The Effect of Child Support Enforcement on Abortion in the United States

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Outline

I. Introduction
II. Research Context
III. Methodology and Empirical Estimation
IV. Results
V. Discussion and Conclusions
I. Introduction

- Abortion as controversial issue, but has been on the decline
- In 2005, there were approximately 1.21 million abortions in the United States (Jones et al. 2008, 9)
- The abortion rate of 19.4 per 1,000 women of childbearing age in 2005, lowest level since 1974
- But these declines mask important variation among subgroups of the population, especially when analyzing the data by socioeconomic status
- More specifically, for those individuals living between 100-199% of the poverty line, the abortion rate rose from 31 to 36 per 1,000 women. Even more striking, those individuals with an income of less than 100% of the poverty line experienced an abortion rate increase from 37 to 42 per 1,000 women (Finer and Henshaw 2006, 93)
II. Research Context

- Child support enforcement as a way to provide more income to mothers—could this impact the incidence of abortion?

- Child support raises the cost of having children from the male perspective by forcing fathers to financially care for their children, but lowers the cost of having a child from the female perspective by guaranteeing mothers adequate economic support. The question for researchers has been which effect dominates: male or female pressures?

- So far—the male effect has dominated! Effective child support has been also associated with lower non-marital birthrates in the states; at the individual level, effective child support has been linked to a decreased likelihood that individual men will participate in an unwanted pregnancy, and a reduced probability that a man will be the father of a non-marital child (Case 1998; Garfinkel et al. 2003; Huang 2002; Huang 2005; Huang and Han 2004; Plotnick et al. 2004).
II. Research Context

- In this analysis, we look at the impact of strong child support enforcement on the percentage of births to nonmarital couples and the abortion ratio (number of abortions per 1,000 live births)
- We use 5 measures of child support effectiveness:
  A. Percentage of cases w/ a collection
  B. Child support dollars collected per case in system
  C. Child support dollars expended per case in system
  D. Child support dollars spent per single mother family in state
  E. Child support dollars spent per single parent family in state
Other Independent Variables:

A. Sociodemographic Measures:
   Percentage of female childbearing population that are teens; Log of percentage Black; Percentage of population in urban areas; marriage rate; percentage Catholic; Percentage of college enrollees who are women

B. Economic Security Measures:
   Percentage of population below the poverty line; Female labor force participation rate; Unemployment rate; Log of Welfare Benefits

C. Political Measures:
   Percentage of legislature that are women; Percentage of legislature that are Republicans; Token or higher percentage of women representatives; Citizen and Government ideology scales (0-100, 100 being most liberal)

D. Availability Measures
   Abortion providers per 100,000 women of childbearing age; Number of Non-ob-mds and Hospitals as instruments

E. Abortion Policy Measures
   Parental restrictions on minor abortions in place (1=yes, 0=no); Medicaid restrictions-no state supplement money (1=yes, 0=no)
III. Methodology & Empirical Estimation

- Analyses confined to 41 states and years 1978-2003
- Data are structured as state-year observations, \( n = 41 \times 26 = 1066 \)
- Models are of the form:
  \[
  Y_{st} = \beta_1 T_t + \lambda \text{ChSupp}_{st} + \beta_2 D_{st} + \beta_3 E_{st} + \beta_4 P_{st} \\
  + \beta_5 PP_{st} + \beta_6 A_{st} + \sigma_s + \varepsilon_{st}
  \]
- We use XTIVREG in Stata for estimation instrumenting for Abortion Provider with number of non-ob/gyn physicians and the number of hospitals
IV. Results

• Non-marital Births
  – Only one of the five child support effectiveness measures - the amount of child support collected per case – shows a statistically significant effect.
  – An additional dollar of child support collected per case by a state reduces its percentage of out-of-wedlock births by .002 percent or that a $100 increase in the child support collected leads to a reduction of non-marital births by about two-tenths of a percent.
  – Effects of all covariates are in the expected direction.
IV. Results

• Abortions
  – Again, only one of the five measures of child support effectiveness has a statistically significant impact on abortion ratio. However, the measure that is significant in this instance is the percentage of all cases with a collection.
  – A 10 percent increase in the state’s collection rate increases the number of abortions per 1000 births by about 4, a substantial effect.
  – All the covariates exhibit the hypothesized sign with the exception of the percentage of women in the state legislature.
V. Discussion and Conclusions

• Analyses that explore the relationship between child support effectiveness and fertility outcomes may be sensitive to how this effectiveness is measured.
• Interestingly, in our analyses, both measures that produced a statistically significant result were drawn from the internal caseload data rather than measures that capture how well the system is interacting with the states’ potential clientele overall. Also, both measures reflect how well the program performs in actually collecting real dollars for families rather than money expended in enforcing these cases.
• Therefore, it may be that data from the actual child support caseload that also involve collecting and distributing real child support dollars send the strongest signal to couples about their potential monetary obligations in the future.
V. Discussion and Conclusions

- Policy Implications?
  - Child support’s effect on reducing the non-marital birthrate found here and in previous work shows that the male influence is potentially more important than the female influence in fertility decisions.
  - That is, by witnessing a strong, effective child support program, men might fear their future financial obligations, but women might be emboldened by a reliable income stream to have additional children.
  - This dominant male effect of reducing the percentage of births to non-marital parents could mean that either men are engaging in abstinence more frequently, using contraception more regularly, or emphasizing the abortion option with their partners when they experience unwanted pregnancies.
  - The analysis presented here, while not purporting to completely solve this puzzle, is suggestive that part of the price of child support reducing non-marital births might involve raising the incidence of abortion.