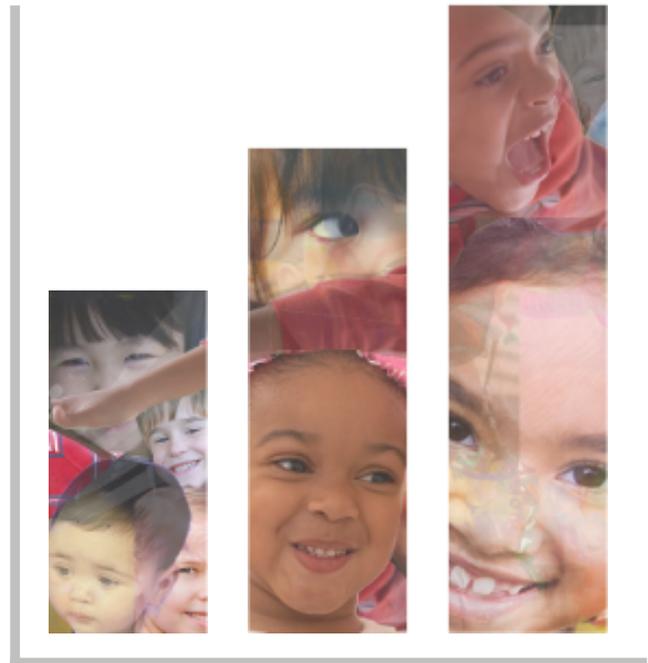


## Why Don't More Poor Custodial Parents Have a Child Support Order?

*The Story Behind the Numbers Fact Sheet Series takes a closer look at child support program data. This series presents the results of data analyses to better understand program performance and caseload trends. Through deeper understanding of the story behind the numbers, the series aims to inform policy and practice and strengthen program outcomes.*

*This fact sheet examines why most poor custodial parents do not have a child support order. It is based on micro data from the 2014 Current Population Survey-Child Support Supplement (CPS-CSS), a nationally representative survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. This supplement is co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE). While the child support program (also known as the IV-D program) has detailed information on its caseload, there is no national source of information for total (IV-D and non-IV-D) child support recipients and total amount of child support received. We rely on nationally representative surveys such as this one to provide information on the total child support population. It is important to note that this survey includes IV-D and non-IV-D families, but does not include households where children are living with a grandparent or someone other than their biological parent.*

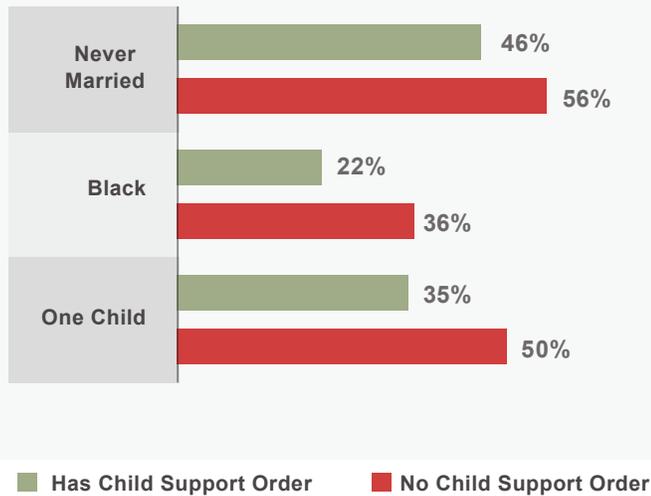


### How many poor custodial parents have a child support order?

Child support payments can be an important source of income for poor custodial families. However, to receive payments through the child support program, a custodial parent must get a legal child support order. When examining poor custodial parents, whether or not they are in the child support program, Census data show that in 2014 over 60 percent, 2.4 million parents,<sup>1</sup> did not have a legal child support order. This *Story Behind the Numbers* examines who these custodial parents are and why they do not have a child support order.

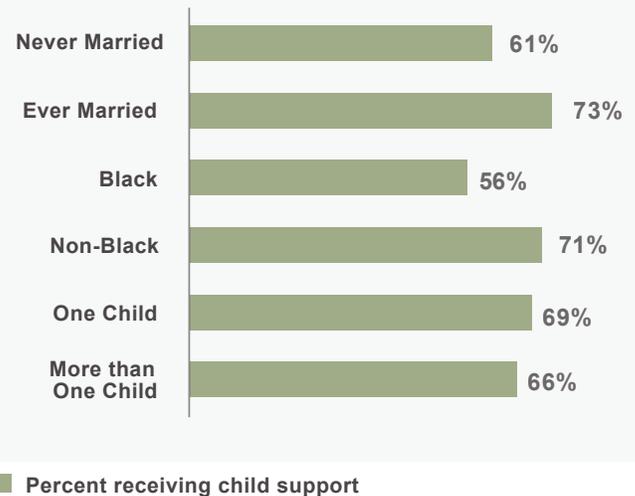
## Why Don't More Poor Custodial Parents Have a Child Support Order?

**Figure 1. Characteristics of All Poor Custodial Parents with and without a Legal Child Support Order (2013)**



Source: Micro data from the 2014 Current Population Survey-Child Support Supplement.

**Figure 2. Rates of Child Support Receipt among Poor Parents with a Legal Child Support Order by their Demographic Characteristics (2013)**



Source: Same as Figure 1.

### What are the demographic characteristics of poor custodial parents (IV-D and non-IV-D) who don't have a child support order?

Poor custodial parents who do not have a child support order are more likely than poor parents with an order to be never married, black, and have only one child eligible for child support. Among poor custodial parents without an order, 56 percent are never married and 50 percent have just one child eligible for child support. In contrast, among poor custodial parents who have an order, 46 percent are never married and 35 percent have just one child eligible for child support. In addition, 36 percent of poor custodial parents without an order are black, while only 22 percent of poor parents with an order are black.

### Do the demographic differences help explain why some poor custodial parents don't have a child support order?

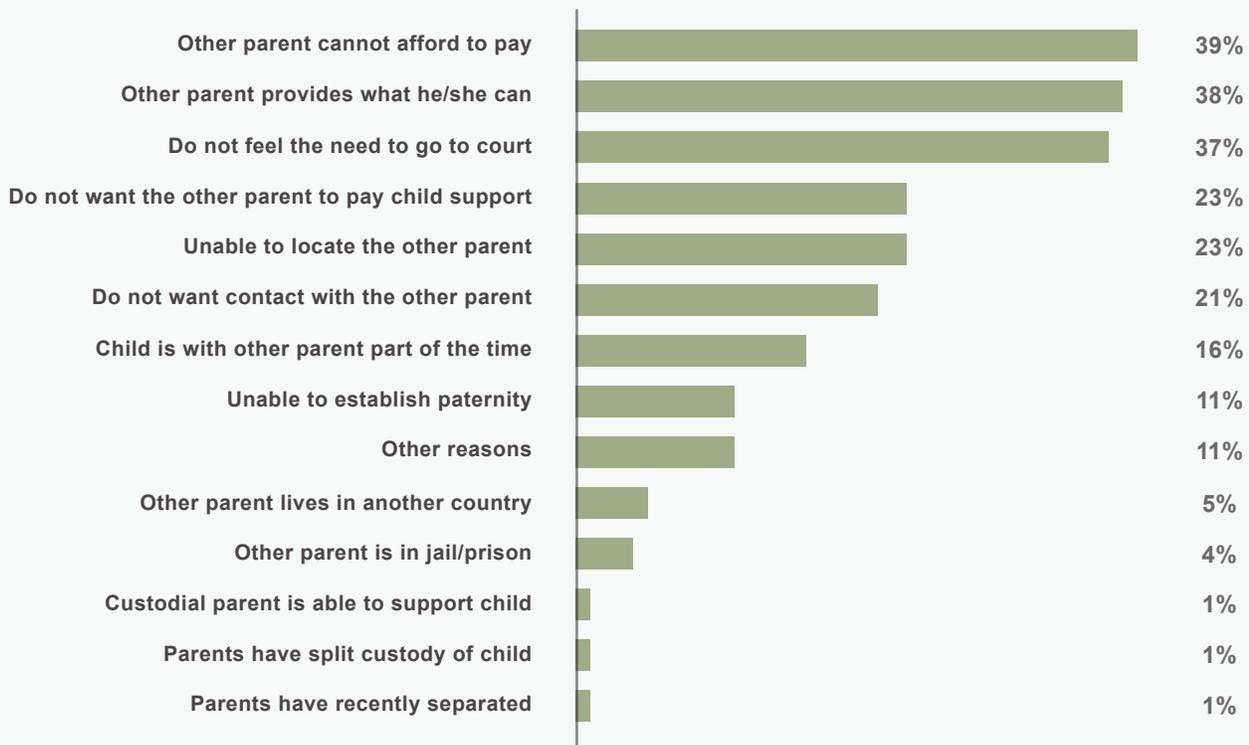
Further analysis shows that poor parents with a child support order are less likely to receive child support if they are black or never married.<sup>2</sup> In 2013, 61 percent of poor never married parents with an order received payments compared to 73 percent of poor parents with an order who were ever married. Similarly, 56 percent of poor black parents with an order received payments compared to 71 percent of poor non-black parents with an order.

Since both never married and black poor parents with an order are less likely to receive child support, this may help explain why poor never married and black custodial parents do not have an order – they expect that their chances of receiving child support, even if they have an order, are relatively low.

On the other hand, poor parents with an order who have only one child eligible for child support (69 percent) are slightly more likely to receive child support compared to those who have two or more children eligible for child support (66 percent).

Why Don't More Poor Custodial Parents Have a Child Support Order?

Figure 3. Reasons Poor Custodial Parents Have No Legal Child Support Order



Source: Same as Figure 1.

**Reasons poor custodial parents don't have legal child support orders**

The U.S. Census Bureau asks all custodial parents why they do not have a legal child support order. Figure 3 lists the possible reasons that custodial parents may choose from to answer this question. Custodial parents are allowed to choose more than one reason.

Figure 3 shows that the top two reasons that poor custodial parents give for not having a child support order are: 1) other parent could not afford to pay (39 percent), and 2) other parent provides what he or she can (38 percent).<sup>3</sup> In fact, over 60 percent of poor custodial parents without an order give one of these two answers for why they do not have an order. These results suggest that most poor custodial parents without a legal order believe that the other parent has a limited ability to pay child support, which helps explain why they do not have an order.

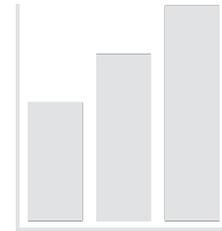
Two other prominent reasons given for not having an order are: 1) unable to locate the other parent (23 percent), and 2) unable to establish paternity (11 percent), two precursors to establishing a legal order. Nearly 30 percent of poor custodial parents without a legal order give one of these two reasons for not having an order. These findings suggest that some poor custodial parents have tried to establish an order but have not been successful or they are doubtful of success.

Other top reasons that poor custodial parents give for not having a legal order are: 1) they do not feel the need to make it legal (37 percent), 2) they do not want the other parent to pay (23 percent), and 3) they do not want contact with the other parent (21 percent). These answers highlight the importance of the relationship that the custodial parent has with the other parent in determining whether to pursue a legal child support order.

## Why Don't More Poor Custodial Parents Have a Child Support Order?

### Conclusion

Despite the benefits of receiving child support, most poor custodial parents (IV-D and non-IV-D) do not have a legal order, which must be established for the child support program to collect support. The findings above suggest that many poor custodial parents do not have an order because they do not expect to receive much, if any, child support — even with a legal order — since the other parent has a limited ability to pay. In addition, nearly 30 percent of poor custodial parents without an order report that they are unable to locate the other parent or establish paternity, which are precursors to establishing an order.



### For More Information

Send questions and comments about this child support fact sheet to Elaine Sorensen at [elaine.sorensen@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:elaine.sorensen@acf.hhs.gov).

### References

- <sup>1.</sup> In this *Story Behind the Numbers*, a custodial parent is considered to have a child support order if the 2014 CPS-CSS indicates that this parent has a legal agreement (i.e. the CPS-CSS variable PRTYPAWD equals 1). PRTYPAWD means type of award.
- <sup>2.</sup> In Figure 2, custodial parents have a legal agreement (i.e. the CPS-CSS variable PRTYPAWD equals 1) and they are supposed to receive child support (i.e. the CPS-CSS variable PRCS DUE is greater than 0). PRCS DUE means amount of child support due.
- <sup>3.</sup> In Figure 3, the universe includes custodial parents without an agreement or with an informal agreement (i.e. the CPS-CSS variable PRTYPAWD equals 3 or 4) and did not indicate they had a legal agreement pending (i.e. the CPS-CSS variable PES376 does not equal 1). PES376 means is there a legal agreement about child support for (CHILD) pending now?

