

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Child Support Guidelines: Economic and Demographic Changes in Families

To adequately review child support guidelines, it is important to consider how the populations served by them have changed over time to ensure that the guidelines continue to meet the needs of contemporary families. When guidelines were first established, the majority of families obtained a child support order following a divorce. At that time, single-earner families were more common¹ and fathers were the primary breadwinners. When couples divorced, child support orders were often set to replicate what the family experienced prior to the separation. Across the country families have changed considerably over the past few decades. Since the guidelines were established in Texas in the late 1980s, Texas parents are now less likely to be married but more likely to cohabit with children; to give birth to children outside of marriage; to be headed by a single parent; to include a working mother; and to be a complex, multi-partner family. Each of these changes place families at greater risk of needing child support services and challenge the existing child support guidelines to meet families' needs. Never-married parents and families with children in multiple households may be more common among the IV-D population than among parents who establish child support orders outside of the IV-D system (Social Security Act Title IV Part D - Child Support and Establishment of Paternity); however, families at all income and education levels have changed considerably since the 1980s with regard to family formation and employment patterns.

Today, Texas children are significantly more likely to live in a single-parent household than they were when the state guidelines were established. Approximately 30% of Texas children live in a single-parent home today, compared to 20% when the guidelines were first established.² Approximately 80% of single-parent households with children are headed by women.³

The increase in single-parent households is driven by the substantial increase in nonmarital births; declines in marriage; persistently high rates of divorce; and increases in cohabiting relationships that involve children, which are more likely than marriages to end in separation.

CHANGES IN FAMILY FORMATIONS

Nonmarital Births

Today, more children are likely to live in a single-parent household because they were born to unmarried parents rather than because they experienced the divorce of their parents. Nationally, the proportion of nonmarital births has more than doubled since the 1980s. In 1980, 18.4% of births were to unmarried mothers; in 2010, 40.8% of births were nonmarital.⁴ In Texas in 2008, 42%, or 169,318 births were to unmarried mothers, a slightly higher proportion than the national average.⁵

Marriage and Divorce

Fewer Texans get married today than they did when the state child support guidelines were established. Between 1990 and 2009, marriage rates in Texas decreased approximately 32% from 10.5 marriages per 1,000 residents to 7.1 marriages per 1,000 residents.⁶

At the same time, Texas experienced a decline in rates of divorce, but they remain somewhat high. The divorce rate declined from 5.5 divorces per 1,000 people in 1990 to 3.3 divorces per 1,000 people in 2009.⁷ Divorce rates are declining at a higher rate among well-educated, affluent families than among low-income families, however. Americans without college degrees have seen divorce rates drop only 6%, whereas Americans with college degrees have experienced a 30% decline in divorce rates.⁸ This “divorce divide” translates into more low-income, single-parent households who will likely establish their child support orders in the IV-D system.

Nonmarital Cohabitation

Another trend in family formation is the increase in nonmarital cohabitation. It is difficult to determine the exact number of cohabiting households with children in Texas, but nationally, the number of cohabiting parent households has increased from 0.6 million households (with children under the age of 15) in 1986 to 7.6 million households in 2010 (with children under the age of 18).⁹ In 2002, 18% of births to women age 15 to 44 were to women in cohabiting relationships; for 2006 to 2010, that number increased to 25%.¹⁰

Cohabiting relationships often begin by mirroring married relationships, in that the couples share a residence and resources. However, cohabiting couples with children have less stable relationships than married couples with children, which place children at an increased risk of living in a single-parent household in the future¹¹ and the family needing to establish a child support order.

Complex Families

Less stable family formations have led to an increased prevalence of complex families, or individuals who have children with multiple partners. Nationally, parents are increasingly likely to have children with multiple partners; at least 59% of children born outside of marriage and 21% of those born to married parents will live in a complex family household.^{12,13} Additional research suggests that in 59% of unmarried urban couples who share a child, one or both parents have a child with another partner.¹⁴ Unmarried women are much more likely to have children with different fathers than are married

women. Approximately 15% of married mothers have had children with more than one man, whereas 43% of unmarried women have children with two or more fathers.¹⁵

In Texas, approximately 36% of the all IV-D open child support cases have children in multiple households. Of these, 79.19% of noncustodial parents are on two cases, 15.49% are on three cases, and 5.32% are on more than three cases.

Teen Parents

A promising change in families has been the decline in the number of teen parents. In Texas, the rate of teen births has decreased from 15.6% of all births in 1990 to 13.6% in 2008.¹⁶ Importantly, however, 83% of teen births are to unmarried teens¹⁷ and 22.4% of teen parents will have more than one birth during their teen years.¹⁸ Nearly every teen birth is at risk for needing to establish a child support order in the future.

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.

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 - ⁸ Martin, S. P. (2005). Growing Evidence for a ‘Divorce Divide’? Education and Marital Dissolution Rates in the US since the 1970s. College Park, MD: University of Maryland Department of Sociology), unpublished manuscript.
 - ⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey. (2011) Table UC-1: Unmarried Partners of the Opposite Sex, by Presence of Children: 1960 to Present. March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements.
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 - ¹² Cancian, M., Meyer, D. R., & Cook, S. T. (2011). The evolution of family complexity from the perspective of nonmarital children. *Demography*, 48, 957-982.
 - ¹³ Carlson, M. J., & Furstenberg, F. F. (2006). The prevalence and correlates of multipartnered fertility among urban U.S. parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68, 718–732.
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 - ¹⁷ The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center. Profile for the state of Texas: Births to teens ages 13-19 out of all live births (Percent) [1990 - 2008]. Retrieved from <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bystate/StateLanding.aspx?state=TX>.
 - ¹⁸ The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center. Profile for the state of Texas: Births to teens ages 13-19 out of all live births (Percent) [1990 - 2008]. Retrieved from <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bystate/StateLanding.aspx?state=TX>.