Promoting Family-Centered Child Support Policies

Insights from Minnesota, California, and Michigan

Submitted to:
The State of Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families

Submitted by: [a]
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Overview and Key Takeaways

When child support programs were originally established in 1975, one of their core purposes was to recoup the costs of providing public assistance to low-income custodial parents and their children.[1] Today's child support programs, however, are evolving toward more family-centered approaches that prioritize child and family well-being over strict cost recovery. This brief summarizes findings from family-centered assessments conducted in Minnesota, California, and Michigan and illustrates the overarching themes and policy implications that such assessments can uncover. The brief provides an overview of what these assessments examined and learned,[b] while a companion Resource Guide provides detailed guidance on how states can plan and conduct family-centered assessments of their own child support programs and policies.

Cross-cutting themes identified across states include the following:

- States are shifting toward family-centered policies that prioritize families over state reimbursement through pass-through policies, streamlined order modifications, and family-first distribution policies.
- Assignment and cooperation requirements often burden and confuse parents.
- Families frequently receive late, inconsistent, or overly technical information about policies, limiting parents' awareness of policies and options.
- Adversarial experiences combined with unclear rules serve to undermine trust and discourage engagement in child support programs.
- Specific populations face distinct barriers to accessing or using child support services due to (for example) language, literacy, and technology barriers; unstable housing; nontraditional employment and earnings; and incarceration.
- Early cross-program engagement among child support, public assistance, and corrections improves communication and policy implementation.
- Staffing shortages, antiquated data systems, and enforcement-based performance metrics can limit consistent, timely, family-centered practices.
- Agencies are working to balance staff discretion that prioritizes family well-being with consistent, transparent policy guidance.

State leaders also stressed the importance of focusing on factors that are most malleable and within their control, while engaging partners to inspire broader changes.

These lessons illustrate both the challenges and opportunities in redesigning child support around families. Taken together, the experiences from these assessments can show other states what family-centered assessments can reveal and demonstrate the value of conducting similar assessments in their own contexts.

[b] The findings and recommendations presented in this brief reflect the authors' analysis and interpretation and not the official positions of the state agencies involved, including the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families; the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Office of Child Support; and the California Department of Child Support Services.

Background

The nationwide child support program was established in 1975 under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act to secure child support payments from noncustodial parents and recover the costs of public assistance for their children.[2] While the program succeeded in expanding collections—caseloads rose from 5 million to nearly 20 million by the mid-1990s—its dual mission of supporting families while reducing government expenditures created ongoing tension.[3]

Families' participation in other social safety net programs, like TANF or Medicaid, has long required assigning their rights to child support to the state and cooperating with enforcement actions as a condition of benefits.[4] These requirements increased collections but often diverted funds away from families and burdened parents—particularly those with low incomes or facing barriers to steady employment.[5,6] Research shows that such policies have shaped parents' willingness to engage with the program, sometimes discouraging participation altogether.[7,8]

Over time, child support enforcement has expanded to include wage withholding, tax refund intercepts, license suspension, and other measures.[9,10] These tools have ensured regular payments for some families but have also raised concerns about unintended consequences, including strained parent–child relationships, reduced employment opportunities, and heightened stress for parents unable to pay.[11,12,13]

Recognizing these challenges, child support programs across the country are increasingly shifting toward family-centered approaches that emphasize providing support to children and parents rather than focusing primarily on cost recovery.[14,15,16] Recent reforms in Minnesota, California, and Michigan reflect this shift: Minnesota has begun reviewing order modification practices, as well as arrears management and prevention policies for parents with a history of incarceration,[17] California implemented a Former Assistance Arrears Pass-Through policy to send more dollars directly to families,[18] and Michigan is exploring how child support cost recovery policies affect families who receive public assistance.[19]

This project builds on these innovations by piloting a family-centered assessment model. The model is grounded in six principles:

- **Principle 1: Prioritizing a family-centered over a program-centered approach**: A family-centered assessment prioritizes family well-being, experiences, and perspectives in its analysis—in contrast with program-centered approaches, which emphasize cost, efficiency, or bureaucratic convenience.
- **Principle 2: Fostering child well-being within the context of family relationships**: A family-centered assessment identifies opportunities to promote holistic child well-being—including emotional, social, and economic well-being—while also recognizing co-parenting relationships, parenting preferences, and capacity.
- **Principle 3: Promoting the assumption of individual differences**: To respect individual differences, a family-centered assessment challenges rigid policies that assume uniform behavior and highlights program strengths that allow for adaptable procedures based on family circumstances.
- **Principle 4: Ensuring responsibility and burden proportional to resources**: A family-centered assessment identifies and addresses burdens that are disproportionate to an individual's available resources, or unequal burdens given similar resource levels (e.g., high child support orders for low-income payors).

- **Principle 5: Identifying opportunities for transparent policy and practice**: A family-centered assessment identifies opportunities for family engagement through transparent policies and practices, clear communication, and streamlined procedures that allow families to understand and utilize services effectively.
- **Principle 6: Promoting structured and evidence-based decision-making processes**: A family-centered assessment identifies and addresses policies and practices prone to error, bias, or discrimination by emphasizing guided or structured decision making to systematically consider family circumstances.

In addition to these principles, the model emphasizes a structured process of five key assessment activities: (1) setting the foundation by clarifying goals and assembling teams; (2) identifying family-centered considerations within current policies and practices; (3) engaging parents, caregivers, and staff to ensure that family voices are heard; (4) leveraging qualitative and quantitative data to understand program impacts; and (5) planning for change by translating findings into concrete improvements. Together, the principles and activities provide states with a practical framework to examine how child support policies and practices can better meet families' needs.

Highlights and Lessons Learned From Conducting Family-Centered Assessments

Table 1 summarizes cross-cutting findings from family-centered assessments of the child support programs in Minnesota, California, and Michigan. The themes in Table 1 provide a high-level picture of what emerged across states during the assessments.

TABLE 1. CROSS-CUTTING THEMES IDENTIFIED ACROSS ALL THREE ASSESSMENTS

Theme	Examples of How the Theme Emerged Across All Assessments
1) States are shifting toward family-centered policies that prioritize families over state reimbursement.	
	Minnesota. Policies include a streamlined child support order modification process for parents sentenced to be incarcerated for at least 180 days, arrears management and prevention strategies, and suppression of certain enforcement actions (e.g., driver's license suspension and credit bureau reporting) during and after incarceration. ***California.*** The Former Assistance Arrears Pass-Through policy was implemented in 2024, sending collections on state-owed arrears accrued during assistance to families that previously received assistance through California's version of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids program (CalWORKs). ***Michigan.*** The state launched several family-first distribution policies starting in 2023, including full pass-through of child support collections to families currently receiving cash assistance through their TANF program (the Family Independence Program).
2) Child support assignment and cooperation requirements can create burdens and confusion for families.	
	Minnesota. Although distinct from assignment, parents are often not directly involved in order modification and arrears decisions during incarceration, representing another process barrier for families. ***California.*** Many parents were unaware of assignment and cooperation rules when applying for cash assistance; some parents reported confusion about cooperation requirements, which may have influenced their decision to exit CalWORKs. ***Michigan.*** Both parents and staff cited assignment rules and adversarial cooperation processes as burdensome and confusing.
3) Communication about policies and benefits is often late, inconsistent, or overly technical, limiting families' ability to act on their rights.	
	Minnesota. Parents who become incarcerated are often not involved in requesting child support order modifications despite intentional efforts by Department of Corrections staff to inform them

	about their options during orientation and during pre-transition reentry planning. Parents often learned details through court orders. ***California.*** Parents commonly did not know what pass-through they would receive or when; state websites conveyed the new policy, but local child support agency websites varied, and communication often felt compliance-focused rather than explanatory. ***Michigan.*** Many parents were unaware of the child support program's assignment and cooperation requirements when applying for other benefits and only learned about them after applying. Parents also struggled to understand what they would receive after state reimbursement and reported long waits and fragmented systems.
4) Adversarial experiences, combined with unclear rules, undermine trust and discourage engagement in child support programs.	
	Minnesota. Limited engagement from either parent in decisions related to child support order modifications and arrears management strategies when a parent becomes incarcerated can limit parent buy-in and erode trust in the system***. California.*** Parents reported impersonal communication and difficulty getting clear answers; case management often prioritized rule compliance over education, eroding trust. ***Michigan.*** Administrative barriers (e.g., staffing shortages, long waits) created hurdles; many parents preferred payments go to their children rather than to state reimbursement.
5) Specific populations face distinct barriers to accessing or using child support services.	
	Minnesota. Parents with incarceration histories were not aware of their options in terms of modified child support orders, arrears management and prevention strategies, and other policies in place to respond to parents' changing circumstances and inability to pay child support during and after incarceration. Whether (and for how long) enforcement suppressions are in place varies by county and client. ***California.*** Examples of specific barriers included being unbanked (and unable to use checks), or dealing with challenges related to older age/limited technology access; having unstable housing, language/low-literacy needs, or nontraditional employment and earnings (gig economy); or belonging to a community that experiences barriers (i.e., immigrants and those with Tribal status). These factors can complicate access to pass-through support and other services. ***Michigan.*** In Michigan, the good-cause process for survivors of family violence can be administratively burdensome, and other structural barriers (e.g., scheduling, transportation, child care) make compliance difficult.
6) Early cross-program engagement among child support, public assistance, and corrections improves communication and policy implementation.	
	Minnesota. A Department of Corrections liaison and reentry support staff facilitate information-sharing and engagement during intake and pre-release; staff emphasized value in expanding cross-system training and partnerships. ***California***. Integration with CalWORKs (e.g., staff time/co-location, eligibility-worker trainings, and aligned materials) was identified as a key strategy to explain assignment, cooperation, and distribution rules clearly to families when applying for CalWORKS benefits. ***Michigan.*** Strengthening collaboration between the child support program and public assistance offices can ensure that both parents understand assignment and cooperation early in the benefits process.
7) Staffing shortages, antiquated data systems, and performance metrics can limit consistent, timely, family-centered practices.	
	Minnesota. Antiquated data systems made it difficult to confirm incarceration status, obtain contact/employment information, and process timely modifications. ***California.*** Local Child Support Agencies reported limited funding and staff and noted that enforcement-focused incentives and performance metrics at the federal level continue to emphasize enforcement over engagement. ***Michigan.*** Parents cited long wait times and fragmented systems; these operational constraints contributed to distrust and disengagement from the child support program.
8) Agencies balance flexible, case-by-case decisions with standardized policy guidance.	
	Minnesota. Counties relied on manuals, county attorneys, recent case law, and team-based decision making to standardize practice, yet discretion remains high—especially in "grey-area" cases—creating variation in policy implementation across counties. ***California.*** Local agencies had latitude in how they informed families about the arrears pass-through and cooperation-related supports, leading to

	uneven communication. Clear, user-tested publications, notices, forms, and tools were flagged as ways to help Local Child Support Agencies communicate complex policies more consistently. ***Michigan***. Partially structured noncooperation determination procedures can lead to inconsistent outcomes across counties.

The themes reflected in Table 1 set the stage for understanding how each activity of the family-centered assessment process played out in practice. The following sections describe each activity in greater detail, drawing on examples from the three state assessments to illustrate how these findings emerged.

Activity 1. Foundation Setting

The first activity in the family-centered assessment process focused on laying the groundwork for credible and actionable assessments. This stage was about more than just choosing a policy area; it was about ensuring that the work would be feasible given time and resources, relevant, and well-supported. Each state selected a focus policy issue that reflected pressing concerns or areas of recent reform in its child support program and then assembled an assessment team to guide the process. Teams consisted of internal and external personnel with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. These foundation-setting steps were essential to ensuring that the assessments were feasible and would generate findings that partners could use. Table 2 summarizes the overall assessment objectives and key policy areas examined for each state.

TABLE 2. ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES AND KEY POLICY AREAS

	Assessment Objectives	Priority Policy Areas
Minnesota	• Assess family centering in policy areas that could differentially affect—or are unique to—parents who are or were incarcerated and are/were concurrently ordered to pay support.	• Streamlined order modification policies and implementation during and after incarceration • Arrears management and prevention policies, practices, and decision making during and after incarceration • Policies and practices around parent engagement in the child support program during incarceration and post-release
California	• Assess family centering in cost recovery policies, with a focus on families with low incomes, including those who have currently or previously participated in CalWORKs.	• Cooperation: Requiring families on aid to cooperate with the child support office to establish parentage and enforceable child support orders • Assignment: Requiring families on aid to assign rights to child support to the state • Distribution: Specific distribution policies, including the distribution of current support to the state and the former assistance arrears pass-through to families • Family engagement: Efforts to engage families through policy communication, case management, and client feedback processes
Michigan	• Assess family centering in the state's approaches to cost recovery	• Requiring families on aid to assign rights to child support to the state

	and how polices affect families with low incomes.	• Requiring families on aid to cooperate with the child support office to establish paternity and enforceable child support orders • Specific distribution policies that prioritize child support distribution to previously or currently assisted families

Cross-state lessons

Despite their different policy foci, all three states emphasized similar priorities during foundation setting:

- Select a tractable focus area with clear connections to family-centered outcomes that could be addressed given available time and resources.
- Clarify who decides what and determine their roles and responsibilities; involve partners who implement policy and those who experience policy in practice.
- Allocating staff and analytic resources so the work could move forward despite competing demands
- Distinguishing between issues that could be addressed in the short term versus those requiring longer-term reform

A central lesson from state leads was the importance of focusing on factors that are most malleable and within the program's control. At the same time, leaders emphasized the value of educating and motivating partner agencies (such as TANF and corrections) to become change makers in their own systems, ensuring that family-centered reforms could be sustained and expanded over time.

Challenges observed across states

While foundation-setting created important momentum, assessment teams also encountered common challenges:

- In some cases, states risked selecting a focus area that was too broad or complex for the available time and resources. States managed this by narrowing the scope and sequencing work, with later assessment activities building on early findings.
- Given the range of organizations and partners involved in planning and conducting the assessments, it was sometimes unclear who was leading which activities, who would be involved in making decisions, and how the teams would reach consensus—especially when teams had different priorities and offered varying opinions. Assessment team roles need to be clearly communicated and agreed upon at an early stage of the planning process. Identifying a dedicated point of contact at each state helped to streamline communication and decision making.
- Limited capacity can create barriers to advancing qualitative and quantitative data collection. For example, assessment teams relied on trusted people who work in the community to meaningfully engage parents across all phases of the assessments. Some teams experienced limited or delayed access to linked administrative data across systems.
- Some assessment partners were initially hesitant to get involved, requiring additional effort to establish shared understanding of the assessment's goals. Frequent communication, co-designing

the assessment protocols, and joint interpretation of early findings helped establish more collaboration and buy-in from partners.

Taken together, these findings show that careful scoping, role clarity, and dedicated resources were critical in laying a foundation for the assessments. The next activity focused on examining state policies and procedures to identify where they supported or hindered family-centered practices.

Activity 2. Identifying Family-Centered Considerations

The second activity examined state laws, policies, and procedures to determine whether they supported or undermined family-centered practice. By reviewing policy manuals, forms, and guidance through a family-centered lens, states uncovered where policies appeared adversarial, inconsistent, or opaque.

Minnesota

In Minnesota, the child support program is state-run and county-administered. Each county has a local office responsible for interpreting and implementing federal and state policies to manage child support cases within that county. Given this structure, reviews of child support policy guidance and procedure manuals highlighted significant discretion in how county-specific child support offices handled order modification reviews and arrears management for parents who become incarcerated. Overall, Minnesota policies show a clear shift toward family-centered practice—including for parents with incarceration histories—through streamlined zero-orders modification processes absent a parent's ability to pay, arrears management and prevention policies, and suppression of certain enforcement acts like driver's license suspensions. However, the review underscored a lack of consistency in policy implementation at the county level, despite clear guidance at the state level.

California

A review of California's statewide policy manual, a parent handbook, a California Courts Self-Help Guide, and other policy documents identified several policies and practices that warranted further exploration. Examples included approaches for engaging both parents in decisions related to child support distribution and collection, the need for clear and consistent alignment between the Former Assistance Arrears Pass Through and debt reduction programs, and inconsistent or limited documentation related to cooperation requirements. California is exploring family impact and engagement performance measures to better align with family-centered goals.

Michigan

Michigan's documentation review included the Michigan IV-D Child Support Manual, various IV-D memoranda, an Understanding Child Support Handbook for Parents, and additional manuals and guidance. The review found that some aspects of the state's assignment and cooperation policies conflict with the six principles that guide family-centered policy making. Assignment decisions can divert payments to the state rather than to children, and cooperation processes can feel adversarial and be unevenly applied across families. In contrast, Michigan's family-first distribution changes (e.g., full pass-through of current support) prioritize a family-centered approach and improve transparency.

Cross-state lessons

Taken together, the policy reviews highlighted three issues that cut across states:

- **Inconsistent communication:** Families often received unclear or incomplete information about cooperation requirements, payment rules, and available benefits.

- **Significant staff discretion:** Workers in all three states had wide latitude in areas such as order modification, arrears management, noncooperation determinations, and good cause processes, leading to uneven treatment across cases and counties.
- **Lack of transparency for families:** Policies were often written in technical language or scattered across multiple documents, making it difficult for parents to navigate the system or advocate for themselves.

Table 3 summarizes how these themes appeared across Minnesota, California, and Michigan.

TABLE 3. FAMILY-CENTERED CONSIDERATIONS

Theme	Minnesota	California	Michigan
Communication of policies	The parent receiving non-public-assistance arrears payments has to agree to an arrears management strategy and cannot be coerced or required to comply.	Policies are described clearly in some places but missing on many Local Child Support Agency websites; cooperation guidance emphasized sanctions without explaining next steps. California has taken steps to improve access to policy information for more families through translated notices and community partnerships.	Cooperation requirements are explained inconsistently across application materials for Family Independence Program (TANF) benefits and policy documents.
Staff discretion in implementation	Staff use county-specific manuals to train case workers and apply policy consistently, and to fill gaps in state policies that leave a great deal of discretion.	Local agencies have latitude in how they inform families about the former assistance arrears pass through and related cooperation supports.	There is variation across counties in how noncooperation is determined; limited oversight.
Transparency for families	There is documented guidance for how parents can initiate order modification review requests, but actual involvement from either parent is often limited.	Parents lack clear information on arrears balances and pass-through eligibility.	Distribution rules are complex and hard for families to interpret.

Together, these documentation reviews underscored the importance of examining both the written policies and how families experience them in practice. The next activity turned to engaging parents and staff directly to better understand policy implementation.

Activity 3. Community Engagement

Community engagement is a critical component of a family-centered assessment process. Given the quick turnaround time for conducting the assessments and limitations on states' capacities, assessment teams engaged with communities primarily through qualitative data collection with three groups: parents receiving support, parents paying support, and child support agency staff.

This activity highlighted how hearing directly from families and staff was essential to ensuring that community voices shape data use, bring strengths and gaps to light, and inform change strategies. Each group provided unique perspectives on how child support policies and practices affect families.

Minnesota

The assessment team conducted a focus group with fathers who had been involved in the child support program and had an arrest or incarceration history to better understand their experiences with order modifications and arrears management processes. Key concerns raised by parents included:

- Being treated as a "case" with an enforcement-focused lens
- Not receiving credit or acknowledgement for adhering to child support orders
- The negative impacts of arrears accrual during incarceration, delays in order modifications, and drivers' license suspensions negatively impacting employment opportunities
- Challenges navigating required documents and paperwork with limited supports offered

The Minnesota assessment prioritized staff feedback and insights from county child support supervisors and managers given the county-administered structure of the program. Interviews focused on how county implementation of child support policy and practice can inform state-level policy making and programming decisions. Staff agreed there are several policies and supports available to parents who have been ordered to pay child support and are incarcerated. However, staff noted challenges in implementing the policies due to the need to balance family-centered decision making with standardized policies and procedures. Staff underscored the limited involvement of parents in order modification or arrears decision-making processes, suggesting opportunities to engage parents in more positive and meaningful ways in the future. Staff also identified a need to modernize existing data systems and bolster already strong cross-system partnerships.

California

Child Trends conducted focus groups with parents participating in both CalWORKs (either previously or currently) and child support, and via interviews with local child support agency directors. Parents strongly supported pass-through arrears payments, but many reported not hearing about this until after implementation. Parents reported limited communication—and a general feeling of disengagement—with the child support program, even though they found online resources helpful. Directors also highlighted both successes and challenges in communicating policy changes consistently. Staff discussed opportunities to improve family engagement and the quality of collaborations with CalWORKS, and identified several populations with low incomes who faced barriers to engaging with the child support program—for example, unbanked parents, immigrant families, Tribal families, families with unstable housing, older parents unfamiliar with technology, and parents working in the gig economy.

Michigan

Focus groups with parents ordered to pay child support and parents receiving child support explored experiences with cooperation and assignment policies from both perspectives. Many parents described these requirements as confusing and burdensome, often learning of them only after facing sanctions. Parents expressed support for family-first distribution policies, noting their desire for payments to benefit children directly rather than reimburse the state. Interviews with Friend of the Court staff (i.e., the arm of the court system that handles family law cases, including child support, custody, and parenting time orders), prosecuting attorney staff, and child support specialists reinforced these findings. Staff noted wide

variation in the application of noncooperation policies, reflecting local discretion, and cited staffing shortages and unclear guidance as barriers to providing consistent, clear explanations to parents.

Voices from the field
The quotes below illustrate the urgency and consistency of concerns raised by parents and staff:

Parent quotes

"… for the parents who's receiving it, it's a load off your shoulder. You got some financial help … That's what we are asking for—financial assistance, financial help, financial relief. So that's exactly what it would do. It'll probably actually help the child more so in the long run." –Parent ordered to receive support commenting on Michigan's pass-through policies

"Now all of a sudden my wife started getting a check for the money I was paying to the state … I definitely support that." –Parent ordered to pay support explaining how he learned about the new Former Assistance Arrears Pass Through policy in California

"So my two cents is there needs to be more education and I don't know if that's in the prison systems and I know they can't do it for everybody, but for Minnesota, can they offer some type of education while they're in the system on how to make that phone call and have that order at least temporarily stopped while they are incarcerated?" –Parent recommending more public awareness and parent education about parents' rights and processes for order modification

Staff quotes

"There's a lot of grey area in policy everywhere, but child support is almost all grey. We have policies, but every situation is so unique, that these policies don't always cover it." –Minnesota county child support administrator

"Parents are not given a whole lot of information and so if they don't have prior incarceration experience or know someone, they likely wouldn't know that support would be set to zero when they open a child support case. That information just isn't out there." –Minnesota county child support administrator

These perspectives highlight that, while families and staff share a desire for transparency and fairness, program-level constraints and inconsistent communication may undermine trust in the system.

Challenges observed across states
While community engagement provided essential insights, assessment teams faced several barriers related to this activity:

- **Recruiting representative parent voices**: Collaborating with local partners to support outreach to families helped mitigate this challenge. Leveraging administrative data to identify parents affected by the pass-through policy in California helped widen the pool of participants.
- **Parents' distrust of the child support program, which limited their openness during discussions**: Having an external partner not affiliated with the child support office conduct interviews and focus groups helped parents feel more comfortable being open and honest during the discussions, as did clear assurances about participants' privacy and confidentiality.
- **Navigating each state's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and human subjects research requirements**: This challenge was addressed through early planning, engagement of IRB specialists, and allocation of sufficient time for approvals.

- **Difficulty translating qualitative insights into actionable recommendations**: Sharing qualitative insights with assessment teams to jointly interpret the findings helped align the findings with each state's broader policy contexts. Combining qualitative and quantitative administrative data can help present a more complete assessment.

Together, these findings underscore the importance of seeking family and staff perspectives to better understand how policies are experienced. The next activity turned to the use of quantitative data to complement these qualitative insights and policy reviews.

Activity 4. Use of Quantitative Data

A core element of the family-centered assessment process is the use of quantitative data to complement qualitative perspectives from the community engagement step and policy reviews.

Developing quantitative data analysis plans early in the process is critical for ensuring feasibility, due to the time required for data sharing. Each state began by developing a structured analysis plan that identified key objectives, the populations of interest, and the data sources available for review. States then moved from planning to analysis, interpretation, and (ultimately) the application of findings to shape policy implications.

Development of data analysis plans

States began by identifying the key objectives for the data analysis:

Minnesota: Child support administrative data and Department of Corrections data will be matched to determine whether and how child support adversely affects those released from prison. Specific child support actions to be assessed include whether orders were modified while parents were incarcerated, whether there was any compromises of arrears, whether driver's license were suspended after release, and whether there were any credit bureau reporting incidents after release.

California: Administrative data are being analyzed to assess the degree to which permanently assigned arrears are passed through to families, what families are affected by the Federal Arrears Pass Through policy, and how they are affected.

Michigan: The main objective of Michigan's administrative data analysis is to determine whether alternative distribution and pass-through strategies have a more positive effect on people of color than traditional policies.

Administrative records were also used to analyze the characteristics of parents participating in two programs—Michigan's cash assistance Family Independence Program or Medicaid—who were referred to the Michigan child support program, and whether rates of noncooperation varied by key demographic characteristics of parents receiving support (such as age, marital status, race and ethnicity, and the age of the parents' oldest child). The results showed that parents receiving support referred from the Family Independence Program were younger or had younger children, and were more likely to be non-Hispanic Black than those referred from Medicaid only. Parents receiving support with young children (ages 5 and younger) showed the highest risk of being placed in noncooperation status.

Summary of quantitative findings

In general, the goal of the administrative data analyses across states is to provide additional evidence of differences in how families experience child support policies and how rules are applied for different

families, and to highlight potential concerns about bias in how rules are applied. A companion summary synthesizes these results across states.

Activity 5. Planning for Change

The final activity of the assessments focused on translating assessment findings into a documented plan of action. Table 4 summarizes the action plans and implications developed through each of the three assessments.

TABLE 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD SUPPORT POLICY AND PRACTICE

	Family-Centering Action Planning
Minnesota	1. Modernize Minnesota's data systems. 2. Formalize opportunities for cross-system partnership, communication, and training. 3. Establish statewide minimum transition periods for resetting orders and implementing enforcement actions. 4. Facilitate communication and information sharing between child support programs and parents who are incarcerated.
California	1. Improve engagement with parents who currently receive CalWORKs and their child support payors. 2. Systematically collect and document input from staff and families regarding strengths and challenges in policy implementation. 3. Provide new and/or strengthened statewide supports and resources for staff. 4. Identify and address families' barriers to accessing child support services. 5. Seek funding to promote family engagement and related innovations. 6. Design and administer family-centered performance measures.
Michigan	1. Improve communication to ensure that both parents understand assignment and cooperation in a timely manner. 2. Improve the complaint process and public education to make child support processes feel less adversarial and more meaningful to families. 3. Address deeper structural issues that may create barriers to parent engagement, including staffing challenges and fragmented coordination among programs. 4. Conduct quantitative data analysis to examine how new distribution options would distribute collections to children experiencing poverty.

Conclusion

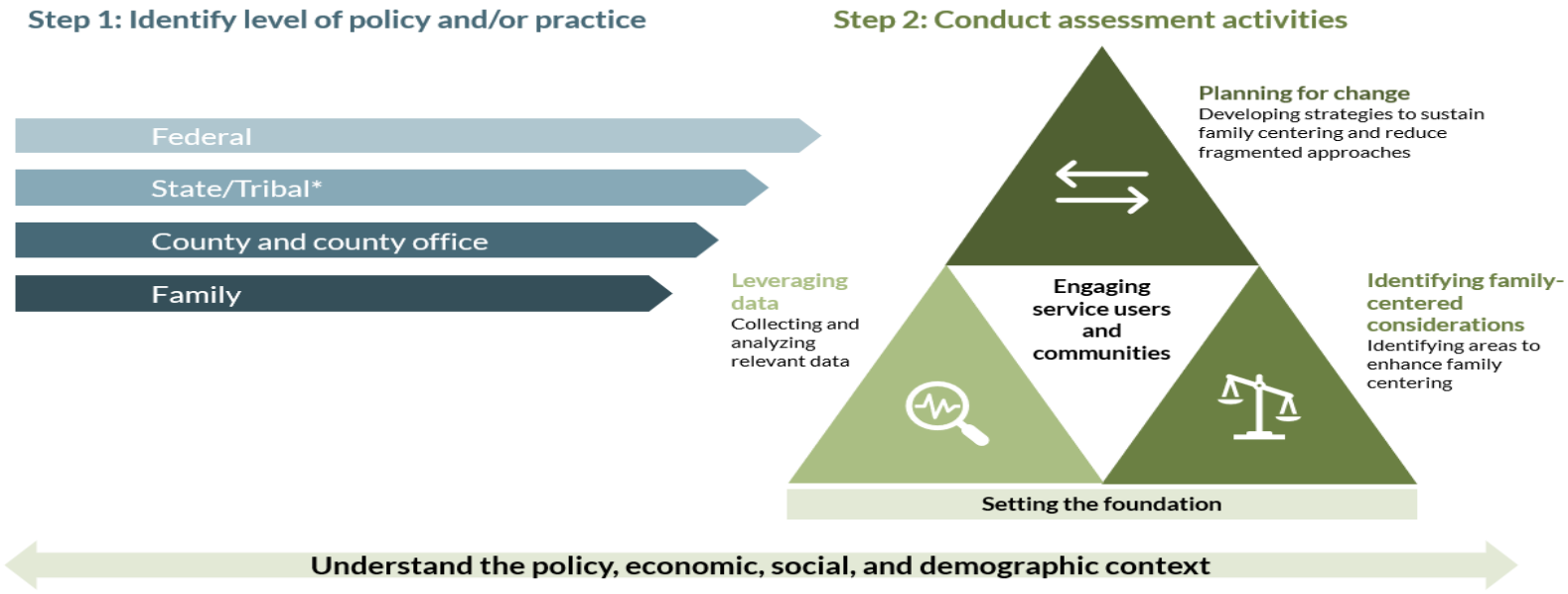
Family-centered assessments in Minnesota, California, and Michigan show that centering families in child support programs is both achievable and aligned with current efforts within each state. The assessments provided a structured process to examine policies, hear directly from families and staff, and use data to uncover differences in how families experience child support policies. Each state generated findings that highlighted opportunities for improvement in policy and program areas, including pass-through policies, assignment and cooperation rules, distribution policies, arrears management, order modifications, and family engagement policies. Together, the findings underscore the value of conducting family-centered assessments and involving families and staff in the process. They show that even within existing constraints, states can surface immediate opportunities to improve how families experience the child support system while also identifying areas for longer-term consideration. These lessons can offer other state administrators a glimpse of what family-centered assessments can reveal and demonstrate the usefulness of this approach.

Appendix A. Associated Resources

As part of this project, Child Trends developed several resources to guide state child support programs in conducting family-centered assessments. Together, these products provide both the conceptual foundation and practical tools for states interested in advancing family-centered policies and practices.

Conceptual Model

The *Family-Centered Program Assessment: A Resource Guide for Child Support Programs* outlines a conceptual model designed to help state child support agencies examine the degree to which their policies and practices center families. The model identifies five interconnected activities—setting the foundation, engaging communities, leveraging data, identifying family-centered considerations, and planning for change. Six guiding principles anchor these activities: prioritizing families over authority; centering child well-being; acknowledging varied family circumstances; aligning responsibility with resources; ensuring transparency; and using structured, evidence-based decision making. These principles clarify what it means to be family-centered in practice and ensure assessments are consistent and rigorous.



* As set forth in the U.S. Constitution, American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal Nations are sovereign entities that maintain a unique and legal, nation-to-nation relationships with the federal government. There are currently 61 Tribal child support programs funded by federal dollars (including Title IV-D of the Social Security Act) and their designation impacts how their policies are designed and implemented.[20]

Internal Case Studies of Three States

As part of the project, Child Trends worked with child support leaders in Minnesota, California, and Michigan to conduct state assessments using the model for family-centered assessment. Each case study highlighted how family-centered assessments can be applied to different policy areas—such as family-first distribution policies, former assistance arrears pass-through policies, and child support modification orders and arrears management for parents with incarceration histories. These state experiences provided real-world testing of the model and informed the cross-cutting lessons summarized in this brief.

Historical Context Brief

To situate current reforms in a broader policy and research landscape, Child Trends also developed a short research brief that reviews the historical context of the federal child support program. This background highlights how the program's enforcement-focused origins continue to shape families' experiences today, and why intentional family-centering is needed to improve trust, family-centeredness, and outcomes.

Together, these materials provide both conceptual guidance and practical examples for states seeking to conduct their own assessments of family-centering and to identify concrete opportunities for reform.

Appendix B. Glossary of Key Terms

This glossary provides definitions of key terms used throughout the brief. It is designed to help standardize terminology for readers and ensure clarity when describing child support policies, processes, and assessment methods.

Assignment
When a parent receiving public assistance legally transfers ("assigns") their rights to collect child support payments to the state. This allows the state to use collected payments to reimburse itself for benefits provided to the family.

Arrears
Past-due child support payments that have not been made. Arrears may accumulate over time and can include interest or penalties.

Arrears Management and Prevention
Policies and practices designed to reduce, forgive, or prevent the accumulation of unpaid child support debt.

Child Support Order Modification
The legal process of changing the amount of child support a parent is required to pay, usually because of changes in income, employment, or life circumstances (such as incarceration).

Cooperation Requirement
A rule requiring parents who receive public assistance to work with the child support program—for example, by providing information about the child's other parent—so the state can establish parentage and enforce support orders.

Cost Recovery
The practice of states retaining some or all child support payments to reimburse themselves for public assistance costs, rather than sending the full amount directly to the family.

Distribution Policies
Rules that determine how collected child support payments are divided between the family and the state. Some states now use "family-first distribution" policies that direct more of the funds to children and parents.

Family-Centered Approach

A family-centered approach is a programmatic strategy that prioritizes family well-being, experience, and voice in program design and implementation. This approach also focuses on providing program resources to families with the most significant barriers to engagement.

Family-First Distribution
A policy ensuring that child support payments go directly to families—even if the family has received public assistance—rather than being applied first to state reimbursement.

Good Cause
Waivers or exemptions from child support cooperation requirements to protect parents and children from harm. For example, in the context of domestic violence.

Pass-Through Policy
A rule that allows all or part of the child support collected on behalf of families receiving public assistance to be "passed through" directly to the family, rather than kept by the state.

Performance Metrics
Measures used to evaluate how well child support programs are operating. Historically, the metrics at the federal level have emphasized enforcement (such as dollars collected).

Quantitative Data
Numerical information (such as administrative records, payment histories, or demographic statistics) used to analyze child support policies and their effects on families. Quantitative data can help identify trends and patterns, and complement qualitative insights from parents and staff.

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