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## **Child Support Patterns in Washington State: 1993–1994**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In 1990 the Washington Legislature responded to the requirements of the federal 1988 Family Policy Act and created a presumptive statewide schedule for child support determination. In 1993, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy was asked by legislative leaders to analyze patterns of actual child support orders, to compare the state's support schedule with other states, and to compare the guidelines to the cost of raising children.

To conduct this research, the Institute relied on a sample of child support summary reports, which are completed in county superior courts when child support decisions are made. The time period for the reports in the sample was between June 1993 and May 1994.

The findings can be organized around four central questions:

#### **1. What proportion of parental income is ordered to be spent on child support?**

When looking at the combined net income of the parents in the study group, the median level of court-ordered support for one-child families is 21 percent; for two-children families it is 30 percent, and for three-children families, it is 37 percent.

#### **2. How frequently do the courts deviate from the statewide guidelines?**

The courts deviated from the presumptive guidelines in 54 percent of the cases examined in this study. In 47 percent of the cases, courts lowered the amount from the standard level, they raised the amount in 7 percent of the cases, and they made no changes from the standard level in 46 percent of the cases.

#### **3. How do child support orders in Washington compare to the costs of raising children?**

No consensus has emerged nationally on the precise costs of raising children. The economic studies in this area typically describe the costs as a share of parental income. While a specific dollar value has not been uniformly accepted in the national cost literature, there is consensus that these studies, taken as a whole, form a low-to-high range for these costs. The median level of Washington's child support orders falls within this range.

#### **4. How do Washington's guidelines compare to other states?**

No study of actual child support levels has compared all fifty states. One study compared the guidelines in all states, but it did not include the deviations courts make from the guidelines. The study focused on three case examples. For the first two examples, which reflect lower and middle parental income levels, Washington's guidelines were high in comparison to other states. For the higher income case, Washington's guidelines were in the middle of the distribution of states.