

Survey of Maintenance Enforcement Programs: Child and spousal support, 2020/2021

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2020/2021 saw the largest increase in collection of child and spousal support payments in three years

In 2020/2021, 84% of child and spousal support payments were collected and then received by people registered in a subset of provincial and territorial maintenance enforcement programs (MEPs). This was 3 percentage points higher than a year earlier—the largest year-over-year increase in three years. Both New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island reported a 100% total payment collection rate for support cases, while Saskatchewan had the lowest rate among reporting jurisdictions (77%).

These data were collected during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and provide insight into the associated trends. Numerous government assistance programs and payor relief measures were put in place in response to the pandemic to help Canadians deal with financial hardships. These measures—combined with more limited options to spend money because of restrictions related to the pandemic—may have had a positive effect on the ability of payors to meet their support payment obligations, as seen in the increase in the total payment collection rate reported above.

Generally, in the Canadian family law system, parties may have a registered separation agreement or obtain a court order dealing with child or spousal support when a union dissolves. Provincial and territorial MEPs exist across Canada to help parents or former partners collect child and spousal support payments. Requirements for registration in MEPs vary by province or territory. The Survey of Maintenance Enforcement Programs collects data from six provinces and two territories (see Note to readers).

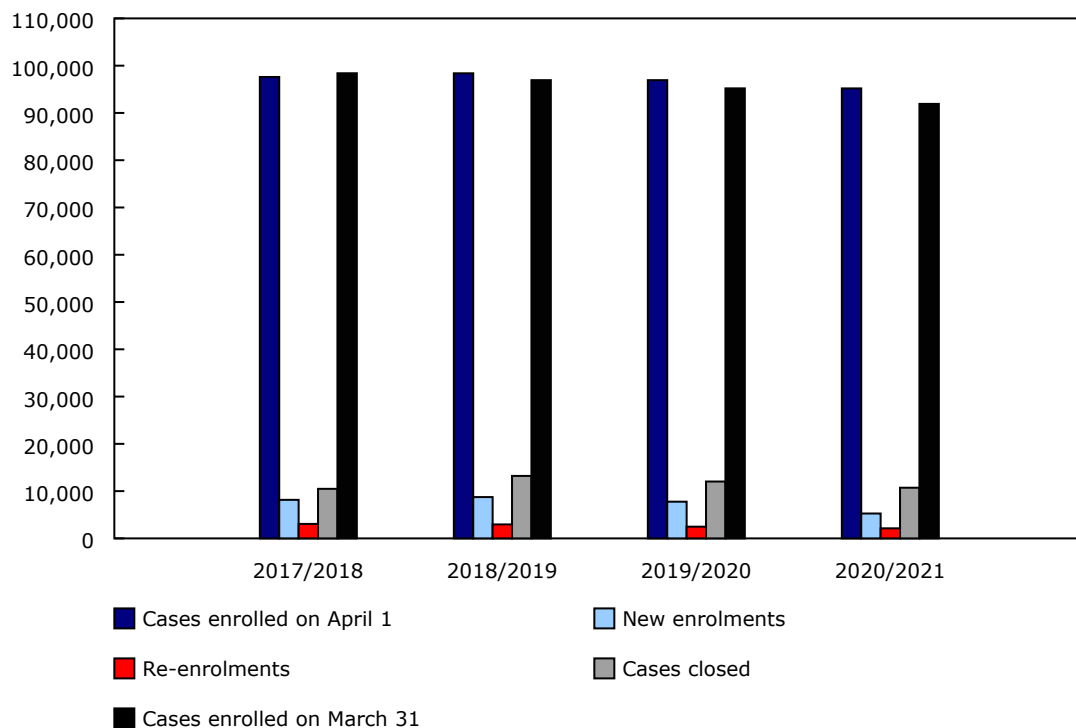
According to results released today, there were 91,915 child and spousal financial support cases registered with MEPs in reporting jurisdictions on March 31, 2021. This marks a decline of 3.5% from the previous year and follows two consecutive, smaller year-over-year decreases. Prince Edward Island reported the sole increase in caseload, up 1% from the previous year.

General shutdowns and, specifically, closures of MEP offices made it more difficult for new cases to be enrolled (-32%) in 2020/2021, until virtual alternatives and other methods not involving in-person contact were put in place across the country. Additionally, the 2020/2021 Civil Court Survey reported a significant decrease in initiated divorce and support cases, which may also have affected the number of new enrolments with MEPs in 2020/2021.



Chart 1
Maintenance enforcement programs, by annual caseload, selected provinces and territories, 2017/2018 to 2020/2021

number of cases



Note(s): Based on information provided by Alberta, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan, and Yukon. These jurisdictions reported consistently over the period.
Source(s): Survey of Maintenance Enforcement Programs (3324).

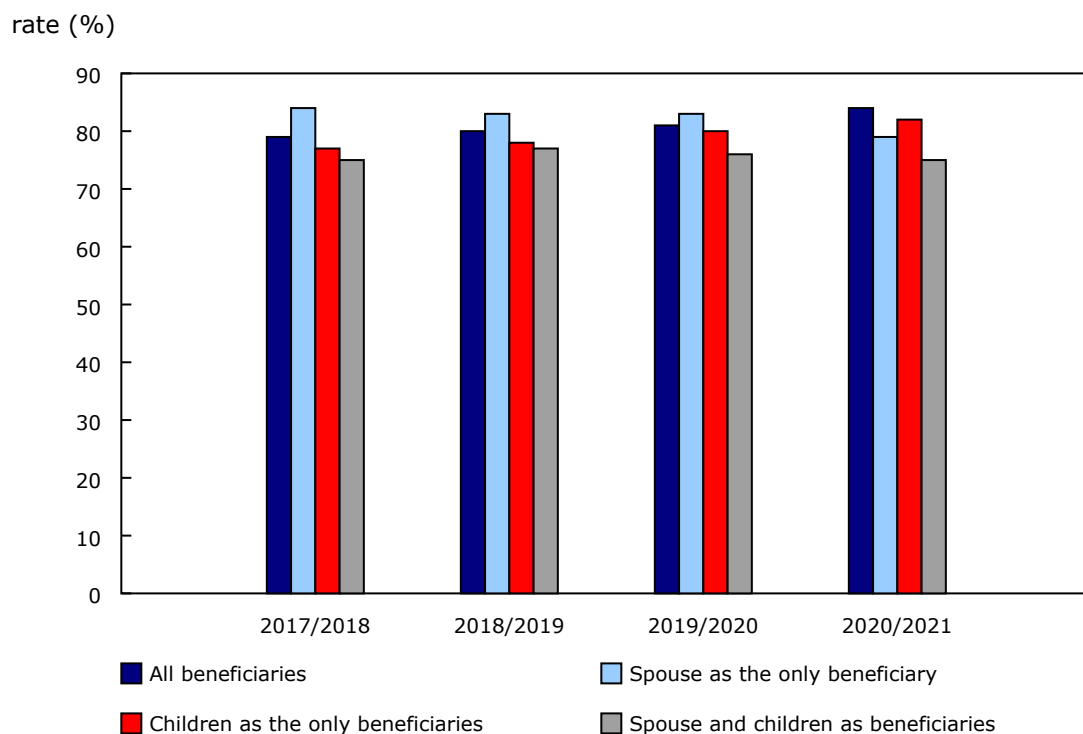
Total collection rates of maintenance enforcement programs highest for children-only beneficiary cases and for older payors

In 2020/2021, children were the only beneficiaries in 68% of registered support cases. Cases with spouses as the only beneficiaries made up 4% of the caseload, while cases that included both child and spousal support accounted for 3%. In the remaining 25% of support cases, the type of beneficiary was unknown.

While 84% of all money owed for child and spousal support was collected in 2020/2021, total payment collection rates varied based on the type of beneficiary named in the support order. Cases that included only spousal support had a slightly lower total payment collection rate (79%), compared with cases that were solely child support (82%). The total payment collection rate for payments of both spousal and child support was lowest, at 75%. When the beneficiary was unknown, the total payment collection rate was 100%, which is linked to a higher proportion of arrears payments made in this category.

Total payment collection rates also varied by payor age and sex. The highest total payment collection rates occurred when the payors were women older than 65 (100%), women aged 45 to 64 (98%) and men older than 45 (87%), while the lowest rates were from men aged 15 to 44 (80%) and women aged 15 to 24 (76%). This difference may be explained by the lower financial means of younger people whose unions have dissolved.

Chart 2
Maintenance enforcement programs, total payment collection rate, by type of beneficiary, selected provinces and territories, 2017/2018 to 2020/2021



Note(s): Based on information provided by Alberta, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan, and Yukon. The "All beneficiaries" category includes cases where the beneficiary is unknown.
Source(s): Survey of Maintenance Enforcement Programs (3324).

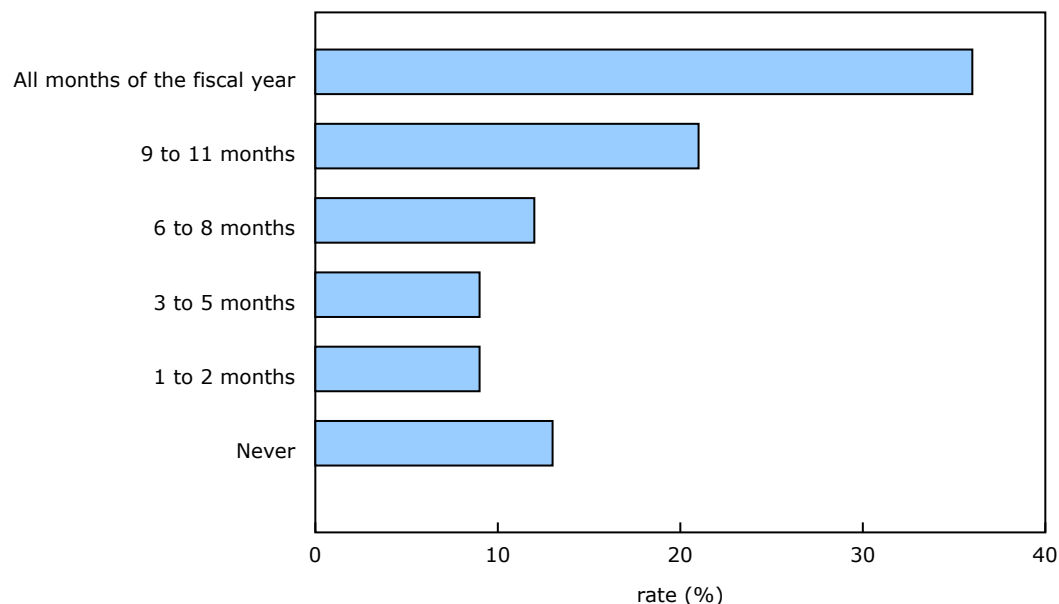
In fewer than 4 in 10 cases, support payments are made in full each month for the entire year

In 2020/2021, fewer than 4 in 10 registered support cases (36%) were in full compliance with payment, meaning that beneficiaries received the amount that was owed to them in every month of the fiscal year. This proportion was relatively unchanged from the previous year (35%). The remaining support cases had varying degrees of payment compliance, with beneficiaries not receiving full support payments in at least 1 month and up to 12 months of the year.

New Brunswick (48%), and Newfoundland and Labrador (45%) had the highest full-payment compliance rates (all payments made in full each month) for support cases among all reporting jurisdictions. Saskatchewan (20%) and the Northwest Territories (21%) had the lowest rates.

Chart 3

Maintenance enforcement programs, total compliance rate, all beneficiaries, by regularity of compliance, selected provinces and territories, 2020/2021



Note(s): Based on information provided by Alberta, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan, and Yukon.

Source(s): Survey of Maintenance Enforcement Programs (3324).

Nearly two-thirds of child and spousal support cases start the year in arrears, down slightly from a year earlier

In 2020/2021, 49,115 child and spousal support cases (64%) started the year in arrears, meaning there was money owing from previous missed payments. This was down 2% (-1,180 cases) from the previous fiscal year. Data on arrears include only those cases that were enrolled for the full year and exclude cases with support payments made outside the jurisdiction in which the order is registered (i.e., interjurisdictional support order).

Of the cases that started the year in arrears, 42% of MEP recipients had the amount of money owing from previous missed payments increase over the course of the year. In just over half (51%) of child and spousal support payment cases, the opposite trend was observed, with arrears declining or being eliminated by the end of the year. Arrears in child and spousal support payments were unchanged in the remaining 7% of cases.

The vast majority (86%) of registered child and spousal support cases that started the year with no money owed from previous payments also ended the year with no arrears. By comparison, 14% of support cases that had no arrears at the beginning of the year accumulated them throughout the year.

Note to readers

The Survey of Maintenance Enforcement Programs (SMEP) conducted by Statistics Canada collects information on child and spousal support payments and cases from provincial and territorial maintenance enforcement programs (MEPs). MEPs are authorized by the Family Maintenance Act to administer child and spousal support obligations under the terms of a court order or agreement. Once an order or agreement has been registered with the MEP, maintenance payments that the payor would normally remit directly to the payee must be sent to the MEP. The MEP processes the payment, maintains an accounting record of it and forwards the payment to the payee.

Survey data provide information on the volume and types of cases enrolled, support amounts due, and compliance with support payments and enforcement actions, among other measures. The data reflect only those jurisdictions that report to the SMEP: Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, Alberta, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories.

Total payment collection rates for child and spousal support payments were calculated by dividing the amounts received over the fiscal year by the total amounts that were due. A rate of 100% would mean that all of the money owed was received. The amounts received may contain arrears payments in addition to the amounts due during the fiscal year, particularly for the unknown beneficiary category.

For the purpose of the SMEP, compliance means that at least the amount expected in a month is received by the beneficiary. Cases in compliance may also be in arrears (money owing from earlier missed payments), since the determination of compliance is made only against the current amount due in a month. It is therefore possible for a support case to be in arrears but still be in compliance with total expected payments for a given month. The full compliance rate is the percentage of support cases for which payment was made in full.

Available tables: [35-10-0102-01](#) to [35-10-0111-01](#) and [35-10-0121-01](#) to [35-10-0123-01](#) .

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [3324](#).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; infostats@statcan.gc.ca) or Media Relations (statcan.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.statcan@statcan.gc.ca).