

**Shared Placement:  
An Overview of Prevalence, Trends, Economic Implications,  
and Impacts on Child Well-Being**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Divorce rates have increased dramatically since the 1960s, reaching their highest rate in the 1980s and since stabilizing. Over the course of this period, there have been major changes in law and practice surrounding marital dissolution, with major implications for parental roles and responsibilities in terms of legal authority, caretaking responsibilities, and financial responsibilities. There has been a shift over time towards more formal sharing of responsibilities across domains: more sharing of legal custody, more sharing of caretaking responsibility, and more sharing of financial responsibilities. The evolution in policy and practice occurred in part in response to concern over negative economic and developmental impacts of divorce on children, and in part in response to increasing demand from fathers to play a greater role. This report examines one dimension of postdivorce responsibilities—caretaking responsibility as manifest in physical placement arrangements. In particular, the report examines what is known about trends and patterns of shared placement in Wisconsin and elsewhere, as well as the implications of shared placement for the well-being of children.

The term *shared placement* as used in this report refers to parenting arrangements that involve the child(ren) living for substantial amounts of time in each of the parents' homes. There is no universally agreed upon definition or threshold for what constitutes shared placement. Indeed, it is only in the context of child support policy—whereby formulas used to set support obligations differ in many states when shared-placement arrangements are in effect—that a formal distinction between sole placement with significant visitation and shared placement is necessary. The lack of agreement on what living arrangements constitute *shared placement*, and the resulting variation in how the term (or any of several other conceptually equivalent terms, such as *shared care* or *joint placement*) is used in the research literature and the legislative arena,

is among the many factors that make it challenging to synthesize the extant knowledge in the area. A related challenge is the frequent use of the term *shared custody* in a way that doesn't clearly distinguish between shared legal custody and shared physical placement, where the former pertains to the assignment of legal decision-making authority and is distinct, both legislatively and practically, from the allocation of residential time.

The remainder of this report proceeds as follows: first, I provide an overview of trends and correlates of shared placement, in Wisconsin and to a lesser degree elsewhere; second, I discuss what is known about the potential and actual impact of shared placement on economic well-being of the parties involved; and third, I discuss what is known about the potential and actual impact of shared placement on child well-being. Although shared placement is not limited to divorce cases and is certainly relevant in nonmarital cases as well, the vast majority of the policy discussion, actual experience, and empirical evidence around shared placement—both its prevalence and its outcomes—is in the context of divorce. As such, much of this report addresses the topic from the perspective of divorced families, but when available, evidence from nonmarital cases is also included. Throughout the report, shared placement is typically framed as an alternative to sole-mother placement. This reflects that sole mother placement has been, until recently, by far the predominant postdivorce living arrangement for children, and as such, it offers a natural point of comparison.

## **II. TRENDS AND CORRELATES OF SHARED PLACEMENT**

The past several decades have seen an increase in state legislation intended to increase the prevalence of shared placement (Melli and Brown, 2008). Whereas the legislative trajectory is clear, surprisingly little is known about how common shared placement is nationwide, nor how it has changed over the past several decades. The lack of clear national data is striking given the

high prevalence of divorce and the strong views about placement on the part of divorced and unmarried parents and groups advocating on their behalf. On the other hand, there is extensive and detailed information about shared placement trends and patterns in Wisconsin, where the ongoing collection of court records affords a detailed look at placement outcomes and how they have evolved in recent decades. In this section I provide a discussion of placement trends and correlates in Wisconsin, followed by a summary of the more-limited knowledge available elsewhere. The Wisconsin discussion draws heavily on past reports prepared by researchers at IRP, as shared placement has been an ongoing focus of the Institute's work.

## **II.A. Shared Placement in Wisconsin**

Research in Wisconsin variously defines shared placement as a minimum of either 25 percent or 30 percent time with each parent, where these percentages correspond to the ways shared placement has been defined at various times in state legislation regarding the calculation of child support. Thus, the Wisconsin-based research on shared placement explicitly focuses on a definition of shared placement that is consistent with how the term is defined in the state's child support arena, as compared to the more vague and often (seemingly) arbitrary definitions in much of the broader research. The Wisconsin-based work typically also differentiates between equal- versus unequal-shared placement, where the latter includes both mother-primary and father-primary placement arrangements. Most of the Wisconsin-based research has focused on divorce cases, although recent work has also explored shared placement in paternity cases.

### ***II.A.1. The Legislative Context***

At least two aspects of state policy are relevant to a discussion of shared-placement patterns: policy concerning the placement decision itself, and policy regarding the interplay between placement status and child support guidelines. In Wisconsin, shared placement was

authorized by the legislature in 1977 (Melli and Brown, 2008). Legislation in 1999 established a presumption that courts order joint legal custody (distinct from joint placement) and likewise a requirement that placement schedules provide meaningful periods of time with each parent, and that such schedules seek to maximize the time with each parent subject to a range of considerations (Melli and Brown, 2008). While this does not include the explicit equal-placement presumption sought by some, and has not been interpreted by the courts as requiring equal placement, it nonetheless provides legislative language strongly in support of shared-placement arrangements.

In terms of child support legislation, the state has formally considered shared placement in its child support guidelines since 1987, at which time shared placement was defined, for child support purposes, as at least 30 percent of nights with each parent. Between 1987 and 2003, there were several changes in the specific formula for calculating child support in the event of shared placement, all based on the 30 percent threshold. The most significant policy change was in January 2004, when the threshold was lowered to 25 percent, and the specifics of the calculation changed such that a sizable “cliff effect” was introduced—that is, a sudden versus gradual change in the guidelines-based child support obligation upon crossing the threshold into shared placement (Brown and Cancian, 2007). In light of the direct financial trade-off between time and child support under any of the shared-placement guidelines, and particularly the sizable increase in this trade-off under the newest policy regime, child support policy—in addition to policy governing placement per se—is a relevant backdrop to understanding placement patterns.

### ***II.A.2. Prevalence of Shared Placement***

The most recent evidence on shared placement in Wisconsin is found in Brown and Cook’s (2011) report, the latest in an ongoing series of studies that have been tracking placement

outcomes in the state. Among cases coming to court in 2007, almost half of the 98 percent of divorce cases in which an order assigned placement to one or both parents had a shared-placement order—45.4 percent. This included nearly one-third (30.5 percent) with equal-shared placement, 13 percent with mother-primary shared placement (51 to 75 percent of time with the mother), and 1.9 percent with father-primary shared placement (51 to 75 percent of time with the father). Fewer than half of cases (45.6 percent) had traditional sole-mother placement, whereas 7 percent had sole-father placement, and the remaining 1.9 percent had split placement (i.e., placement that differed among children). Using a 30 percent threshold—which is not consistent with the state’s current child support-related definition but more consistent with older definitions in the state and much of the non-Wisconsin literature on shared placement—the prevalence of mother-primary shared placement falls slightly, from 13 percent to 11.6 percent, and the prevalence of father-primary shared placement falls from 1.9 percent to 1.7 percent. These shifts reflect the small share of placement outcomes that fall in the 25 to 30 percent time with the lesser-time parent. By either definition, these data make it strikingly clear that shared placement is a normative outcome among divorce cases—as common, now, as is sole-mother placement.

Placement patterns are considerably different in nonmarital (paternity) cases. Brown and Cook (2011) differentiate between voluntary paternity establishments and adjudicated establishments, where the latter require explicit court involvement. Among voluntary paternity establishments with a placement order with one or both parents (90 percent of all voluntary paternity establishments), shared placement is found in 16.2 percent of cases, including 8.8 percent with equal-shared placement, 6.8 percent with mother-primary shared placement, and 0.6 percent with father-primary shared placement. Sole-mother placement is found in the large majority of cases, 80.9 percent, whereas sole-father placement is rare (2.9 percent). In the case of

adjudicated paternity cases with a placement order with a parent (92 percent of cases), shared placement is much less common, occurring in 6.7 percent of cases, with the vast majority having sole-mother placement (90.9 percent) and a small minority in sole-father placement (2 percent).

### ***II.A.3. Trends in Shared Placement***

Consistent with the evolution of policy, as well as with changing norms around parental roles, the past 25 years have seen dramatic growth in shared placement, particularly in divorce cases. Unless otherwise noted, this and all subsequent discussion of shared placement in Wisconsin uses the 25 percent threshold. Overall rates of shared placement in divorce cases in Wisconsin more than tripled between the 1990 to 1993 period and the 2007 outcomes reported above, increasing from 14.2 percent to 45.4 percent of divorces over the 17-year span (Cook and Brown, 2005; Brown and Cook, 2011). The largest growth has been in equal-shared placement, which increased fivefold, from 5.7 percent to 30.5 percent; there was much smaller growth in mother-primary shared placement (increasing from 7.6 percent to 13 percent), and little change in father-primary shared placement, which remained very uncommon, in the 1 percent to 2 percent range over the period. Using a 30 percent threshold, for which a longer time trend is available, the prevalence of shared placement among Wisconsin divorce cases increased from 7 percent in 1986 to 43.8 percent in 2007 (Cancian and Meyer, 1998; Brown and Cook, 2011).

Shared placement has likewise been increasing in paternity cases, although the overall prevalence remains much lower than in divorce cases as described above, and a shorter time trend is available. In voluntary paternity establishments, shared placement increased from 6.1 percent of cases in 2001 to 16.2 percent in 2007—a roughly 250 percent increase over a six-year period. In the case of adjudicated paternity cases, there was faster growth but from a very low base, increasing from 1 percent to 6.7 percent (Brown and Cook, 2011). The high rate of growth

over a short period suggests that shared placement may well take on a more significant role in nonmarital cases—particularly if recent trends continue.

#### ***II.A.4. Factors Associated with Shared Placement***

While there has been tremendous growth in shared placement over the past two decades, there continues to be wide variation across groups, and growth has not been uniform even among divorce cases. Broadly speaking, the likelihood of shared placement among divorce cases appears to be associated with the legal/policy context; institutional characteristics; parental socioeconomic status; child characteristics; and parents' relative capacities in navigating the legal system. The following discussion provides an overview of factors associated with shared placement in Wisconsin, largely based on descriptive data published in a series of reports and articles utilizing the Wisconsin Court Record Data.

As discussed above, the legislative framework with regards to placement has evolved rapidly, with changes intended to increase the prevalence of shared placement as well as to alter the calculation of child support when shared placement is ordered. There is some evidence that shared placement increased in tandem with legislative changes intended to foster its use (Brown, Joung, and Berger, 2006), and also may have increased in response to economic incentives that make it more desirable for fathers than traditional sole-mother custody (Brown and Cancian, 2007). These legislative changes, however, occurred in a social context characterized by ongoing shifts in norms related to parental roles. Legislation alone cannot explain the dramatic growth in shared placement, but nonetheless evidence suggests it may have played a role—and to the extent that changing practice affects perceived norms, and vice versa, legislative incentives may have helped set in play a process of escalating change.

The growth in shared placement has not been uniform around the state. As detailed in Brown and Cook (2011), growth in Milwaukee County has been considerably slower than in a group of rural counties or a group of other urban counties in the sample. For instance, equal shared placement increased from 17 percent to 33 percent in rural Wisconsin counties in the sample over the 1997 to 2007 period; from 19 percent to 31 percent in non-Milwaukee urban counties; yet only from 15 percent to 19 percent in Milwaukee County. Brown and Cook (2011) indicate that several other counties had rates below those of Milwaukee, although these are not detailed in the report, and Brown and colleagues (2006) highlight sizable cross-county variation in shared placement in earlier cohorts. They also found that rates of shared placement differed across judges, although they speculate—since most placement arrangements are ultimately negotiated by the parties and merely signed off on by judges—that differences by judges and counties may reflect broader differences in practices, such as mediation services, that impact the arrangements ultimately settled on by parents in different jurisdictions (Brown et al., 2006). It is also likely that parents and attorneys negotiate their placement arrangements with some knowledge of what is normative in the area.

Numerous Wisconsin studies have pointed to parents' socioeconomic status as an important determinant of shared placement, with such arrangements more common among higher income parents (Cancian and Meyer, 1998; Cook and Brown, 2005; Brown and Cancian, 2007; Brown and Cook, 2011; Melli and Brown, 2008). The most recent evidence suggests that the relationship has strengthened sharply over a relatively short period (Brown and Cook, 2011). Note that these data, summarized below, combine shared-father primary and sole-father placement into a single category, presumably because of the very low prevalence of shared-father primary. In the 1997 to 2001 divorce cohorts, the prevalence of shared placement—

including equal-shared and mother-primary—was 12 percent of families with combined income below \$25,000; 16 percent of families in the \$25,000 to \$50,000 range; 22 percent in the next range of up to \$75,000; and 35 percent to 39 percent in each of the highest three ranges (income up to \$100,000; \$150,000; and above \$150,000)—thus a range of 12 percent to 39 percent across income categories. By the 2006 to 2007 cohorts, prevalence had increased in all income categories except the lowest, with the largest absolute increases in the highest categories, such that shared placement rates in the six income categories, from lowest to highest income, were 11 percent, 27 percent, 37 percent, 45 percent, 57 percent, and 64 percent, respectively. On the one hand, shared placement is clearly increasing among all except the lowest income households. At the same time, the differences in placement outcomes according to family income are becoming much more pronounced, suggesting growing disparity in the nature of postdivorce living arrangements for children at different income levels. The income disparity is hardly unexpected given the reality that shared placement is more expensive than sole placement due to the duplication of the fixed costs associated with children, making the arrangement more economically feasible when more income is available. There may be, however, further issues at play, ranging from how the explicit tradeoffs between child support obligations and time play out at different income levels; to differences in preferences among parents with differing professional commitments; to differences among income groups in pre-divorce patterns of child-rearing responsibilities. Regardless of underlying cause, the income differential is among the most striking patterns evident in shared-placement outcomes.

There is also some evidence that placement outcomes differ in conjunction with characteristics such as number and age of children, although these differences are relatively modest in the most current data (Brown and Cook, 2011). The most recent data show shared

placement is somewhat less common among families with four or more children than among families with fewer children (27 percent as compared to 37 percent to 45 percent). Likewise, shared placement is somewhat less common among families with only teenagers (31 percent) than all younger age groups (40 percent to 46 percent). Interestingly, there is very little difference in placement among children within the age 0 to 10 range. Whereas some have expressed concerns about the use of shared placement among very young children, those concerns are not reflected in the patterns found in Wisconsin, where shared placement is almost as common among families whose youngest child is age 0 to 2 (42 percent equal-shared or mother-primary shared) as among those whose youngest child is age 6 to 10 (46 percent equal-shared or mother-primary shared), and more common than among families whose youngest child is a teenager.

Finally, it appears that parents' relative capacities to navigate the legal system may play a role in placement outcomes, with some evidence that parents receive a higher share of placement when they have legal representation and the other party does not (Brown and Cook, 2011; Cook and Brown, 2005; Cancian and Meyer, 1998). This is evident in both descriptive and multivariate analyses. In addition, shared placement is most common among families in which parents have relatively equal incomes (Brown and Cook, 2011). To the extent that income facilitates favorably navigating the system, similar incomes may be indicative of similar bargaining power, or more generally of similar capacity to achieve one's objective within the legal system.

## **II.B. Shared Placement Outside of Wisconsin**

The legislative trends enabling shared placement, and the acknowledgement of shared placement in child support guidelines, are not unique to Wisconsin. Almost all states explicitly address shared child placement in their child support guidelines, although the specific formulas

vary (Brown and Brito, 2007). In contrast to the detailed information from Wisconsin, however, little systematic information about shared placement is available nationwide, and thus—surprisingly—there appears to be no data from which one can describe trends over time nor patterns across states in a meaningful fashion. Rather, there exists a wide range of studies using varying definitions, sampling frames, and time periods, making comparisons of limited value.

In 1989 to 1990, a 19-state report based on data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics yielded an estimate of 15.7 percent joint custody in new divorces, with prevalence in the 19 states ranging from a low of 4 percent in Nebraska to a high of 44 percent in Kansas and Montana (Clarke, 1995). It is not clear, however, if the data in fact refer to physical or legal custody, making interpretation difficult. A national sample in the late 1980s yielded estimates of 13 percent of divorced parents with joint custody, though it likewise did not explicitly specify physical versus legal (Donnelly and Finkelhor, 1993), and included a cross section of all divorced parents, both recent as well as longer-term divorces. Joint custody in this sample increased with income, education, residence in a larger city, and nonwhite households. Other work in the early 1990s suggests that a smaller share of divorced families—5 percent—had shared residential arrangements (Nord and Zill, 1996, as cited in Kelly, 2006).

At the state level, a range of smaller-scale studies through the late 1990s suggests prevalence of joint physical custody in the 12 percent to 27 percent range in Arizona and California (Kelly, 2006). In general, studies in the period found that fathers with higher education and more financial resources had higher rates of shared placement (Kelly, 2006), generally consistent with the patterns noted in Wisconsin and in the available national data. More recently, in Arizona in 2007, 15 percent of court orders for child support from a random sample of cases involved roughly equal parenting time (Venohr and Kaunelis, 2008). Likewise, in

Washington in 2007, 16 percent of placement orders following marital dissolution involved equal time with each parent, and another roughly 18 percent involved at least 35 percent time with each parent, suggesting a shared-placement rate moderately lower than in Wisconsin, though based on a more stringent standard (35 percent versus 25 percent time with each parent) (George, 2008). In the Washington study, when only one parent had legal representation, he or she tended to get more placement than when both were represented, consistent with patterns found in Wisconsin. Overall, research suggests that shared placement is used disproportionately among families of higher socioeconomic status, lower conflict, and among those who self-select into the arrangement.

### ***II.B.1. Shared Placement in International Context***

Shared placement has received increasing attention from policymakers and parents in other countries as well. Canada, England, and Australia have had active campaigns from fathers' groups on behalf of shared placement, and countries are increasingly passing legislation that is favorable towards shared placement when parents live apart (Gilmore, 2006; Spruijt and Duindam, 2010). Without attempting a comprehensive study of international placement patterns, it is nonetheless noteworthy that there is a growing body of research on prevalence of shared placement outside of the United States. A study of actual (as distinct from legally ordered) post-separation living arrangements in Canada found 17 percent of separated parents with shared-placement arrangements in the late 1990s (Juby, LeBourdais, and Marcil-Gratton, 2005). Spruijt and Duindam (2011) cite recent studies indicating 20 percent of children in Denmark have shared residence following divorce, with similar rates in Sweden. Australian research finds 8 percent of parents who live apart, regardless of past marital status, have shared-care arrangements involving at least 35 percent of nights with each parent, of which roughly half have

equal time with each parent (Cashmore et al., 2010). In an analysis of shared-placement patterns and impacts in the context of recent Australian legislation intended to foster its more widespread use, Fehlberg and colleagues (2011) argue that the 2006 legislation appears to have led to a shift in the perceived importance of parents' rights rather than child well-being in determining placement outcomes. In short, it is clear that shared placement—and the attendant debates about its merits—is not solely a phenomenon in the United States. As in the U.S. research, differences in definitions and samples make meaningful comparisons difficult.

### **III. SHARED PLACEMENT AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING**

Divorce has strikingly different economic implications for mothers and fathers. Mothers on average experience larger drops in their standard of living postdivorce than do fathers, and divorced women as a group are much worse-off economically than are divorced men (Bartfeld, 2000; Bianchi, Subaiya, and Kahn, 1999).<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, children have lived with the mother following divorce; the costs associated with children are one of the factors contributing to the differences in postdivorce outcomes between mothers and fathers. At the same time, child support from nonresident fathers has been found to play a nontrivial role in improving mothers' and children's postdivorce economic well-being (Bartfeld, 1997 and 2000).

Most of the research on postdivorce economic well-being of parents and children has focused on families in which the children live with the mother, which historically has been the most common arrangement. Indeed, economic well-being of divorced mothers and that of children are frequently discussed synonymously; there has been extremely limited attention to economic well-being in the case of shared placement. In light of the growth in shared placement,

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<sup>1</sup>The published work reflects gender differences in the economic impacts of divorce through the 1990s; it is possible that current patterns may be different.

at least as documented above for Wisconsin, this omission represents a major gap in our knowledge of how children fare economically when their parents divorce—or for that matter, how parents fare economically postdivorce. As discussed in more detail below, the lack of information on economic well-being in the face of shared placement reflects both conceptual difficulties in defining and measuring economic well-being in such cases and, perhaps at least in part as a result of those difficulties, a lack of empirical research attempting to document economic well-being when shared placement is in place.

Limited research notwithstanding, shared placement has important potential implications for the financial resources available to parents and children. First, placement arrangements affect direct costs to the parents; there are both fixed costs and variable costs associated with a child living in the home. For instance, both homes need to be of sufficient size to accommodate the children (a fixed cost), and there are costs such as food (a variable cost) that increase as children spend more time in the home. Second, placement arrangements can be expected to affect child support payments and receipts. As discussed previously, almost all states explicitly address shared child placement in their child support guidelines (Brown and Brito, 2007), and shared-placement guidelines typically result in orders that are lower than would be the case under sole placement.

There are competing financial impacts, then, of shared placement: parents will have lower direct expenses if the children live part-time rather than full-time in the home, but they can also expect lower child support receipts. Conversely, parents will have higher direct expenses if the children live part-time rather than none of the time in the home, but can also expect to make lower child support payments. The net impact of shared physical placement on the economic well-being of mothers' and fathers' households is uncertain, and depends on the extent to which

changes in direct child-related costs are offset by changes in child support transfers. This in turn depends, at least in part, on the extent to which child-related costs are fixed versus variable, that is, the extent to which costs change with the specific amount of time children spend in the home.

The implications for children's—as distinct from parents'—economic well-being are still more complicated. The mere existence of shared placement implies that to characterize children's economic well-being, one need consider their economic well-being in each of two households, rather than in only one household. Accounting for the economic well-being of children as (part-time) members of their fathers' households clearly has potential to alter the conclusions about how children fare postdivorce. Recent research on divorce cases with shared placement in Wisconsin found that at least for the first two years postdivorce, fathers' earnings were substantially higher than mothers' (Bartfeld, Brown, and Ahn, 2009).

### **III.A. Measuring Economic Well-Being in the Case of Shared Placement**

The literature on the cost of children provides many estimates of the cost of children when children live full time in a single home, yet does not offer guidance on the appropriate estimation of child costs in the case of shared placement. A variety of methods exist for calculating the costs of children (see, e.g., Lewin/ICF, 1990, and Rothe and Berger, 2007, for summaries), yet these are focused on costs of children when they live full time in a single home. Two of the foundational theoretical approaches to estimating the cost of children—the Engel and Rothbarth methods—involve developing equivalence scales for households of various configurations by equating the share of income spent on food (in the case of the Engel estimator) or adult expenses (in the case of the Rothbarth estimator). These approaches do not appear to have been applied to expenditure data to produce estimates of the cost of children who divide their time between homes—although in principle one could presumably undertake such an

exercise if appropriate data were available. An alternative approach, used by Mark Lino to produce annual estimates of expenditures on children, involves allocating various categories of expenditures among household members to directly compute expenditures (see, e.g., Lino, 2010); this work offers no particular insight into how to estimate costs in shared-placement situations. Poverty thresholds have a built-in equivalence scale in that they establish minimum needs standards for households of various configurations, but such thresholds are not available for households with part-time children. In short, it does not appear that any of the prevailing strategies for estimating the cost of children, or measuring the economic well-being of households with children, have been applied to households in which children are present only a portion of the time. The lack of systematic empirical estimates of child costs in shared-placement households has left researchers with little guidance as to how to best estimate economic well-being in the event of shared placement—and thus little guidance as to how to quantify the implications of shared versus sole placement on the economic well-being of the various parties involved.

### **III.B. Estimates of the Impact of Shared Placement on Economic Well-Being**

To my knowledge, only one study has formally sought to assess the impact of shared placement on economic well-being. Bartfeld and colleagues (2009) compared estimated income-to-poverty ratios among shared-placement households in Wisconsin under two scenarios: first, household composition in accordance with placement orders, under the assumption that child support was transferred between parents in accordance with relevant child support guidelines; and second, household composition under the counterfactual of sole-mother placement, again assuming guidelines-based child support, and also assuming that nonresident fathers (as distinct from fathers with shared placement) would have no child-related expenses other than child

support. Thus, they examined economic well-being under assumptions of a perfectly working child support system, considering the actual shared-placement orders and a hypothetical sole-mother placement arrangement as a comparison. To address the uncertainty in how best to characterize the economic well-being of households with part-time children, they constructed income-to-poverty ratios based on two different poverty thresholds: one that counts children in both parents' households, reflecting the substantial fixed costs of children (such as housing); and one that was imputed based on children counted proportional to their time in the home (such that, for instance, the poverty threshold for a single parent with 60 percent placement of one child would be imputed as 60 percent of the distance between the threshold for a single adult and that for an adult with one child), reflecting the assumption that the costs of children vary with the amount of time in the home.

Notably, they found that, on average, both mothers and fathers fared at least somewhat less well economically under shared placement than they would have under sole-mother placement, under almost all scenarios considered, assuming full adherence to guidelines and full payment of the resulting orders.

Bartfeld and colleagues (2009) also found that the magnitudes of the negative economic impacts of shared placement depend on assumptions about how child-related costs vary with the specific amount of time in each home. The greater the extent to which costs are fixed rather than proportional to time in the home, the greater the apparent cost to both parents in the choice of shared placement compared to sole-mother placement. This is due to the assumption, implicit in the fixed-cost measure, that mothers' direct costs don't change with a change from sole-mother to shared mother-primary placement, while fathers shift from having no direct costs to full direct costs. If all costs are assumed to be proportional, however, shared placement would result in very

little change in average economic well-being to either mothers or fathers—in most cases very small average costs to both. Treating the two income-to-poverty ratios as upper and lower bounds, their overall assessment is that mothers' and fathers' household economic well-being both decline modestly under shared placement.

They further found that the economic losses stemming from shared physical placement, as an alternative to sole-mother placement, differ for mothers and fathers. For mothers, the apparent losses associated with shared placement are greater in the case of equal-shared placement than mother-primary placement, as the reduction in child support would be larger. The converse is true for fathers: the apparent losses associated with shared placement are greater in the case of mother-primary placement than equal-shared placement.

What does this mean for the economic well-being of children, as distinct from that of mothers and fathers? Assessing the impact on children's economic well-being requires comparing their well-being in each shared-placement home to what it would have been if living solely with the mother. Bartfeld and colleagues' findings suggest children, on average, fare a little bit worse economically in at least one of their households than they would have fared with their mother under a sole-mother placement arrangement. The results vary somewhat between the equal-shared placement and primary-mother shared placement groups, and are also sensitive to the choice of well-being measure. Assuming for simplicity that the best measure of economic well-being lies midway between the two estimates, children in equal-shared placement fared, on average, slightly worse in their mothers' households, and slightly better in their fathers' households, than they would have fared with their mother under sole-mother placement. Children in primary-mother shared placement fared, on average, roughly the same in their mothers' household and somewhat worse in their fathers' household than they would have fared with their

mother under sole-mother placement. The impacts are modest, and results do not suggest substantial economic costs (or gains) to children associated with shared placement.

The above findings regarding the economic impacts of shared placement pertain to the specific families in which such orders were issued, and thus reflect the particular income configurations of those families. Further, the differences between economic impacts in equal-shared and unequal-shared placement reflect both the differences in direct child costs and child support transfers associated with those arrangements as well as differences in incomes of families in the two groups. As discussed earlier, shared placement is not equally used at all income levels; the economic impact of shared placement for all the parties involved could differ substantially if extended to a different mix of families. Furthermore, the above findings only address average impacts of shared placement; results could obscure potentially substantial offsetting gains and losses among the families involved.

### **III.C. Shared Placement and Economic Well-Being: Additional Considerations**

There remain further complications in assessing the financial implications of shared placement. I provide a brief overview of a number of these issues, to further highlight the challenges involved.

First, the literature on economic impacts of divorce, and the limited research on economic impacts of shared placement, makes the simplifying assumption that nonresident fathers have no child-related expenses other than child support payments. In fact, while there are no systematic estimates of the extent of nonresident fathers' spending on children, research clearly indicates that some—perhaps many—fathers incur considerable direct expenses, ranging from toys to clothes to a home with an extra bedroom, at placement levels that fall far short of shared-placement guidelines (see, e.g., Fabricius and Braver, 2003). As a result, estimates of the

economic well-being of nonresident fathers may be too high (Braver, 1999), and estimates of the economic costs to fathers of shifting to shared placement may be exaggerated.

Second, whereas the impact of shared placement on guidelines-based child support obligations can be directly calculated, there may be differences in actual practice, stemming both from possible differences in the adherence to guidelines in shared versus sole placement cases, and from differences in payment compliance patterns associated with different placement arrangements. That is, the differences in child support payment and receipt according to placement regime may be more complex than suggested by a mere technical accounting of guidelines-based orders under alternative scenarios. The most recent evidence from Wisconsin indicates that only a very small share of support orders in shared-placement cases appear to adhere to the guidelines (12 percent in equal-shared placement cases and 20 percent in mother-primary shared placement cases); when guidelines are not followed, the deviations most commonly result in either no order or lower orders from fathers than warranted by the shared-placement guidelines (Cook and Brown, 2011). On the other hand, Bartfeld and colleagues (2009) found that actual child support payments in shared-placement cases were, on average, very close to guidelines-specified amounts, suggesting that underpayments and overpayments (relative to guidelines) tend to be offsetting. Examining distributions rather than means could shed further light on this issue.

Furthermore, the impact of shared placement on economic well-being ultimately depends not on court-ordered placement, but on what living arrangements actually happen in practice. To the extent that actual living arrangements differ from those ordered by the courts, economic well-being of the various parties could change substantially. The research on “maternal drift,” or the tendency found by some early researchers for children to gradually increase their time with

mothers even if formally assigned to shared placement (see, e.g., Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992), is discussed in more detail later. In Wisconsin, however, neither is there evidence that maternal drift is widespread, nor is there evidence that shared-placement arrangements are any less stable than sole placement (Berger et al., 2008).

There also may be behavioral choices associated with shared placement that are difficult to measure yet which may have substantial economic implications for one or both households. In particular, it is possible that parents alter their employment and earnings patterns depending on both their caretaking responsibilities and their anticipated child support obligations or receipts.

Finally, shared placement may affect economic well-being of one or both households through tax implications and/or eligibility for various forms of economic assistance. As such, there may be ripple effects of placement that go beyond a mere accounting of changes in child-related expenses and child support transfers. While a full accounting of the interactions between placement and economic assistance eligibility is beyond the scope of this report, an illustrative example involves the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The parent with whom a child lives at least half the year is able to claim the EITC on behalf of that child, assuming the parent meets the income and earnings criteria. In the case of equal time with both parents (as in the case of equal-shared placement), the higher-income parent has priority to claim the credit on behalf of the child. Thus, a parent in some instances stands to lose potentially substantial tax benefits under equal-shared placement relative to what she would be eligible for under sole placement, in the event she is the lower-earning of the two parents.

#### **IV. SHARED PLACEMENT AND CHILD WELL-BEING**

An extensive literature over several decades has documented that, on average, children from divorced families fare worse on a variety of short- and longer-term outcomes—ranging

from measures of adjustment, to academic performance, to labor market performance—than do children from intact families (see, e.g., Amato and Keith, 1991; McLanahan, 1999; Amato, 2005). With the growing attention to shared placement as a viable postdivorce living arrangement for children, there is considerable interest in its implications for child well-being, including its potential to offset the negative impacts of divorce.

#### **IV.A. Potential Impacts of Shared Placement on Postdivorce Child Well-Being: Evidence from Sole-Mother Placement Families**

As summarized by Bauserman (2002), researchers have identified a range of processes that help to explain the link between divorce and negative outcomes for children. These include, for instance, loss of parental resources in the form of involvement and supervision; loss of financial resources; loss of community resources; conflict between parents; and diminished parenting quality (McLanahan, 1999; Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch, 1996; Whiteside and Becker, 2000; Amato, 2005). Shared placement has the potential to affect these processes, and as such, there are various theoretical arguments about its potential impact on postdivorce child well-being. For instance, shared placement increases the opportunity for involvement and supervision from both parents, which could be beneficial to children. It could also improve the quality of parenting, if sharing parenting alleviates stress for mothers; yet gains would presumably be contingent on parenting from fathers also being of sufficient quality. On the other hand, it likewise risks exposing children to greater inter-parental conflict—a harmful influence. To the extent that it provides children access to resources from fathers who might otherwise contribute less, shared placement could potentially reduce harmful effects stemming from loss of economic resources—though as discussed earlier, providing for two homes for children typically results in lower economic well-being in both households than using child support to concentrate financial resources in a single household (Bartfeld et al., 2009), bringing into question whether shared

placement necessarily mitigates the loss of economic resources at divorce. Overall, shared placement clearly has the capacity to influence postdivorce child well-being by altering many of the pathways that lead to negative outcomes, but the net impact remains an empirical question.

There is a substantial empirical literature on the relationship between father-contact and the well-being of children of divorce, focusing largely on various measures of child adjustment including externalizing behaviors, internalizing behaviors, and academic performance. While this literature addresses the impact of father-child contact largely in the context of sole-mother placement arrangements, it is nonetheless potentially relevant to outcomes under shared placement, as such arrangements—by definition—involve substantial contact with both parents. The broad conclusion from this body of work is that more contact in and of itself does not lead to better child outcomes. Rather, more frequent contact with fathers is beneficial in the context of other protective factors—such as competent parenting (including active involvement with children, authoritative parenting style, and appropriate expectations), low conflict, and availability of financial support. Conversely, more frequent contact appears harmful in the context of poor parenting or high inter-parent conflict (Kelly and Emery, 2003; Kelly, 2006; Gilmore, 2006). Thus, frequency of contact appears to moderate the impact of risk and protective factors on postdivorce adjustment. Other work finds that frequency of contact has an indirect impact on child well-being, specifically by contributing to a higher-quality father-child relationship, which itself is beneficial (Whiteside and Becker, 2000). Overall, higher-frequency contact appears to offer the potential—but not the guarantee—of more favorable child outcomes, where the specific impact depends on a broad configuration of other factors; and under certain circumstances it appears harmful rather than beneficial.

The apparent benefit of more frequent father contact for children, at least in certain circumstances, is borne out by children's reports of their own preferences for contact with their fathers postdivorce. The majority of college students who had experienced their parents' divorce report having wanted to spend more time with their fathers, and the amount of time they did spend was positively correlated with their feeling of closeness with their fathers—as well as with the degree of college support provided (Fabricius, 2003; Fabricius, Braver, and Deneau, 2003). Note that this research pertains to a select subset of children of divorced parents, namely those who attend college.

#### **IV.B. Shared Placement and Child Well-Being: Empirical Evidence**

Whereas the above research is only of indirect relevance to shared placement, there is also a body of literature seeking to assess the impacts of shared placement directly. The overall conclusion that emerges from this work is that, in general—as discussed in more detail below—shared placement does not appear to be worse for children than traditional sole-mother placement, and at least in the kinds of cases in which it has been used, in many instances it seems to be better. That said, despite a large number of studies that purport to address this issue, there remains substantial uncertainty—both about the generalizability of the findings and the extent to which positive relationships between placement and child outcomes can be interpreted as causal. Aspects of this literature that make it challenging to draw firm conclusions include a preponderance of work that is

- dated or unpublished (e.g., doctoral dissertations);
- based on small samples, and very narrow in geographic scope;
- lacking a consistent definition of shared placement, including some work with no specific definition used, others with varying definitions, and still others that don't clearly differentiate legal custody from physical placement;

- lacking a consistent comparison group (with shared placement variously compared to intact households or to other placement arrangements); and
- lacking rigorous statistical controls for selection issues.

The most systematic effort to draw conclusions from a wide range of largely small-scale and frequently unpublished literature on shared placement was conducted by Bauserman (2002). In a formal meta-analysis involving 33 studies (23 of which were unpublished) over the 1982 to 1993 period, he examined the relationship between shared placement and child adjustment, looking separately at multiple categories of adjustment: general adjustment, emotional adjustment, behavioral adjustment, self-esteem, family relations, academic performance, and divorce-specific adjustment. His broad conclusion is that shared physical placement is associated with better adjustment across all adjustment categories, relative to sole (primarily mother) placement. Effect sizes do not differ significantly across types of adjustment, suggesting that shared placement has benefits that span a broad set of domains. At odds with theoretical predictions, he found no evidence that the relationship between placement and child outcomes was moderated by the degree of parental conflict. This differs from the empirical relationships among frequency of contact with fathers, parental conflict, and child outcomes in the context of maternal placement, as discussed above. However, Bauserman found relatively little variance in parental conflict in the studies in his analysis, indicative of the inherent selectiveness in shared placement samples.

The positive conclusions of Bauserman (2002) notwithstanding, not all studies offer evidence that shared placement has an advantage over sole-mother placement, with a sizable number finding no significant differences. For instance, Kline and colleagues (1989) conducted a longitudinal study of 93 children in California, comparing adjustment in various placement arrangements two years following divorce and controlling for child characteristics, initial

parental functioning, and post-separation parental relationships, and found no evidence that child adjustment differed between shared versus sole-mother placement. Likewise, Pearson and Thoennes (1990), using a large sample created from several previous studies, found no evidence of better child adjustment for children in shared placement versus mother placement. Other research differs from Bauserman (2002) in finding that, while shared placement is beneficially linked to child outcomes, this relationship is conditional on low parental conflict (Lee, 2002; Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992).

A frequently cited criticism of shared placement from some of the earlier research involved lack of stability of such arrangements, with Maccoby and Mnookin's (1992) influential study finding that children who started out in shared-placement arrangements in California in the mid-1980s gradually transitioned into a de facto mother-placement living arrangement over the first two years. Several subsequent studies also found evidence of such a pattern (Cloutier and Jacques, 1997; Kline et al., 1989; Pearson and Thoennes, 1990). This pattern is used by critics as evidence of inherent problems with shared placement as a tractable arrangement, and the implications include the possibility that mothers end up with larger child-rearing responsibilities than are reflected in their child support orders. Recent research in Wisconsin, however, finds no evidence of such maternal drift (Berger et al., 2008). Rather, that work finds that, among divorce cases in Wisconsin in the 1990s, living arrangements of children in shared-placement arrangements are at least as stable as those of children with sole-mother placement. It is notable that the Wisconsin study considers living arrangements in a period in which shared placement has become increasingly normative, and in which gender roles are more egalitarian, such that pressures that work against shared placement may be weaker than when the earlier studies took place.

Other work examines children's views on placement arrangements as an indicator of the potential advantages or disadvantages of shared placement. Fabricius (2003) reports that, among a sample of college students with divorced parents, 70 percent supported having equal time with each parent, and a majority supported this arrangement regardless of their own placement arrangement. On measures of closeness to mothers and anger at fathers, students who had had equal placement arrangements looked more similar to students with married parents than did students with other postdivorce placement arrangements.

Finally, there is also limited recent evidence from an international context, some of which is suggestive of potential benefits to children of shared placement and some of which raises potential concerns. In a cross-sectional study of adolescent students in Bergen, Norway, Breivik and Olweus (2006) examined various measures of internalizing and externalizing problems. On most measures, children with joint placement, defined in this study as having approximately equal time with each parent, fared no worse than children with married parents, and on some measures fared better when directly compared to children in sole-placement arrangements. And, in a recent nationwide study in the Netherlands, Spruijt and Duindam (2011) found no evidence that children in co-parenting arrangements (defined as spending three to four nights with each parent) fared worse on measures of adjustment than children in other postdivorce living arrangements, and some evidence that they may fare better. Relationships with both parents were as strong in children with co-parenting arrangements as in intact families. Both of the above studies were cross-sectional and had only limited controls for other factors that could affect outcomes, making it difficult to draw causal inferences. Researchers in Australia found little evidence that, on average, children's developmental outcomes—including cognitive and socio-emotional indicators—vary systematically with their care arrangements, although they too found

at least weak evidence of potential benefits on some outcomes for children in shared or near-shared care (Cashmore et al., 2010). On the other hand, there are at least some indications that shared care is not always beneficial. Kaspiew and colleagues (2009) found that children with shared care have worse outcomes compared to other care arrangements in the subset of cases in which mothers report safety concerns involving the father. And in a high-conflict Australian sample, McIntosh (2009) found that child satisfaction with placement arrangements was lower with shared placement than with other living arrangements.

## **V. CONCLUSIONS AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS**

The research summarized here leads to several broad conclusions as well as important unanswered questions.

Research from Wisconsin offers compelling evidence of rapid and continuing growth in shared placement, initially among divorce cases and subsequently spreading to nonmarital cases. The most recent data reveals that shared placement is, in fact, as common as sole-mother placement among divorced parents. While several factors appear linked to shared placement, the strongest predictor is family income, with sharply higher rates among higher versus lower income parents. As such, the prevailing postdivorce parenting arrangements differ fairly starkly between parents at different income levels. The implications of this are not clear.

While there is considerable interest in the role of shared placement nationwide—clearly evident both in legislation and in the proliferation of vocal advocacy groups working on its behalf—systematic and timely evidence of its current prevalence and correlates outside of Wisconsin remains surprisingly scarce. Because Wisconsin is not, however, unique in its legislative context—numerous states have passed legislation intended to increase shared placement and to more directly acknowledge it in child support formulations—Wisconsin may

offer a reasonable approximation of what is happening nationwide, even as the specific rates may differ. If nationwide growth in shared placement is anywhere close to that seen in Wisconsin, then it represents a largely invisible and ignored demographic shift with potentially profound implications for our understanding of how families are organized. Obtaining accurate information about the prevalence and correlates of shared placement nationwide is a high research priority.

Despite the apparent growth in shared placement households, we know very little about how to conceptualize and measure economic well-being in the context of shared placement. Expenditure patterns of shared-placement households have not been systematically studied, and as such, we do not have clear information about how differences in time allocations translate into differences in spending. The limited research that exists suggests that, to the extent that actual placement arrangements conform to orders and that actual child support payments conform to guidelines, children's economic well-being—on average—does not change substantially under shared placement, in the specific mix of cases in which shared placement is used. However, children on average do seem to fare at least somewhat worse in at least one of their homes than they would with mothers under sole-mother placement. The specifics are dependent on how economic well-being is measured—and specifically on the assumptions that are made about the extent to which child-related costs are fixed or varying in the case of shared placement. Applying standard methods of measuring the costs of children to shared-placement households would allow the creation of empirically grounded equivalence scales to facilitate meaningful comparisons of economic well-being under varying placement arrangements. Systematically studying expenditure patterns could provide important insights into the costs associated with shared placement. Focusing on the distribution of outcomes, rather than just on average

outcomes, would provide a fuller picture of the economic implications of shared placement. Closer attention to how the economic implications of shared placement differ across a range of income configurations would be particularly beneficial.

Finally, despite a plethora of studies, we do not know with any certainty how shared placement affects child well-being in either the short- or medium-term. In the end, the existing research appears to support a general conclusion: in the cases in which shared placement is typically used, there is very little evidence that it is worse for children than sole-mother placement, and at least some evidence that it is better. The evidence finding a benefit, however, is fairly weak and inconsistent across studies, and remains susceptible to selection concerns. Virtually none of the existing studies have used state-of-the-art statistical methods to control for unmeasured differences between children and families with different placement arrangements. The broader literature on divorce outcomes offers strong reason to suspect that any benefits of shared placement would be contingent on a low-conflict relationship between parents, yet the empirical evidence is inconsistent here—perhaps reflecting in part the select nature of cases in which shared placement is typically used. Given the likelihood that the impact of placement arrangements differs across families, and the fact that shared placement is not assigned in a representative cross-section of cases, making inferences from existing studies as to what the impacts of shared placement might be if extended more broadly is difficult at best.

Overall, the evidence offers reason to be cautiously optimistic about shared placement as used, while leaving many unanswered questions. The state of knowledge would benefit tremendously from rigorous studies using careful statistical methods to attempt to make more credible causal links between placement type and child outcomes, and to more fully assess whether and how placement outcomes differ according to family characteristics. Such methods

seem feasible to undertake in Wisconsin, where there appears to be considerable variation in placement patterns across counties.

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