

Child Maintenance in the USA: Key Principles and Goals, Institutions, and Current Issues

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Child Maintenance

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Abstract

The first part of this presentation provides an overview of child maintenance policy in the US. The (implicit) goals of US policy include requiring parental financial responsibility, increasing the incomes of lone-parent families, ensuring at least a semblance of justice in the way children who do not live with both parents are treated, and, perhaps most important, limiting public expenditures. These goals are revealed in policies surrounding whether parents who separate are assigned child maintenance orders, the level of those orders, whether they are paid, and what happens if they are not. But as will be seen, the overarching goals can conflict, and some parts of policy do not fit these goals. The institutional arrangements in the US, with its unique blend of federal and state responsibilities and responsibilities vested in both courts and child maintenance agencies, will be presented. This institutional array sometimes leads to goal conflict, as will be described.

The presentation will then focus on policy challenges looking to the future. Three recent societal trends in the US that produce challenges will be discussed: (a) an increase in family complexity, particularly parents who have had children with more than one partner; (b) an increase in the number of children who are spending significant amounts of time with both parents after divorce or separation; and (c) an increase in economic insecurity for both parents, with a special focus on the extent to which increases in incarceration limit the ability of parents to provide for their children. For each of these trends, challenges to policy will be discussed, especially the trade-offs that mean that all goals cannot be simultaneously met.

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