

Child Support across State Lines: Distance, Interstate Enforcement, and Welfare Reform

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Abstract

Since federal welfare reform in the U.S. in 1996, child support enforcement (CSE) has become a key policy for fighting poverty in low-income single-parent families. Despite evidence of increasing effectiveness of CSE, chief among problems plaguing the system is interstate enforcement when a non-custodial parent resides in a different state from the child. This study examines several dimensions of this relatively unexplored problem. Welfare reform required states to adopt the Uniform Interstate Family Support Act (UIFSA), which provides mechanisms to improve CSE across state lines. In order to understand what makes interstate cases so difficult, we separate the effects of different state enforcement systems from that of the physical distance. Using Geographic Information Systems, we can separate empirically the effect of distance between parent and child from that of residence in another state (state-line effect). In addition, we attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of UIFSA in reducing this legal impediment. We analyze administrative data from Illinois on 50,000 children in single-parent families on welfare in the mid-1990s. Probit models are estimated on child support outcomes of whether a paternity or an order is established as well as whether any payment has ever been received. Results show that distance and state lines have separate negative effects, and that UIFSA brought no significant improvement.

Endnotes:

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