 0.08 |