

# The blurry line between the welfare state and child support

Dalrock | 22 August, 2011 | by Dalrock

---

One thing which struck me when I started looking into the issue of child support is how difficult it is to distinguish between child support and the welfare state. For example, [in 2007](#) 47.6% of all custodial parents with support agreements in the U.S. were on public assistance. In cases where the custodial parent is on welfare, [child support payments are paid to the state](#) which may or may not pass a token amount of the funds on to the custodial parent. The interrelationship between public assistance and child support in the U.S. is described in the paper [Child Support Harming Children: Subordinating the Best Interests of Children to the Fiscal Interests of the State \(2007\)](#):

Out of the \$105 billion in child support debt nationwide, the government claims half so it can seek to recoup the costs of welfare benefits provided to low-income families. Our current welfare program, called Temporary Aid to Needy Families (“TANF”), requires custodial parents applying for benefits to cooperate in establishing child support obligations against the absent parents and to simultaneously assign the resulting child support payments to the government. Mothers, fathers, and children all become government debtors—the mothers and children owe their child support rights and the fathers owe the payments until the welfare benefits are repaid in full. This system of welfare cost recovery is a side of child support that is largely unknown to the public. Rather, child support is generally perceived as a pure good: a benefit to children, families, and society, as well as a moral and legal obligation of absent parents. But for the millions of children whose child support has been assigned to the government, the reality of child support is anything but pure or good.

This blurry line makes sense when you consider that both have the same basic objective; both are designed to shelter children from the poor choices made by their parents. Moreover, in both cases this almost exclusively means providing benefits to *mothers*. However, safety net programs are supposed to be something only used in a true emergency. If they are made too generous, too readily available, or without stigma they will inevitably be abused. With this in mind one key problem with the current system in the US is it allows welfare mothers to rationalize away their welfare dependency; they only need welfare because the baby daddy isn’t sending them a big enough check. Perhaps worse, middle class baby mamas are painted as a sort of heroic victim for receiving child support payments. They don’t need to apply for welfare benefits, and no one questions the life’s choices which lead to a situation where they are dependent on a third party for monthly checks. As long as they got knocked up by or divorced a wealthy enough man, there is no stigma to them raising their children out of wedlock. The only irresponsible party is the man.

The paper I mentioned above also corroborates a point I made in [The child support catastrophe](#). The adversarial and high stakes nature of the child support system is damaging to the very relationships the child needs most:

Poor mothers are forced to name absent fathers, and then sue them—and sue them again and again. Because the fathers are often also poor, the vast amount of assigned child support goes unpaid and insurmountable arrearages quickly result. The fathers who try almost always fail as the automated enforcement mechanisms throttle endlessly: a trucker’s license is suspended, so he cannot work; a laborer’s wages are garnished at sixty-five percent, so he cannot afford to pay his own rent; a father obtains a new job and then loses it after being incarcerated for contempt because of his child support arrearages. The relationships between the mothers and fathers,

fragile at their beginnings, can be obliterated through the process. The hopes of children to have fathers who are supportive and involved in their lives are often dissolved.

---

Archived from [theredarchive.com](http://theredarchive.com)