

# Can Policy Encourage Fathers to Meet Their Child Support Obligations? Trends, Determinants, and Consequences of Non-Payment in France

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## Introduction

The number of separations involving children is considerable in many developed countries, and France is no exception. While some families are already experiencing poverty before separation, parental separation often precipitates child poverty. Each year, around 4% of children living with both parents fall below the poverty line - defined as a household income below 60% of the median standard of living. The proportion is more than five times higher (21.5%) among children whose parents separate during the year (Bonnet & Solaz, 2023).

Economic resources after separation are often much more limited, particularly for the custodial parent — most often the mother — who bears most of the expenses related to the child(ren). Consequently, the receipt of child support plays a crucial role. The non-payment of child support can further exacerbate financial vulnerability and increase the proportion of children living in poverty. This issue remains a recurrent topic in public debates in France and abroad. (Cour des Comptes, 2025), as well as in research on the living conditions of parents and children following separation (de Montaignac et al., 2024; Hakovirta & Mesiäislehto, 2019, 2022; Smyth et al., 2014, 2017).

Although legally mandated by a family affair judge (for most of the parents) and essential for children's welfare and upbringing, child support obligations are not systematically fulfilled. According to Laubresac *et al.* (2020), between 20% and 40% of child support payments are subject to non-payment in France, whether partial, irregular, or total. Given the financial significance of these transfers for children's standard of living, the French government established, in 2017, the Child Support Recovery Agency (*Agence de recouvrement des pensions alimentaires*, ARIPA). Its main objective is to secure the payment of child support and to assist single parents in recovering unpaid alimony. It can collect child support directly from the paying parent and transfer it to the receiving parent, thereby reducing the risk of non-payment. In cases of default, the agency can advance the payment of a minimum amount through the family support allowance (*Allocation de soutien familial*) and subsequently recover the unpaid sums from the debtor.

Despite its considerable social and economic relevance, the non-payment of child support remains poorly documented. Available data offer only a partial view of the phenomenon. "Theoretical" support amounts are typically established by family court judges and captured in surveys by the Ministry of Justice, thus covering only cases in which parents formalize their agreements legally. In contrast, recent tax data provide insights into the amounts actually paid or received, as these transfers are taxable for the recipient and tax-deductible for the payer. However, these two sources remain unlinked.

Our first objective is to document the incidence of non-payment among children whose parents have recently separated and to identify the factors associated with it. Second, we analyze the extent to which non-compliance affects children's living standards and poverty risk. Finally, we assess the impact of the 2017 implementation of ARIPA and evaluate whether this reform has effectively reduced non-payment.

## Data and Method

We use data from the French part of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey. We constructed a panel dataset spanning the years 2004 to 2021, with the child-year as the unit of observation. The dataset comprises a total of 106,167 observations, corresponding to 31,670 children who were observed for from one up to nine years.

The data document the family structure of the child and particularly the post-separation arrangement whether the child is alternating between both parental households (joint physical custody), lives mainly with his/her mother, or mainly with his/her with father. The benefit of child support and its

amount and household income are also available (fiscal data), as well as characteristics of the custodial parent (education, employment status, income level, repartnering, presence of additional children).

We use two types of samples:

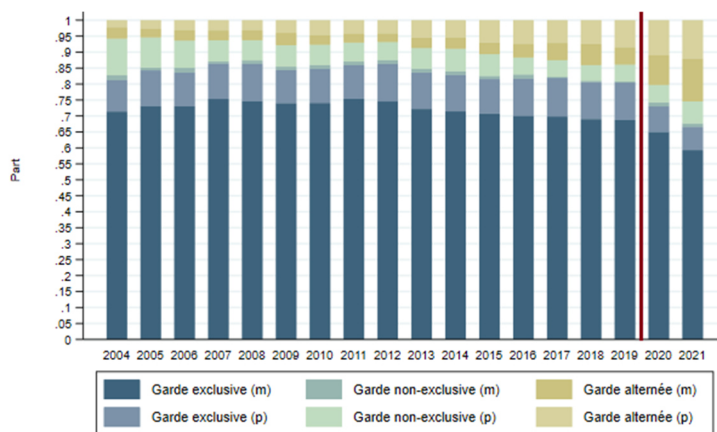
- i) First, we analyse the entire population, including all individuals who have experienced a separation and for whom the date of separation is known.
- ii) Second, taking advantage of the panel structure of the data, we are able to follow individuals over time as they separate. This makes it possible to analyse their situation prior and after the separation event. We can examine the receipt, the amount, and the regularity of child support payments.

## Preliminary results

### *Shared custody becomes a more common arrangement*

Consistent with observations in other countries (Hakovirta et al., 2023, Meyer et al., 2024), shared custody is becoming increasingly common (Figure 1). This trend is important to consider, as child support is not obligatory in cases of shared custody. When parents share childcare almost equally, it is generally assumed that they also contribute equally to the costs of raising the child, so there is typically no need for a child support transfer from one parent to the other — except in cases where there are significant differences in living standards between the parents.

**Figure 1: Detailed trends in children’s living arrangements with separated parents (2004–2021)**



Source : French part of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey.

Note : Between 2019 and 2020, the definition for shared custody has been slightly changed.

(m) refers to living with the mother and (p) refers to living with the father

“Garde exclusive” refers to Sole custody ; “Garde alternée” refers to equal shared custody ; “Garde non exclusive” refers to unequal shared custody.

N = 21736

### *A decrease in the share of children benefiting from support payments, as well as in the amounts paid*

We observe a decline in children perceiving a child support payments over years. This downward trend cannot be explained by changes in living arrangements. Among households headed by custodial mothers, approximately four out of ten mothers reported receiving child support in 2011 (see Figure 2). Ten years later, in 2021, this proportion had declined sharply to 28 percent.

The amount of child support also decreased slightly over the same period. Median payments fell from €115 (2015 constant €) per child at the beginning of the 2010s to roughly €100 per child by the end of the observation period for mothers with sole custody (Figure 3).

### *Determinants of receipt of child support*

In order to emphasize the factors associated to a non-payment, we perform a logistic regression on the probability to receive a payment following a separation for the children living mainly with their mother (Table 1). Preliminary show that receiving child support is positively associated to the age of

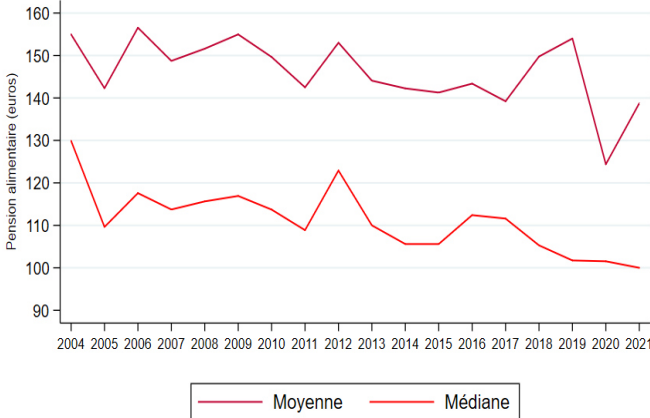
children. The probability of receiving child support increases as children grow older: it is higher for children aged 11–14 and even more so for 15–18 years old. The number of children is positively associated with receiving child support. Compared to families with one child, those with two, three or four or more children have significantly higher probabilities of receiving support. This may reflect both a greater financial need and a higher likelihood of formalizing support agreements in larger families, except very large ones. We also introduce time since separation. The coefficient for zero years is strongly negative, indicating that child support is rarely received in the immediate year of separation. This likely reflects administrative or legal delays before support arrangements are established. Beyond the first year, differences by duration since separation (2, 3, or 4+ years) are not statistically significant, suggesting that once established, the probability of receiving support remains relatively stable over time. Income has an association with the receipt of child support, but only for the lowest income quintiles who are less likely to receive support. This could be explained by homogamy. Ex-partners may also have low incomes and be unable to pay child support. Education shows a clear and significant gradient.

**Figure 2 – Evolution of the proportion of children receiving child support (mother has sole custody), 2004–2021**



Source : French part of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey  
 Note : N = 15414

**Figure 3 – Trends in the child support amounts per child (constant euros), 2004-2021, mean and median**



Source : French part of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey  
 Note: only households receiving child support, N=6667

*No visible effect of the recent policy*

Finally, we do not observe any visible effect of the implementation of ARIPA in 2017. We are going to go further by implementing a regression by discontinuity around the year 2017, but first graphical results do not show a turning point (Figure 2).

**Next steps**

Given the availability of the 2022 and 2023 survey waves, we plan to extend the observation window. Additionally, we will examine the impact of child support receipt on mothers’ living standards. This requires estimating the amount of child support that fathers would be expected to provide, taking into account their characteristics prior to the separation.

**Table 1 – Probability of receiving child support (logit), mothers with sole custody**

	Coeff	
<b>Age (ref : 5-10 years old)</b>		
0-4 years old	-1.205***	(0.152)
11-14 years old	0.537***	(0.106)
15-18 years old	0.871***	(0.134)
<b>Number of children (ref : 1)</b>		
2	0.851***	(0.144)
3	0.877***	(0.168)
4 et +	0.630**	(0.196)
<b>Distance to separation (in years) (Ref: 1)</b>		
0	-3.279***	(0.239)
2	0.176	(0.235)
3	-0.552	(0.291)
4 et +	-0.272	(0.215)
Unknown	-0.316	(0.209)
<b>Quintile of individual incomes (Ref: 3<sup>rd</sup> quintile)</b>		
1	-0.504***	(0.148)
2	-0.268*	(0.123)
4	0.239	(0.134)
5	-0.0570	(0.168)
<b>Labour market status (Ref: employment)</b>		
Student	0.602	(0.433)
Unemployed	-0.234	(0.131)
Inactive	-0.120	(0.144)
<b>Education (Ref : High school diploma)</b>		
No high school diploma	-1.148***	(0.147)
Undergraduate level	1.135***	(0.184)
Graduate level	0.937***	(0.185)
<b>Repartnered (Ref : no)</b>		
Yes and cohabiting	0.472***	(0.121)
Yes and not cohabiting	0.155	(0.199)
N	15414	

Source : French part of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey

Notes: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001. Standard errors in parentheses.

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