

Shared Placement in Wisconsin: An Overview of Trends, Child Support Guidelines, Payments and Cost-Sharing, and Economic Implications

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INTRODUCTION

Shared placement—that is, parenting arrangements involving children living for substantial amounts of time in each parents’ home—has grown dramatically in recent years. These patterns are evident nationwide and even more so in Wisconsin (Cancian et al., 2014; Meyer et al., 2019). Growth has occurred in tandem with increasing interest in more balanced parenting roles, evidence suggesting that shared placement is often beneficial to children and families, and legislation designed to support its use.

Placement arrangements are inherently linked to expectations about how parents contribute to the support of their children. This is implicitly true in that it is assumed parents provide for the needs of children living in their home, but also formally recognized in guidelines that establish presumptive child support obligations under different placement regimes. As such, the growth in shared placement and corresponding decline in sole placement—in tandem with the policies governing child support under different placement arrangements—has important implications for parents, children, and child support systems. From a child support standpoint, shared placement entails more complex guidelines than those for sole placement, incorporating both parents’ incomes and the specific time allocation as well as implicit and explicit expectations about how actual child-related costs are to be shared between parents. From the standpoint of mothers, a shift away from mother-sole placement means their economic circumstances are increasingly tied to their own earnings, and increasingly decoupled from the income of the other parent. From the standpoint of fathers, the shift means that the economic impact of children is increasingly felt in the assumption of direct costs and less from the payment of support to the other parent. Of relevance to all parties involved, it is inherently more expensive to raise children part-time in two different homes due to the necessary duplication of

at least some costs. Policy and practice governing how costs are shared in the context of shared placement are thus, to at least some degree, decisions about how the additional costs of shared placement end up allocated between parents.

Wisconsin has long been at the forefront of research on shared placement. This stems in part from a longstanding research project and associated research infrastructure established decades ago to study the child support system, which is maintained via a long-term partnership between the State of Wisconsin and the Institute for Research on Poverty. The rapid growth in shared placement in the state, in conjunction with a well-targeted research capacity, has made it a prime location in which to document shared placement's growth and implications.

This report provides an overview and synthesis of research on shared placement in Wisconsin, focusing on research at the intersection of placement and child support, with particular attention on more recent work. I begin with a brief explanation of the relevant legal context related to the use of shared placement and to child support guidelines under different placement arrangements; next, I provide a brief overview of the primary Wisconsin data used in the research discussed here. I then summarize empirical research in four broad areas: use of shared placement in Wisconsin; child support and cost-sharing in the context of different placement arrangements; implications of shared placement for economic well-being; and parents' perspectives on their child-related expenditures in the context of shared placement. I summarize key findings and their implications for child support policy and practice, and discuss areas where further research could be of value. Note that this report is focused on the intersection of shared placement and child support policy and practice in Wisconsin; it does not address broader questions around when shared placement may be most appropriate or its implications for a range of child and family outcomes, nor does it examine shared placement in different policy

contexts. However, many of the kinds of issues addressed here are relevant elsewhere even as the specifics differ among policy regimes.

LEGAL CONTEXT

Two aspects of state policy are particularly germane to this report: policy governing children's living arrangements when parents live apart, and policy governing how parents are expected to contribute to child-related costs under different placement arrangements. Children's legally prescribed living arrangements are referred to here as child placement; this differs from child custody, which refers to legal decision-making authority. Shared placement was explicitly authorized in Wisconsin almost 50 years ago, in 1977 (Melli & Brown, 2008). Legislation in 1999 introduced the 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 & Brown, 2008). This differs from an explicit presumption of equal placement, but it does put state policy squarely in support of shared placement; not surprisingly, then, this policy appears to be one of the factors contributing to its continued growth (Brown et al., 2006).

Placement arrangements are inherently linked to child support expectations. Wisconsin has had presumptive child support guidelines since 1987 that address the establishment of child support when parents live apart and the child lives in one primary home (sole placement), with child support based on a fixed percent of the noncustodial parent's income varying only with the

number of children. Presumptive orders are based on 17% of income for one child, 25% for two children, 29% for three children, 31% for four children, and 34% for five children.¹

Wisconsin also has explicitly addressed shared placement in its child support guidelines since 1987, in conjunction with the original percent-of-income guideline. At that time, shared placement, for purposes of child support orders, was defined as at least 30% of nights with each parent. The formula underwent several revisions over the next 15 years, though the 30% threshold was unchanged. A more substantive change was a 2004 law that lowered the threshold to 25% and changed the specific calculations such that child support had the potential to decline abruptly at the threshold, making the threshold itself more significant (Brown & Cancian, 2007). Following legislation in 2021, the relevant administrative code was changed such that the shared-placement guideline is now listed as the default arrangement rather than a special circumstance, and the language now specifies that the standard percent-of-income formula is only applicable if the shared-placement conditions are not met (DCF 150.035(1)).

In Wisconsin, as in most states, application of support guidelines results in lower child support obligations in shared as compared to sole placement. The formula considers both parents' income and the specific time allocation, with parents essentially assessed offsetting orders reflecting their particular incomes and timeshares. In recognition of the higher total costs when children live part-time in two homes, each of the offsetting orders is inflated by 50% in the final calculation, which has the effect of reducing how quickly child support declines when the higher-income parent crosses the threshold from nonresident parent under sole placement to a part-time resident parent with shared placement. The implications vary across cases, but the

¹There are also guidelines addressing special cases, including when the nonresident parent is low-income or high-income, as well as when he/she has multiple child support obligations (serial payers). These were introduced later and have undergone modest adjustments over time.

resulting orders (relative to sole placement) decline as time with the mother declines below the 75% threshold, with the details dependent on the relationship between parents' incomes. When parents' incomes and time are equal, application of the guidelines results in neither parent owing support. Later in this report, I provide a detailed examination of how the guideline functions across a range of circumstances.

The relevant policy addresses more than the calculation of the formal support order. The relevant administrative code also links the use of the shared-placement guideline to the formal expectation that parents provide for their child(ren)'s basic needs (i.e., food, shelter, clothing, transportation, personal care, and incidental recreational costs) proportional to the specified time in each home (DCF 150.035(1)(a)2). The shared-placement guidelines further dictate that variable costs are also to be shared in proportion to time in each home. Variable costs to be shared are defined as reasonable child-related costs above basic support; these include but are not limited to things such as childcare, tuition, special needs, and other activities involving substantial cost. Variable cost obligations may differ among families; obligations are based on detailed lists submitted by parents in conjunction with their support orders (DCF 150.035(1)(b)6). In addition to the direct payment of basic needs and the sharing of variable costs in the context of shared placement, Wisconsin administrative code calls for orders in all cases, not just shared placement, to address how the cost of health insurance and other medical expenses will be handled, and indicates that courts may adjust guidelines-based orders to account for health insurance costs.

An important feature of cost-sharing expectations as distinct from child support is that cost sharing is not subject, nor amenable, to the kind of routinized payment, monitoring, and enforcement as is child support. Whereas child support is typically collected through routine

wage withholding, and most payments are made through the state such that compliance is readily known, variable expenses are to be paid between parents or to a third-party provider, not to DCF. More generally, cost-sharing obligations, which span the range from expectations of meeting children's needs to share formal obligations to share certain kinds of costs in certain proportions, happen by their very nature outside of a routinized or centralized system.

Importantly, guidelines—whether for sole or shared placement—are presumptive but not mandatory. Courts are permitted to deviate from these guidelines if they find that the guidelines-based order would be unfair to the children or any of the parties (Wis. Stats. 767.511(1m)), though they are required to state the amount and reasons for the modification in writing or on the record.

DATA

Much of the research discussed in this report utilizes the Wisconsin Court Record Data (CRD). Over the past several decades, researchers at IRP have tracked the evolution of child support and child placement arrangements among divorce and paternity cases. These analyses have relied on the CRD, a sample of divorce and paternity cases entering the courts in 21 Wisconsin counties, with new cohorts collected for most years since the mid-1980s.² The counties include rural and urban counties, including Dane County and Milwaukee County. Sample weights are used to account for different sampling rates across counties and over time; this ensures results are representative of the caseloads in the 21 counties. While not technically representative of the whole state in that only a subset of counties is included, the CRD does

²Two types of paternity cases are sampled: voluntary and adjudicated. As the name implies, the former include parents voluntarily establishing paternity, a necessary step to allow for legal placement arrangements and child support orders; adjudicated paternities are otherwise. Paternity cases are only sampled if the court is involved; paternity is often established through a civil process, with no role for the courts unless a legal placement or support order is sought.

include a wide range of counties in terms of size, rurality, and geographic location within the state. It has long served as a pulse for what is happening with child support and child placement statewide.

A key feature of the data is the detail it provides about placement arrangements. Placement outcomes are classified as mother sole placement (more than 75% of nights with mothers); shared placement (at least 25% of nights with each parent); father sole placement; or split placement (different outcomes across children). Shared placement includes equal placement (50% of time with each parent) and unequal shared placement; the latter differentiates mother primary (51–75% of time with mothers) and father primary (51–75% of time with fathers). The distinction among different subsets of shared placement is relevant from a research standpoint, in terms of identifying how various outcomes may differ with the details of placement; it does not reflect a legal distinction.³ Researchers have variously looked at all shared-placement cases together or broken them out into subgroups, and that is reflected in the research discussed here.

A key feature of the CRD is the ability to link it to a variety of administrative records in the Wisconsin Administrative Data Core (WADC). Of particular relevance here, cases in the WCRD can be linked to KIDS records of child support orders, payments, and receipts, and to earnings records as reported to the Unemployment Insurance program. Less central to this report, cases can also be linked to a broader array of data contained in the WADC, such as FoodShare and TANF records, child welfare records, Medicaid records, and records from a range of other programs.

³Unrelated to child support policy, certain tax and safety net benefits are also linked to placement. For instance, eligibility for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, known as FoodShare in Wisconsin) on behalf of resident children is limited to the parent with the larger share of time (or no more than one parent if time is equal); eligibility for tax benefits is generally limited to the parent with more time, with a series of tie-breaker rules when time is equal.

The research discussed here also relies on the 2020 WiscParents Survey, which involved interviews with a subset of divorced parents from the CRD 6 to 10 years after divorce (Vogel, 2021). The sample included mothers originally assigned to sole mother placement, and mothers and fathers originally assigned to shared placement. All parents in the sample had at least one child aged 6 years or under at the time they began divorce proceedings, and thus at least one child still under age 18 at the time of the survey. The survey provides information about stability of and adherence to placement arrangements, perceptions of and satisfaction with placement arrangements, contributions of both parents to child-related costs, and subjective economic well-being. A limitation of the survey is that it only includes shared-placement fathers, and not fathers of children for whom the mother has sole placement. As such, the data have been used to compare various outcomes for shared and mother-sole placement from the standpoint of mothers in both groups; similar comparisons from fathers' perspective are not possible. This is reflected in the research discussed here.

SHARED PLACEMENT – PATTERNS AND TRENDS

Because placement and child support are fundamentally connected, understanding how placement arrangements have evolved—and how common shared placement is for different kinds of families—is important to assessing its implications on the child support side. This section provides an overview of research on placement trends and correlates in Wisconsin, how stable these arrangements are over time, and the extent to which parents report adhering to their placement arrangements.

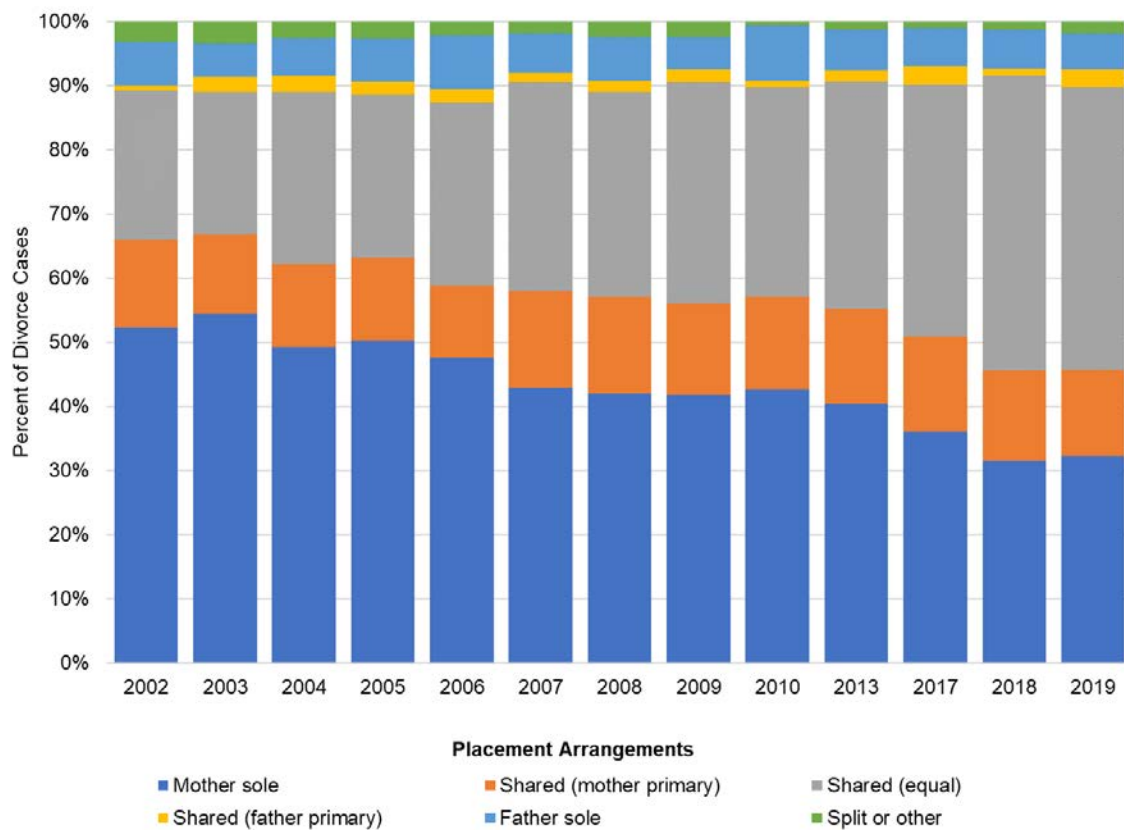
Prevalence of Shared Placement

Through a series of reports over the past decades, IRP researchers have documented dramatic growth in shared placement (e.g., Chanda et al., 2024; Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2017; Brown & Cook, 2012). As discussed earlier, key legislation related to shared placement was passed several decades ago, with legislation in 1999 encouraging shared placement and subsequent legislation in 2004 modifying the associated child support guidelines. By the time of that legislation, shared placement had been increasing for at least a decade. Policy changes and parenting norms were mutually reinforcing, with the policy environment both influenced by and further catalyzing evolution in placement practice (Brown et al., 2006; Brown & Cancian, 2007; Bartfeld, 2011). While the formal policy context surrounding shared placement has not changed dramatically since the 1999 legislation and the 2004 change in shared placement guidelines, the continued growth in shared placement in the intervening years has been considerable.

Continuing growth in shared placement is most evident among divorce cases. As of the most recent data available, cases entering the courts in the 2017–2019 period, 60% of divorce cases had shared placement arrangements, while only one-third had traditional mother-sole placement (Chanda et al., 2024). This pattern reflects steady growth in shared placement among divorce cases both before and after the 1999 policy changes—from 14% in the early 1990s (Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2017), to around 40% by the early 2000s, to the 60% level seen in the most recent data. Growth over the past two decades has progressed at a fairly steady rate, with no sign yet of a leveling off (**Figure 1**). This is largely due to a continued increase in equal-shared placement over this period—from 23% to 44%—while the prevalence of mother primary placement has fluctuated in the 11–15% range (Chanda et al., 2024). Thus, it appears that shared placement growth in this period reflects substantial shifts in broad placement norms, from

mother-sole to equal-shared, rather than smaller shifts from one side of the 25% threshold to the other. As a result, shared placement has not only become more common, it has also become more heavily dominated over time by parents with equal time shares.

Figure 1: Placement Trends in Divorce Cases, 2002–2019

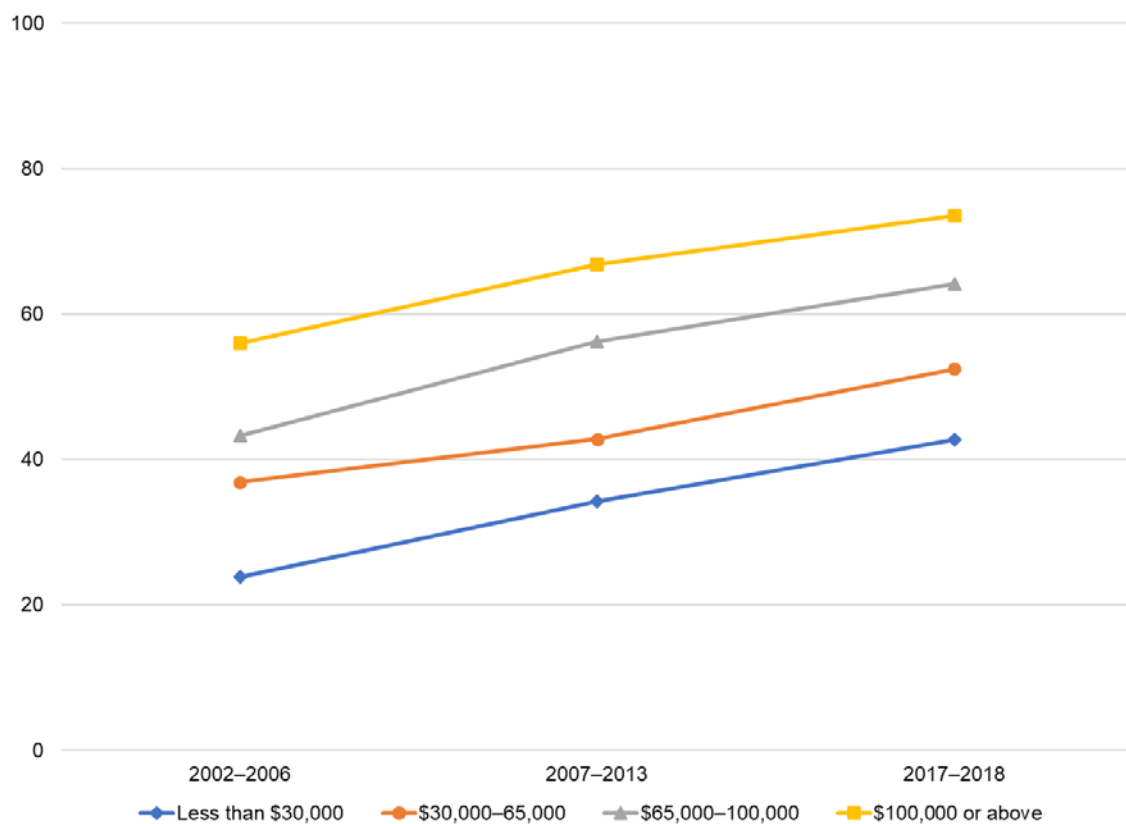


Notes: Data are from Cohorts 23–39 of the Wisconsin Court Record Data. Percents are weighted to account for different sampling rates across counties. Source: Figure 2A from Chanda et al., 2024.

A long-standing pattern in placement outcomes is the much higher rate of shared placement among higher-income couples. This is still evident in the most recent divorces, where shared placement ranges from 43% of those in the lowest income quartile prior to divorce (below \$30,000 in combined earnings) to 73% among those with over \$100,000 in combined earnings (roughly the top quartile). Nonetheless, growth in shared placement among divorcing couples has been steady across the income distribution (**Figure 2**). As a result, among the lowest-income

group, shared placement is now more common than it was among divorces overall a mere 20 years prior, even as the differential between higher- and lower-income couples remains largely unchanged (Chanda et al., 2024). The income differential in shared placement appears strongly, but not entirely, driven by higher prevalence of shared placement among divorced couples in which fathers, more so than mothers, have higher incomes and larger shares of combined income (Bartfeld & Chanda, 2022).

Figure 2: Shared Placement in Divorce Cases by Income Groups, 2002–2018



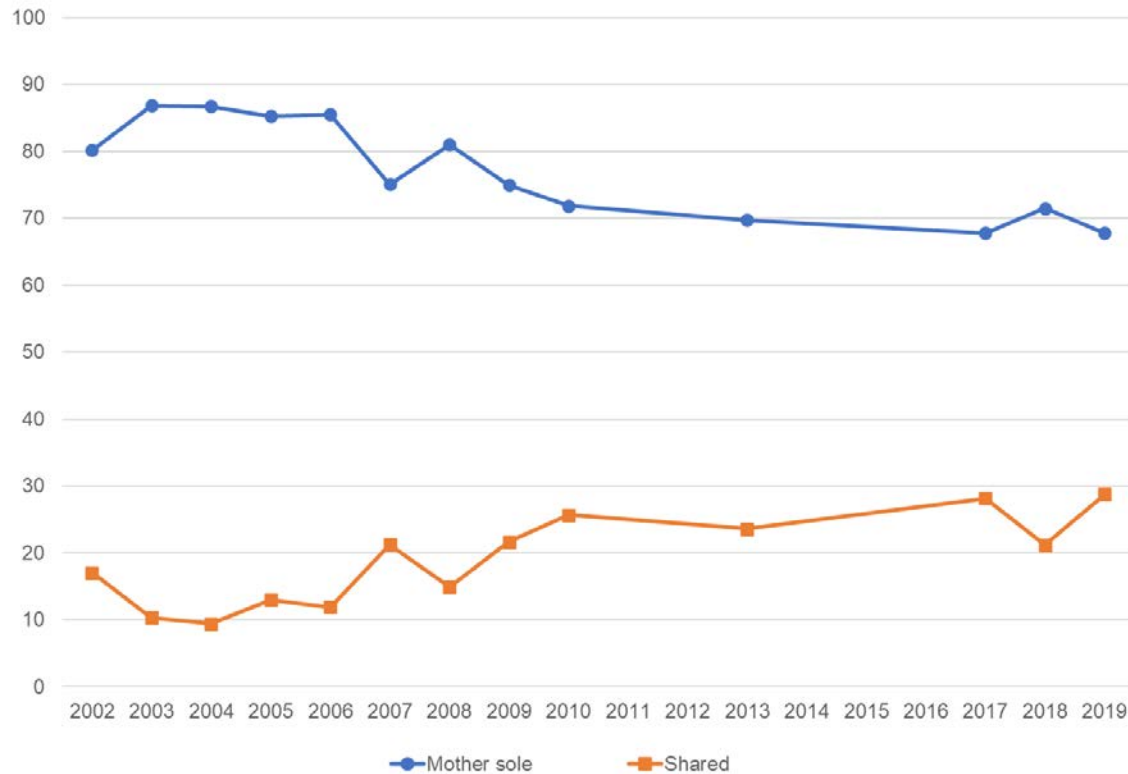
Notes: Data are from Cohorts 23–38 of the Wisconsin Court Record Data. Percents are weighted to account for different sampling rates across counties. Source: Figure 4A from Chanda et al., 2024.

Shared placement is less widespread but not uncommon among voluntary paternity cases. Around one-quarter (26%) have some form of shared placement in the 2017–2019 cohorts, even as mother-sole placement remains the norm (69%) (Chanda et al., 2024). As with divorce cases,

there has been notable growth over the past two decades, though from a much lower baseline, and with limited overall growth since 2010 (**Figure 3**). Incomes among paternity cases are substantially lower than among divorce cases, and income differences in placement are evident but less pronounced than in divorce cases, with declining differences over time. Growth has been most rapid among those in the \$25,000–\$50,000 range, for whom shared placement tripled since the early 2000s from 10% to 30%. There was comparatively little growth over this period among those with incomes over \$50,000 while growth among the lowest-income couples appears to have stalled in recent years. By the most recent cohorts, 18% of the lowest-income group had shared placement, compared to 29–30% in middle- and higher-income groups (Chanda et al., 2024). As with divorce cases, the income differences across placement are more strongly influenced by incomes of fathers than mothers (Costanzo & Reilly, 2024). Finally, among adjudicated paternity cases, shared placement remains quite uncommon (12%) (Chanda et al., 2024).

The growth in shared placement, as well as differences by income and case types, provides important context for thinking about the changing role of child support when parents live apart. In particular, trends over the past two decades mean that the implications of shared placement will increasingly be influenced by comparatively lower-income couples and, to at least some degree, by nonmarital couples. We have little research about shared placement in nonmarital couples, other than efforts to document its growth and correlates.

Figure 3: Placement Trends in Voluntary Paternity Cases, 2002–2019



Notes: Data are from Cohorts 23–39 of the Wisconsin Court Record Data. Percents are weighted to account for different sampling rates across counties. Source: Figure 3B from Chanda et al., 2024.

Stability of Shared-Placement Orders

While trends in initial placement are well documented in Wisconsin, much less attention has been paid to whether and how legal placement changes in the years following an initial agreement. This reflects, in part, relatively short periods of follow-up data collection for cases in the CRD, typically 2.5 to 3.5 years. As courts usually will not make changes in placement for at least two years after the original order—so as to provide a sufficient adjustment period—the follow-up duration of the available data is not well suited to assessing stability of legal arrangements.

We do, however, have some insight from recent surveys with divorced parents. The 2020 WiscParents Survey—which interviewed parents who divorced during 2010–2013 and had a

child aged 6 or younger at the start of divorce proceedings—found that equal shared placement orders were most stable (11% reported some kind of legal change) and unequal-shared were least stable (38% reported a change), with mother-sole placement falling in between (Chanda et al., 2025). These order changes didn’t necessarily yield a shift from shared to sole or vice versa, but simply some change in the details of the legal arrangement. The comparatively high rate among the unequal-shared group—more than three times the rate of equal shared—is notable, though the sample size for that group was small so these differences should be viewed cautiously. We have no information about stability of legal arrangements in the case of paternity cases, but we note that unequal-shared placement makes up a somewhat larger share of all shared placement among paternity as compared to divorce cases.

Adherence to Shared-Placement Arrangements

De facto living arrangements may or may not align with legal placement arrangements. Adherence to legal arrangements first emerged as a policy concern in the early 1990s, when early research on shared placement in California suggested that many shared-placement arrangements shifted in relatively short order towards de facto mother-sole placement (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Researchers at IRP initially examined adherence to placement arrangements among Wisconsin divorces from the early 2000s, based on surveys of recently divorced parents. While they found that a shift towards more time with mothers was evident across placement types, it was no more common in shared-placement than sole-placement arrangements in the initial 2 to 3 years after divorce (Berger et al., 2008).

More recently, the 2020 WiscParents Survey examined longer-term adherence to placement orders 6 to 10 years after divorce. More than half of mothers across placement groups reported time allocations that differed from their legal orders, almost always involving more time

with mothers, and around half of mothers indicated that adherence to orders was lower than right after the divorce. For roughly one-quarter of mothers with shared placement, the living arrangements they described would not be considered shared placement from the standpoint of child support guidelines, in that more than 75% of nights were with mothers. On the other hands, shared-placement fathers tended to report considerably more adherence to placement orders, though they too reported de facto schedules that involved more time with mothers than specified in their legal orders. Overall, the more recent data does suggest that in the longer term there is nontrivial movement away from the details of legal placement arrangements, though mothers and fathers disagree on the magnitude. There is, moreover, some evidence that later adherence to the details of shared placement orders is lower for teenagers as compared to younger children, and for children whose parents who were lower income at the time of the divorce (Bartfeld et al., 2021).

Changes in living arrangements over the medium and long term are not surprising; many family changes may occur that impact day-to-day arrangements, including residential moves, job changes, repartnering, preferences of parents and children, etc. In describing reasons practices doesn't align with orders, parents pointed to a wide range of factors spanning preferences of parents or children; contextual factors such as proximity as well as safety and stability or conflict in one of the homes; and schedule (in)compatibility (Bartfeld et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the link between placement and child support means changes in living arrangements, to the extent they alter the time balance, are not inconsequential. Up to one-quarter of parents with shared placement may actually be adhering to an arrangement that is more like sole placement, while for others the balance between parents may differ from the order even if still within the shared-placement guidelines. As such, mothers (or less frequently, fathers) may in practice bear a larger

share of child-related costs than reflected in their order. The key takeaway here is not that adherence is differentially low with shared placement, but that widespread tendencies for living patterns to differ from orders may be differentially relevant in the case of shared placement given that specific time-sharing assumptions are reflected in shared-placement guidelines.⁴

CHILD SUPPORT OUTCOMES FOR SHARED AND SOLE PLACEMENT

Child placement has important implications for the way child-related costs are allocated among households, impacting child support transfers between parents as well as how parents contribute to children's direct expenses. In practice, child support and cost-sharing are impacted not only by policy, but by what orders are actually set, and the extent to which parents adhere to those orders. In this section, I discuss research on the extent to which child support orders align with guidelines under different placement arrangements; how payment and compliance patterns differ by placement; and how divorced parents with shared and sole placement report sharing expenses beyond formal child support.

Placement Arrangements and Guidelines Adherence

In conjunction with the federally mandated quadrennial child support guideline reviews, researchers at IRP have periodically assessed the extent to which child support orders in Wisconsin appear to conform to support guidelines. A series of reports has consistently found that, regardless of placement type, a substantial share of orders do not align with numeric guidelines, for divorce and paternity cases alike (Bartfeld et al., 2015; Hodges & Cook, 2019). In this section, I summarize the most current data on guidelines usage, focusing on differences

⁴As a caveat, note that the survey data were collected in 2020 and, for most respondents, a portion of the 12-month reference period spanned the pandemic. Nonetheless, controlling for the extent to which the reference period overlapped the pandemic (ranging from no overlap to up to 7 months of overlap) did not change the overall results.

between shared and sole placement, based on new analyses that will be included in more detail in a forthcoming report on guidelines use.

Among cases entering the courts during 2017-2020—the most recent years available for analysis—only 37% of cases (including divorce and paternity) appeared consistent with guidelines, meaning their order appeared to be within 1 percentage point of the guidelines-based amount or had other indication in the court record indicating that the guidelines had been used.⁵ This includes some cases without an order, when a \$0 obligation would be consistent with guidelines—such as a noncustodial parent with no income, or equal-shared placement when parents have the same income. The remaining cases vary widely: 18% have no order despite evidence in the data that a positive order is warranted based on relevant guidelines;⁶ 10% have an order below the guidelines; 7% have an order above the guidelines; and 27% have an outcome—either an order or absence of order—with insufficient information to determine whether it aligns with guidelines. Although these are imperfect estimates, and some of the cases with missing or insufficient information might appear consistent with guidelines if more information were available, it is nonetheless clear that child support guidelines, in a substantial share of cases, do not dictate the precise outcome.

Adherence to guidelines varies considerably between couples with shared and sole placement, and within the shared-placement group, between those with equal or unequal timeshares. Looking first at divorces with equal-shared placement, fewer than one-quarter (23%)

⁵IRP has used a consistent approach over time to assess compliance with guidelines based on information in the Court Record Data. Sole-placement cases are classified as consistent if they are based on either the percent-of-income guideline or an applicable alternative guideline (i.e., low-income, high-income, or serial payer). Orders based on imputed income are consistent if the record specifies the guidelines-consistent percent of the imputed income used to calculate the order. Shared-placement cases are classified as consistent based on application of the shared-placement formula. Cases are also considered consistent if there is no order and the guidelines-based order would be \$50 or less, or if other information in the court record suggests that relevant guideline(s) were used to calculate the order.

⁶These are roughly evenly divided between those with known incomes in the court record for whom guidelines suggest a non-zero order and those with missing income information in the court record.

appeared consistent with guidelines (including some \$0 orders), while more than two in five (42%) lacked orders when application of guidelines suggest an order would be warranted. The remaining one-third were divided amongst those with too-low orders (12%), too-high orders (13%), and outcomes (whether orders or lack of orders) where consistency could not be determined (11%). For the most part, guidelines seem to serve as an upper bound for child support in this group, and the most common outcome is no order at all.⁷

In the case of divorces with unequal-shared placement, the pattern was quite different: Only 19% had orders consistent with guidelines, slightly fewer than the equal-placement group; in this case the most common outcome was orders that exceeded the guideline (28%, much higher than the equal-placement group). Almost one-quarter (23%) lacked an order when an order appeared warranted, and another 19% had low orders, while 11% had outcomes that couldn't be classified (including orders and absence of orders).

In contrast, among divorced mothers with sole placement, 43% had consistent orders, with the remainder roughly evenly distributed among too-low orders (17%), too-high orders (11%), absence of orders when an order appeared warranted (14%), and outcomes that couldn't be classified (15%).

Overall, three things stand out among divorce cases with varying placements: first, adherence to guidelines is much lower in shared as compared to sole placement. Second, \$0-orders that do not appear to conform to guidelines are very common with equal placement—much more than in other placement groups. Third, above-guidelines orders are considerably more common among unequal-shared placement cases than in other placement groups, albeit still fewer than one-quarter of the group.

⁷The classification of too-high and too-low does not differentiate which parent should be the obligor, merely how the order compares to what guidelines indicate would be appropriate.

Analyses in the forthcoming placement report also provide information on differences in guidelines use by placement type among voluntary paternity cases. Similar to divorces, consistency is much higher among those with mother-sole placement than either of the shared placement groups. Half of the mother-sole group have consistent orders, while roughly one-quarter have inconsistent orders (including 13% with no order), and one-quarter have unknown consistency (including 16% with no order). In contrast, only one-third of the mother-primary shared placement group have consistent orders (32.1%); 44.9% have inconsistent orders, including 23% that are too low, 8% that are too high, and 14% with no order; and 23% have unknown consistency, including 16% without an order. Finally, among voluntary paternity cases with equal-shared placement, only 18.5% are consistent, while 29.6% are inconsistent, including 19% without an order. The remaining 51.9% have unknown consistency, almost always without an order (45%). The large share with unknown consistency (typically indicating lack of income information) among the equal-shared placement voluntary-paternity group is striking, and is almost five times the unknown-consistency rate among equal-shared-placement divorce cases. Thus, equal-shared placement cases frequently lack orders among divorce and paternity cases alike, but in paternity cases, information to assess whether this is consistent with guidelines is usually unavailable in the court record. Another notable difference between divorce and paternity cases is that, among those with mother-primary shared placement, above-guideline orders are considerably less common among paternities.

As noted, judges do have discretion to deviate from guidelines so long as they provide a reason in writing or on the record. The CRD do not necessarily contain all information stated on the record, so analyses of those data cannot speak to how fully the requirement to provide

reasons for deviations is followed.⁸ However, they provide some insight into the reasons that are captured. Fewer than half of the equal-placement cases lacking orders had a written reason. Commonly the reasons referred to household costs and/or payments between parents, such as payments towards the other parent's mortgage, payment of childcare or medical/insurance expenses, or other payments between households. This at least suggests some kind of trade-off between child support and the direct allocation of expenses. In many cases, the reason listed was that parents had stipulated to the agreement. This is consistent with recent research involving interviews with court officials, along with observations of court proceedings. Regarding couples with shared placement, a common theme from court officials, and mirrored in courtroom observations, was that parents with shared placement often stipulated to low orders or no orders, and that non-guidelines orders were often arrived at by parents through a collaborative process oriented around the collective interests of all the parties (Vogel et al., 2022). Together, this evidence provides valuable context for thinking about zero-orders, suggesting that lack of an order is often responsive to family preferences about collectively meeting children's needs. At the same time, an issue emerging from interviews with court officials was the importance of being attuned to instances in which requests for zero-orders may warrant scrutiny for potential abuse or intimidation (Vogel et al., 2022). Analysis of shared placement cases without orders indicates that, when orders would be warranted under the shared placement guideline, the median guidelines-based order is around \$243 per month, meaning half of orders would be at least that amount.⁹ As such, the lack of orders is not inconsequential.

⁸Written reasons for deviations in the court record are captured in the CRD, however, reasons may be stated on the record without being in writing, which would not be captured.

⁹Note that this estimate is a simple calculation based on both parents' income and the specific time allocation; it does not reflect potential tradeoffs on other dimensions that parents might make, such as allocation of health insurance or other costs, nor does it reflect situations that might warrant more complex formulas incorporating low-income or serial payer adjustments in conjunction with shared placement.

The seemingly low adherence to the guidelines, overall and relative to cases with sole placement, suggests that the guidelines alone are not sufficient to understand the economic ramifications of shared-placement arrangements. It is notable that equal- and unequal-shared placement appear to be handled very differently, with orders frequently absent for the former and, among divorces, too high in the latter. These patterns suggest a potential need to explore, more systematically, reasons on the part of parents and courts for deviating from guidelines, and the extent to which deviations are consistent with the underlying intent and feel reasonable to the parties, not only when initially set but over the longer term.

Placement, Compliance, and Payment Totals

Taken together, it is clear from existing research that use of guidelines is lower in the context of shared rather than sole placement; that the nature of non-aligned outcomes differs for equal-shared and unequal-shared cases; and that orders are much less common among equal-shared placement cases, both divorce and paternity, than among either those with unequal-shared or mother-sole placement. Of course, actual child support outcomes depend not only on the order but on compliance with that order. To that end, research suggests that while shared-placement couples overall are less likely to have support orders, their compliance ratios (that is, their pay-to-owe ratios) when they do have orders are higher, in divorce as well as paternity cases (Bartfeld & Chanda, 2022; Meyer et al., 2019; Costanzo & Reilly, 2023). Preliminary analyses of the newest CRD cohorts find evidence of this as well: In the first year following an order, compliance ratios are around 94% for divorced parents with equal shared placement, compared to around 78% with sole placement, with a larger difference by placement among voluntary paternity cases (88% vs 63%).

The implications of all this for the amount of child support actually transferred between households under different placement arrangements are further complicated because average incomes vary considerably by placement. In the most recent cohorts, the average income of divorced fathers with shared placement was around \$56,000 for those with shared placement, compared to \$33,000 for those with mother-sole placement (Chanda et al., 2024). Because of this, simple comparisons of payment amount in different placement arrangements are misleading. Controlling for a wide range of pre-divorce characteristics including income, a recent study found that, consistent with the general patterns one would expect from the structure of child support guidelines, average child support receipts by otherwise-similar mothers during the first four post-divorce years were highest among those with sole placement, lower among mothers with mother-primary shared placement, and lowest among those with equal placement, with differences ranging from \$4,800 to \$5,800 per year (Bartfeld & Chanda, 2023). These differences reflect the net impact of guidelines, implementation of those guidelines, and compliance on the part of parents. The estimates are helpful in that, by controlling for income differences, they better identify differences in support that are due to placement itself. A net difference of \$5,800 in average child support payments between equal-shared and sole placement is equivalent to 15.3% of the pre-divorce earnings of fathers in the equal-shared group.

To summarize, shared-placement guidelines yield lower orders than sole-placement guidelines, consistent with the assumption that both parents also are contributing directly to the costs of children; the difference in orders, in the case of equal-shared placement, may be magnified because of the high prevalence of \$0-orders that do not appear consistent with the guidelines; yet when orders are issued, compliance with shared placement orders is higher. The net result of these competing factors is that actual child support payments, across those with and

without orders, are on average substantially lower under shared as compared to sole placement—which is, indeed, the expected outcome.

Cost Sharing

Formal child support orders and payments receive the brunt of the attention from researchers and policymakers, however, understanding the way parents share direct expenses associated with children in addition to regular child support payments is increasingly important, as the assumption of some degree of cost-sharing is built into shared placement guidelines. That is, shared-placement guidelines yield lower orders precisely because there is an assumption that some costs are shared outside of formal child support—proportional to the time with each parent—via parents covering routine direct costs while children are living with them as well as via formal sharing of certain variable costs. The extent to which this kind of cost sharing happens in practice, while not formally tracked in the way regular child support is tracked, is central to understanding how the financial responsibility for children is shared.

The 2020 WiscParents Survey provides valuable insights into cost sharing outside of formal child support, with broad information on the extent to which divorced parents share costs in six areas: health insurance, medical expenses, childcare, clothing, school expenses, and activities (e.g., sports, music lessons, etc.). Specifically, respondents indicate whether one parent paid all the expenses in an area or whether expenses were shared and, if shared, whether they were shared about equally or one of the parents paid more. Substantial cost sharing is reported by mothers with shared placement, and far less by those with sole placement. While the specifics vary by category, mothers with shared placement most commonly report an even sharing of expenses (reported by 42–50% of mothers across all categories other than health insurance); when expenses are not evenly shared, shared-placement mothers are much more likely to report

paying for most or all expenses themselves, while reports of fathers paying most or all are uncommon. Mothers with sole placement, in contrast, almost always report paying more of, or most commonly all, of the expenses in each of the categories (Bartfeld et al., 2022). Analyses that control for a wide range of parent and child characteristics also confirm sharply higher rates of cost sharing across domains among mothers with shared placement (Haapanen et al., 2024a). These broad differences by placement arrangements are consistent with the underlying logic of child support guidelines, which trade lower standard support for expectations of explicit sharing of many direct costs.¹⁰

PLACEMENT ARRANGEMENTS AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

The shift from mother-sole placement to shared placement has potentially large implications for the economic well-being of parents and children by redistributing the direct costs of children as well as reducing the expected flow of child support dollars between households. As the above discussions highlight, the ways parents contribute to the support of their children differ considerably by placement. Orders and payments are both far more common among parents with sole than shared placement, largely due to low rates of orders among those with equal-shared placement, while payment amounts are lower. At the same time, cost sharing across a range of expenses is far more common and extensive among those with shared placement. Child support and cost sharing aren't mutually exclusive, but their relative importance differs considerably across placement groups. While child support is far easier to

¹⁰Thus far, research has only looked at mothers' reports, as the focus has been on a comparison of shared and sole placement, and the survey did not include fathers of couples with mother-sole arrangements. Preliminary analyses suggest that fathers with shared placement report higher rates of equal cost-sharing across categories than do mothers with shared placement. As such, I put greater weight on comparisons of mothers with different placement arrangements than on specific estimates of cost-sharing in the context of shared placement.

measure than cost sharing, accounting for both is necessary in assessing the implications of different placement arrangements for economic well-being.

In the following sections, I discuss the challenges in measuring economic well-being in the context of shared placement and describe how recent Wisconsin research has approached this. I then provide a stylized look at how guidelines-based orders are related to economic well-being for mothers and fathers with different income combinations and different time allocations, under simplified assumptions. Finally, I summarize empirical research on the economic implications of shared placement, based on recent evidence from divorced parents in Wisconsin.

Comparing Economic Well-Being in Shared- and Sole-Placement Households

Shared placement not only redistributes costs and resources between households, it also increases total child costs, as there is nontrivial duplication of costs when children live part-time in two homes. In short, it is more expensive to raise children in two homes than in one. Quantifying this, however, is challenging. While there is a well-developed literature on the costs of children, that literature does not address child costs in shared-placement arrangements (see, e.g., Lewin/ICF, 1990; Robb, 2019; Rothe & Berger, 2007).

Credible estimates of how children who are in the home part-time impact economic well-being are necessary to understand the economic impacts of shared placement. Having a child parttime in the home almost certainly is less expensive than fulltime, though not proportionally less. Researchers typically compare economic well-being across households by constructing income-to-poverty ratios, that is, by dividing income by the appropriate poverty line for a given household size. Poverty thresholds have a built-in equivalence scale, such that economic well-being of different-sized households are considered equivalent if they have the same income-to-poverty ratio. Such thresholds are not available for households with children in the home part-

time. As such, there is no established way to standardize measures of economic well-being across households with varying placement arrangements.

To address this, IRP researchers have turned to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's research on expenditures on children for insight. Evidence on how typical child-related expenditures in single-parent households are allocated among categories that are unlikely to change meaningfully when children live part-time rather than full-time in the home (e.g., housing), and categories expected to change roughly proportionally to time in the home (e.g., food), allows researchers to make data-informed estimates of how costs of children would change with shared placement. Informed by Lino and colleagues' work (2017), which narrows the plausible range of cost-savings stemming from shared placement, Bartfeld and Chanda (2023) provide an estimate that half of child costs are fixed as long as children spend at least 25% of time in the home (i.e., a shared- or sole-placement arrangement), while half are proportional to time in the home.¹¹ Based on this, they impute poverty thresholds allowing for partial children, based on the specific time allocation and number of children, and construct income-to-poverty ratios as standardized measures of economic well-being. As an example, a child with equal-shared placement counts as three-quarters of a child in each home, and the associated poverty threshold for each household, assuming one equal-share child, would be set at three-quarters of the distance between that for a one-person and two-person household. The 'extra' .5 children across the two households results from the duplication of costs. The specifics vary with the number of children and the actual timeshare.

¹¹Lino and colleague's (2017) estimates imply that around 38% of child expenditures in single-parent households stem from child-related housing costs, while 22% stem from child-related food costs. Those categories are helpful in placing upper and lower bounds on expected savings when children live less than fulltime in the home, implying that at least 38% of child expenditures (housing costs) are fixed while at least 22% (food) are proportional. The remaining expenditure categories, including transportation, clothing, health care, child care and education, and miscellaneous expenses, make up the remaining 40%. Shared placement presumably would result in some savings across these categories, though not necessarily proportional.

In the next section, I use the approach developed by Bartfeld and Chanda (2023) to describe economic well-being of mothers and fathers under stylized scenarios that vary incomes and time allocations.

Shared-Placement Guidelines: Implications for Economic Well-Being

The assumption of a reduction of direct costs to a custodial parent with shared as compared to sole placement, the parallel increase in direct costs associated with shared placement as compared to being a noncustodial parent, and the increase in total costs arising from the duplication of some child costs in both homes are all reflected in Wisconsin's shared-placement guideline. The guideline addresses the redistribution of direct costs between parents by basing support orders on offsetting orders reflecting the share of time in each home; it addresses the duplication in costs by increasing each parent's offsetting order by 50%, such that reductions in support stemming from less time in the home are partially offset by higher base orders.¹²

Before turning to empirical work on the economic impacts of shared placement, I illustrate how these impacts would look under a series of stylized examples. The first set of examples is for a mother with earnings of \$30,000, in conjunction with fathers' earnings ranging from \$20,000 to \$100,000. The second set is for a father with earnings of \$60,000, in conjunction with mothers' earnings ranging from \$20,000 to \$100,000. I illustrate how

¹²In a simple example, a noncustodial parent with \$60,000 in income and two children would owe \$15,000 annually under the sole-placement guideline (25% of \$60,000); his portion of support under the shared placement guideline, assuming equal time with each parent, would instead be \$11,250, or three-quarters of what it would be under the sole-placement guideline. In essence, the order goes down only half as much as does time in the home, reflecting that child costs don't decline proportionally to time. This order is then offset by a similar calculation of support owed by the mother. If parents have equal incomes and equal time allocation, the net guidelines-based support is zero. Thus, compared to sole placement, mothers with shared placement receive lower support both because of the assumed savings from a reduction in direct child costs, as well as from now contributing towards child costs in her ex-partner's home. Fathers with shared placement pay less support because of bearing a portion of the direct costs, as well as benefitting from an offsetting contribution towards those costs from his ex-partner. The way this plays out in practice, putting aside for the moment issues of whether orders align with guidelines and payments align with orders, is dependent on parents' relative incomes and the specific time shares.

guidelines-based support changes as incomes and placement arrangements change; how post-support incomes of both parents change in conjunction with guidelines-based child support changes; and how needs-adjusted incomes change, using the approach described above to calculated needs-adjusted incomes when children live part-time in each home. With this approach, assumptions that guidelines are implemented in full are incorporated in measures of household income, while assumptions about proportional cost-sharing of variable expenses and duplication of fixed expenses are integrated into the income-to-needs adjustment used to standardize incomes across households with different placement arrangements.

Context for Stylized Examples

Before proceeding with examples, I provide general considerations for interpreting these numbers. First, on the cost-sharing side, these should be understood as stylized examples of what, in practice, unfolds more flexibly. In reality, the point at which parents assume substantively different housing or other fixed costs on account of a child living part-time in the home wouldn't always be precisely at the 25% threshold. Some may have more expensive housing to accommodate children even with more limited time; others may avoid substantial fixed costs even after this threshold. Likewise, parents almost certainly incur at least some routine child costs (e.g., food) as a nonresident parent, even if they don't formally share other variable costs as is expected under shared placement.

Second, the examples do not consider any secondary impacts that may result. The income changes do not reflect changes in eligibility for public assistance programs or tax credits, for instance, nor do they reflect that different placement arrangements might influence parents' earnings. More generally, they do not capture changes in household composition (e.g.,

repartnering, new children) and the associated income and costs; they focus solely on the original parents and children.

Third, because divorced and unmarried parents encompass a wide range of economic circumstances, I illustrate outcomes under a wide range of potential income scenarios. At the same time, average economic circumstances for child support-eligible families are modest. For parents divorcing in the 2017–2020 CRD cohorts, parents’ combined earnings averaged around \$74,000, and mothers’ earnings accounted for about 43% of the total. For parents in the voluntary paternity establishment sample, combined earnings averaged about \$35,000, of which mothers’ earnings accounted for just under half (Chanda et al., 2024). These do, however, mask considerable variety in both groups.

Additionally, in illustrating the implications of child support guidelines for child support orders and associated income and needs-adjusted income, my discussion is framed around a comparison of mother-sole placement and shared placement, as that is the shift driving the growth in shared placement in recent decades; the vast majority of placement arrangements have and continue to fall within this range. My discussion therefore largely focuses on implications for mothers of a shift from mother-sole to shared placement, and implications for fathers of a shift from being a nonresident parent (i.e., from a mother-sole scenario) to shared placement. Thus, when I discuss implications of the guidelines for mothers, it is primarily in the context of where they fall on the mother-sole to shared placement spectrum; likewise, when I discuss implications for fathers, it is in the same context but reflecting the spectrum from being a nonresident parent to a shared-placement parent. However, the guidelines themselves are gender neutral and the following examples allow comparing outcomes across the full range of placement possibilities.

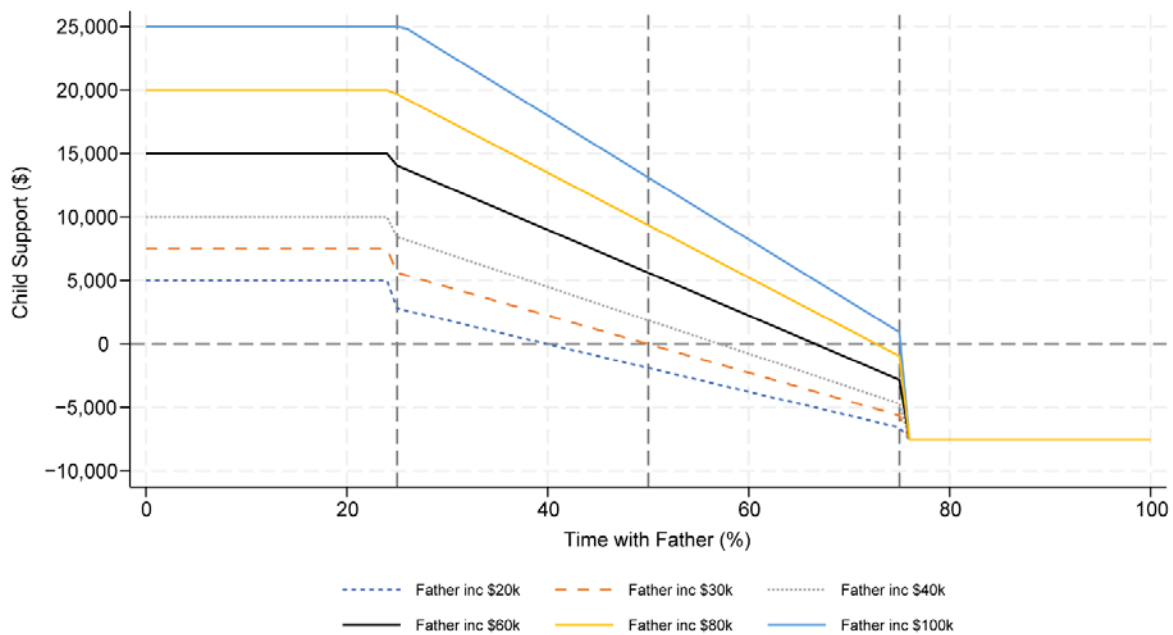
Finally, these examples address economic well-being of mothers and fathers under different placement arrangements, but do not consider the extent to which either group is better or worse off than if the parents and child(ren) all lived together. Applied to divorced parents, then, the examples illustrate differences in both parents' post-divorce economic well-being under various placement arrangements, but not the economic impact of divorce itself.

Example 1: Varying Father Incomes, Fixed Mother Income

The implications of shared-placement guidelines depend on the absolute and relative incomes of the parents. Specifically, the extent to which an order for a given couple differs under shared versus sole placement depends both on how high the order would have been under sole placement (a function of the father's income) and what it would be under shared placement (a function of both incomes).

The first set of scenarios illustrate, for a mother at a particular income level, how the implications of a change in placement vary depending on the father's relative income. **Figure 4** shows guidelines-based support orders for a mother with \$30,000 in income whose ex-partner has income ranging from \$20,000 to \$100,000, assuming two children, for time shares ranging from 100% with the mother to 100% with the father. Vertical dashed lines show the shared-placement thresholds (25% and 75%) and the equal-shared position; the horizontal dashed line divides orders in which the father is the payer (positive orders) from orders in which the mother is the payer (negative orders).

Figure 4: Child Support Across Custody Scenarios (Mother Original Income = \$30,000)



Notes: Figure shows guidelines-based child support orders with different placement arrangements for a mother with \$30,000 income and fathers at various income levels, with two children. Positive child support amounts indicate the father is the obligor, and negative amounts indicate the mother is the obligor.

Orders are unchanged across the sole placement range. At the 25% threshold orders drop under all scenarios except the highest-income version, and continue to fall until the 75% threshold, after which there is no further change. Falling below \$0 indicates the point at which the designated payer switches from father to mother. At the 25% threshold, the immediate drop is greatest when fathers have the lowest income, because offsetting orders have the largest immediate impact the lower the father's income relative to the mother's income. For the highest-income father depicted, the drop begins very slightly after entering the shared placement range.¹³ Once in the shared placement range, however, further declines are steepest for fathers with the

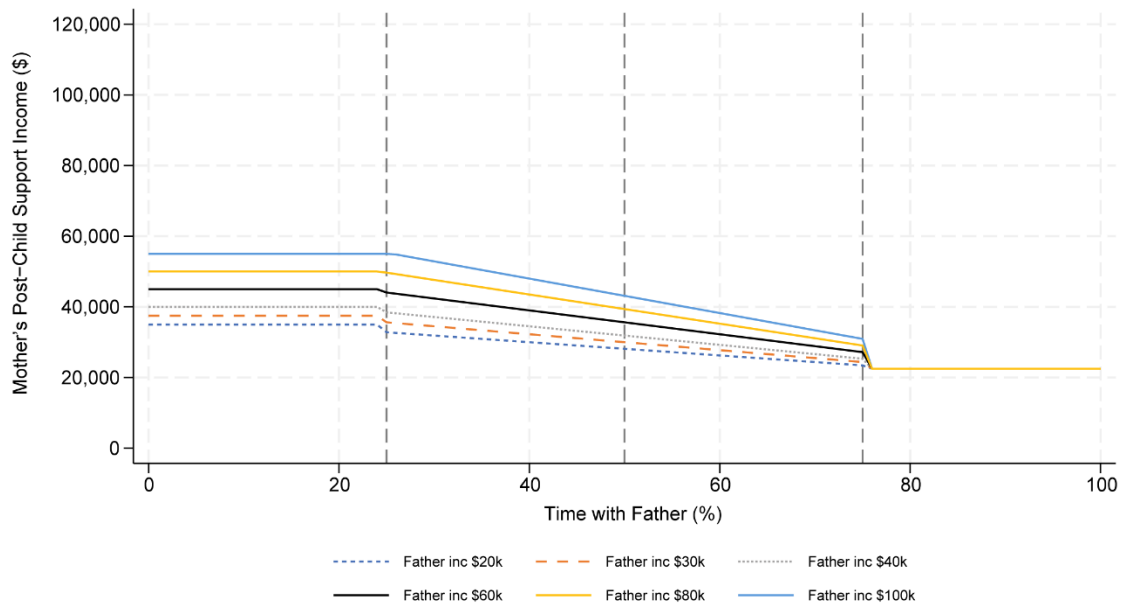
¹³The very slight delay in the order declining in cases of extreme income imbalance results from inflating both offsetting orders by 50%. For practical purposes the delay is not consequential other than avoiding a 'cliff' at the threshold, and simply means the decline over the rest of the range is slightly steeper.

highest income relative to mothers, because their order starts from a higher base. The point at which the designated payor switches from father to mother depends on the parents' relative incomes. With equal incomes (the orange dashed line in the figure), this happens upon crossing the 50% threshold. Once past the 75% threshold, the order is the same across couples, as it is based solely on the mother's income which in this example is always \$30,000.

The next figures (**Figures 5a & 5b**) illustrate the variation in mothers' and fathers' incomes after child support under the same scenarios. Here, I simply subtract child support from the obligor and add it to the recipient. Consistent with the changes in child support, mothers' incomes are flat in the sole placement range, consisting of their own pre-support income (always \$30,000 in this example) and 25% of the father's income. Incomes begin declining at the shared-placement threshold; once in the shared-placement range, the decline in mothers' income as time with father increases is greatest for those whose ex-partners have the highest income, because the starting amount of support is highest. Under father sole-placement, when time with fathers is at least 75%, mothers would owe 25% of their income in support, resulting in post-support income of \$22,500.

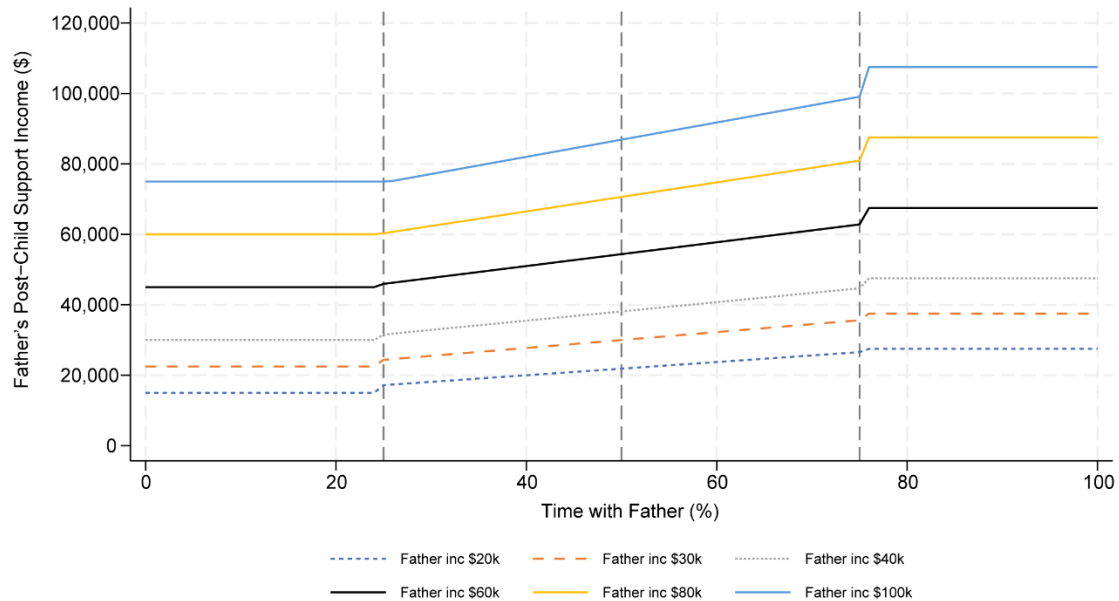
Turning to fathers' incomes, this plays out in reverse. Incomes are flat in the mother-sole range, where fathers pay 25% of their pre-support income in child support; post-support incomes begin increasing at the shared placement threshold. As time with fathers increase beyond the 25% threshold, post-support incomes increase most rapidly for the highest-income fathers, who would otherwise have owed the most. Under father-sole placement, fathers' incomes would consist of their own income as well as \$7,500 in child support.

Figure 5a: Mother's Post-Support Income Across Custody Scenarios (Original Income = \$30,000)



Notes: Figure shows mothers' post-child support income with different placement arrangements, for mothers with \$30,000 income and fathers at various income levels, with two children.

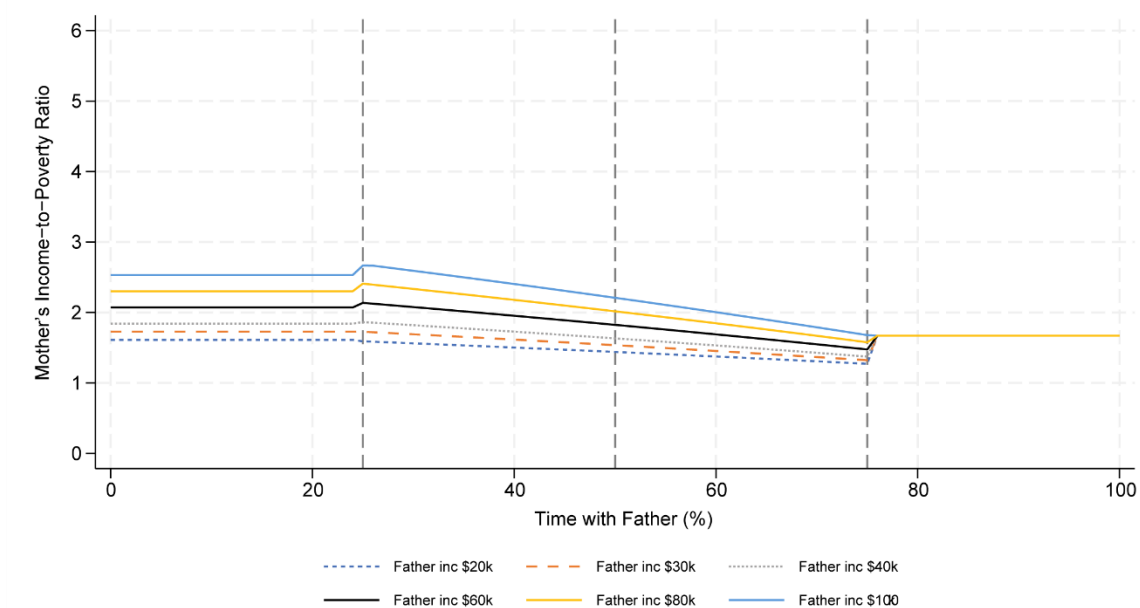
Figure 5b: Father's Post-Support Income Across Custody Scenarios (Mother Original Income = \$30,000)



Notes: Figure shows fathers' post-child support income with different placement arrangements, for mothers with \$30,000 income and fathers at various income levels, with two children.

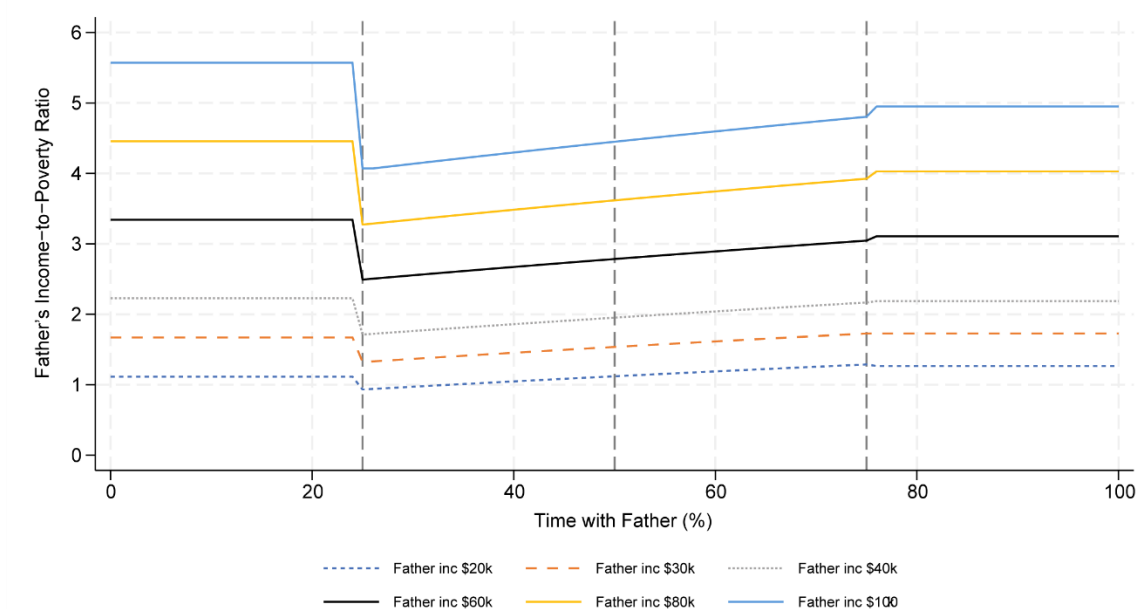
Income changes only capture part of the story, as they do not reflect the changing costs associated with different placement arrangements. The next two figures (**Figures 6a & 6b**) show how needs-adjusted incomes change as time with fathers increase. Needs-adjusted incomes reflect guideline-based changes in support in conjunction with estimates of how child-related expenses change for each parent when time is divided between two homes. Critically, adjusting for changing need has opposite impacts for mothers and fathers in moving from sole to shared placement. Mothers' needs decline due to a reduction in variable child costs, which offsets to some degree the reduction in child support. At the shared-placement threshold, fathers' needs increase sharply, as they are assumed to take on new fixed costs as well as a portion of variable costs. As previously noted, the sharp change in costs at a precise threshold is of course an oversimplification; however, it reflects the assumption that there is a substantive distinction between a child living part-time in the home versus visiting, and that this is reflected in additional fixed costs as well as systematic assumption of variable costs. As such, the change in costs, and thus in needs-adjusted income, is sharper for fathers at the 25% threshold than it is for mothers. While mothers' variable costs begin declining and fathers' begin increasing, the fixed costs at this threshold are a new cost for fathers, even as they don't decline for mothers.

Figure 6a: Mother's Income-to-Poverty Ratio Across Custody Scenarios (Original Income = \$30,000)



Notes: Figure shows mothers' post-child support income-to-poverty ratios with different placement arrangements, for mothers with \$30,000 income and fathers at various income levels, with two children. Poverty lines are imputed in shared placement range to account for children part-time in the home.

Figure 6b: Father's Income-to-Poverty Ratio Across Custody Scenarios (Mother Original Income = \$30,000)



Notes: Figure shows fathers' post-child support income-to-poverty ratios with different placement arrangements, for mothers with \$30,000 income and fathers at various income levels, with two children. Poverty lines are imputed in shared placement range to account for children part-time in the home.

Looking first at mothers, changes in needs-adjusted income at the shared placement threshold depend on fathers' incomes, ranging from a small increase (when fathers' relative incomes are high and the initial reduction in support is smaller than the assumed savings from beginning to share variable costs), to a small decline. In all cases, needs-adjusted incomes then decline steadily across the shared-placement range. Under most shared-placement scenarios in this example, mothers' households are at least somewhat worse off economically than with sole placement, despite adjusting for changing needs; when income differentials between parents are relatively large, the decline in needs-adjusted income doesn't begin until a little bit into the shared-placement range, though in all cases well before equal placement. By the equal-shared point, declines are largest when income differentials are greatest, because those mothers have the most to lose. The figure also shows that, upon crossing the father sole-placement threshold, mothers' economic well-being improves, reflecting the assumption that they no longer incur child-related costs other than child support.

Turning to fathers, the most notable story is the drop in needs-adjusted income at the shared-placement threshold, reflecting the assumed start of both fixed and variable costs. The drop is largest for the highest-income fathers, as their child support declines more slowly due to the substantial difference in parents' relative incomes.¹⁴ When incomes are more similar, the drop is much more modest. Fathers' needs-adjusted incomes gradually recover across the shared-placement range, though they rarely reach the level of economic well-being they would have under mother-sole placement. The key takeaway here is that under almost all scenarios, both mothers and fathers fare worse economically under shared placement than mother-sole placement, which arises directly from the fact that shared placement is, in the aggregate, a more

¹⁴The drop is also larger in absolute terms because the adjustment for household size implicit in the income-to-poverty ratio assumes the costs of children are proportional to income.

expensive arrangement. Under the assumptions of how needs-adjusted income is calculated, the negative impact is immediate for fathers and gradually attenuates, whereas for mothers, the impact is gradual but increasing.¹⁵

The orange dashed line illustrates how this plays out when parents have comparable incomes: For mothers, the transition from sole to shared placement involves a gradual decline in needs-adjusted income beginning at the shared-placement threshold; for fathers, where the transition instead is from nonresident to shared, it involves an initial drop corresponding to the assumption of new costs, followed by a steady recovery. At equal time, the needs-adjusted incomes of both parents are the same. In the event of a further transition to father-sole placement, mothers would see a jump in needs-adjusted income corresponding to the presumed ending of costs beyond child support. Note that the assumptions regarding the nature of mothers' child-related expenses in the father-sole range are identical to those for fathers in the mother-sole range.

The takeaway here is that, transitioning to shared placement involves an assumption of substantial new costs, which are only partially offset by reduction of costs to the other parent. Child support guidelines are constructed to recognize the higher costs, resulting in a more gradual decline. The effect of how the additional costs of shared placement are allocated are, in essence, that the home where the child spends more time is more shielded from the additional costs; thus, the decline in well-being to mothers is gradual, and increases as the child spends

¹⁵Were we instead to assume that variable costs are shared proportionally even before entering the shared placement range, fathers' needs-adjusted incomes would decline slowly over the mother-sole range as their assumed costs increased; there would still be a large drop at the shared placement threshold reflecting new fixed costs, and the substantive story would be essentially the same. Likewise, mothers would see a small increase in their needs-adjusted income over the sole placement range as their assumed costs declined.

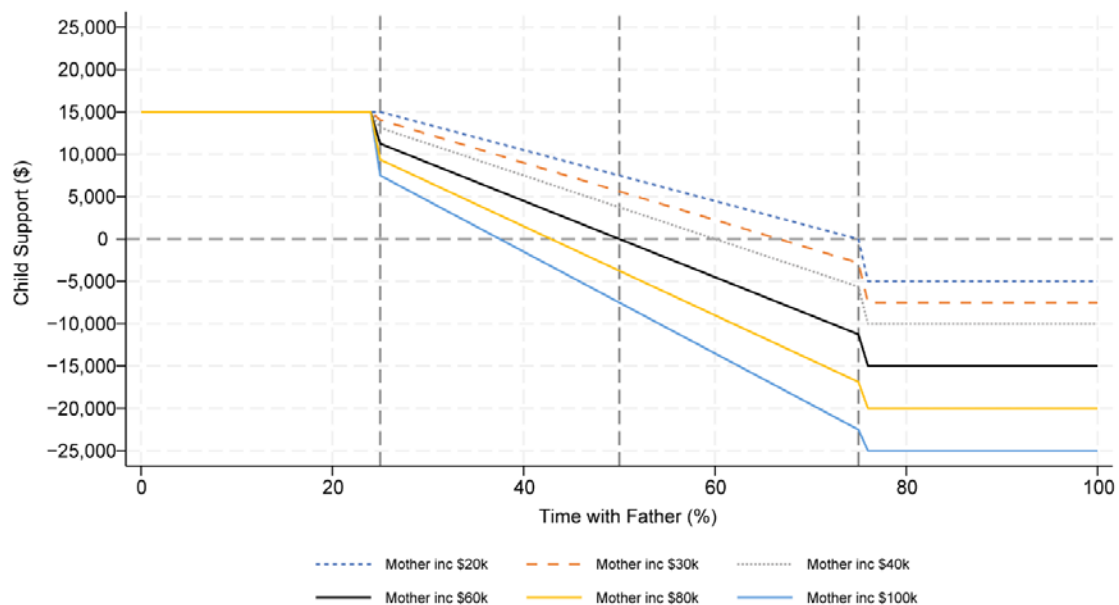
more time in the fathers' home; conversely, the decline in well-being to fathers is largest on assuming limited shared placement, but attenuates as the share of time increases.

Example 2: Varying Mother Incomes, Fixed Father Income

The above examples show how outcomes for both parents vary depending on fathers' income. The next figures show how outcomes vary depending on mothers' income. In this case, the examples describe support orders, income, and economic well-being assuming a father with \$60,000 in income and mother incomes ranging from \$30,000 to \$100,000.

Orders are again unchanged across the sole placement range (**Figure 7**). At the 25% threshold, the immediate drop is greatest for the mothers with highest income, because their offsetting orders have the largest immediate impact. Continuing declines across the shared-placement range are likewise steepest for the highest-income mothers. When incomes are equal (the black line), the order zeros out at the 50% threshold, after which it becomes negative, indicating that mothers owe support. When mothers have higher income than fathers, orders zero out sooner; when mothers have higher incomes, orders zero out later.

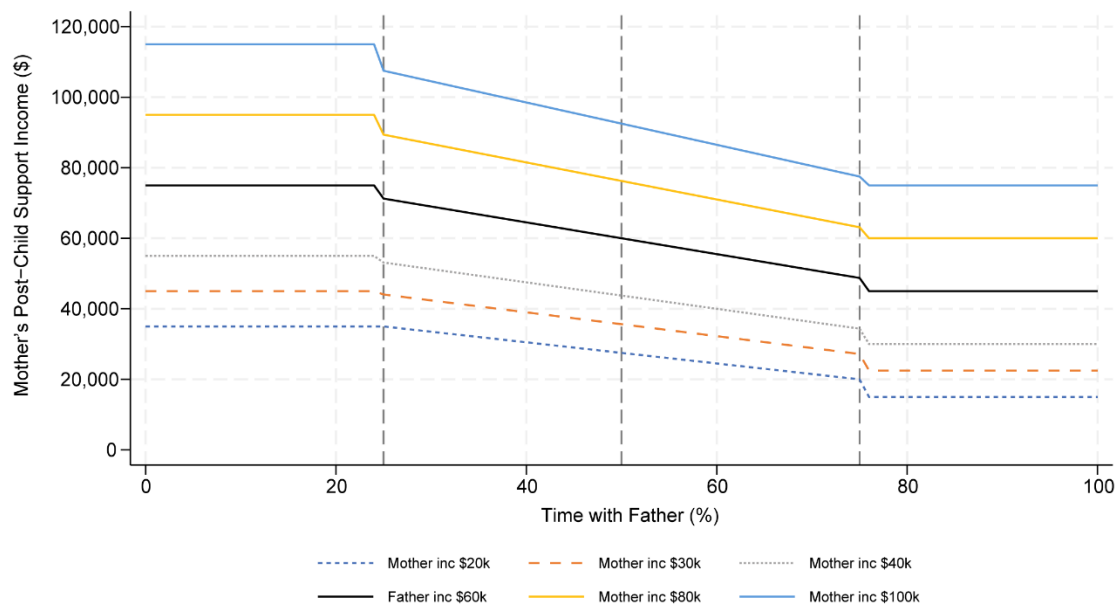
Figure 7: Child Support Across Custody Scenarios (Father Original Income = \$60,000)



Notes: Figure shows guidelines-based child support orders with different placement arrangements for a father with \$60,000 income and mothers at various income levels, with two children. Positive child support amounts indicate the father is the obligor, and negative amounts indicate the mother is the obligor.

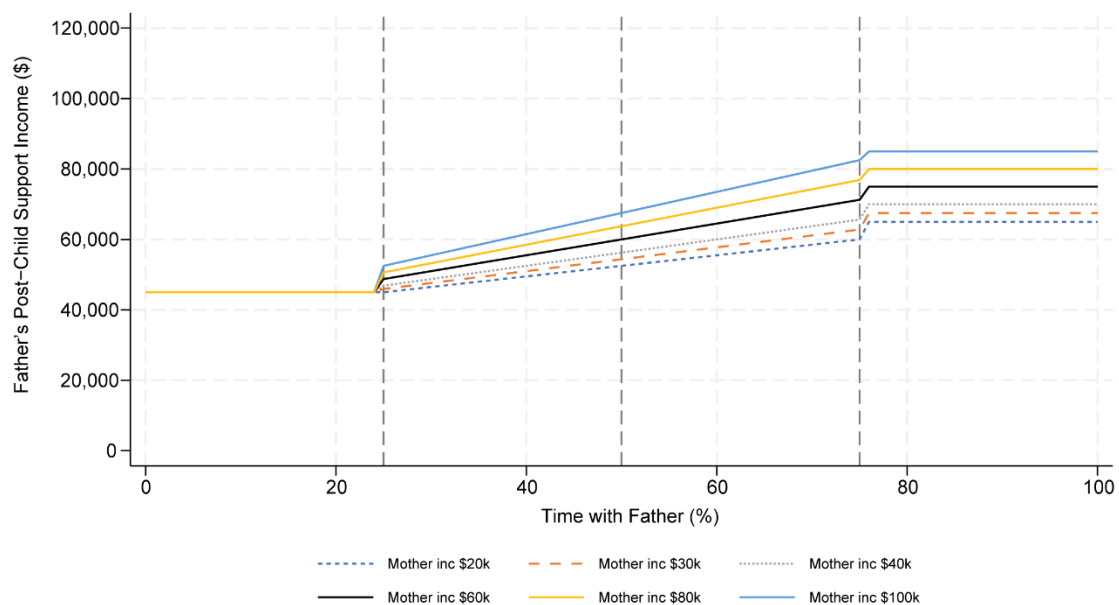
Turning to income, mothers' incomes in the sole-placement range consist of her own pre-support income (ranging from \$20,000 to \$100,000) and \$15,000 in child support (**Figures 8a & 8b**). Incomes begin declining at the shared-placement threshold, most sharply for mothers with the highest income, in line with their larger declines in support. For fathers, incomes in the mother-sole range are fixed at \$45,000, reflecting \$60,000 income of which \$15,000 is paid in child support. At the shared placement threshold their incomes increase, most sharply when mothers have the highest incomes.

Figure 8a: Mother's Post-Support Income Across Custody Scenarios (Father Original Income = \$60,000)



Notes: Figure shows mothers' post-child support income with different placement arrangements, for fathers with \$60,000 income and mothers at various income levels, with two children.

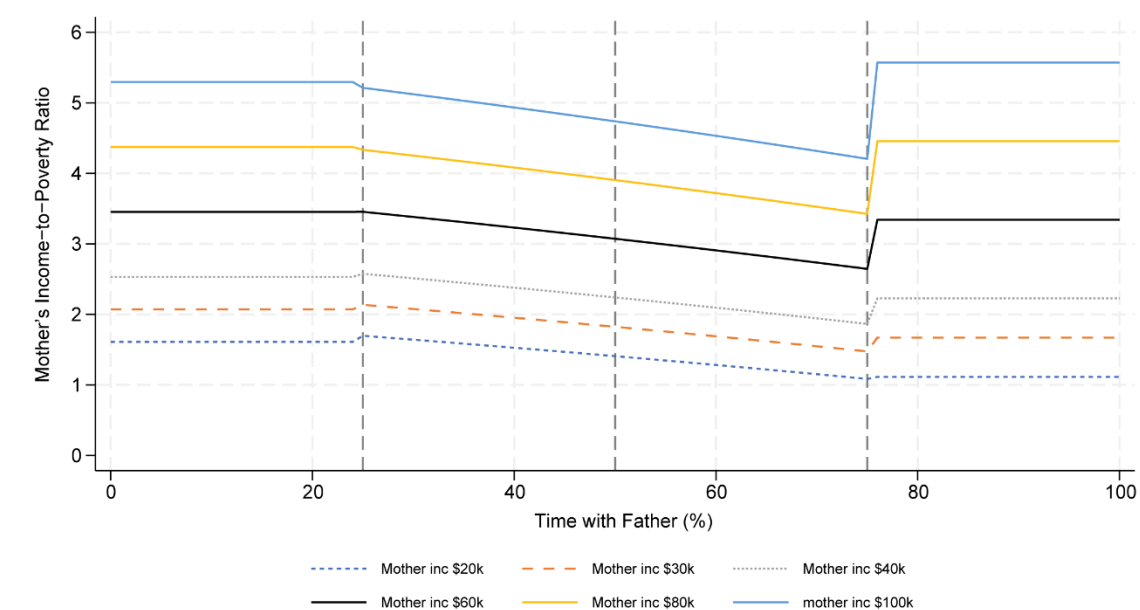
Figure 8b: Father's Post-Support Income Across Custody Scenarios (Original Income = \$60,000)



Notes: Figure shows fathers' post-child support income with different placement arrangements, for fathers with \$60,000 income and mothers at various income levels, with two children.

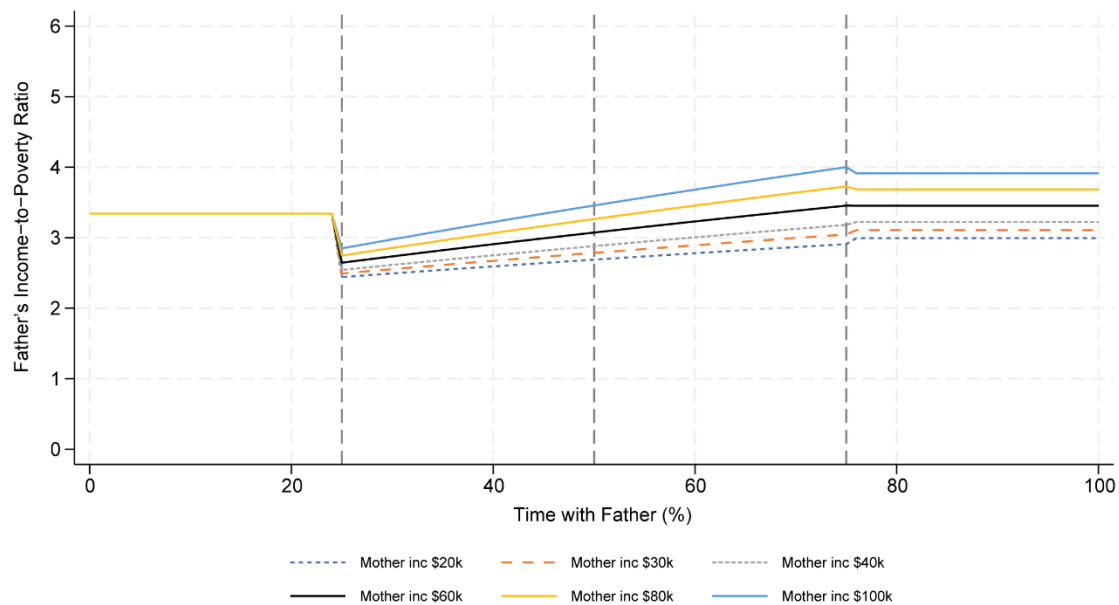
In terms of needs-adjusted income (**Figures 9a & 9b**), while there are slight differences across mothers at the shared-placement threshold, all the mothers experience similar rates of decline over the shared-placement range. For the most part, mothers' economic well-being under each of the income scenarios is lower throughout the shared placement range than under sole placement. Finally, for fathers there again is a large drop in needs-adjusted income at the shared-placement threshold, again due to new fixed and variable costs, and again a gradual recovery, particularly when mothers' incomes are higher such that child support declines more rapidly. Fathers in this example still tend to be worse off under shared than sole placement, though there are exceptions when mothers have higher income than fathers and time increases beyond 50%.

Figure 9a: Mother's Income-to-Poverty Ratio Across Custody Scenarios (Father Original Income = \$60,000)



Notes: Figure shows mothers' post-child support income-to-poverty ratios with different placement arrangements, for fathers with \$60,000 income and mothers at various income levels, with two children. Poverty lines are imputed in shared placement range to account for children part-time in the home.

Figure 9b: Father's Income-to-Poverty Ratio Across Custody Scenarios (Original Income = \$60,000)



Notes: Figure shows fathers' post-child support income-to-poverty ratios with different placement arrangements, for fathers with \$60,000 income and mothers at various income levels, with two children. Poverty lines are imputed in shared placement range to account for children part-time in the home.

Takeaways from Stylized Examples

These stylized illustrations are highly simplified, but reveal broad patterns about how guidelines play out, if perfectly implemented and if the assumptions about costs under shared placement are reasonable. Under most scenarios, both households appear worse off under shared versus mother-sole placement. That is, under most scenarios, the effect of the shared-placement guideline, if precisely implemented, is to divide, to varying degrees, the additional costs associated with shared placement. Under limited circumstances, specifically when there are substantial differences in income and the children spend more than half the time with the lower-income parent, that parent may be moderately better off than under mother-sole placement. This is more evident when fathers are the lower-income parent, for whom the comparison is between being a nonresident parent (mother-sole placement) and being a majority-time shared placement

parent; for mothers, the comparison is between being a sole-placement parent and a majority-time shared placement parent.

Compared to having mother-sole placement, for mothers at any given income level, shared placement throughout most of the range is most ‘costly’ in terms of a reduction in needs-adjusted income for mothers with an ex-partner with substantially higher income, simply because there is more income to lose (see Figure 6a). Conversely, for fathers at any given income level, shared placement is more costly relative to mother-sole placement when their ex-partners have relatively lower income, as child support declines less in conjunction with the increase in costs (Figure 9b).

The impact of transitioning from mother-sole to shared placement unfolds differently for mothers and fathers. Mothers generally have a gradual decline across the shared-placement range as child support declines more rapidly than costs; fathers experience an immediate decline due to new fixed costs, followed by a gradual recovery as child support continues to fall. This follows directly from the assumption that parents incur fixed costs so long as the children live at least 25% of time in the home. However, the pattern would broadly hold even if the prevailing threshold were different; the takeaway is that taking on the fixed costs of a child is a significant economic change, while sharing variable costs is more gradual.

Economic Impact of Shared Placement: Empirical Evidence

As the stylized examples show, shared placement, under a wide range of income scenarios and with a variety of simplifying assumptions, would reduce the economic well-being of both parents to at least some degree; that is, the parents would usually share the costs of shared placement being a more expensive arrangement. In real life, the economic implications are more complicated and harder to measure. Potential complicating factors include that

guidelines are not always used; payments do not always comply with orders; the cost-sharing assumed in the needs-adjusted income calculations doesn't necessarily happen; and the real-life costs of having children part-time may vary from household to household. Furthermore, placement arrangements might impact income indirectly, via access to safety net programs, potential impacts on earnings, and potential impacts on repartnering, all of which could impact the total resources available, not just the way limited resources and costs are allocated between parents. As a practical matter, we typically do not have full information on all household members and all income sources. Complicating matters further, shared placement is more common among higher- than lower-income couples, and particularly among higher-income fathers. As such, simple descriptions of economic outcomes for parents with different placement arrangements may conflate differences attributable to placement with underlying differences between groups.

To assess the real-world economic implications of shared placement, IRP has conducted a variety of research that variously uses the WADC and/or survey data to compare economic well-being of parents in different placement arrangements. It includes descriptive work focused on comparisons of parents with different placement arrangements as well as work that uses statistical models to control for underlying differences, in order to more clearly separate the role of placement from differences in income and other characteristics. This work has focused exclusively on divorced parents, and largely on mothers. As such, it provides valuable but incomplete information on the range of outcomes relevant in the real world.

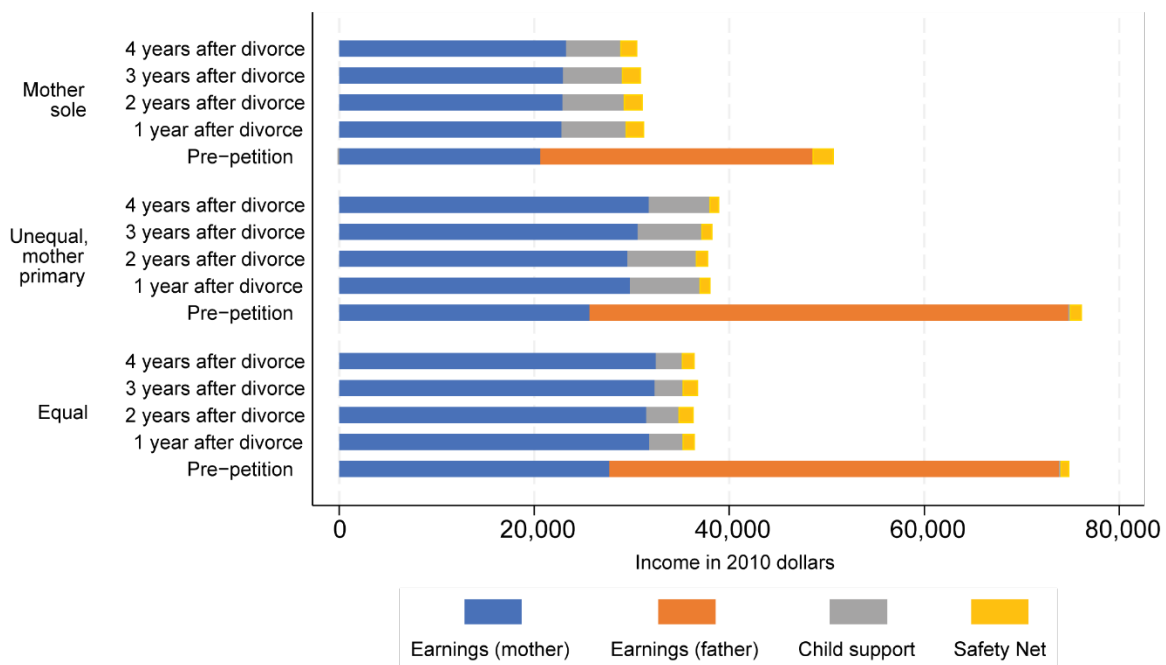
Shared Placement and Needs-Adjusted Income

A recent study looked at parents divorcing during 2005–2013, focusing on how mothers' economic well-being over the first four post-divorce years varied between those with shared and

mother-sole placement (Bartfeld & Chanda, 2023). This research drew on earnings records as well as records of FoodShare receipt, Unemployment Compensation, and child support. Couples with shared placement, consistent with the patterns discussed above, had higher pre-divorce income, with income differences most pronounced among fathers. As a result, shared-placement mothers had the most to lose from divorce, in both absolute and relative terms; and shared-placement guidelines mean they would expect to recoup less in child support. Indeed, that pattern is evident in the trajectories of the income from prior to divorce through four years after divorce (**Figure 10**). Mothers with sole-, mother-primary shared, and equal-shared placement all experienced stark declines in individual income following divorce, consistent with the loss of a second potential earner; these losses were largest in the two shared-placement groups, where the loss of father income was greatest and the share received back in child support was smallest.¹⁶

¹⁶This research focused only parents' own income; information on potential new partners was not available.

Figure 10: Mother’s Income Components Before Divorce Petition and After Final Divorce, by Child Placement.

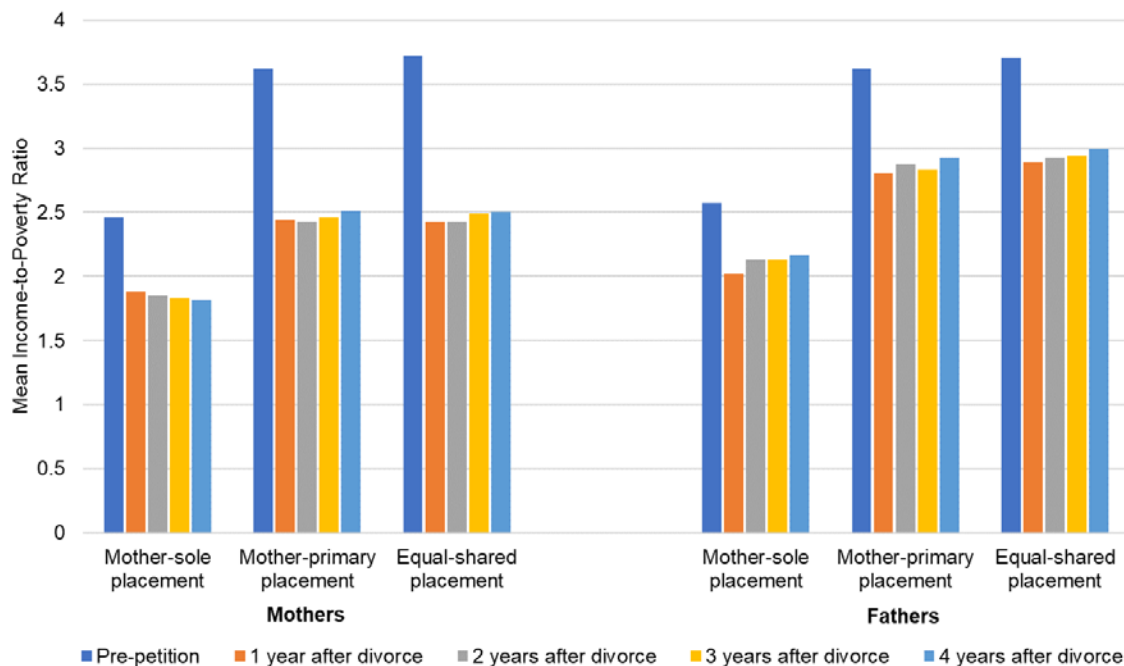


Note: Mothers’ income components before divorce petition and after final divorce, by child placement. Incomes are in 2010 dollars. Sample sizes from prepetition through 3 years after divorce are 1,318 for sole placement, 527 for unequal mother primary placement, and 1,094 for equal shared placement. Sample sizes in year 4 are 1,301; 519; and 1,076. Source: Figure 1 from Bartfeld & Chanda, 2023.

Focusing instead on needs-adjusted income, using the same approach as described previously, offsets part of the income loss associated with shared placement. **Figure 11** shows needs-adjusted incomes for mothers and fathers in the mother-sole, mother-primary, and equal-shared placement groups, pre-divorce and over four post-divorce years. Mothers in both shared-placement groups have significantly larger declines from their pre-divorce levels than the sole-placement group, though declines are substantial across the board. This is also true for fathers, although their declines relative to pre-divorce in all groups are smaller than for mothers. Notable in these results is that both mothers and fathers with shared placement end up better off economically than their sole-placement counterparts—a finding that differs from the stylized examples—where parents with sole placement fared better. The primary explanation for this difference is that the shared-placement couples have significantly higher incomes, such that

differences in post-divorce outcomes arise from a combination of income differences and differences related to the placement arrangement. The stylized examples, in contrast, showed how identical couples would fare under different placement scenarios.

Figure 11: Mothers' and Fathers' Mean Income-to-Poverty Ratios Before Petition and for Four Years After Divorce, by Placement Type



Note: Sample includes 720 mothers with mother sole placement; 345 with mother primary placement; 694 with equal shared placement; 632 fathers with mother sole placement; 338 with mother primary placement; and 695 with equal shared placement. All values calculated using weights to adjust for different sample percentages by county. Source: Bartfeld & Chanda, 2020.

To better isolate the role of placement in the real-world sample, researchers developed statistical models of mothers' post-divorce needs-adjusted income controlling for baseline income and a host of other factors (Bartfeld & Chanda, 2023). In this work, they implicitly assumed that children's living arrangements as well as sharing of substantive variable costs aligned with the timeshare specified in placement orders. This assumption is reflected in their measure of economic well-being which, like in the stylized examples, assumes variable costs

under shared placement are proportional to legally specified time in each home. With this assumption, they found that among divorced mothers, there were no significant placement-related differences in needs-adjusted incomes over the four post-divorce years, nor were there placement-related differences within either higher-income or lower-income subgroups.

That economic well-being was not (on average) lower among divorced mothers with shared placement does run counter to what our stylized examples suggest; those examples show that literal application of guidelines under a wide range of income scenarios does lead to at least modestly lower economic well-being among mothers (and fathers) with shared placement. A countervailing factor that could play a role is that mothers with equal shared placement increased their post-divorce earnings more than did mothers with sole placement, a difference of almost 20% in the first post-divorce year; this contributes to shared-placement mothers not losing ground relative to those with sole placement, and is a good example of how the economic impacts of shared placement are not, in practice, simply a matter of how losses are allocated. Furthermore, outcomes may also reflect higher child support compliance among the shared-placement group, though that was not examined explicitly in the study.

The researchers also demonstrated that the finding of no differential impacts among placement groups was dependent on the assumed cost-savings associated with having children part-time rather than full-time in the home. When they no longer accounted for these presumed savings when adjusting for household size, instead using an income-to-poverty measure that treated shared-placement children the same as sole-placement children, they found that equal-shared placement was associated with lower needs-adjusted income, particularly among mothers from higher-income couples. This highlights that the extent of actual cost-sharing matters for accurate measurement of economic outcomes under shared placement. If children in practice

spend more time with mothers than called for in their placement orders, or if variable costs are not shared proportionally, using a needs-adjusted income measure that assumes proportional responsibility for basic and other variable costs overstates the cost-savings to mothers from shared placement.

Shared Placement and Subjective Economic Well-Being

One way to get around the uncertainty about how child-related costs change in the context of shared placement is to use subjective rather than objective measures of economic well-being. Subjective measures are useful in that they rely on what parents themselves say about their economic well-being, as compared to relying on researchers to determine what income levels denote comparable well-being across different households. If shared placement leads to more of a reduction in child support than it saves in direct costs of children borne by mothers, then mothers with shared placement presumably would, on average, be subjectively worse off (economically speaking) than otherwise-similar mothers with sole placement. Recent work looking at subjective economic well-being among mothers 6–10 years after divorce found no evidence of this (Haapanen et al., 2024(b)). In this analysis, subjective well-being was measured by mothers' reports of how difficult it was to cover expenses and pay their bills. To the contrary, mothers currently practicing shared placement (based on their child's actual living arrangements over the past year) reported higher levels of economic well-being, even after controlling for earnings, spousal earnings (when relevant), household composition, and other characteristics such as home ownership, education, and age. Differences persisted after controlling for formal child support, but became smaller and insignificant after also controlling for the extent to which parents shared the direct costs of children in a variety of domains (above and beyond child support payments) (Haapanen et al., 2024b). It appears, then, that shared-

placement mothers perceived themselves as better off economically than sole-placement mothers who were similar in terms of formal income and other relevant characteristics, and that this difference could be largely explained by greater sharing of child costs above and beyond child support. In related work, researchers found that divorced mothers with shared placement reported significantly higher confidence in their ability to handle an unexpected financial emergency compared to those with sole placement, after controlling for a wide range of economic and household characteristics (Bartfeld & Chanda, 2022).

Collectively, the research discussed here suggests that overall, divorced mothers with shared placement do not fare worse economically than otherwise similar mothers with sole placement, and this is true whether we focus on an objective measure of economic well-being (i.e., income-to-poverty ratio) in the short to medium-term, or subjective measures in the longer-term.

Shared Placement and Debt

Researchers have recently begun exploring the nature and extent of debt for parents after divorce, including differences for parents with shared and sole placement. While that work is still in the early stages, initial work suggests that fathers with shared placement have substantially higher mortgage and auto debt immediately following divorce than do those with sole placement, net of differences between groups; no such difference is found for mothers (Chanda, 2025). This pattern is consistent with the assumption that fathers incur substantial new fixed costs with shared placement, as reflected in the drop in needs-adjusted income for fathers at the shared placement threshold.

PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES

The above discussion has explored relationships between placement arrangements, contributions to children's expenses in the form of child support as well as cost-sharing, and measures of economic well-being. It is also helpful to assess what parents themselves think about their collective support of their children. The WiscParents Survey asked parents about how satisfied they were with all the ways that both parents contributed to their child(ren)'s expenses, and how fair they found these contributions. These questions, which followed immediately after detailed questions about child support orders and payments as well as cost-sharing across a range of expenditures, were intended to capture respondents' views on the totality of child expenditures spanning child support and direct cost-sharing.

Divorced mothers with shared placement reported substantially higher satisfaction with overall allocation of child expenditures than those with sole placement: almost half of shared-placement mothers were very or extremely satisfied, compared to just over one-quarter of the sole-placement group; conversely, fewer than one-quarter of shared-placement mothers were not at all or only a little satisfied, compared to just over half of those with sole placement (Bartfeld et al., 2022). These differences persisted after controlling for differences between mothers in the two groups (Riser et al., 2022). Likewise, mothers in shared-placement arrangements rated the degree of fairness much more highly than their sole-placement counterparts. Those with sole placement were more than twice as likely as those with shared placement to characterize overall sharing of costs as not at all or only a little fair (58% vs 27%), and less than half as likely to find it very or extremely fair (20% vs 47%) (Bartfeld et al., 2022). While there is clearly room for

improvement, the differences both in satisfaction and perception of fairness between mothers with shared and sole placement is striking.¹⁷

Mothers in both placement groups rated fairness more highly when they received more support, all else equal. Nonetheless, mothers with shared placement also rated fairness more highly when there was no order at all, suggesting that the high rates of non-orders for that group often may accord with parental preferences, even if not with guidelines (Bartfeld et al., 2022). This would be quite consistent, of course, with what researchers learned from talking with court officials and observing court hearings (see Vogel et al., 2022). Notably, the extent of direct cost-sharing—as distinct from formal child support—was central to mothers’ perceptions of fairness, and this was true regardless of placement. Thus, mothers in shared and sole placement alike rated fairness more highly when direct costs were more equally allocated, even though cost-sharing was far more common and extensive in the context of shared placement. The much higher perceived fairness on the part of mothers with shared placement was, in a statistical sense, explained entirely by the extent to which costs across domains were shared (Bartfeld et al., 2022).

The importance of cost-sharing of actual expenses was reinforced by mothers’ short explanations as to why they found arrangements fair or unfair. Shared-placement mothers who found the allocation of child costs to be fair frequently referenced the way they divide actual expenses—ranging from dividing down the middle, to agreed-upon ways of establishing who pays what, to sharing of costs that simply seemed to work smoothly without need of a particular plan. They rarely mentioned formal child support, even though many did also have formal

¹⁷Because the survey sample only included fathers from shared placement arrangements, researchers were not able to compare how fathers in different placement arrangements feel about their cost-sharing. However, comparing satisfaction and perceptions of fairness between shared-placement fathers to those of shared-placement mothers shows that fathers report similar or slightly higher satisfaction and perceived fairness (author’s calculations).

support orders in place. In addition to highlighting cost-sharing, these mothers often referenced a constructive or friendly relationship with the other parent as a reason that direct cost-sharing worked smoothly. Some emphasized good communication; others a shared priority for the well-being of children. Consistent with this, quantitative analyses showed that the quality of parents' relationship was a strong predictor of how fair they found the allocation of costs, and how satisfied they were with that allocation (Bartfeld et al., 2022; Riser et al., 2022).

Similarly, mothers with shared placement who found the allocation of costs to be unfair frequently highlighted issues with the way direct costs were or weren't shared. Mothers in this group frequently emphasized that cost-sharing practices did not conform to legal orders; less frequently they talked about cost-sharing orders that were insufficient or out of date. Medical expenses, such as orthodontia or health insurance, were frequently flagged as not shared properly. In other cases, mothers talked about the cumulative impact of day-to-day expenses that weren't shared, such as school activities, transportation, or school meals. Much as relationships and communication emerged as playing a key role when mothers found their allocation of costs to be fair, challenging relationships were often implicated by those who found it unfair. Thus, mothers talked about disagreement between parents over which expenses should be shared, communication challenges in negotiating cost-sharing, and difficult relationships that let some to prioritize conflict avoidance and not "rocking the boat" over engaging around cost-sharing concerns (Bartfeld et al., 2022).

CONCLUSIONS, CHILD SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS, AND RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

Recent decades have seen considerable evolution in placement arrangements among children of divorced parents, with a shift from mother-sole to shared placement. This shift

impacts not only how children's time is allocated between homes, but how parents are expected to support their children, with a decline in the importance of child support and a greater expectation that both parents contribute to the direct costs of their children. The growth in shared placement has unfolded on the heels of decades of research highlighting the disproportionate negative impact of divorce for mothers and children, stemming in part from the role of childrearing responsibilities and costs that have traditionally fallen on women (see, e.g., Bartfeld, 2000; Bayaz-Ozturk et al., 2018; Bonnet, Garbinti, and Solaz, 2020; Mortelmans, 2020; Leopold & Kalmijn, 2016). Child support has played an important role in helping to offset single mothers' economic hardship (Bartfeld, 2000; Bartfeld et al., 2012; Bianchi et al., 1999). At the same time, most research finds that divorced fathers also fare worse economically than they did while married (see, e.g., Mortelmans, 2020 for a recent review). Shared placement, by reshuffling the ways parents support their children when living apart, necessitates a rethinking of the interplay between childrearing responsibilities, child support, and economic well-being. To that end, this report has provided an overview of research on shared placement in Wisconsin, with a focus on work at the intersection of placement arrangements and child support. Reflecting the nature of the available research, it focuses more heavily on divorce than nonmarital parents, and on mothers more so than fathers. At the same time, the report also highlights emerging themes from newer research on shared placement and fathers as well as shared placement among nonmarital parents.

Overview of Findings

The implications of shared placement for child support and for the economic circumstances of families depend on a wide range of factors. The legal context is of course critical, as child support guidelines and associated policy regarding contributions to the direct

costs of children specify formal expectations. Implementation is also important, as courts have discretion to deviate from support guidelines; here the perspectives of court officials as well as parents' own preferences can play a role. Thus, adherence to guidelines appears substantially lower in shared- as compared to sole-placement cases, in part due to a very high rate of zero-orders in equal-shared placement arrangements, while orders in unequal-shared placement divorce cases are quite varied vis-à-vis guidelines but more likely than among other placement groups to be higher than guidelines suggest. Lower adherence to guidelines in the context of shared placement is evident for voluntary paternity cases as well as divorces, as is a lack of orders in equal-shared placement cases, though there are substantially higher rates of missing information in the court record for paternity cases that prevent us from assessing whether zero orders are or are not consistent with guidelines.

Compliance with support obligations, both formal support as well as cost sharing, matters as well. Formal compliance is consistently found to be higher with shared placement, and new analyses show this is the case in paternity as well as divorce cases; at the same time, we know very little about compliance with cost-sharing expectations, though this came up as an area of concern among many shared-placement divorced mothers who found the overall allocation of child expenses to be unfair. The extent to which actual living arrangements align with legal placement orders, in total time even if not in day-to-day specifics, is likewise important. While divorced parents with shared and sole placement alike commonly report children spending more time with mothers than specified in placement orders, this is particularly salient for those with shared placement given the formal link between time allocation and child support orders. Placement arrangements, moreover, may have downstream impacts that indirectly influence economic well-being. For instance, research discussed here suggests that increases in divorced

mothers' earnings in the context of shared placement may help offset declines in child support and help to strengthen economic well-being. Finally, parents' perspectives are valuable. Concerns notwithstanding, divorced mothers with shared placement report considerably higher satisfaction with and sense of fairness regarding the way both parents contribute to their child(ren)'s expenses, compared to those with sole placement.

Parents' relationships are implicated in important ways at all stages. Thus, parents may negotiate support agreements that differ from guidelines, yielding arrangements that they feel best meet their collective needs, which may go a long way to explaining the high rate of zero-orders in equal-shared arrangements; at the same time, power imbalances between parents may intervene in this process in ways that are not always apparent. De facto living arrangements may over time shift from those specified in legal agreements, and these changes may variously reflect shared preferences or coparenting challenges. How effectively parents communicate, and the quality of their coparenting relationship, emerged as an important theme in how divorced parents handle discussions and decisions around cost-sharing in the context of shared placement. Notably, some parents pointed to trade-offs between pursuing concerns around child support and cost-sharing and risking rocking the boat when relationships were fraught. Across placement types, mothers' assessments of the quality of their relationship with the other parent was a strong predictor of their satisfaction with and perceptions of fairness regarding the overall allocation of child expenditures. In short, it is not possible to understand how guidelines impact parents' economic outcomes without some consideration of how parental relationships factor in.

These complexities notwithstanding, the research discussed here yields important findings regarding shared placement and economic outcomes. One set of contributions comes from the stylized examples which illustrate, under simplifying assumptions, how the guidelines

would play out under various scenarios if fully implemented and followed. These examples have the advantage of focusing on both mothers and fathers, in contrast to empirical work which has paid much more attention to mothers than fathers. Furthermore, by looking not just at total income but also needs-adjusted income, they reflect not only how child support changes, but also how direct costs of children to each household change in tandem. In doing so, these examples make explicit the expected costs of shared parenting to fathers, which are often overlooked when the focus is solely on child support. At the same time, it's important to highlight that these are stylized examples relying on specific assumptions about how expenses change at the shared-placement threshold.

Under most scenarios, both parents appear economically worse off under shared as compared to mother-sole placement. These impacts unfold differently for mothers and fathers. Mothers experience a gradual decline in financial well-being when moving from sole to shared, in some instances with a modest initial drop right at the threshold, with the decline continuing through the shared-placement range. Fathers, in contrast, experience an immediate decline due to new fixed costs, followed by a gradual recovery as child support continues to fall. For either parent, needs-adjusted income within the shared-placement range increases as time with the child increases.

Empirical studies on the economic impacts of shared placement are informative about how this functions in the real world, though existing research has paid more attention to mothers than fathers, and has not yet explored how this unfolds for unmarried parents. After controlling for differences between couples with different placement arrangements, divorced mothers, in contrast to the stylized examples, on average fare no worse economically than otherwise similar mothers with sole placement; this is true when using objective or subjective measures of

economic well-being. Potential reasons for this include that mothers with shared placement have modest post-divorce increases in earnings relative to similar sole-placement mothers; higher compliance with child support orders may also play a role. Comparable analyses are not available for fathers, though early-stage research showing divorced fathers with shared placement have significantly higher mortgage and auto debt than nonresident fathers aligns with the assumption of higher fixed costs.

A key takeaway from the research discussed here is that what actually happens with expense sharing under shared placement is critical to understanding its economic implications. This is clear from the stylized results, which demonstrate the implications of assuming new fixed and variable child costs for fathers under shared placement. It is likewise clear from the empirical results for mothers, in that the finding that mothers with shared placement fare no worse economically than comparable mothers with sole placement is contingent on assumptions that variable costs decline as placement time with fathers increase. Parents do share substantially more costs with shared as compared to mother-sole placement, based on mothers' reports; however, sharing of variable costs also remains a point of contention for some. Lack of adherence to placement arrangements may also call into question whether cost-sharing happens to the extent intended. Whereas routinized payment of child support makes tracking formal payments straightforward, what actually happens with cost sharing—both routine costs that may naturally align with living arrangements as well as formally designated variable costs that are specified in the agreement—remains opaque. The research discussed here suggests this is an important gap.

Implications for Policy and Practice

These findings have several implications for child support policy and practice. I find no particular evidence suggesting the shared-placement guideline itself should be modified.¹⁸ The inherent challenge of shared placement is that it is, in the aggregate, more expensive than sole placement. The shared-placement guideline ultimately is tasked with allocating the extra costs between parents; that there are higher costs to allocate, at least on average, is unavoidable. The structure of the shared-placement guideline is broadly consistent with research-based insights about how the costs of children would vary in different placement arrangements: It reflects the assumed redistribution of costs between parents by basing support orders on offsetting orders based on the share of time in each home; it addresses the duplication in cost, stemming from the fixed costs of children that don't decline as time declines, by inflating each parent's offsetting order by 50%. In effect, each parent is charged with compensating for not only variable costs that realistically change in tandem with time, but also a portion of fixed costs. That in most cases, the net result in stylized examples is a decline in economic well-being for both households relative to mother-sole placement suggests that both parents generally share the additional costs. Overall, the guideline appears to appropriately balance tradeoffs stemming from what is essentially a zero-sum situation.¹⁹ As with sole placement, the courts have discretion to deviate from the guideline.

While the guideline structure appears to work appropriately, this is contingent on living arrangements aligning with orders, and sharing of agreed-upon variable expenses playing out as

¹⁸The research discussed in this report, and the associated conclusions and implications, focus specifically on the shared-placement guideline as an adaptation of the underlying percent-of-income guideline. An examination of the percent-of-income guideline itself, including the specific percents used and how they relate to the broader research on costs of children, is beyond the scope of this report.

¹⁹Of course, shared placement may create new income opportunities, as suggested by evidence of modestly higher earnings with shared placement. We do not assume any behavioral responses to shared placement in the stylized examples.

intended. Aspects of this alignment and cost-sharing remain poorly understood, but the available evidence suggests this is a concern for at least some families, and in many cases is enmeshed in underlying patterns of communication, differences in priorities and expectations, and the quality of coparenting relationships (Bartfeld et al., 2022). Ensuring appropriate supports to help parents navigate expense sharing in practice seems critical, in both the short and long term. Front-end support at the time of initial orders, such as through mediation or other approaches, could help ensure arrangements for sharing of designated variable expenses are crafted in ways likely to work for parents, and that such arrangements are comprehensive enough to encompass a range of expenses that might occur. This is particularly important in that variable expenses that parents are expected to share are formally established in conjunction with the initial order via a detailed list, and a change in variable expenses is not, in and of itself, considered a substantial change in circumstances sufficient to justify a revision of the support order. Over the longer term, access to ongoing, accessible help in navigating disagreements related to expense sharing, as well as conflict management more generally, could be useful for some families. Enhancing access to these kinds of supports is consistent with the evolving role of child support agencies. It also may be useful to explore more flexible processes for updating lists of variable expenses that are included in orders, given that circumstances and needs can evolve in ways not necessarily foreseen when orders are established. Streamlined approaches to updating formal placement arrangements, and associated support orders reflecting those arrangements, could also be explored.

In recent decades, policymakers have paid considerable attention to standardizing child support orders and routinizing the collection of support obligations. In light of the trend towards shared placement and evolving expectations about how parents are supporting children, new

strategies may be needed. Expectations about routine cost sharing are factored into shared-placement guidelines, and importantly, responsibility for a specified list of variable costs is assigned by the court; indeed, many shared-placement families have no standard child support ordered at all. Strategies to assess whether this is proceeding as intended seem important, albeit challenging. For those with well-functioning coparenting relationships, additional monitoring and enforcement would be both unwanted and unnecessary; indeed, many mothers emphasized the collaborative approach their families use to navigate cost-sharing. For other families, however, things do not work smoothly, and greater involvement may be needed. Striking the right balance is difficult. Gathering input from parents could be valuable in exploring what kinds of support, if any, they would find helpful. While not directly addressed in the research discussed here, strategies to support parents in monitoring and strengthening expense sharing should be attuned to the potential for power imbalances and financial abuse that can interfere with expected expense sharing while also making it difficult to seek help. At the same time, monitoring how designated expenses are shared is a far more complicated and intrusive undertaking than monitoring formal child support payments; providing strategies, tools and supports to enhance parents' ability to negotiate this aspect of shared placement may be more appropriate than any kind of routine monitoring of expense-sharing itself. In the end, input from parents and CSAs would be critical to exploring possibilities.

Finally, while outside the purview of the child support system itself, the safety net writ large could do more to support families with shared placement via strategies such as making support available to both households when warranted. For instance, a child can only count in one home for SNAP benefits even when both meet income criteria, and no clear rules exist for who is eligible in the case of equal placement. Eligibility for various child-related tax credits generally

depend on where the child spends the most nights but are subjected to various tiebreaker rules. In general, the safety net has not grappled meaningfully with shared placement as a relevant family form. Hakovirta, Meyer, and Haapanen (2024) provide a useful discussion of conceptual issues in assessing how safety net policies can support shared placement.

Research Questions and Opportunities

From a research standpoint, there are several valuable avenues to pursue. We know a great deal about trends in the original placement arrangements, but very little about the extent to which placement changes over time and, if so, how child support evolves in tandem. What we do know stems from the survey data, which is valuable but limited to parents' descriptions, and difficult to align with records of orders and payments. To address this, it would be valuable to collect follow-up court record data on shared-placement cases from one or more past cohorts, which could provide a much longer time course than the 2.5 to 3.5 years that we collect for new cohorts. Long-term data on the evolution of placement arrangements would allow us to assess the stability of placement arrangements over many years, and the extent to which changes in placement are tied to changes in child support orders and payments. It would also provide insight into whether some kinds of placement arrangements are more or less stable over the longer term. For instance, the survey data revealed strikingly high rates of placement changes for parents with unequal-shared placement; yet the sample size for that group was small enough that these findings were suggestive at best.

Another research priority involves structured, systematic information about how parents with shared placement share costs. Cost sharing—through the routine coverage of expenses assumed to occur when children are living in the home, as well as structured sharing of designated variable costs—is an important part of how parents are expected to support their

children in the context of shared placement. We know far less, however, about what actually happens than we do about traditional child support, even as no child support is owed for many shared-placement cases. While our analyses of the economic impacts of shared placement essentially presume that variable costs are shared proportionally, there are certainly signs in existing research that this not always the case. There is broad information in the survey data about the extent to which certain kinds of costs are shared, and it is clear that there is more cost-sharing in shared as compared to sole placement. An information gap exists, however, regarding how closely cost sharing aligns with the intent of the order, whether for routine costs that naturally follow living arrangements or for designated variable costs for larger expenses. Methodological approaches to learning about cost sharing could range from focused interviews about the details of cost-sharing practices, to diary-type data where parents record detailed information for designated time periods. Including mothers and fathers in these kinds of studies is important. Also related to cost sharing, it would be valuable to get parents' input on the kinds of supports and resources that would facilitate optimal cost-sharing, the challenges they have encountered, and the strategies that have been effective. Looking beyond variable costs, it is also important to learn about how the duplication of significant fixed costs plays out in practice and, in particular, if taking on fixed costs such as more expensive housing tends to align with the 25 percent time threshold assumed in shared placement guidelines and reflected in the examples considered here.²⁰

While we have some information on why orders often don't align with shared-placement guidelines, this is another area in which focused research would be beneficial. A straightforward

²⁰Some relevant information could be learned from the WiscParents data, which has information on whether children have their own bedroom in both homes, and the extent to which children bring personal items back and forth between homes. Survey data on earlier cohorts in Wisconsin, preceding the introduction of the 25% threshold, showed that a substantial share of fathers with timeshares in the 20-30% range reported their child had their own bedroom (Brown & Cancian, 2007).

approach could start with written surveys to court officials involved in setting or approving orders in a broad sample of counties, with particular questions about shared placement and the circumstances in which guidelines are and are not used.

A critical line of research involves much more systematic attention to the economic implications of shared placement for fathers. The stylized examples included here highlight the significant new costs associated with shared placement as compared to being a nonresident parent. Exploring the implications of this via statistical models of needs-adjusted income for fathers with different placement arrangements, akin to existing analyses for mothers, would be beneficial. Additionally, comparisons of shared-placement mothers and fathers' perspectives on their cost-sharing arrangements, including why they find them fair or unfair, is a promising avenue. Early-stage research on post-divorce debt among both mothers and fathers in different placement arrangements may shed further light on the ramifications of shared placement.

Another critical research avenue involves nonmarital parents. Most of the research to date has focused on divorced couples, where shared placement has been most prevalent. The growth in shared placement in voluntary paternity cases—over one-quarter of this group now have shared placement—make it critical to understand how shared placement plays out for those families; from a practical standpoint, the higher prevalence also means it's more feasible to focus on them in the CRD without small samples causing difficulty. To that end, our newest work on guidelines usage now looks at shared placement paternities, as summarized earlier. Another area we could examine is the economic impacts of shared placement, analogous to work we have done in divorce cases. Including nonmarital parents in the kinds of new data collection proposed above, namely extended follow-up of shared placement cases in the court records, as well as new research into the details of cost-sharing, would be important. The economics of shared placement

could well function differently in nonmarital and divorce cases, both because of substantially lower average incomes as well as very different family histories and parental relationships. There may be unique challenges stemming from the very limited incomes of many nonmarital mothers and fathers, just as in the case with sole placement. Likewise, the lack of a substantial history of coparenting for many parents with paternity cases means that navigating parental relationships may introduce different challenges than with divorced parents. As such, ensuring future research considers this group is a high priority.

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