

# Who Responds to Survey Questions About Child Support? Turnover in the Survey of Program Dynamics Child Support Sample

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## Abstract

Surveys that collect data on child support orders use whether children have a parent living outside the household as a screening question for the child support module. If parents transition in and out of households frequently, this screening question may not capture the true child support-eligible population. I use the Survey of Program Dynamics, a large-scale panel dataset with yearly information on child support orders, to examine transitions in the child support survey population and find turnover of about one-third of the child support sample between waves. If sample turnover is high because parents return to the household, current estimates of the number of children without child support orders may be overstated. Another possibility is that the screening questions miss eligible households and the child support-eligible population is underestimated. I explore the reasons for turnover in the child support sample and compare the sample characteristics to other national surveys.

The Survey of Program Dynamics data allows us to examine whether parents and children who are asked child support questions in one wave remain part of the child support sample in subsequent waves. Surprisingly, although the characteristics of the child support sample remain similar across waves, about one third of children with a parent outside the household who respond to child support questions in one wave do not respond to child support questions in the next wave. This could be either because of sampling and survey issues or because the children are living with both parents in subsequent waves.

The Survey of Program Dynamics is the only large-scale panel dataset that asks child support questions on an almost yearly basis over such a long period of time. It provides new insights into who responds to child support survey questions. Since the Current Population Survey and the Survey of Income and Program Participation (on which the Survey of Program Dynamics is based) identify the child support sample in similar ways, information about transitions in and out of the SIPP/SPD child support sample is likely to apply to the

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Current Population Survey’s March/April match file, which is one of the most frequently used datasets for child support research.

Both the SIPP and CPS base the child support sample on the set of children who have a parent living outside the household. In the SIPP, parents or guardians with children under 21 are asked whether those children have a parent living outside the household. If so, parents/guardians are asked about child support agreements for those children. The CPS asks about child support agreements for children who have a parent outside the household or do not live with both of their biological or adoptive parents. In the Survey of Program Dynamics, child support data is collected at the child level instead of at the mother level.

The extent to which transitions in and out of the SIPP/SPD child support panel indicate similar transitions in the CPS population depends on the extent to which the two surveys capture the same population. I compare data from the first child support topical modules in the 1992 and 1993 SIPP panels to data from the 1994 CPS March/April match file.<sup>1</sup> These correspond to similar time periods: interviews for the SIPP modules were conducted between September and December 1993 and ask about child support during the past 12 months. The CPS interviews were conducted in April 1994 and refer to child support due or collected during 1993. Both surveys were designed to be representative of the US civilian non-institutionalized population. Table 1 shows summary statistics for the child support populations in the CPS and each SIPP panel.

Overall, the group of custodial parents and children who respond to the child support questions are similar across the surveys. The weighted fraction of the sample under age 21 is very similar, but only 22 percent of children are identified as having a parent outside the household compared to 26 percent in the CPS. This may be partly because the public-use SIPP includes data on only four children per parent or guardian. Another possibility is that because the SIPP asks whether a parent’s “own children living here” have a parent outside household, children with neither parent in the household may be under-represented relative to the CPS. Parents of children in the CPS are more likely to report having a legal child support agreement (56% in the CPS as opposed to 46-48% in the SIPP), but among parents with support orders, the amount of child support ordered and paid is very similar, as is the length of time for which parents have had the order. One major difference is that parents in the SIPP are much more likely to report that the noncustodial parent owes back support: 29 percent in the CPS compared to 40 to 42 percent in the SIPP.<sup>2</sup> The characteristics of custodial parents are similar across surveys, although the CPS includes more never-married parents.

Given the strong similarities between the SIPP and the CPS, the frequency of transitions in the SIPP sample is likely to be indicative of amount of transitions in the CPS sample, which we do not observe. Although the percentage of people under age 21 with parents outside the household remains fairly constant across waves, nearly 1/3 of the child support sample turns over between interviews. Table 2 shows the fraction of children within the SIPP/SPD child support who enter and exit the sample between years. Figure 1 shows the reasons for exits from the child support sample. Children who are no longer age-eligible for child support represent a small fraction of the turnover, as do cases in which the mother and

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<sup>1</sup>These are the 1992 SIPP topical module 6 and 1993 SIPP topical module 3.

<sup>2</sup>The phrasing of the questions does not provide an obvious explanation for the difference.

Table 1: Comparison of 1994 CPS and 1992/1993 SIPP Child Support Samples

	CPS 1994	SIPP 1992 TM 6	SIPP 1993 TM 3
Number of Observations			
Full Sample	105,166	51,286	53,935
Age < 21	32,667	16,460	17,495
Children < 21 with parent outside household	8,640	3,622	3,816
Parents with child support data	5,325	2,251	2,302
Weighted Sample Fractions and Means			
Fraction of sample < age 21	0.31	0.32	0.32
Fraction of children < 21 with parent outside household	0.26	0.22	0.22
Fraction of children with any agreement	0.55	0.47	0.49
Fraction of parents with legal agreement	0.56	0.48	0.46
Fraction of parents with informal agreement	0.04	0.06	0.06
Fraction of parents with no agreement	0.40	0.47	0.48
Average year agreement was first reached	1988	1988	1988
Agreements with payment due in 1993/last 12 months	0.94	0.92	0.94
Agreements with back support due in 1993/last 12 months	0.29	0.40	0.42
Fraction of cases in which other parent lives in same state	0.74	0.77	0.74
Average support due to parents with agreements	\$3,581	\$3,313	\$3,722
Average support received by parents with agreements	\$3,085	\$3,205	\$3,578
Custodial parent is male, fraction	0.16	0.13	0.12
Custodial parent is white, fraction	0.70	0.71	0.70
Custodial parent is black, fraction	0.26	0.26	0.27
Custodial parent never married, fraction	0.27	0.24	0.24
Average age of custodial parent	34.7	34.9	34.7

child are no longer in the survey.<sup>3</sup> A larger fraction of exits are due to children leaving the household (while the mother remains). This group is small in the 1993-1995 SIPP waves, but much larger in the 1998-2002 Survey of Program Dynamics waves. But in the entire 1993-2002 period, over half of the exits from the child support sample represent children who remain in the survey but are not asked the child support questions.

Since the child support questions are predicated on the child having a parent who lives outside the household, this may mean that these children now have both parents in the household. However, this is difficult to confirm in the SIPP, which records a designated parent for each child but does not record whether the child has both a father and mother in the household. Most exits from the child support sample occur in the first year after entry into the child support panel, as shown in Figure 2. Each line in the graph represents children who entered the child support sample for the first time in a particular year. The decline between the first and second years is quite steep, while in subsequent years the number of participants remaining is relatively stable. (The steep declines in the last year are due to large cuts in the SPD sample size in the final year of the panel.)

<sup>3</sup>The exception to this is exits between 1995-1998 and between 2001-2002. In these years the SPD sample was cut.

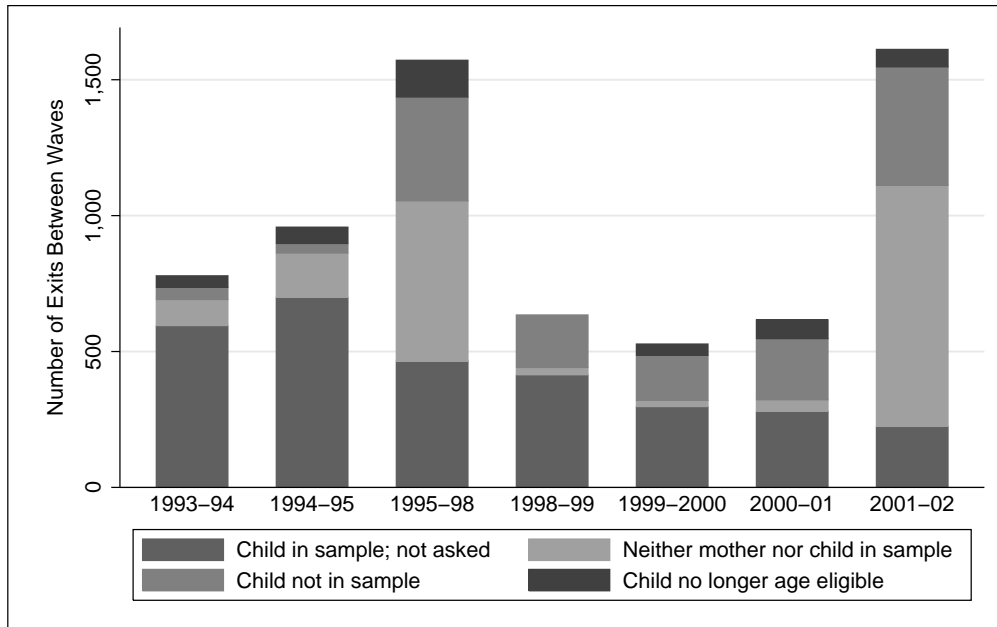
Table 2: SIPP and SPD Child Support Sample, By Year

	1993	1994	1995 <sup>a</sup>	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
(1) Respondents Age < 21	28,000	26,706	14,257	21,490	18,272	20,098	22,903	12,533
(2) Children without father in household	6,324	6,322	2,925	4,385	4,867	5,245	6,144	3,359
(3) Children without father, valid identifiers <sup>b</sup>	5,205	5,846	2,677	3,457	3,233	3,967	5,004	2,674
(4) Children with child support agreement data	5,197	5,835	2,669	3,392	3,199	3,885	4,946	2,646
Fraction of under-21 sample without father (2/1)	0.23	0.24	0.21	0.20	0.27	0.26	0.27	0.27
Fraction of under-21 sample without father, identifiable (3/1)	0.19	0.22	0.19	0.16	0.18	0.20	0.22	0.21
Fraction of children w/out fathers, identifiable (3/2)	0.82	0.92	0.92	0.79	0.66	0.76	0.81	0.80
Fraction of under-21 sample w/ agreement data (4/1)	0.19	0.22	0.19	0.16	0.18	0.19	0.22	0.21
Fraction of children w/out father w/ agreement data (4/2)	0.82	0.92	0.91	0.77	0.66	0.74	0.81	0.79
Fraction who are new entries	1.00	0.37	0.20	0.46	0.16	0.22	0.30	0.20
Fraction who will exit in next wave	0.31	0.49	0.61	0.37	0.31	0.31	0.64	1.00

<sup>a</sup>The SIPP 1992 panel ended before 1995; this column includes only SIPP 1993 panel participants.

<sup>b</sup>In the SIPP, many parents list children as having fathers outside the household but either the children are not in the sample or their personal identifiers are corrupted. In the SPD, some respondents both do not answer the child support questions and do not include a reference child (sibling) whose child support data can be used.

Figure 1: Reasons for Child Exit from the SPD Child Support Sample



Current survey methods for identifying the sample of children eligible for child support result in a child support sample with a large transitory component. One possibility is that these children are not really eligible for child support. Instead, the fathers might be absent from the household for only a short time. If so, survey estimates could overstate the number of children without child support orders. Another possibility is that the child support-eligible population is even larger than past estimates suggest, but we capture only a fraction of it in surveys. Either way, better documentation of how the child support modules in surveys are conducted or more careful design of child support modules would be helpful.

Figure 2: Persistence of Child Support Sample Entrance Over Subsequent Panel Waves

