

Child Support and the Media

**By Marguerite Roulet
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**Center for Fathers, Families, and Public Policy
23 North Pinckney Street, Suite 210
Madison, WI 53703
608-257-3148 (Tel)
608-257-4686 (Fax)**

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Since the creation of a federal office of enforcement in 1975, the issue of child support has received a fair amount of national attention. Increasingly significant within government efforts at welfare reform - most notably the Family Support Act of 1988 - child support enforcement has come to be a cornerstone of the current legislation designed to restructure the system of social support for low-income parents and children.

Throughout the process of welfare reform negotiations and the crafting of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, child support has been consistently discussed and represented in the media as an intrinsic part of any potential reform effort. As Gloria Borger put it in a representative article on Clinton's welfare reform efforts, the central services that represent the "expensive ground rules [necessary for] taking women off welfare" are child care, job training, health care, and child support enforcement (*U.S. News* 19.7.1993).

While the other components listed by Borger (along with components not listed, such as transportation) are needs to be met in part by state and federal governments, child support is an obligation that is met not by the government, but by noncustodial parents. Indeed, over the course of the negotiations in the early 1990s, the original proposal put forth by Clinton's advisors on welfare reform which called for "child support assurance" guaranteed by the government was eclipsed by calls for stronger enforcement of parental child support obligations.

The political popularity of child support enforcement, the ease with which such enforcement legislation is passed in Congress, and the near total public support for such legislation do, however, lead one to question what allows for such unanimity in response to what is in fact a complex and entangled public and private issue. In an effort to evaluate the public representation of child support as a national issue, the Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy (CFFPP) has reviewed the three most widely circulated newsmagazines in the U.S. - *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*¹ - to examine how the issue has been discussed in articles between 1992 and 1997 (the beginning of the Clinton presidency and the debates over welfare reform)².

In these articles (which number 165 for the three magazines over the six-and-a-half year period), child support and its enforcement are discussed in many different contexts. While often mentioned in passing in articles concerned with other issues, child support is a central focus in articles having to do with welfare reform³, new child support legislation and enforcement methods⁴, and changing family patterns in the U.S. and abroad⁵. In these articles child support enforcement clearly emerges as more than the straightforward safeguarding of efforts to pass on to children the economic support they require and to which they are entitled. Instead, child support emerges as an institution central to the continuation of the idea of the nuclear family at a time when U.S. family structure has undergone, and continues to undergo, changes. This emphasis on child support as the

preservation of family structure affects the way child support legislation is represented in the media.

The economics of child support

Many of the articles surveyed represent child support as primarily an economic issue tied directly to the financial well being of children. While child support is rarely represented as the central means of ensuring children's economic well being, the lack of child support is frequently represented as a (or the) primary source of children's poverty⁶. This representation is common in articles concerned with wealthy as well as low-income children, and the issue is often set out in general terms that do not distinguish between income levels, as in the following article which notes: "The consequences of nonpayment [of child support] are staggering. On average the family income of the mother retaining custody drops 23 percent after divorce or separation—a disparity that could be wiped out for many families if full child support payments were made" (*Newsweek* 4.5.1992).

Although more than one-third of the articles surveyed address the issue of child support in the context of welfare reform⁷, the issue is equally central to discussions of the declining status of middle-class custodial families after divorce. This cross-class economic significance of child support is a focal point of its representation in the media, as indicated in an article on child support in which the author states, "deadbeatness cuts across income groups: college graduates are as likely to have a negligent ex-spouse or ex-boyfriend as high-school grads" (*Newsweek* 4.5.1992). Represented in this manner, child support is an issue of concern relevant to more than a narrow population. Indeed, many of the articles (particularly during political campaigns) point out the political significance of this broad interest in child support. For example, several articles in the early 1990s note the political currency for politicians of endorsing legislation that "toughens" child support enforcement⁸, one of which emphasizes the seeming grass-roots genesis of this interest: "Consultants for former Louisiana Governor Buddy Roemer were surprised to discover that in focus groups during the 1991 campaign, middle class voters spontaneously mentioned child support as one of their most important concerns" (*Newsweek* 4.5.1992).

The broad appeal of child support enforcement appears reasonable given the seemingly straightforward figures on child support reported in the media: 10 million women in the U.S. raise their children without the natural father in the home; more than \$20 billion is owed by absent fathers to mothers and children; 75% of single mothers do not receive regular child support payments (*U.S. News* 30.8.1993). According to the 1990 Census, of the 5 million women who were to receive child support, only half received the full payment, one quarter received partial payment, and one quarter received no payment. Of women who tried to receive support, 2.7 million were unable to obtain an award (*Newsweek* 4.5.1992). In the case of out-of-wedlock births, only 66% of the fathers are identified, and among those identified, only 18% pay child support (*Newsweek* 21.6.1993). In 1989, \$16.3 billion in child support was ordered by courts in the U.S., of which \$11.2 billion was paid (*Time* 25.5.1992).

Given such figures, the immediate conclusion that is frequently drawn is that if noncustodial parents paid their child support, fewer custodial parents and children would live in poverty (*Newsweek* 4.5.1992). In turn, fewer parents would require government assistance in the form of housing subsidies, food stamps, Medicaid, or cash transfers. Politicians and social policy analysts in fact most often draw this conclusion, and it is a central theme echoed in media accounts about child support and its enforcement. As one journalist noted, the figure of the deadbeat dad has become the "villain by consensus" of the 1990s, a figure that represents "that selfish fugitive condemned by liberals and conservatives alike for his irresponsible behavior and generous contribution to the cycle of welfare dependency" (David Van Bierma, *Time* 3.4.1995).

But such representations mask significant distinctions within the category "noncustodial parents." For while child support is constructed as an issue that cuts across class, this broad categorization eliminates the distinction between noncustodial parents able but unwilling to pay child support and those unable to pay (a distinction that can, at times, be difficult to determine, but that is important nonetheless). And while this lack of effort to make distinctions among noncustodial parents and the likely impact of their child support payments may be benign, it is also important to consider what is at stake in refusing to maintain the distinction.

On the one hand, the distinction may be hard to make at all times (i.e., is an unemployed parent truly unable or simply unwilling to find and retain employment?). On the other hand, representing the issue as a cross-class concern makes it appealing as a means to generate support among voters (particularly women voters, who might be personally affected by child support issues).

More fundamentally, however, the issue of child support's uniform representation extends beyond these matters, because child support is not discussed as solely an economic issue. Instead, child support is protecting the nuclear family standard at a time when family structure is changing. The argument that unpaid child support creates poverty (and creates welfare dependence) among women and children is possible only when it is assumed that two-parent families (with one or both parents working) provide children with financial stability and that a family that can provide financial stability in such a form is most healthy and successful.

In this regard, although child support appears to be a straightforward financial issue, it is also a way to define and maintain a specific family structure as a critical institution. Consequently, the media representation of child support (and government constructions of child support) is not restricted to a discussion of the economic terms noted above. Instead, discussions of child support and its enforcement are often couched in the broader debate of changing family patterns in the United States and the declining prevalence of the nuclear family.

The nuclear family and child support

By definition, child support is an institution that necessitates a non-nuclear family structure. Predicated as it is on out-of-wedlock birth or parental separation or divorce, child support is emblematic of changing family patterns and the declining prevalence of nuclear families. As such, child support is frequently portrayed in the media as a symbol of 'the post-modern family' and the disarray often thought to accompany such families. This role of child support is evident in an article about a wealthy family involved in a highly publicized scandal: "In one aspect, though, this brood is like many other post-nuclear families: last week a judge ordered the father to pay \$68,804 in overdue child support" (*Time* 6.9.1993, pg.54). The lack of child support payments is easy to comprehend as a sign of the breakdown in family financial security and stability that has emerged with the increasing presence of "post-nuclear" families.

However, at the same time that child support stands as an emblem of post-nuclear families in the U.S., it simultaneously represents the means by which the nuclear family continues to exist within the context of these changing patterns. Child support is the financial and symbolic means to continue the structure of the nuclear family. It maintains (and indeed requires the existence of) a familial structure in which there is a custodial parent and a noncustodial parent who operate as a single economic unit in regard to their joint children. Taken most narrowly, child support merely preserves the nuclear family in economic terms, maintaining the structure in form but not in substance. However, this association opens the space for an ideological elision whereby talking about child support becomes a means to talk about the nuclear family (and by extension the 'values', this familial structure is said to entail).

This association between child support and nuclear family structure is accorded much attention in the three newsmagazines surveyed: over 20% of the articles reviewed address the issue of child support specifically in relation to family structure in the U.S. and abroad⁹. Some approach child support as primarily an economic institution whose objective it is to support children financially in the context of changing family structures. In these articles, children are portrayed as facing increased economic risk in the context of out-of-wedlock birth, divorce or separation, and child support is listed as one means to redress this situation.

Barbara Ehrenreich exemplifies this approach when she argues in an article about the growing anti-divorce movement in the U.S. that,

[T]he most destructive feature of divorce, many experts argue, is the poverty that typically ensues when the children are left with a low-earning mother, and the way out of this would be to toughen child support collection and strengthen the safety net of supportive services for low-income families-including child care, Medicaid and welfare. (*Time* 8.4.1996)

Child support in this context represents nothing more than financial support from adults who would be expected to provide similar financial contributions in a context in which they were residing with the children, and is logically equated with government assistance programs such as Medicaid and welfare.

In contrast to Ehrenreich's piece, most of the other articles that address child support in relation to family structure do not limit child support to its economic role. Instead, child support comes to stand for the nuclear family, often in terms that are unexplained and not altogether clear. For example, Mortimer Zuckerman argues in an article on the dangers of the decline of two-parent families that,

The impact that family disintegration has on children's lives is a national crisis that has weakened our social fabric and placed unbearable burdens on schools, courts, prisons, and the welfare system. The nuclear family must be nurtured. It must be at the center, not the periphery, of social policy. (*U.S. News* 12.4.1993)

In defense of the nuclear family, Zuckerman suggests the following policy options:

"We should enforce stricter compliance with child support orders, expand the earned-income tax credit and improve the availability and quality of child-care services. And we should discard the assumption that it is somehow unfair to use welfare benefits as an incentive to encourage poor people to marry or discourage poor women from having illegitimate children."

These are all options that necessarily or possibly operate in concert with the nuclear family, with the exception of enforcing stricter compliance with child support orders, which represents a policy option that is possible only in the absence of nuclear families. However, in the context of the article's broader argument, child support is clearly intended to represent an institution that strengthens and buttresses nuclear families.

Other authors make a similar elision in their linking of child support with nuclear families. For example, in an article in *U.S. News* in 1992, David Whitman and Dorian Friedman discuss the 'family values' debate that emerged during the presidential campaign in response to the television show *Murphy Brown*. In relating the significance of the debate to middle class and poor families in the U.S., the authors note the following:

Amid the cultural debate, one thing is clear: Both sides [i.e., 'conservatives' and 'liberals'] believe that fatherless families are at the heart of most problems in urban ghettos. Last year, the National Commission on Children reported that children in single-parent families are at greater risk than those in two-parent families for alcohol and drug abuse, adolescent childbearing, juvenile delinquency, mental illness, suicide and dropping out of school. Moreover, that dismal litany understates the risks to children of unwed mothers. They are far more

likely than the children of divorce to live in poverty, to go without child support from their fathers, and to engage in crime. (*U.S. News* 8.6.1992)

According to this argument, the lack of child support is listed in a series of issues that contribute to the hardship of single-parent families, making them and the children in them vulnerable. Again, however, it is not clear how the issue of child support has been incorporated in the argument. Is the reason for its inclusion the lack of financial support and the consequent poverty of children? Alternatively, is it the presumed fatherlessness that this lack of child support is supposed to indicate? While the lack of child support is routinely cited as a sign of the disarray of such families, and indeed as a source of the disarray, the actual role child support plays within this equation remains unclear and unexplained.

To leave it unexplored increases the symbolic value of child support as an institution that has the potential to redress a myriad of social problems. Perhaps child support will decrease the poverty of poor children. Perhaps it will supply the fathers to otherwise fatherless families and thus reduce the incidence of social ills supposedly associated with single-parent families (e.g., alcohol and drug use, adolescent childbearing, juvenile delinquency, mental illness, suicide, dropping out of school, and engaging in crime). The logical slippage between family structure and socio-economic status, and the place of child support within these, makes it possible for the authors to continue with the following conclusion: "Not unexpectedly, politicians and social-policy experts are realizing that marriage is the surest way out of poverty" (*U.S. News* 8.6.1992). Given the place of child support within the structure of the argument (i.e., the lack of child support is associated with single-parent families and their vulnerability), payment of child support is structurally associated and symbolically equated with well-functioning two-parent families, with the ultimate emphasis on marriage. Were the role of child support made more specific at the outset (e.g., its function is strictly economic), the presumed implications of its payment could not be so far-reaching and could not carry the same ideological force.

While the articles cited above are able to imbue child support with great symbolic power through their lack of specificity, several other articles reviewed are more specific in how they link child support to the nuclear family. In these articles, child support is represented as playing an instrumental role in the creation of nuclear families. For example, a 1995 *U.S. News* article dealing with the issue of single-parent families discusses the efforts of the Cleveland-based Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization, a program devoted to reconnecting fathers with their children. Although the authors note the program's emphasis on connecting fathers with their children without emphasizing financial support as a prerequisite for such involvement, they summarize the results of a study of the program in the following manner:

"Ninety-seven percent of the men began providing financial support for their children; 71 percent did not have any more children outside of marriage; there was one glaring shortcoming: The program had less impact on marriage rates. Just 1 in 5 of the participants married" (*U.S. News* 27.2.1995).

Child support is represented here as more than a financial institution; it is represented as having a direct bearing on family structure. Fathers' financial support of their children is conveyed as inextricably related to family structure, and the figures on financial support are immediately followed by figures on family organization. And while it is noted that program efforts failed to bring about an increase in actual marriages, the program was successful in curtailing the establishment of further non-marital households. Given the way information is juxtaposed in the article, this achievement is made to appear as a direct result of child support. In this article, then, child support from noncustodial parents is presented as critical to the creation of married households or, at the very least, the reduction of additional non-marital households and the strengthening of nuclear family bonds within existing non-marital families.

This same association between child support and familial relationships is drawn in even more direct terms in the following article which notes, "[M]en who feel they have a significant role in the lives of their sons and daughters spend more time with them and pay more child support" (*U.S. News* 27.2.1995). And another argues similarly, "[S]everal studies have shown that fathers who retain close contact with their children are more likely to pay child support" (*Newsweek* 4.5.1992).

These articles contribute to the belief that child support is not simply concerned with the economic security of children or the legal technicalities of a divorce settlement, but with the creation and maintenance of familial relationships, an understanding that child support officials often publicly espouse. And although the summaries of studies cited above are limited to the argument that high paternal involvement leads to increased support, merely associating the two creates room for the converse argument: namely, that paying increased child support strengthens nuclear family relationships.

Significantly, the relationships at issue are not restricted to those between noncustodial parents and their children. The impact of child support is characterized as extending to the relationship between custodial and noncustodial parents as well, an emphasis that is apparent not only in the discussion of the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization, but also in articles concerned with families of divorce. Indeed, such a focus is consistent with the recent emphasis on co-parenting among families of divorce. As Mike Padden, Republican Representative to the Washington State House of Representatives, is quoted as stating about divorcing parents, "[T]he fact of the matter is that through visitation or through custody or through [child] support [issues], you're still going to be dealing in some form with that person" (*U.S. News* 30.9.1996).

Child support then, as represented in the media, has multiple roles to play. Among families of divorce, the enforcement of child support obligations will fulfill the objective of maintaining involvement by fathers, not only with the children, but also with the former spouse, and thus of preserving in muted form the overall structure of the family as it was prior to divorce. Among non-marital families, the strict enforcement of child support will fulfill the multiple objectives of curtailing additional out-of-wedlock childbearing and increasing paternal involvement with the children on whose behalf support is paid. Through this process, child support will enable the establishment of pseudo-nuclear families, and if

successful possibly create nuclear families through marriage—a goal understood by some to represent "the surest way out of poverty" (*U.S. News* 8.6.1992). In other words, child support will have the power to maintain the economic viability and social structure of nuclear families after divorce and transform poor, non-marital households into married, nuclear families that are no longer poor (or into pseudo-nuclear families that are no longer poor even if they remain non-marital).

Child support and the legitimation of relationships

Beyond its instrumental role in creating nuclear families (or pseudo-nuclear families that function as nuclear families), child support is also represented as the primary means by which these familial relationships are publicly legitimated. This aspect of child support is clear in the many articles that address the issue of paternity establishment and paternity contests¹⁰. The payment of child support is contingent upon the recognition of paternity, and many articles attest to the increasing prevalence of DNA testing as a means to determine biological paternity and ultimately force and enforce child support. The payment of child support stands as the final step in the legitimation of paternity -- a process that is organized and sanctioned by the state and its legal and administrative institutions.

In addition to its obvious role in legitimating paternity, child support is frequently used in the media as a means of discussing the legitimacy of other familial relationships. This implicit role of child support is perhaps most evident when it is violated, as exemplified in a 1997 *Time* article concerned with the wife of Dick Morris and the circumstances that led to her decision to divorce her husband. In the article, author Margaret Carlson lists some of the more publicized issues that are thought to have led her to take this action. According to Carlson, "It didn't help that in addition to Rowlands' diary, the woman in Texas with whom Morris had fathered a child six years earlier was giving television interviews and was rumored to be shopping on her book, despite the fact that Morris had faithfully paid her \$4000 a month in child support" (27.1.1997). In this discussion, the child support that Dick Morris paid on behalf of his child is represented as a sufficient fulfillment of his obligations, indeed as more than that to which the child (and the child's mother) is entitled. The fact that the child's mother could be seeking any additional returns (either financially or in terms of broader social acknowledgement) is represented as inappropriate. The primary reason for this characterization, however, appears to be that the relationship itself was inappropriate and illegitimate. Had they been married previously or had the relationship been widely considered legitimate, the article would likely represent the issue of child support as an unquestionable social and financial obligation that has no bearing on whether the mother seeks additional publicity and publicity-income. It is only in the context of an illegitimate and inappropriate relationship that child support is represented as something more than what would otherwise be required, particularly since, in this case, the child support would not preserve the structure of a former nuclear family or lead to the establishment of such a family in the future.

In this sense, the article ideologically equates child support with the legitimacy of relationships, an equation that stands in relief in this context since the payment of child support legitimates a relationship that is not, and will never be, legitimate. Given that the

relationship cannot be legitimated, the ensuing contradiction is resolved by calling into question the payment of child support. In doing so, the author reaffirms the importance of child support's role as a legitimator of relationships.

In other articles child support is conversely represented as a means to determine what constitutes an appropriate relationship. Thus, for example, a 1998 *Newsweek* article devoted to a discussion of a legally complex case concerning a child born to a surrogate mother, represents child support as one of the means used by the presiding family judge to, literally, create the child's family. The article describes the situation surrounding a child who was born in 1995 to a couple by a surrogate mother with an anonymously donated egg and sperm. A month before the baby was born, the father-to-be filed for divorce from the mother-to-be and refused to acknowledge paternity or pay child support -- an action that ultimately led a judge two years later to argue that the child had no parents. As Donna Foote puts it in the article:

"...[The baby] was conceived in a petri dish, the product of egg and sperm donors, both anonymous. She was carried and delivered by a surrogate with no genetic ties to any of the parties. [Superior Court Judge] Monarch not only said John wasn't the legal father but ruled that Luanne wasn't 'entitled' to be declared the legal mother either" (*Newsweek* 2.2.1998).

The article goes on to note that in this case (the outcome of which was still to be determined at an appeals hearing after the article was published), the court of appeals was likely to establish legal familial relationships on behalf of the child by awarding custody to the would-be mother and requiring child support payments from the would-be father (see also *Time* 1.12.1997). In this manner child support is equated with a legally established and legitimated familial relationship: even in the absence of marital, biological or adoptive relationships, a nuclear family would be constructed, with child support playing a critical role in its creation and maintenance over time.

Policy Implications

As the foregoing discussion indicates, child support, as represented in the media, plays a role that extends far beyond its explicit goal of providing children with economic support. While economic support undeniably is a factor in discussions of child support and its enforcement, child support is also central to discussions of the nuclear family and its maintenance in contemporary "postnuclear" (*Time* 6.9.1993) and "post-marital" U.S. society (*U.S. News* 12.4.1993).

Social policy analysts and politicians have made no secret of their interest in promoting and supporting nuclear families in recent years (e.g., through supporting tax code changes that would favor married families; using welfare supports to encourage nuclear family formation; supporting initiatives to repeal no-fault divorce laws; imposing sanctions on out-of-wedlock birth among welfare recipients). Within these efforts, the institution of child support has come to stand both as a potent symbol of family breakdown and as a means of maintaining

a nuclear family structure in the context of this breakdown. Politicians seeking election or re-election routinely support child support enforcement, and there is little public debate about the issue. It is a widely accepted, popular issue among Republican and Democratic voters and politicians, and, as indicated in media accounts, child support enforcement legislation is easily proposed and passed in Congress¹¹.

In media accounts, as well, there is little debate about the issue of child support itself. Only a few of the 165 articles surveyed indicate frustration among noncustodial parents and 'second families' about child support issues (e.g., *Newsweek* 22.4.1996, 13.5.1996; *Time* 1.7.1996; *U.S. News* 8.8.1994), and none address contexts in which child support enforcement is not necessarily supported by all custodial parents. This uniform discourse on child support is striking, given that the issue is often privately contentious, emotionally charged, and anything but uniformly approached. This discrepancy is sometimes noted in the media, where politicians who espouse tough enforcement legislation are at times exposed for shirking their own child support obligations (e.g., *Time* 21.8.1995; *Newsweek* 2.11.1992). Nonetheless, as a public issue, child support and its symbolic linking with the nuclear family, is a virtually unassailable institution that is routinely supported as a socially and morally appropriate expression of "responsible" behavior (e.g., see *U.S. News* 11.9.1995).

This association of child support with the nuclear family does, however, have important implications for how the institution is to be organized. For, while it would appear from later media accounts that there is only one manner in which child support could be organized (i.e., as a financial contribution from noncustodial parents to custodial parents and children), earlier media accounts indicate that there are alternatives to such a structure.

One of the central pieces of the proposed welfare reforms suggested by Clinton's early advisors was an effort to increase the amount of child support received by children. While tougher enforcement of child support played an important role within these suggestions, there was simultaneously a proposal to develop a form of "child support assurance," guaranteed by the government. As Thomas Sanction describes in an article in *Time* in 1992:

"A plan proposed by [David] Ellwood would expand those efforts [to increase child support collections from noncustodial parents] and add a new twist: collection insurance. In cases in which the absent father could not be tracked down or did not have the money to pay up, the government would pay the mother a fixed amount per child each year. This approach is the basis for a bipartisan plan that would guarantee a single mother a minimum of \$2000 a year and would collect payments from the father through the Internal Revenue Service" (25.5.1992, see also *U.S. News* 5.10.1992 on the development by Irwin Garfinkel of the idea of child support assurance).

While maintaining the emphasis on the nuclear family through increased efforts at collecting support from noncustodial parents, the proposed plan also involved government

support for custodial parents and their children -- a proposal that was ultimately rejected in favor of enforcement efforts directed at noncustodial parents. In later articles, child support assurance and collection insurance are no longer mentioned, and child support itself is uniformly discussed as an institution that solely involves custodial parents, noncustodial parents, and their children.

That child support is constructed in this manner in the media is striking, given that it is an issue raised not only in regard to families who do not receive government assistance, but also to families who do receive such assistance. For families not receiving assistance, child support may be an issue that involves only the parents, provided the custodial parent has not sought state help collecting child support, and excluding the role of the state in defining the collection process (e.g., state guidelines, New Hire Directories, automatic income withholding).

However, unlike such families, for whom the support amount actually reaches the custodial parent and children, in families in which the custodial parent and child receive government assistance, the child support collected by the government from noncustodial parents in many cases does not reach the children. As the Sanction article indicates, under the laws in effect before welfare reform, "welfare recipients [were] allowed to keep only \$50 in child support" (*Time* 25.5.1992). Whatever amount remained of the noncustodial parent's child support payment beyond that \$50, was used to offset government costs of support to the children.

Under the PRWORA of 1996, even this meager "pass-through" of \$50 has been eliminated. Although each state has the option of using state funds to "pass through" the equivalent of the child support payment, very few states have done so. In practice then, most if not all of the child support payment made by a noncustodial parent can be used to pay back the state and federal governments for any assistance they have provided the child.

The fact that many custodial parents and children who receive government support often do not receive all (if any) of the child support paid by noncustodial parents is not an issue raised in the media. To the contrary, articles on child support and its ability to reduce welfare dependence appear to take for granted that the children will receive all of the support that is paid.

This assumption is notable in articles that address the fact that many fathers of children receiving government assistance are themselves unable to provide financial support. As is pointed out, a popular response to this issue, at both the federal and state levels, has been to require unemployed fathers to find employment (e.g., *U.S. News* 13.12.1993; *Newsweek* 4.5.1992). For example, a *Newsweek* article noted, "A Grand Rapids, Mich., program found jobs for 432 of 1077 employees during an eight-month period -- and their child support payments jumped by more than 300 percent" (4.5.1992).

While the increase in support paid appears to be quite high, the article makes no mention of whether the custodial parents or children saw the same 300 percent increase. That this occurred is clearly implied by the article, but the issue is not explicitly addressed or further

explored. Given the organization of child support for families receiving government assistance, it is not an assumption that can, in fact, be made. By not addressing this issue, media coverage of child support, especially those related to welfare reform, maintains the connection between child support and the nuclear family, even though in many instances the financial contributions from noncustodial parents have no economic or social bearing on the lives of their children or their children's custodial parents.

Conclusion

On the face of it, child support appears to be a straightforward issue. Given the increasing number of families in which children live with only one custodial parent and the financial insecurity of many of these parents, the payment of child support from noncustodial parents represents a logical means to improve these children's economic security and lessen the financial burden of custodial parents.

Child support, however, is not represented in such simple terms in the media. In spite of appeals to its economic implications, child support is rarely addressed strictly as a financial institution. Instead, child support is overwhelmingly represented as a social and symbolic institution whose role it is to create and legitimate nuclear and pseudo-nuclear family relationships in contexts in which these are considered to be at threat.

This symbolic value of child support masks its actual role of ensuring the financial security of children. While this is the case for middle-class as well as low-income families, it is most salient for families receiving government assistance. For these families, the ideological displacement of child support as a way to create nuclear families rather than a means to support non-nuclear families reaches its inevitable conclusion: in many of these families, the child support payment never in fact reaches the children and plays no role in ensuring their well-being. The payment, as far as the children are concerned, is purely symbolic—a testament to state mediated and enforced paternal "responsibility" rather than a reliable monthly income.

¹ In this Issues & Insights, the endnotes refer to the publication dates of the specific magazine issues. Please refer to those issues for the cited articles.

² *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* have a current circulation of 4.2 million, 3.2 million, and 2.2 million respectively *New York Times*, 30.6.1998.

³ *Newsweek* 4.5.1992, 29.6.1992, 26.10.1992, 21.6.1993, 30.8.1993, 20.6.1994, 12.12.1994, 9.1.1995, 16.1.1995, 6.2.1995, 6.3.1995, 27.3.1995, 29.5.1995, 8.12.1995, 7.10.1996, 26.5.1997, 19.1.1998; *Time* 18.5.1992, 25.5.1992, 25.5.1992, 25.5.1992, 16.11.1992, 10.1.1994, 20.6.1994, Fall 1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996, 21.4.1997, 19.5.1997, 23.3.1998; *U.S. News* 20.1.1992, 20.4.1992, 20.4.1992,

1.6.1992, 8.6.1992, 5.10.1992, 21.12.1992, 15.2.1993, 19.7.1993, 13.12.1993, 20.6.1994, 4.7.1994, 1.8.1994, 23.1.1995, 6.2.1995, 10.4.1995, 14.8.1995, 11.9.1995, 30.10.1995, 27.1.1997, 16.3.1998, 1.6.1998

⁴ *Newsweek* 4.5.1992, 29.6.1992, 26.10.1992, c9.1.1995, 6.3.1995, 27.3.1995, 29.5.1995, 18.12.1995; *Time* 18.5.1992, 25.5.1992, 15.10.1992, 16.11.1992, 10.1.1994, 20.6.1994, 3.4.1995, Fall 1996, 23.9.1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996, 13.1.1997, 23.3.1998; *U.S. News* 20.4.1992, 20.4.1992, 5.10.1992, 21.12.1992, 28.12.1992, 15.2.1993, 3.5.1993, 2.8.1993, 30.8.1993, 13.12.1993, 28.3.1994, 1.8.1994, 23.1.1995, 6.2.1995, 10.4.1995, 11.9.1995, 8.4.1996, 12.5.1997, 1.6.1998

⁵ *Newsweek* 4.5.1992, 4.5.1992, 21.9.1992, 14.12.1992, 21.6.1993, 20.6.1994, 27.3.1995, 20.1.1997, 17.2.1997, 26.5.1997, 19.1.1998v2.2.1998; *Time* 15.10.1992, 19.7.1993, 20.6.1994, 8.8.1994, 20.3.1995, 8.4.1996, 1.7.1996, 7.10.1996, 18.8.1997, 1.12.1997; *U.S. News* 1.6.1992, 8.6.1992, 21.9.1992, 19.10.1992, 28.12.1992, 12.4.1993, 8.8.1994, 27.2.1995, 12.6.1995, 14.8.1995, 30.10.1995, 30.9.1996, 27.1.1997.

⁶ e.g., *Newsweek* 4.5.1992, 4.5.1992, 30.8.1993; *Time* 25.5.1992, 4.1.1996; *U.S. News* 8.6.1992, 5.10.1992, 19.7.1993, 30.8.1993.

⁷ see endnote 1

⁸ *Newsweek* 4.5.1992, 26.10.1992, 6.3.1995, 29.5.1995; *Time* 18.5.1992, 16.11.1992, 20.6.1994, Fall 1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996, 4.11.1996; *U.S. News* 1.6.1992, 20.4.1992, 21.12.1992, 28.12.1992, 23.1.1995

⁹ see endnote 3

¹⁰ e.g., *Newsweek* 4.5.1992, 17.8.1992, 23.11.1992, 26.5.1997, 2.2.1998; *Time* 1.12.1997, 13.4.1998; *U.S. News* 14.8.1995, 27.1.1997

¹¹ see endnote 6