

Title: “Child Maintenance Obligations, Complex Families, and Equality for Children”

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Abstract

In most developed countries child maintenance policies attempt to ensure that parents who do not live with their children provide them some financial support. However, family complexity raises fundamental questions about these policies. In this paper we describe child maintenance policies in fourteen countries, considering whether current obligations continue when parents have new children with new partners; we also examine whether new children are treated equally to old children. We focus on a father with a single nonresident child and consider two situations: when he has another nonresident child with a different woman and when he has a resident biological child in a new relationship.

We use data on child maintenance regimes in ten European countries and Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the US, provided by national experts in 2006. We group policies into several types, depending on whether the obligations to the two children are equal, and whether a new child (whether resident or nonresident) results in a lowering of the obligation to the first child.

We find that in the situation of two nonresident children, half the countries have equal obligations; among these, lowering the obligation to the first child is more common than doubling the initial obligation. The typical unequal leaves the obligation to the first child unchanged and has a lower obligation for the second child. In the situation with one nonresident child and one resident biological child, only the UK and Canada (Ontario) reference trying to equalize obligations; most countries reduce the first child's order because of the new responsibilities, but their policies are not attempting to equalize obligations between the children. We analyze likely effects of the different rules, discussing the advantages of each, and highlight the policy tradeoffs that are caused by these increasingly common family situations.