Advancing Equity in Child Support:

A Review of the Literature and State Equity Assessment Tools

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

Submitted by[1]*:*
Jacqueline Whearty, Ph.D.
Destinee Starcher, Ph.D.
Betelhem Merra Tegegne, M.Sc.
Jessica Pearson, Ph.D.

CPR center for policy research

1570 Emerson St., Denver, CO 80218 | Tel: (303) 837-1555 | centerforpolicyresearch.org

This research is supported by Grant Number HHS-2023-ACF-OCSE-FD-0022 from the Office of Child Support Services within the Administration for Children and Families, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Neither the Administration for Children and Families nor any of its components operate, control, are responsible for, or necessarily endorse this research (including, without limitation, its content). The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Administration for Children and Families and the Office of Child Support Services.

[1] **Suggested citation:** Whearty, J., Starcher, D., Tegegne, B. M., & Pearson, J. (2025). *Advancing equity in child support: A review of the literature and state equity assessment tools*. Center for Policy Research. Submitted to the State of Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Glossary ..... **iii**
Executive Summary ..... **vi**
Section 1: Introduction and Methodology **1**
Introduction 1
Methodology 3
Scope and Research Questions 3
Search Criteria 4
Publications Selected for Analysis 5
Limitations 5
Conclusion 6
Section 2: What is the Child Support Program and Whom Does it Serve? **7**
Overview of the Child Support Program 7
Program Evolution and Impact 9
Historical Evolution of Federal Child Support Policy 9
The Impact of Child Support for Families 9
Equity Challenges Rooted in the Evolution of Child Support Policy 10
Recent Changes Designed to Advance Equity 11
Families Currently Served by the Federal Child Support Program 13
Distribution of Parents by Gender, Race, and Ethnicity 15
Poverty and Near Poverty Income 17
Other Marginalized Populations 18
Conclusion 19
Section 3: Disproportionalities, Inequities, and Disparities in the Child Support Program **21**
Enrollment in the Child Support Program 21
Cooperation Requirements 21
Voluntary Enrollment 23
Order Establishment 24
Imputed Income and Default Orders 24
FEM Rule Changes 26
Child Support Compliance and Arrears Accumulation 26
Race, Employment, and Child Support Arrears 27
Order Burden 28
Interest Charges on Arrears 28
Public Benefits and Child Support Arrears 29
Consequences of Child Support Arrears 30
Preventing and Reducing Child Support Arrears 30
Child Support Enforcement 31
Administrative Enforcement Actions 31
Civil Contempt and Incarceration 33
Consequences of Enforcement 35
FEM Rule Changes 36
Modification of Child Support Orders 37

Modifications for the General Population 37
Modifications following Incarceration 38
Interactions with Parents and Addressing their Needs 41
Parent Interactions with Child Support Staff 41
Parent Interactions with Legal Staff 43
Addressing Parents' Needs through Employment Support and Parenting Time Help 44
Conclusion 46
Section 4: Review of State Equity Assessment Tools 47
Background Information: Equity Statements and Action Plans 48
Basic Structure of Equity Assessment Tools 55
Development and Application Logistics 58
Who Are the Populations Addressed? 59
What Is the Process for Engaging the Community? 60
Other Tools for Analyzing Disparities in the Child Support Program 61
Federal Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation, n.d.) 61
Wisconsin Disproportionality Index (Renno, 2021) 64
Similarities and Differences 65
Summary, Conclusions, and Future Research 65
Section 5: Recommendations to Advance Equity in the Child Support program 67
Improve Communication, Service Provision, and Procedural Justice 67
Provide Employment Programs and Address Employment Barriers 68
Base Orders on Ability to Pay and Conduct Research on In-Kind Support 69
Eliminate Interest and Expand Debt Forgiveness 70
Eliminate Interest on Child Support Arrears 70
Debt Forgiveness 70
Reduce the Use of Punitive Enforcement Practices for Low-Income Parents 71
Reduce the Use of Driver's License Suspension as an Enforcement Mechanism 71
Reduce the Use of Incarceration as an Enforcement Mechanism 72
Simplify and Expedite the Modification Process 73
Simplify and Expedite the Modification Process for the General Population 73
Simplify and Expedite the Modification Process for Incarcerated Parents, Specifically 73
Reassess Cooperation Requirements and Implement Full Child Support Pass-through 74
Reassess Cooperation Requirements 74
Implement Full Pass-through 75
Future Directions 76
Standardize Measures of Race and Ethnicity 76
Assess the Differential Impact of Policies, Programs, and/or Processes on Various Groups 76
Conclusion 77
References 78

GLOSSARY

Child support program. Program established through Title IV-D of Social Security to collect child support and distribute it to custodial families. The child support program—often referred to as "IV-D"—is a partnership between federal, Tribal, state, and local agencies (OCSS, 2023b).

Custodial parent. The broadest term, used to describe the parent or respective party who receives child support. Historically, the term "custodial parent" has been used in child support and in federal regulation, and "custodial" and "resident" parent and "obligor" are often used in research. However, because these terms ignore cases where a parent with joint physical custody could also receive child support, many of the government child support programs participating in the consortium to advance equity have adopted terminology such as "parent receiving support."

Difference. The broadest term**,** used to describe variation in outcomes for various groups (Kim et al., 2024). Difference is synonymous with inequality (McDaniel, 2017).

Disparity. A difference or inequality in a treatment or outcome that may arise from unjust or unfair processes (with or without an established causal link). Differences that are not due to that group's need, eligibility, or preference, but are instead unfair and unjust (McDaniel, 2017; Kim et al., 2024).

Disproportionality. When a group is underrepresented or overrepresented in some outcome relative to that group's position in the general population (Chen & Harper, 2023; Kim et al., 2024).

Equity. The consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities (OCSS, 2023a).

Equity assessment. Systematic examination of available data and expert input on how various groups are (or will likely be) affected by a policy, program, or process. They aim to minimize unintended adverse outcomes and maximize opportunities and positive outcomes (ASPE, 2022).

Inequality. The broadest term**,** used to describe measurable differences in outcomes between groups (Kim et al., 2024; McDaniel, 2017). Inequality is synonymous with difference (McDaniel, 2017).

Inequity. A difference, caused by systemic issues, that is unfair, unjust, and avoidable (McDaniel, 2017).

Noncustodial parent. Parent responsible for paying child support. Historically, the terms, "noncustodial parent" has been used in child support and in federal regulation, and both "noncustodial" and "nonresident" parent are often used in research. However, because these terms ignore cases where a parent with joint physical custody could also pay child many of the government child support programs participating in the consortium to advance equity have adopted terminology such as "parent paying support."

Pass-through. Considered to be any amount of child support collections, from current monthly support or arrears, the states decide to directly forward to families participating in TANF. The states can do this in lieu of retaining the collection for their own keepsake (Turetsky & Acevedo, 2024a).

Poverty guidelines. Updated annually, the poverty guidelines are used to determine income eligibility for Medicaid, SNAP, and other programs. The 2025 federal poverty guidelines (FPG) are as follows: $15,650 per year for one person, $21,150 for two persons, and $26,650 for three persons (ASPE, 2025). These are the amounts used for the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia.

Poverty thresholds. Updated annually by the U.S. Census Bureau, poverty thresholds are more detailed than the guidelines. They are mostly used for statistical purposes and calculated using family compositions and ages (ASPE, 2025). Poverty thresholds for years 1979 through 2024 are available here.

Race and ethnicity. Race refers to the groups humans are often divided by based on similar physical traits due to a shared ancestry (e.g., White, Black). Ethnicity refers to the groups of those who share a common cultural background such as language, traditions, religion, or otherwise (e.g., Hispanic, Non-Hispanic). The federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) minimum categories for race and ethnicity include:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White

Additional details on the OMB categories can be found in Section 2.

Rural. The U.S. Census classifies anything not urban as rural.

Urban. The U.S. Census defines urban areas as those which contain 50,000 or more people or urban clusters, which have at least 2,500 people but fewer than 50,000 residents (Ratcliffe, 2022).

Executive Summary

Section 1: The Center for Policy Research (CPR) conducted a review of published child support literature that focuses on equity in the child support program. It was prepared as part of a grant awarded by the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) to the Minnesota State Department of Children, Youth, and Families to advance the fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals.[2] The review addresses research findings on racial and ethnic disproportionalities or disparities in the child support program, how some states systematically examine the treatment of various groups using equity assessment tools, and what the literature suggests might be done to advance equity in the child support program. To conduct this assessment, CPR identified and reviewed relevant publications from 2014 through 2024 that appeared in online literature review services, books and book chapters, and additional publications conducted by universities, major thinktanks, and government agencies. In all, CPR selected and analyzed nearly 200 child support publications and gathered and reviewed equity assessment tools from four states. Although the OCSS funding opportunity listed many populations of interest, CPR's review focuses almost exclusively on the groups that have been the subject of child support research to date: Black, Latino, and other persons of color as well as persons affected by persistent poverty. Necessarily, given the interactions between race, class, and income, CPR's literature review addresses the intersectionality of many of these populations.

Section 2: The complexity of the child support program (i.e., IV-D program) makes it difficult to pinpoint where inequities exist, for whom they are occurring, and how to make the program more equitable. These complexities include the program's historical mission to obtain financial support from the noncustodial parent and reimburse the government for public assistance paid to the family; its administration, operation, and governance across 54 states and territories and in 63 Tribal Nations; and the many partnerships, rules, laws, and guidelines to which it is subject. Another complexity is the program's dramatic evolution through successive federal laws that vastly expanded its authority, scale, scope, and performance but eventually generated concerns about the impact of its aggressive enforcement actions on low-income noncustodial parents and led to the issuance of newer federal rules that attempt to address these problems. In point are the Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization (FEM) Rule of 2016 and the Employment and Training Services for Noncustodial Parents in the Child Support Program (NCP Employment) Rule that became effective January 1, 2025. Respectively, they aim to generate evidence-based orders by reducing the use of income imputation to establish orders, requiring the consideration of the noncustodial parent's subsistence needs, and reducing the growth of

[2] This research is supported by Grant Number HHS-2023-ACF-OCSE-FD-0022 from the Office of Child Support Services within the Administration for Children and Families, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Neither the Administration for Children and Families nor any of its components operate, control, are responsible for, or necessarily endorse this research (including, without limitation, its content). The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Administration for Children and Families and the Office of Child Support Services.

arrears during incarceration (FEM Rule) and to promote payment by allowing child support agencies to help unemployed and under-employed noncustodial parents with job services (NCP Employment Rule). Many advocates, child support professionals, and policymakers urge program administrators to continue to adopt culturally responsive, family-centered policies and services.

Although the federal and most state child support agencies do not track and report on the race and ethnicity of custodial and noncustodial parents in their program, some information is available in national surveys. According to the U.S. Census, which follows guidelines for collecting and categorizing race and ethnicity established by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the racial and ethnic profile of custodial parents that receive the services of the child support program closely resembles the profile of custodial parents in the nation in which nearly half (45% versus 47%) are non-Hispanic White; 24–25% are Hispanic; and 23%–24% are Black. Studies find that many families in the child support program live in poverty and use public benefit programs. Thus, in 2017, 33% of custodial parents in the child support program lived in poverty, another 28% lived near poverty, and 51% of their children received at least one public benefit. Recipients of TANF tend to be women (84%), single parents (92%), and to identify as Hispanic (33%) or Black (31%). Although the income of noncustodial parents tends to be higher than custodial parents, many of them also live in poverty (18%) or near poverty (36%). And like patterns for custodial parents, there is strong overlap between race and ethnicity and poverty. There are few to no publications on the other populations prioritized for this study (i.e., members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTIQ+) persons; person with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequity). Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that many of these populations are more likely to have low incomes. Therefore, many of the experiences issues faced by low-income parents in the child support program are those of the prioritized populations.

Section 3: The following literature review is organized around the key actions taken in child support cases.

Cooperation and custodial mothers' involvement in the child support program: Two studies of the racial composition of TANF recipients in state child support programs find that TANF recipients are disproportionately likely to be Hispanic or Black. As a condition of receiving cash TANF assistance, custodial parents must assign their right to child support to the state and cooperate with the child support program. Research finds that the cooperation requirement leads to loss of autonomy. The child support assignment requirement is associated with reduced child support income due to payments that are kept by the state and reduced payments by noncustodial parents who may not see the reason to comply with orders that will not directly benefit their families. Researchers in Illinois also found that custodial parents of

color who enrolled in TANF were disproportionately sanctioned for noncooperation when compared with White families.

Establishing child support orders: Several studies find that child support generates orders that are perceived by low-income noncustodial parents of color to be unfair and unrealistic. Another study finds that orders that are set by default and based on imputed income are common, especially among low-income parents of color who are much more likely to be unemployed and lack documented earnings. Still other research finds that noncustodial parents of color experience disproportionately high orders relative to their earnings even though their average income is only 65% of earnings of White males. Some of these issues are addressed in the 2016 FEM Rule, but, to date, there has been little research on compliance with the Rule and its impact in the states.

Arrears accumulation: There is substantial literature on the accumulation of child support debt which is disproportionately held by noncustodial parents with the lowest income and is tied to their higher rates of unemployment, the use of imputed income in setting orders, and the high ratio of order amounts relative to earnings. Studies conducted in Wisconsin and New York City find differential patterns by race. Thus, researchers report that Black noncustodial parents make child support payments regularly when they have sufficient income but fall into arrears when they lack income; Black fathers are more likely to have criminal legal debt, child support debt and both, or dual debt; increases in child support burden (high orders relative to income) are associated with declines in rates of compliance and increases in debt; debt obligations are more severe for noncustodial parents whose children receive public benefits and are required to cooperate with child support; child support owed to the state is three times higher for Black noncustodial parents than White noncustodial parents in Wisconsin; and Black and Hispanic noncustodial parents are twice as likely to owe arrears than White noncustodial parents in New York. State interest charges on unpaid child support range from no interest to 12%, and high-interest charges contribute to debt. A Wisconsin study finds that the reduction in state interest charges on arrears from 1 to 0.5% was associated with increases in payments and reductions in debt, especially for Black noncustodial parents. In 2021, Illinois dropped interest on unpaid child support because of its disproportionate impact on low-income families and people of color. An evaluation of systematic and innovative programs to compromise state-owed arrears accumulated during incarceration, unemployment, or disability that engaged Black noncustodial parents almost exclusively and incentivized the payment of current support found that they yielded significant improvements in post-program payment patterns. Finally, some research also documents the negative effects of child support arrears on noncustodial parents. This includes food insufficiency, housing difficulties, limited access to health care and other hardships, reduced ability to work and have stable earnings, poor physical health, and increased depressive symptoms.

Child support enforcement: Quantitative studies that examine racial and ethnic disproportionalities in the use of several administrative enforcement tools in Wisconsin find that Black noncustodial parents are overrepresented relative to their White counterparts and are five times more likely to receive any enforcement action relative to their representation in the population. In a similar fashion, Minnesota researchers find that American Indian and Black noncustodial parents are far more likely to have their driver's licenses suspended than their White counterparts. Researchers have consistently shown that relative to their White counterparts, noncustodial parents are disproportionately held in civil contempt for child support nonpayment, Black noncustodial fathers are incarcerated for nonpayment at a rate that is 10 times higher than other noncustodial fathers, and differential incarceration for nonpayment continues even after accounting for child support debt owed and parents' employment characteristics. As in other areas of child support practice, writers attribute the elevated use of civil contempt and incarceration with delinquent noncustodial parents of color to the assumption that they are unwilling to find employment and ignore the structural barriers they face that include limited access to higher education, reduced employment opportunities and gaps in wages at every education level. Multiple writers dismiss aggressive enforcement as wholly ineffective with no- or low-income noncustodial parents of color who lack stable employment and/or financial resources. Indeed, writers argue that it has the opposite effect, exacerbating their employment situation, reducing their ability to repay their debt, worsening their compliance, and decreasing their later engagement in legitimate employment. On a positive note, research in Wisconsin following the adoption of the FEM Rule of 2016, finds a decline in the use of more severe enforcement actions like license suspension and contempt proceedings, although use of these enforcement tools remains more common in smaller counties and with low-income noncustodial parents.

Modification of child support orders: Despite the benefits of changing orders to match the noncustodial parent's financial situation, order modification remains rare, and one study finds that Black noncustodial parents have particularly low rates. The limited research finds that streamlining the process can increase the rate of modification activity. Although there has been no research on whether lower modification thresholds affect the frequency or number of modifications, particularly among parents of color, there is more research on modifications during and after incarceration. As a result of the FEM Rule of 2016, incarcerated noncustodial parents are legally able to request a modification of their support orders but many are unaware of their rights to do so, lack the legal capacity to make such requests, and learn about their options while they are in prison where it is especially difficult for them to obtain information and help. Projects that have tried to increase the number of modification requests among incarcerated noncustodial parents in Washington and Texas by distributing simplified materials about this option have found that it produced substantial increases in rates of modification activity. Still other writers suggest that states automatically abate or adjust orders upon incarceration, which currently happens in only a limited number of states. A qualitative analysis

in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, found that using a systematic, proactive approach to modify the orders of incarcerated noncustodial parents had the effect of reducing their arrears and improving post-release payments.

Interactions with and addressing the needs of parents: Researchers report that many noncustodial parents, especially those of color, say that their interactions with the child support agency leave them feeling invisible and worthless, with a marginalized family role. Wisconsin research with low-income noncustodial parents of color reveals that they frequently failed to understand the child support process and viewed it as unfair and felt hopeless, all of which discouraged them from seeking help. Accordingly, some researchers have underscored the importance of engaging in clearer communication with parents and adopting outreach and engagement strategies that are informed by principles of procedural justice, practices that are at odds with the high caseloads and automated processes that characterize the child support program. Researchers have identified some of these same issues in family court systems that handle child support enforcement cases. Once again, many noncustodial parents report being viewed and treated as criminals rather than parents in need of assistance, and court-based ethnologies from Michigan and Wisconsin argue that Black families are systematically disadvantaged due to entrenched racial bias, cultural misunderstandings, and the criminalization of poverty. Exacerbating these perceptions is the failure of the child support program to provide supportive services dealing with employment and parenting time, issues that are both highly relevant for low-income parents of color, are frequently not addressed, and have been shown in pilot projects to improve perceptions of fairness, increase child support payments, and produce other positive outcomes.

Section 4: In recent years, Colorado, Minnesota, California and Michigan have developed or are in the process of developing or refining equity assessment tools to assess how various groups, especially those believed to be facing inequality or disparity, are affected by a policy, program, or process. Developed to advance equity in state programs, equity assessment tools often have the following components: analysis of data disaggregated by race and ethnicity or the priority population to identify potential disparities, a review of policies and procedures to identify possible inequities, and engagement of populations believed to be affected by a possible inequity. Parent councils are used as a vehicle to engage parents in both Colorado and Michigan and are being developed in California and Minnesota. Equity assessments have been conducted in Minnesota to assess the impact of proposed child support guidelines changes on parents of color. The Colorado tool has been used to assess whether a proposed policy change to the use of electronic signatures on administrative orders and proposed policy clarification to county options of arrears compromise would have an inequitable impact on parents of color. Overall, however, these tools are still in their formative stages of development and as more states craft and use equity assessments in their child support programs, it will be important to analyze and assess them.

Section 5: Although many of the structural barriers that low-income, parents of color experience in American society require remedies that go beyond the scope of child support policies and practices, CPR's literature review identifies many recommended actions that promise to reduce certain inequities in the child support program and improve the treatment that parents of color experience. In light of the program's historic focus on performance measurement to stimulate its dramatic growth and improvement, the child support community should consider augmenting the five congressionally mandated performance measures under which it has operated since 1998 to include a new performance measure that reflects the goal of improving equity and advancing the fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals. Some recommendations based on the literature review follow.

Improve communication, service provision, and procedural justice: Child support programs should pursue early first contacts with parents before relationships have become adversarial, use behaviorally informed communication strategies to ensure that parents understand the child support process and what is expected of them, and deliver enhanced services that include expedited review of child support orders, order modifications if appropriate, temporary abeyance of enforcement tools, and reductions of state-owed arrears.

Provide employment programs and parenting-time services: The most common recommendation for reducing inequities in the reviewed literature is to provide job programs that address barriers to employment. The NCP Employment Rule is an important step in this direction, and it will be important to monitor the extent to which state and tribal child support agencies opt to establish programs, the racial and ethnic composition of the parents they engage, and the outcomes they yield. Another important area of needed service expansion deals with providing support for visitation and parent-time agreements which are currently unallowable activities in the child support program. As a result, unmarried parents, who are disproportionately parents of color, typically receive a child support order without attention to parenting time and must initiate a legal action in a separate court to address it.

Base orders on ability to pay and conduct research on in-kind support: Many scholars recommend that the child support program base orders on the ability to pay, avoid imputing earnings and support the modification of orders during incarceration. Fortunately, the FEM rule of 2016 requires many of these recommendations. It will be important for agencies and researchers to monitor the extent to which these practices are adopted, and income imputation is abandoned or reduced. A second, less common recommendation deals with recognizing in-kind support. Pilot projects and evaluations are needed on the use and impact of in-kind support including the extent to which these options are used by various racial and ethnic groups and the outcomes they yield.

Eliminate interest charges on child support arrears: The interest that states charge on unpaid support is an important factor in driving the growth of arrears. Rates range from no charge to a 12% charge with a few states determining it annually based on market factors. Research conducted in Wisconsin found that dropping interest charges from 1% to 0.5% was associated with a significant decline in monthly debt accumulation by noncustodial parents, especially Black men. It also led them to increase their payments, although not as much as was exhibited by their White counterparts. In 2021, Illinois dropped interest charges because it disproportionately affects low-income families and people of color.

Implement systematic programs to forgive and compromise state-owed arrears: Although 45 states and the District Columbia have policies that allow compromise of state-owed arrears, most initiatives are limited in scale and operate on a case-by-case basis with case selection and treatment at the discretion of the caseworker or have terms that typically go beyond the capacity of most low-income noncustodial parents. Only 10 states have more "robust and innovative" programs that are agency-wide, have established criteria for eligibility (e.g., debt accumulated during incarceration or unemployment), and treatments that incentivize the payment of current support. An evaluation of Black and Hispanic noncustodial parents served in three of these programs found that their payment of current support increased significantly during and following program participation. Several writers recommend the implementation of systematic debt compromise programs, and some urge exploration of forgiveness of arrears owed to the family, which comprise 80% of child support debt.

Reduce the use of punitive enforcement practices with low-income parents: Researchers find the disproportionate use of all administrative enforcement actions with noncustodial parents of color in Wisconsin; researchers in Minnesota reach similar conclusions about driver's license suspension; and studies consistently find that noncustodial parents of color are disproportionately held in civil contempt for child support nonpayment when compared to their White counterparts, while Black noncustodial fathers are disproportionately incarcerated for nonpayment, even after accounting for child support debt owed and parents' employment characteristics. Not only are punitive enforcement measures totally ineffective with parents who lack the ability to pay, but Wisconsin data shows that their imposition leads to subsequent employment, earnings, and compliance patterns that are worse for noncustodial parents of color than for White noncustodial parents who are exposed to sanctions. Driver's license suspension is viewed as particularly detrimental for low-income men of color because it is a barrier to employment and leads to reciprocal processes of child support debt and incarceration that further undermines the ability to become employed. There is more support for approaches that require workers to turn on suspensions and other remedies after they have determined that there is an ability to pay and they have attempted to negotiate a settlement payment or plan with the noncustodial parent. A pilot project conducted in Minnesota to reduce disparities in the driver's license suspension process found that early interventions with

delinquent noncustodial parents increased payments, suppression of license suspension, and connection to arrears management services among Black noncustodial parents in comparison to White parents. The FEM Rule requires states to screen noncustodial parents and determine their ability to pay before pursuing civil contempt. Research conducted in Wisconsin examining license suspension and civil contempt prior to and following passage of the Rule found less frequent use of severe actions like license suspension and contempt proceedings in the post-Rule time period, although the decline was less pronounced in smaller counties. Qualitative findings revealed a shift toward engagement with staff highlighting early intervention and communication as more effective approaches.

Simplify and expedite the modification process: An evaluation of a behaviorally informed demonstration project in Ohio finds that simplification of the review form completed by parents and other streamlining activities increased the percentage of completed order reviews. These communication approaches should be utilized more widely. Research on the barriers to and process for modifying orders for incarcerated noncustodial parents during and following their imprisonment finds that few are aware of their right to modify, most lack the capacity to make such requests, and virtually all are unable to get information or help. Once again, behaviorally informed demonstration projects to increase modification requests among incarcerated noncustodial parents in Washington and Texas found that the development and distribution of simple material on the modification option and process increased both the rate of modification requests and successful awards. The FEM Rule requires child support agencies to review and adjust orders or notify parents of their right to review when the parent is incarcerated for 180 days or more. In addition, some states automatically adjust or abate support when the noncustodial parent is incarcerated. Given the extreme challenges to effective outreach, communication, and assistance, states should be encouraged to adopt automatic procedures to adjust or abate support when noncustodial parents are incarcerated.

Reassess the cooperation requirement and implement full child support pass-through: As a condition of benefit eligibility, custodial parents who receive TANF are required to cooperate with child support and help the agency establish paternity, a child support order, and sign over their rights to child support. According to some writers, cooperation deprives custodial parents of autonomy in determining whether they want to apply for child support. Researchers in Illinois have found that Black custodial parents are disproportionately sanctioned for child support noncooperation when compared with White custodial parents. And a cost-benefit analysis in Kansas of a child support cooperation requirement for SNAP found no benefit to families or to the government. While these findings have led some writers to recommend dropping the cooperation requirement, others contend that the absence of a mandate may increase parental conflict, reduce economic security, and increase taxpayer costs. These differing views have led authors to recommend reassessing the cooperation requirement for TANF and other public benefits and possibly shifting away from it. To contrast, there is a great

deal of consensus that the program should distribute all collected child support to families and that it should stop keeping all or even a portion of the child support paid by the noncustodial parent to help repay the state for the costs of public assistance. Some researchers say that cost recovery reduces the incentive for noncustodial parents to pay support and may generate a preference for informal support among custodial parents. In contrast, research conducted in Colorado, the first state to pass-through all current monthly support, found that total current collections for TANF families rose dramatically after the first year of its implementation. In addition, earlier evidence from Wisconsin's pilot of full pass-through showed causal evidence of increases in paternity establishment and reductions in child maltreatment. To date, six states have implemented full pass-through of either current or former support and the seventh (Illinois) is doing full pass-through for both. Research is needed on how these policies affect different racial and ethnic groups and the variations for states that have adopted new pass-through policies for current versus former TANF cases and the one state that has adopted both types.

Standardize methods of measuring equity in the child support program: Two key recommendations exist to standardize methods of identifying and measuring equity in the child support program. First, OCSS should adopt the OMB race and ethnic categories to be able to evaluate racial equity in the child support program. Central to the many programmatic and research recommendations noted above is the need to assess the experiences of various ethnic and racial groups in the child support caseload and monitor the impact of existing and new policies and programs on them. Thus, the first and necessary step is the need to standardize the definition and methods of identifying various racial groups, ethnicities, and other identities that are of interest to the child support program and utilize them with all parents in the program. To accomplish this, it is recommended that OCSS adopt the classification of identities released by OMB and presented in Section 2 of this report. In addition to being extensively vetted, the OMB definitions are widely used and are now required for all new federal record keeping or reporting requirements that include racial or ethnic information. Since the utility of this new classification system is dependent upon its use by all state and Tribal programs, it is recommended that information on racial and ethnic characteristics of parents in the child support program be treated as required fields and collected on a routine basis. And to further ensure compliance with providing this vital information, it is recommended that OCSS incentivize state and Tribal child support programs to do so. Second, we must systematically assess the impact or potential impact of policies, programs, and/or processes on various groups to minimize unintended adverse outcomes. Equity assessment activities are in their infancy. As states craft new equity assessment tools and use them to examine various child support issues, states should communicate to the child support community about the findings that they generate, the insights they provide on racial and ethnic disparity, the lessons learned from the assessment process, whether the results translate into actions and advance equity for the

populations that they aim to support, and how future assessment activities can be strengthened.

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the Minnesota State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DYCF) was awarded a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) to strategically advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in the child support program.[3] Equity, as defined in the OCSS funding opportunity, is shown in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1: OCSS Definition of Equity

> The term "equity" means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, Latino, Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTIQ+) persons; person with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.
>
> from U.S. DHS Office of Child Support Services (2023a) *Advancing Equity in Child Support HHS-2023-ACF-OCSE-FD-0222.* P. 4

Specifically, the grant (OCSS, 2023a) is dedicated to examining child support policies and services to:

- Assess disproportional access to child support services;
- Examine child support order alignment with parents' ability to pay;
- Improve child support services to customers; and
- Share promising practices and recommendations to promote equitable access to child support services.

One of the core project activities of this grant is to conduct a literature review aimed at identifying ways to mitigate inequities in the child support program (OCSS, 2023a). As such, the major purpose of the current study is to review child support publications for information that could be useful toward advancing equity (i.e., the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities) in the child support program. This literature review focuses on equity in the child support program for the population specifically named in the OCSS grant opportunity: Black, Latino, Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons affected by persistent poverty. CPR recognizes the intersectionality of many of these populations. For example, given the interactions between race, class, and income,

[3] HHS OCSS # 90FD0266-01-00.

people of color have a higher rate of poverty, as well as limited socioeconomic opportunities (e.g., Brinig, 2017).

Equity advancement in the child support program is particularly complicated for several reasons:

1. Child support policies and actions can affect both the custodial family and the noncustodial parent, and their equity impacts and solutions may differ.
2. Issues of equity for both custodial and noncustodial parents are inextricably intertwined with poverty and low-income issues that many[4] parents and families in the child support program face.
3. The terms used to understand and advance equity (e.g., difference, disproportionality, disparity, inequity) are complex. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, they may represent independent or interconnected processes. Three relevant examples are as follows:
    a. The differences in the percentages of unmarried mothers who identify as Black (69%) compared to other races and ethnicities (Wildsmith et al., 2018) may lead to racial differences (unrelated to racial inequities) in the rates of paternity establishment.
    b. The differences between divorced parents and never-married parents who receive help to establish child support orders might not necessarily indicate inequity (i.e., unfairness) in order establishment. Instead, it could simply reflect that never-married parents may have a greater need for assistance, for example, because they are less likely to have gone through formal legal processes where child support orders are often handled.
    c. The differences in income between custodial parents who are required, compared with not required, to participate in the public child support program are not inequities by themselves. However, the systemic policy differences imposed on families who face mandatory cooperation (e.g., pass-through and distribution policies) create inequities and disparities in income for these families. These distinct, yet interconnected, processes are highlighted further in Exhibit 2.

[4] It would be a misnomer to characterize all noncustodial parents and custodial parents in the child support program as impoverished or low-income. Unlike most ACF programs, child support services are not means-tested. Those receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) do not pay a fee to receive child support services. Non-TANF families may have to pay a nominal fee.

Exhibit 2: Definitions for and Distinctions between Differences, Inequities, and Disparities.

Term	Definition	Key Idea	Example
Difference	Any difference between groups, regardless of cause.	Descriptive difference (neutral).	Custodial parents enrolled in TANF have lower income than those who are not enrolled in TANF.
Inequity	A difference that is unfair, unjust, and avoidable.	Unfair systemic cause.	Custodial parents who face mandatory cooperation with child support are subjected to cost recovery policies, whereas those without mandatory cooperation are not.
Disparity	A difference that remains after adjusting for relevant factors, such as need.	Inequity reflected in outcomes.	Custodial parents who face mandatory cooperation receive lower proportions of the child support the noncustodial parent pays as a result of their involvement with TANF.

The current literature review is organized into four sections. The current section (Section 1) provides an introduction to the document and outlines the literature review methodology. Section 2 provides an overview of the child support program and the families served by it. Organized by the key functions and stages of the child support program, Section 3 summarizes the literature that identifies issues related to equity at each stage, as well as the potential underlying causes. Section 4 summarizes equity assessment tools that have either been created or implemented by state agencies to examine the ways in which various groups are affected by the child support program. Finally, Section 5 provides the research and policy recommendations from this literature review.

METHODOLOGY

Scope and Research Questions

Broadly, this literature review aims to identify the inequities and disparities, as well as their underlying cause(s) (e.g., racial discrimination; interaction between racial and income discrimination) within the child support program. It also aims to identify potential solutions, both as outlined in the literature and in available equity assessment tools. In alignment with the project scope, CPR identified three research questions.

Research Question 1: ***What does recent research tell us about racial/ethnic disproportionalities, inequities, or disparities in the child support program?***

To answer this research question, CPR reviewed studies that specifically aimed to identify the racial and ethnic disproportionalities (i.e., under- or overrepresented in some outcome relative to that group's position in the general population), inequities (i.e., unfair differences, rooted in systemic injustice), and/or disparities (i.e., inequity reflected in outcomes, even after accounting for relevant factors such as need) in the child support program. CPR examined this

literature pertaining to custodial families, noncustodial parents, and custodial parents within the key functions and/or stage of child support service delivery.

Research Question 2: ***To what extent do states systematically examine how various groups are affected by the child support program?***
To support state, local, and tribal child support agencies launch their own equity initiatives, CPR reviewed and described equity assessment tools used or being developed by state child support programs. To review these equity assessment tools or frameworks, CPR first analyzed and compared their general purpose and structures. For states that have implemented their tools, CPR examined and detailed some of the logistics of their development and use.

Research Question 3: ***What do these sources of literature suggest can be done to advance equity in the child support program?***
CPR used findings from Research Questions 1 and 2 to identify and summarize recommendations for advancing equity in the child support program.

Search Criteria

Databases and Sources

CPR relied on a wide range of sources to conduct the literature review, including:

- Online literature review services (e.g., Google Scholar, APA PsychINFO, and Academic Search Complete). These services produced literature from peer reviewed articles, books and book chapters, law review articles, and additional publications from research conducted by universities with child support agency contracts to conduct large-scale child support research (e.g., University of Wisconsin-Madison's Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP), University of Maryland School of Social Work's Family Welfare Research and Training Group), major thinktanks dedicated to advancing government programs pertaining to child support (e.g., Child Trends, Mathematica, MDRC, Urban Institute, Center for Policy Research (CPR)), and government agencies (e.g., HHS OCSS, OPRE, and ASPE)
- Publications and conference materials from professional child support associations (e.g., National Child Support Engagement Association,[5] Western Intergovernmental Child Support Engagement Council, and Eastern Regional Interstate Child Support Association)
- Reports from reviews of state child support guidelines

[5] The National Child Support Engagement Association does not make its conference materials available publicly, so its citations are limited.

- State equity assessments, as identified through public records or personal correspondence

Publication Year

This literature review focused on publications from 2014 through 2024, although older publications were reviewed if they were cited in a more recent article to make a point about current equity issues.

Search Terms

When conducting the literature review, CPR used the following search terms:

- Child support OR family law; AND
- Equity OR inequity OR inequality OR disparity; AND
- Difference OR disproportionality; AND
- Race and/or ethnicity; OR
- Payer-parent OR receiving-parent OR noncustodial parent OR custodial parent OR nonresident parent OR resident parent

Publications Selected for Analysis

Publications were selected for analysis if they:

- Focused on individuals served by the child support program, court process that is intertwined with government child support programs (e.g., family law system); AND
- Included published statistics on racial and ethnic composition (or other marginalized status); OR
- Specifically identified a difference, disproportionality, inequity or disparity for a marginalized population served by one of the above programs

In all, CPR selected and analyzed nearly 200 child support publications. In addition, CPR gathered and reviewed equity assessment tools applicable to the child support agency from four states.

Limitations

The goal of this view was to focus on, compile, and present literature that uncovered racial and ethnic disparities, inequalities or disproportionality.in the child support program. This review therefore does not represent a comprehensive account of all research perspectives on the child support program and its accomplishments.

CONCLUSION

In 2023, OCSS launched a grant initiative to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in the child support program. The grant focuses on assessing disparities in access to services, aligning child support orders with parents' ability to pay, improving customer service, and sharing best practices to ensure equitable access. The current report, which encompasses one key component of this grant opportunity, is a literature review aimed at identifying strategies to reduce inequities, especially for underserved groups—including people of color, LGBTQI+ individuals, people with disabilities, religious minorities, rural residents, and those affected by persistent poverty. The project acknowledges the intersectionality of these identities and the systemic challenges many individuals in these communities face.

This comprehensive literature review aims to answer three broad research questions. First, it aims to identify what recent research tells us about racial/ethnic disproportionalities, inequities, or disparities in the child support program. Second, it aims to understand the extent to which states systematically examine how various groups are affected by the child support program. And finally, it summarizes the literature that suggests what can be done to advance equity in the child support program.

Section 2: What is the Child Support Program and Whom Does it Serve?

The child support program is highly complex, making it challenging to identify where inequities occur, who is affected, and how to create a more equitable system. This complexity stems from the program's original mission—to secure financial support from noncustodial parents and reimburse the government for public assistance—as well as its broad and varied implementation across 54 states and territories and 63 Tribal Nations. The program operates within a web of partnerships, laws, rules, and administrative structures. The following section will discuss the program's general structure; the federal laws that have significantly expanded its reach, authority, and performance expectations; and importantly, how expansions have also raised concerns about the unintended consequences of aggressive enforcement on low-income noncustodial parents, prompting more recent reforms aimed at addressing these issues.

Overview of the Child Support Program

The federal and state child support programs were created in 1974 due to amendments to the Social Security Act (Pub. L. 93-647; U.S. Senate Committee on Finance, 1974). According to federal legislation (Sect. 451, U.S.C. 651); the mission of the child support program is as follows:

> For the purpose of enforcing the support obligations owed by noncustodial parents to their children and spouse (or former spouse) with whom such children are living, locating noncustodial parents, establishing paternity, obtaining child and spousal support, and assuring that assistance in obtaining support will be available under this part to all children (whether or not eligible for assistance under a State program funded under [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] for whom such assistance is requested (Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 651, 1996).

In short, the program was established to obtain financial support from the parent who lives apart from the child. Initially, the focus was on recovering the cost of public assistance paid to the family from the parent who lives apart. The child support program of today, however, has evolved. Its current iteration reflects changes in federal policy as well as changes in family structure, the nature of assistance programs and tax credits available to families and childless adults, and earnings trends and employment opportunities available to parents. OCSS currently describes the program as:

> Focused on delivering family-centered child support services that improve the long-term financial and emotional support of children, by collecting and facilitating consistent child support payments based on the noncustodial parents' ability to pay (OCSS, 2024d).

The OCSS administers the child support program that functions in 54 states and territories and in 63 Tribal Nations (OCSS, 2024d; OCSS, 2024e). In turn, actual child support programs may operate at the state level or may be administered by a state program and operated by another entity such as courts, counties, or regions within the state. Many states house their child support program within their department of social services or health and human services agency, but some states operate their child support program through their revenue department, attorney general, or another level of state administration. In addition, child support programs often have agreements with prosecutors, courts, state birth record agencies, and/or other entities. Partnerships with courts are particularly important because child support orders are legal orders; however, states are also required to have administrative processes for some child support actions (e.g., a process in which the child support agency establishes support orders, often without a judicial hearing) (Gardiner et al., 2002). The extent, scope, and breadth of administrative processes varies widely among states.

Although the federal government requires certain operating standards, computer system specifications, data confidentiality and security protocols, domestic violence safeguards, and use of multiple enforcement techniques, states and localities have significant flexibility in designing their child support programs (OCSS, 2011). When the parents are not married, the child support program first establishes parentage, the prerequisite to establishing a child support order. When parents do not voluntarily acknowledge parentage, child support agencies have the authority to order genetic tests and go to court to determine parentage. Once the child support program establishes parentage and payment obligation, it collects payments based on the amount in the child support order (OCSS, 2011). State and Tribal courts and administrative agencies establish child support orders that set the amount of support to be paid according to child support guidelines adopted by every state and tribe. Most child support payments (about 75%) are collected through automatic payroll deductions and withholding from other sources of income such as unemployment insurance. Child support payments are processed automatically through state payment centers or disbursement units (OCSS, 2011). These entities receive payments from employers, noncustodial parents, and other sources, and disburse them to families, keep payment records, and provide parents with an accurate payment history. The child support program also has statutory enforcement mechanisms, including property liens, debt garnishments, data matching with banks and other financial institutions, suspension of driver's licenses, professional and recreational licenses, passport denial, and credit bureau reporting. States also have the option to intercept lottery winnings and assess interest on arrears. Finally, in addition to collecting child support arrearages through the enforcement methods noted above, all jurisdictions have civil or criminal contempt-of-court procedures and criminal non-support laws (OCSS, 2011). Federal criminal penalties also may be imposed in certain cases (Tollestrup, 2024). Beginning in 2016, federal regulation essentially requires an ability-to-pay consideration in a contempt action.

PROGRAM EVOLUTION AND IMPACT

Historical Evolution of Federal Child Support Policy

OCSS, a state-federal collaboration, aims to ensure financial contributions from noncustodial parents (Solomon-Fears, 2016). The federal child support program currently serves nearly two-thirds of custodial families (Grall, 2020; Sorensen, 2021). To promote family self-sufficiency and enforce parental responsibility, Congress has significantly expanded federal child support law. Key legislative changes have progressively increased the program's enforcement capacity and operational scale:

- **Child Support Enforcement Amendments of 1984** mandated that states implement procedures to recover delinquent payments, such as wage withholding, property liens, and intercepting tax refunds (Morgan, 1999).

- **Family Support Act of 1988** required states to adopt rebuttable guidelines for child support orders, immediate wage withholding, and procedures for paternity establishment until a child's 18th birthday.

- **Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993** mandated in-hospital paternity acknowledgment processes in all states.

- **Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA)** overhauled the system with sweeping changes, including automated processing, expanded data access, and stronger enforcement tools, such as license revocations and centralized employment records (Cancian, 2021; Legler, 2000; Sorensen & Oliver, 2002).

- **Deficit Reduction Act of 2005** further required periodic support reviews for TANF families, established cost-sharing measures, and introduced mandates related to medical child support and fees for families never on assistance (OCSS, 2006).

The Impact of Child Support for Families

These reforms transformed the scale and performance of the program. By Fiscal Year 2023, it served 12.6 million (one in five) children and 8 million custodial parents. It collected $29.6 billion in child support (OCSS, 2023c). As further evidence of its efficacy, it established orders for 87% of the cases in its caseload, collected 65% of current support that was due, and collected $4.73 for each $1 spent on the program (OCSS, 2023c).

Child support plays an impressive role in the reduction of poverty. Early evaluations of PRWORA found that child support lifted between 5% and7% of eligible recipients out of poverty and

reduced the poverty gap by between 6%–8% (Meyer & Hu, 1999; Sorensen & Oliver, 2002; Sorensen & Zibman, 2000). In a 2018 study designed to describe the custodial parents in the Maryland child support program, Demyan & Passarella (2019) found that child support lifted one in 10 custodial families living in deep poverty to incomes above poverty. The authors also found that child support brought an additional one in three custodial families who were in deep poverty to a poverty-level income (Demyan & Passarella, 2019). The same study also found child support was effective at raising seven in 10 custodial families classified as low-income (but not impoverished) to incomes above 200% of poverty (Demyan & Passarella, 2019).

In addition to raising family incomes, child support has long been credited with helping mothers move off welfare and increase their work hours (Meyer, 1993). Still, other empirical studies found that strong child support enforcement combined with medium to high expenditures on this enforcement increased the incomes of single mothers by approximately two dollars for each dollar of child support received (Garfinkel et al., 2001), and that tougher legislation and expenditures led to an increase in child support receipt for never-married mothers (Freeman & Waldfogel, 2001). Research found that child support payments lifted 790,000 children and 593,000 adults out of poverty in 2015 (Sorensen, 2016a). In 2013, child support represented 41% of family income among poor custodial families who received child support and 65% of family income for custodial families who received child support and had incomes at or below 50% of the federal poverty level (Sorensen, 2016a). In addition to its financial benefits, research shows that child support receipt is associated with positive outcomes for children, including higher grades, fewer school problems, and increases in high school completion and college attendance (e.g., Sorensen, 2016b; White et al., 2021). These features of the child support program, along with its rigorous system of performance measurement and assessment, are credited with stimulating the program's dramatic improvements (Sorensen, 2016a).

Equity Challenges Rooted in the Evolution of Child Support Policy

The positive impacts of the child support program have not been experienced equally by all families it serves. Demographic shifts in the child support caseload—particularly increasing racial, ethnic, and economic diversity—have revealed deep misalignments between the program's historical design and the realities of today's families.

Originally established in 1975 amid concerns about rising welfare costs, the program's early focus was reimbursing the state for families receiving public assistance (Crowley, 2003; Garfinkel et al., 1998). As divorce rates rose, the program expanded to serve a greater proportion of middle- and higher-income families, emphasizing enforcement against noncustodial fathers presumed to have the means but not the will to pay (Leopold, 2018; Robbins et al., 2022). This shift embedded White, middle-class assumptions into the program's framework, sidelining the lived experiences of lower-income and racially diverse families (Cancian, 2021; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). Although the child support caseload today includes a

broad range of parents in terms of race, income, and family structure (Sorensen, 2024; Landers, 2021; Bea et al., 2024), the program remains optimized for a narrow segment of the population—parents who are financially capable of meeting support obligations or can be coerced into compliance through enforcement or case management. For the estimated 35% of noncustodial parents with limited income and constrained ability to pay (Landers, 2021), the program's efficacy significantly diminishes (Brito, 2019; Meyer et al., 2020; Battle, 2023; Selekman & Johnson, 2019).

Authors also argue that the child support program's assumptions have also reinforced a moralistic view of nonpayment, framing it as a personal failure rather than recognizing broader structural barriers such as poverty, unemployment, and systemic racial inequities (e.g., Battle, 2019a) and that as a result of these assumptions, the program has relied heavily on punitive enforcement mechanisms that disproportionately affect Black families and entrench cycles of poverty (Battle, 2019a; Robbins et al., 2022). Sanford Schram (2005) also observed that welfare reform policies often reproduce racial bias by expecting Black families to meet unrealistic benchmarks of economic and familial stability. In his words, these policies "reinforce racially biased institutions and practices in the broader society with respect to education, jobs, housing, and other factors affecting life chances" (p. 255). The child support program is also tightly interwoven with welfare policies and the carceral state, compounding existing disparities across class, gender, and race (McDonald, Lemmons & Arroyo, 2024; Battle, 2019a).

Race-neutral approaches designed around the circumstances of White noncustodial parents often fail to address the layered economic and historical disadvantages disproportionately affecting parents of color. Rather than closing gaps, these policies risk perpetuating and deepening existing racial and class-based inequities (Gonzalez Van Cleve & Mayes, 2015; Kim et al., 2024).

Recent Changes Designed to Advance Equity

Longstanding concerns have been raised that child support orders are often set too high (beyond what parents can actually pay), which triggers harmful cycles of debt accumulation, legal consequences, and reduced parent-child contact (OCSS, 2016). In response, OCSS developed the 2016 Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization (FEM) Rule (OCSS, 2016). Through updating and strengthening current rules, and with an emphasis on considering ability to pay, the FEM Rule aims to increase regular, on-time payment to families, increase the number of working noncustodial parents who support their children, and reduce the accumulation of unpaid arrears (OCSS, 2022a).

To ensure orders are fair, the rule aims to ensure that low-income noncustodial parents' incomes are based on their actual earnings, rather than estimated earnings based on imputed income. To ensure that low-income parents are not incarcerated because they are simply

unable to comply with high-burden orders, the rule also aims to ensure due process by assessing whether noncustodial parents have the ability to pay their ordered child support before holding them in contempt for nonpayment (*Turner v. Rogers*, 564 U.S. 431 (2011)).

The mandatory changes of the 2016 FEM Rule (OCSS, 2022a), as they relate to equity in the child support program, include:

1. Incorporating the longstanding federal requirement that child support orders reflect the noncustodial parents' ability to pay;
2. Indicating that child support guidelines must consider the basic subsistence needs of the noncustodial parent who has a limited ability to pay by incorporating a low-income adjustment, such as a self-support reserve;
3. Addressing the overuse of imputing income when establishing child support orders by requiring that child support orders be based on available information about the specific circumstances of the noncustodial parent when evidence of earnings and income are limited;
4. Requiring child support agencies to screen cases before requesting a civil contempt hearing to determine whether the noncustodial parent has the "actual and present" ability to pay the support order; and
5. Prohibiting states from treating incarceration as voluntary unemployment and from barring modification of support obligations during incarceration to reduce accumulation of uncollectible debt and improve noncustodial parents' ability to pay child support upon release from prison.

Additional changes include adding more circumstances where a state can close a child support case, streamlining payment processing, and removing barriers to electronic communication and document management. Additionally, the FEM Rule permits states to offer paternity-only limited services to allow parents who are living together to legally establish paternity for their children.

One 2019 survey of state child support directors conducted by former OCSS Commissioner Vicki Turetsky (2023a) found that many states were moving towards adopting more pragmatic and family-centered policies that incorporated the objectives outlined in the FEM Rule. These include:

- Setting realistic and accurate child support orders
- Implementing sensible debt reduction strategies
- Providing employment and income supports when noncustodial parents have barriers to payment

- Ensuring families receive all child support payments
- Providing family stabilization services
- Improving equal access to justice

According to Turetsky, tribes have additional flexibility under federal law to determine Tribal child support policies, and many Tribal child support programs have adopted culturally responsive, family-centered policies and practices related to order establishment, case management and services, dispute resolution, and procedural justice (Turetsky, 2023).

Building on the concerns addressed in the 2016 FEM Rule, OCSS developed and implemented a new federal rule (effective January 13, 2025) to help low-income and unemployed or underemployed noncustodial parents overcome barriers to meeting their child support obligations (OCSS, 2024b). Although previously, states could not use federal child support funding to support noncustodial parents' employment, a wide range employment services are now considered "allowable" activities. More specifically, child support agencies can now offer noncustodial parents who are unemployed, underemployed, or have barriers to employment that hinder their ability to pay child support the following employment services:

- Skills assessments
- Job search assistance
- Job development and placement
- Occupational training (directly related to employment)
- Job readiness training
- Job retention services
- Work supports

These services aim to help noncustodial parents improve their employment prospects and ability to meet child support obligations (OCSS, 2024b).

Families Currently Served by the Federal Child Support Program

There is limited demographic and socioeconomic data available on many of the populations identified in the OCSS equity definition (Exhibit 1) to paint a national picture of them in the child support caseload. Most of the data that is available deals with race, ethnicity, and income. A further limitation is that the compiled data does not always discern between child support

and non-child support cases. Consequently, the statistics provided in this subsection provide an incomplete picture of the studied population.

Another big constraint on our understanding of the race and ethnicity of custodial and noncustodial parents and their treatments in the child support program is the lack direct information about the racial and ethnic characteristics of the parents in the caseload for most state and tribal child support programs. Although Congress required the establishment and maintenance of state and national case registries in 1996, each state collects and submits only certain required data elements to OCSS for its national case registry. The state and national case registries include data elements for gender, name, social security number, and date of birth for all persons on a case—consequently excluding a person's race or ethnicity. To gain a comprehensive picture of the families in the child support caseload and their treatments and experiences in the program, it is necessary that OCSS adopt the race and ethnic categories used by the federal Office and Management and Budget (OMB) and require their incorporation in all federal and state case registries.

To fill this gap, researchers rely on the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Child Support Supplement (CPS-CSS)—a nationally representative survey of custodial parents—to capture information about their child support arrangements, demographic, and socioeconomic characteristics. Funded by OCSS, it is conducted every other year. The Census data follows OMB guidelines for collecting and categorizing race and ethnicity (Sorensen, 2024a). An example of the OMB standard for collecting data on race and ethnicity can be found in Exhibit 3.

Exhibit 3. Example of OMB Standard for Gathering Information on Race and/or Ethnicity

Select all that apply and enter additional details in the spaces below.

□ **American Indian or Alaska Native** – Enter, for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation of Montana, Native Village of Borrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, Aztec, Maya, etc.

□ **Middle Eastern or North African** – *Provide details below.*

□ Lebanese	□ Iranian	□ Egyptian
□ Syrian	□ Iraqi	□ Israeli

Enter, for example, Moroccan, Yemeni, Kurdish, etc.

□ **Asian** – *Provide details below.*

□ Chinese	□ Asian Indian	□ Filipino
□ Vietnamese	□ Korean	□ Japanese

Enter, for example, Pakistani, Hmong, Afghan, etc.

□ **Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander**– *Provide details below.*

□ Native Hawaiian	□ Samoan	□ Chamorro
□ Tongan	□ Fijian	□ Marshallese

Enter, for example, Chuukese, Palauan, Tahitian, etc.

□ **Black or African American**– *Provide details below.*

□ African American	□ Jamaican	□ Haitian
□ Nigerian	□ Ethiopian	□ Somali

Enter, for example, Trinidadian and Tobagonian, Ghanian, Congolese, etc.

□ **White**– *Provide details below.*

□ English	□ German	□ Irish
□ Italian	□ Polish	□ Scottish

Enter, for example, French, Swedish, Norwegian, etc.

□ **Hispanic or Latino**– *Provide details below.*

□ Mexican	□ Puerto Rican	□ Salvadoran
□ Cuban	□ Dominican	□ Guatemalan

Enter, for example, Colombian, Honduran, Spaniard,, etc.

This remainder of this section includes national breakdown of custodial[6] and noncustodial[7] parents by race and ethnicity and poverty (or near poverty) status. We end this discussion by presenting national statistics, as available, for the other populations identified in the OCSS definition of equity (Exhibit 1).

Distribution of Parents by Gender, Race, and Ethnicity

Analysis of the most current (2023) CPS-CSS data (Sorensen, 2024) found that custodial parents identified as the following:

- 45% White, non-Hispanic
- 25% Hispanic
- 23% Black, non-Hispanic
- 2.8% Asian and Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic
- 2.3% Two or More Races, non-Hispanic
- 1.2% American Indian or Alaska native, non-Hispanic

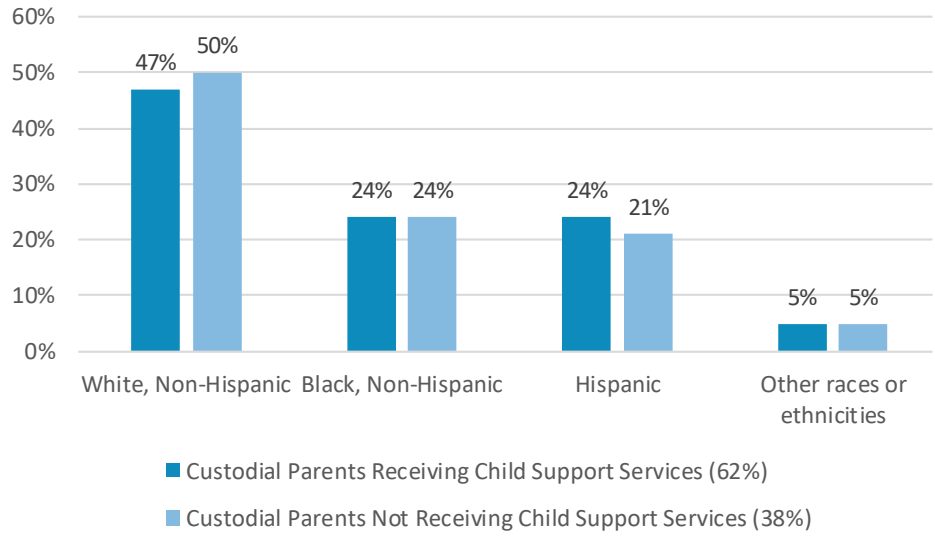
Sorensen (2024a) also examined the change in the distribution of custodial parents by race and ethnicity from 1994 to 2023 and found dramatic decreases in the percentage of custodial parents who identified as White (60% in 1994 to 45% in 2023). By contrast, she found dramatic increases in the percentage of custodial parents who identified as Hispanic (12% in 1994 to 25% in 2023). There were much smaller changes for the other races and ethnicities.

[6] The CPS-CSS defines custodial parents as "parents who have a child under the age of 21 living with them who has a parent living outside the house."

[7] The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), as identified below, uses the term "nonresident parent," which is defined as a "biological, adoptive, or stepparent who does not live in the same household as their child." This term is conceptually similar to noncustodial parent.

Although the 2023 CPS-CSS analysis (Sorensen, 2024) did not examine differences in the racial and ethnic identities of custodial parents who were involved, compared with not involved, in the public child support program, the 2018 analysis of the CPS-CSS (Sorensen, 2021) did. Notably, Sorensen (2021) found that 62% of custodial parents participated in the child support program and 38% did not, and that nearly all (91% of) custodial parents receiving child support services were female. Results for Sorensen's analysis of the racial and ethnic identities within and outside of the child support program are presented in Exhibit 4. Sorensen (2021) found small racial and ethnic differences between custodial parents receiving and not receiving child support services, none of which were found to be statistically significant.

Exhibit 4. Custodial Parents Enrolled in the Child Support Program, Compared with Not, by Racial and Ethnic Category



Source: Sorensen, 2021.

Analysis of another U.S. Census dataset, the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), describes the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of all nonresident parents (i.e., noncustodial parents, hereafter), not just those in the child support program (Landers, 2021). The analysis of the 2018 SIPP (which considers incomes in 2017) found that noncustodial parents identified as the following:

- 75% male
- 54% White, non-Hispanic
- 20% Hispanic
- 19% Black, non-Hispanic
- 7% Other, non-Hispanic

There is no national dataset that tracks race and ethnicity of noncustodial parents in the child support program only, or other races and ethnicities, gender identities, or other marginalized populations.

Poverty and Near Poverty Income

In 2022, the national poverty rate (using the official poverty measure, (OPM) was 11.5% for all individuals and 15.0% for children under 18 years (Shrider & Creamer, 2023). Poverty rates are higher among custodial parent families than noncustodial parent families in the child support program. The primary reason poverty rates are higher among families in the child support program compared to all families is because they tend to be single-parent families, which have higher poverty rates (Salas-Betsch, 2024).

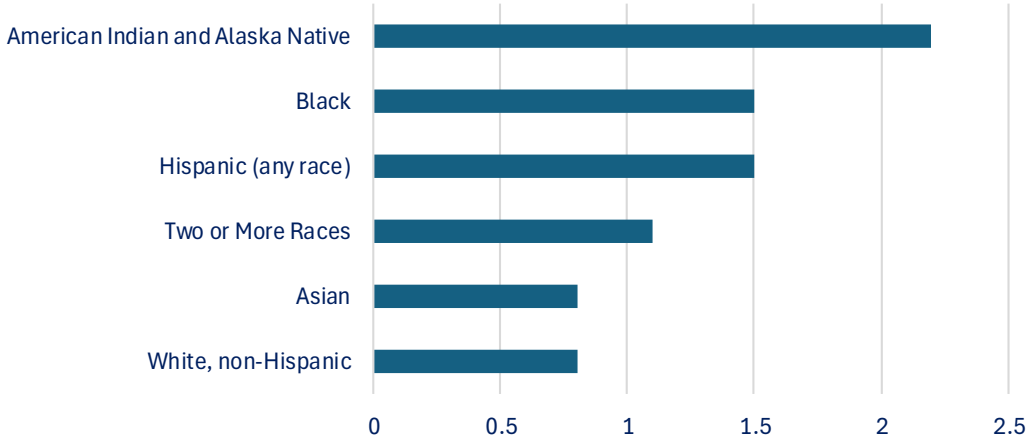
In 2017, one-third (33%) of custodial parents served by the child support program lived in poverty and an additional 28% lived near poverty (Sorensen, 2021). Just over half (51%) of parents worked full time. In 2017, just over half (51%) children who received child support services received at least one of the following public benefit: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits (10%); Supplemental Security Income (7%); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (36%); National School Lunch Program (NSLP) benefits (51%); Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) benefits (14%); and public housing assistance (15%) (Sorensen, 2021). As reported in a recent policy paper by Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey (2024a), approximately half of custodial parents in the child support program have received TANF assistance (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024a). Data from the federal Office of Family Assistance (collected in 2022) showed that recipients of TANF tend to be women (84%), to be single parents (92%) and to identify as Hispanic (33%) or Black (31%) (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024a).

Income of noncustodial parents tends to be higher than that of custodial parents. Analysis of data from the 2018 SIPP finds that, in 2017, 18% of all noncustodial parents lived in poverty and 36% lived in households with incomes below 200% of the poverty level (Landers, 2021). Further analysis of the 2018 SIPP (Landers, 2021) found that the racial and ethnic breakdowns of the 36% of noncustodial parents with incomes below 200% of poverty are fairly similar to those in the general population (outlined several paragraphs above). The specific racial and ethnic breakdowns by parents with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level are below:

- 50% identified as White, non-Hispanic
- 23% identified as Black, non-Hispanic
- 20% identified as Hispanic
- 7% identified as “other” race, non-Hispanic

These results show slightly higher proportions of Black noncustodial parents, and slightly lower proportions of White noncustodial parents living near poverty, when compared with their presence in the general population of noncustodial parents. More to to the point, these data suggest a slight intersection between race and ethnicity and poverty. These conclusions are echoed in Shrider & Creamer (2023) who used 2022 Census data to show both differences and disproportionalities in poverty rates by race and Hispanic origin (Exhibit 5). As shown, individuals who identify as Hispanic (any race), Black, or American Indian and Alaska native experience poverty at rates significantly more often relative to their inclusion in the general population. Conversely, individuals who identify as non-Hispanic White or Asian experience poverty at significantly lower rates compared to their inclusion in the general population.

Exhibit 5. Disproportionalities of Poverty by Race (2022)



Note. Any values above 1 represent heightened risk for experiencing poverty (high disproprtionality), whereas values under 1 represent a decreased risk for experiencing poverty (low disproportionality). Source: Shrider & Creamer (2022).

Other Marginalized Populations

Although the OCSS definition of equity (see Exhibit 1) identifies members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons; person with disabilities; and persons who live in rural areas, CPR could only locate child support-related statistics pertaining to three of these groups: individuals living in rural areas, individuals identifying as LGBTQI+ persons, and individuals with disabilities.

Individuals Living in Rural Areas. According to the 2020 Census, 81% of the U.S. population lived in urban areas, or areas that contain 50,000 or more people or urban clusters, which have at least 2,500 people but fewer than 50,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Poverty rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas across all races and ethnicities. Across all groups, analysis of the U.S. 2019 American Community Survey reported a poverty rate of 15.4% among all individuals living in a rural area and a 11.9% poverty rate among those living in urban areas (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2021).

There was also a recent study on rural differences specific to child support (McDonald & Ghertner, 2024). Specifically, rural and nonrural differences in child support engagement and child access were measured from the CPS-CSS for a recent HHS Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) brief. The analysis considered five different measurements to capture whether the noncustodial parent was engaged in the child support program. One way included the percentage with orders established and another way included the percentage with formal parenting-time agreements. The analysis generally found better rates among rural custodial parents than non-rural custodial parents but did not provide an explanation. Rather, it suggested that additional research would be needed to better understand if the differences are indeed due to child support agencies located in rural areas being more sensitive to the economic circumstances of each parent when setting a child support order, or other factors.

Individuals Identifying as LGBTQI+. Limited data exists on the LGBTQI+ population. Analysis of the U.S. Census 2019 Current Population survey found that 15% of same-sex couples had at least one child under 18 while the comparative percentage was 38% for opposite-sex couples (Taylor, 2020). A 2013 Pew Research survey found that over one-third (35%) of LGBT respondents were parents and 17% had children under 18. It also found that 52% of bisexual respondents were parents and 30% had children under 18 (Pew Research Center, 2013). These reports did not estimate how many of these parents were noncustodial parents or custodial parents eligible for child support.

Individuals with Disabilities. The analysis of the 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation found that a chronic health condition or disability was the most common reason for not working given by noncustodial parents who did not work for pay (Landers, 2021).

Conclusion

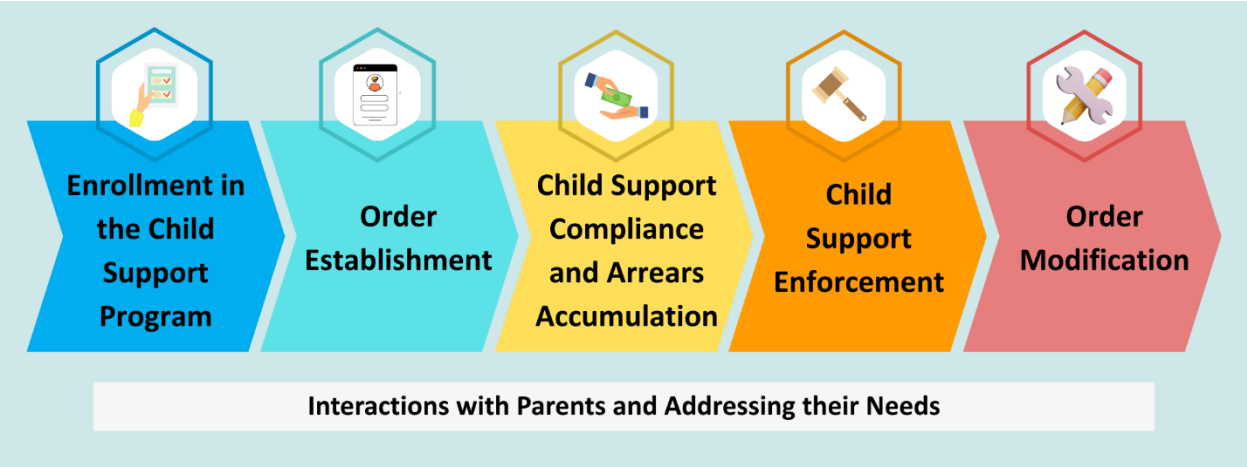
The federal and state child support programs have evolved significantly since their inception in 1974, transforming from a cost-recovery tool for public assistance to a more holistic, family-centered system aimed at promoting the financial and emotional wellbeing of children. Although the program continues to demonstrate measurable impacts in reducing poverty and increasing parental accountability, its design and enforcement mechanisms have often failed to reflect the economic realities and structural barriers faced by many families, particularly people of color and families with low incomes. Recent reforms, such as the 2016 Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization (FEM) Rule, mark a critical shift toward equity and fairness, prioritizing parents' actual ability to pay, reducing punitive consequences, and encouraging more consistent support for children. As state and tribal programs increasingly adopt these evidence-based, pragmatic approaches, the child support program is better positioned to meet the diverse needs of today's families and contribute to greater economic stability and equity.

Although available data provides important insights into the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of custodial and noncustodial parents, significant gaps remain. The lack of standardized, comprehensive race and ethnicity data in child support case registries limits a full understanding of equity within the child support program. Although national surveys like the CPS-CSS and SIPP offer valuable supplemental information, they are not sufficient to paint a complete or current picture of the populations served. Addressing these limitations through more inclusive data collection practices (including those aligned with OMB standards) and targeted research on underrepresented groups is critical for advancing equity and improving outcomes for all families engaged in the child support program.

Section 3: Disproportionalities, Inequities, and Disparities in the Child Support Program

The following literature review discusses the equity considerations outlined in the policy reviews, quantitative research, and qualitative research conducted over the last 10 years. Each section, which covers key stages or functions of the child support program, begins by briefly describing the relevant child support process. It is followed by the literature that either directly or indirectly identifies disproportionalities, inequities, and/or disparities in the child support program. The topics covered are as outlined in Exhibit 6 below.

Exhibit 6. Key Functions and Stages of the Child Support Program Outlined in this Review



Enrollment in the Child Support Program

Cooperation Requirements

The child support program has strict cooperation requirements, which require that custodial parents who receive (or formerly received) TANF[8] establish paternity for the noncustodial father, establish a child support order, and sign over their rights to child support as a condition of continued benefit eligibility (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024b). National and state data show that recipients of TANF tend to be women and single parents, and to identify as Hispanic or Black (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024a; Dinan, 2023; Kaplan et al., 2022). Using

[8] Certain families who receive Medicaid Medical Support (Medicaid and CHIP Learning Collaborative, 2023) and foster care payments (Berrick, 2022; Children's Bureau, 2024), cooperate with child support. Though not federally required, states may opt to require cooperation for families who receive child care assistance (23 states as of 2018; Selekman & Holcomb, 2018) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; 9 states as of 2024 (Holcomb et al., 2024; USDA, 2024). Sometimes, local county human-service workers will promote child support enforcement when a parent applies to receive other income supports (Rodriquez, 2016).

qualitative data from Wisconsin, Vogel and colleagues (2022) identified that most parents in the child support program first have contact with it following a referral from the public benefits system. This finding suggests that the demographic characteristics that describe the TANF caseload carry over, at least in part, to the child support program. As a result, custodial parents served by the program are slightly more likely to be parents of color and to have lower income and lower levels of employment than custodial parents not served by the child support program (Sorensen, 2021; Brogan & Partners, 2023).

Although regular child support payments can promote custodial families' financial stability, the public benefit recipients required to cooperate with the child support program, who are disproportionately unmarried, very low-income, people of color (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024a; Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024b), are inequitably burdened by their involvement with the child support program. First, custodial families with mandatory cooperation requirements are inequitably disadvantaged by their lack of autonomy in determining whether they want to apply for child support. Several authors (e.g., Vogel et al., 2022; Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024a; Landrum et al., 2025) argue mandatory participation in the child support program undermines parents' abilities (and previous choices) to support their children how they can and want. As described by Vogel's (2022) qualitative analysis of fairness in the child support program, some parents who did not want—but were required to have—a child support order shared that they felt "voiceless and disrespected" during the order establishment process. Landrum and colleagues (2025) found that mandatory child support cooperation rules limit parents' abilities to balance relational and financial goals on their own terms.

Secondly, because of cost recovery and distribution policies, custodial parents with mandatory cooperation requirements receive less child support than those without, solely because they are current or former public benefit recipients. As described previously in Exhibit 2, this nuance is both inequitable and creates disparities in outcomes for these families. In 2023, states collected $29.6 billion in child support, of which $1 billion was held back from families and kept by the state (OCSS, 2024d). Only half of states "pass-through" any of the support paid by noncustodial fathers to the custodial mothers, and among the states that do, most pass-through only the first $50 per month (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024b). The failure to pass-through child support payments made by noncustodial parents whose families receive TANF enhance financial burdens for impoverished families, because as discussed in Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey (2024b), TANF program benefits still leave recipients at or below 60% of the poverty level in every state. And when received, child support makes up between 40%–50% of low-income families' incomes (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024a).

Researchers (e.g., Waller, 2002; Berrick, 2022; Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024b; Vogel, 2020a; Vogel, 2020b) have long argued that low-income mothers and fathers are burdened by

cost recovery policies and, because of this, often report a preference for informal support when the father's child support payment is retained to recover welfare costs (e.g., Waller, et al., 2018). To contrast, they have hailed policies that pass-through some or all child support to the families as intended (i.e., "family first distribution policies" (Turetsky & Azevedo-McCaffrey, 2024a)) as beneficial and supportive of family wellbeing. Rodriquez (2016) used qualitative data from Mississippi to highlight the salience of cost recovery for custodial parents. He noted that families viewed cost recovery as particularly unjust and a penalty for receiving cash assistance.

By contrast, policies that pass-through payments to families have been shown to encourage noncustodial parents to comply with their formal child support orders and to improve payment regularity for children (Vogel, 2020b). In the first year after implementing its policy to pass-through and disregard[9] all current monthly support, the Colorado Department of Human Services found that total current collections for TANF families rose 76% based on an analysis of its administrative data (Martinez-Schiferl et al., 2019). Earlier evidence from Wisconsin's pilot of full pass-through showed causal evidence of reductions in child maltreatment (Cancian et al., 2010).

Research shows that among the parents who avoid cooperating with the child support program (likely as means to continue receiving their full payments), parents of color are disproportionately sanctioned for it, suggesting that there are inequities in the enforcement of cooperation policies. Using 2018–2019 administrative data from TANF recipients in Illinois, Kaplan and colleagues (2022) found that people of color enrolled in TANF are disproportionately sanctioned for noncooperation when compared with White families. Specifically, they found that multiracial families and Black families were 57% and 111% more likely than White families to receive at least one sanction for noncooperation. Black families received more sanctions for child support noncompliance (2018: 42%; 2019: 50%) than White families (2018: 30%; 2019: 34%) (Kaplan et al., 2022). As a result, parents of color disproportionately receive less government assistance due to inequitable cooperation policies.

Voluntary Enrollment

Although many custodial mothers become involved with the child support program because of their public benefit receipt, others voluntarily seek child support services. Research suggests there may be racial and timing differences in parents' voluntary entrance into the child support program. For example, the National Council of Child Support Directors (NCSCSD)/National Child Support Engagement Association (NCSEA)/Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) Joint Committee on Public Relations found that White parents were more likely to have a child

[9] Child support disregard refers to the portion of child support payments that are not counted when determining a family's eligibility for public assistance programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

support arrangement and court order for it, and reported that they wanted to use the program because "the amount feels more fair if it's set by a neutral decision maker." By contrast, Black parents were more likely to have informal child support arrangements than any other racial group, and both Black and Hispanic/Latino parents use informal cash transfer tools to exchange support more frequently than White parents (Brogan & Partners, 2023). Moreover, Black custodial parents reported that "we had an informal arrangement, but it is not working" and "I don't know where the other parent is" as motivations for wanting to use the child support program. Hispanic/Latino custodial parents reported "I don't know where the other parent is" and "I wouldn't know how to get the other parent to pay" as reasons for wanting to use the child support program (Brogan & Partners, 2023). Given that national data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Sariscsany et al., 2019) and from the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Program (CSPED) (Berger et al., 2019) showed that mothers pursue fathers for child support through the formal program when fathers' informal contributions (which are not tracked by the child support agency) decline or their relationships become conflictual, it is possible that parents of color are more apt than White parents to opt to receive informal child support until that is no longer an option.

Order Establishment

Although every state and tribe must use one set of guidelines to set and adjust child support orders—guidelines intended to reflect the noncustodial parent's income, consider their basic living needs, and limit income assumptions—many low-income noncustodial parents say these orders still leave them unable to meet their own needs, do not adjust well to life changes, and fail to account for obligations to more than one family (Hodges & Vogel, 2021; Vogel et al., 2022; Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Vogel and colleagues (2022) used qualitative data to understand perceptions of fairness in the child support program in Wisconsin and found that one area of perceived unfairness was around the facts that orders are calculated on gross (rather than net) earnings and that additional sources of debt and discretionary expenditures are not considered (Vogel et al., 2022). These perspectives are particularly salient to low-income Black fathers (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Using qualitative data from a sample of low-income Black fathers in fatherhood programs, noncustodial fathers claim that the program places "unrealistic financial demands" on them, making it impossible to meet their obligations despite their desires to maintain the provider role and subsequently criminalizes low-income men (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015).

Imputed Income and Default Orders

Child support orders set based on imputed income are common (Brinig & Garrison, 2018; Demyan & Passarella, 2018), particularly among lower-income noncustodial parents (Cancian et al., 2019). In a 2022 observational study of Wisconsin court proceedings, Vogel et al. (2022) found that 39% of cases had orders set using imputed income versus actual earnings. An

analysis of paternity cases filed in an Indiana county between 2008 and 2010 found that roughly half (47%) of noncustodial parents appeared to have orders set on an imputed value (Brinig & Garrison, 2018). A Maryland analysis, drawing on a sample of cases used in the state's 2011–2014 quadrennial guidelines review, identified that 24% of cases were set using imputed income (Demyan & Passarella, 2018). A recent study on the use of imputed and default orders in Wisconsin, which was comprised of a sample of cases filed between 2007 and 2010 or in 2013, identified that 21% of all noncustodial parents with a child support order had orders set using imputed income, compared to 42% (twice as many) of low-income parents (Cancian et al., 2019).

In addition to being disadvantaged by poverty, underemployment, and unemployment (Boggess, 2017; Holifield, 2019), people of color are disproportionately disadvantaged by the size of their child support orders relative to their income (Renno, 2021; Kim et al., 2024). In Renno's (2021) study of disproportionality in child support debt accumulation and enforcement actions in Wisconsin, she raised the possibility that people of color (who are overrepresented in having arrears and experiencing enforcement actions taken on them) experience disproportionately high orders. These findings are echoed in Kim and colleagues' (2024) analysis of disproportionality and disparity in child support. They too found noncustodial parents of color being ordered to pay more of their earnings compared to their White counterparts. To reach this conclusion, Kim and colleagues highlighted the differences in parents of color order amounts and income relative to those of White parents. Although the average working male of color earns only 65% to that of the average white working male (Social Security Administration, 2022), the average Black and Hispanic noncustodial parent owes child support that is 84% and 86% (respectively) relative to child support owed by the average White noncustodial parent (Grall, 2020).

Researchers (e.g., Brito, 2019; Robbins et al., 2022) have argued that Black fathers' disproportionate rates of high-burden orders (i.e., orders with high order-to-income ratios) are due to their disproportionate likelihood of having orders based on imputed income. These arguments are logical given that recent Bureau of Labor Statistics data showed that Black men were twice as likely as non-Hispanic White men to be unemployed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025) and may therefore be more frequently eligible for income imputation (Demyan & Passarella, 2018). In the analysis of paternity cases filed in an Indiana county between 2008 and 2010, Brinig & Garrison (2018) found indeed that Black fathers were more likely than non-Hispanic White or Hispanic fathers to have orders based on imputed income. Because evidence suggests that imputed income amounts often do not align with actual earnings, especially for those with low incomes (Demyan & Passarella, 2018; Plotnick & Kennedy, 2018), researchers (e.g., Brito, 2019; Brinig & Garrison, 2018) have concluded that many Black noncustodial parents' child support orders are much higher than what they can actually pay. Renno's (2021) study of child support arrears in the Wisconsin population also finds that people of color are

disproportionately disadvantaged by the size of their child support orders. And multiple authors in many states report that parents with unstable earnings (e.g., those who are unemployed, are employed part-time, have income documentation missing), or even who fail to come to court are issued- standard minimum wage orders, where their child support orders are based on imputed income rather than actual earnings or the ability to pay (Demyan & Passarella, 2018; Cancian & Meyer, 2018; Cancian et al., 2021). For example, research from a random sample of child support orders in Maryland between 2011 and 2014 found that employment stability and earnings were lower among noncustodial parents with imputed income, leading to a limited capacity to pay support (Demyan & Passarella, 2018). And although past research has described that orders that exceed 20% of parents' gross earnings reduce their compliance (e.g., Turetsky & Waller, 2020), this data showed that nearly two-thirds of parents with imputed income owed support that exceeded 25% of annual earnings (Demyan & Passarella, 2018). Noncustodial parents with imputed earnings earned approximately 72% less than what their worksheets claimed, whereas noncustodial parents with non-imputed earnings earned approximately the same as their worksheets claimed (Demyan & Passarella, 2018).

FEM Rule Changes

As discussed in Section 2, given the previous concerns around parents' ability to pay, OCSS 2016 Final Rule included specific considerations that states should take into account when determining order amounts for those noncustodial parents whose income is "unavailable or insufficient" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Centers for Medicaid Services (CMS), 2016). Subsequently, Wisconsin updated its child support guidelines to reflect the federal Office of Child Support Services (formerly Enforcement) 2016 Final Rule (Costanzo et al., 2024) and identified disparities in the outcomes. Even after guidelines changes, Black noncustodial parents still had a significantly higher likelihood of having an order set either by default or imputation compared with White noncustodial parents, even when controlling for other case characteristics (Costanzo et al., 2024). Among Black noncustodial parents, Costanzo and colleagues (2024) also found that orders set by imputation (compared to those that were not) were associated with 34.9% less compliance. Findings were similar, although less robust, for the consequences of default orders on Black noncustodial parents. The differences in consequences were larger for Black noncustodial parents than those for the entire sample of noncustodial parents with low incomes, and authors suggested that these findings may reflect a pattern of higher order amounts for Black noncustodial parents.

Child Support Compliance and Arrears Accumulation

The child support program uses presumptive guidelines to determine the amount of noncustodial parents' income that should be put toward child support, as well as the automatic withholding of support from their paychecks. Although this system works well for most noncustodial parents who have adequate, regular earnings, a disproportionate share of

noncustodial parents has limited earnings and ability to pay child support (Cancian et al., 2022). As a result, since the creation of the federal child support program in 1975, outstanding child support arrears have grown to approximately $113.5 billion (Sorensen, 2021), and 77% of cases in the child support enforcement system are in arrears (OCSS, 2018).

Race, Employment, and Child Support Arrears

As previously described in qualitative and quantitative research and policy reviews (e.g., Brito, 2019; Turetsky & Waller, 2020; Mincy et al., 2016), noncustodial parents with child support debt are disproportionately those with the lowest income, suggesting that those who face financial hardships will inevitably accumulate child support arrears (Brito, 2019). In fact, in a landmark Urban Institute study, Sorensen and colleagues (2007) estimated that approximately 70% of child support debt was held by noncustodial parents earning less than $10,000 annually— many of whom are formerly incarcerated or face significant barriers to employment— therefore making the debt largely uncollectible. Authors (e.g., Brito, 2019) have argued that the child support program continues to accrue debt because of its own (inaccurate) beliefs about what impoverished fathers *should* earn and be able to pay (Brito, 2019). As Maria Cancian (2021) poignantly stated, "The mismatch between rhetoric and reality of families' situations has been part of family policy development that has often reinforced, rather than ameliorated, inequities across race and class." Both qualitative and quantitative research support the notion that noncustodial parents accrue significant child support debt due to not having sufficient income to meet their obligations (Vogel, 2020a; Vogel, 2020b) or stable employment (Cancian et al., 2021; Vogel, 2020a; Vogel, 2020b).

Importantly, recent analyses using Wisconsin data showed that Black noncustodial parents exhibit a stronger link between their own earnings and child support compliance compared to other groups, suggesting that income has a larger impact on compliance for Black noncustodial parents than parents of other races or ethnicities (Bea et al., 2024). For every $1,000 increase in earnings, compliance rises by 3% for Black noncustodial parents, compared to 2.5% for Hispanic noncustodial parents and only 1.4% for White noncustodial parents. These results suggest that, when Black noncustodial parents have sufficient income to make their child support payments, they are the most likely to do so; and conversely, Black noncustodial parents are more likely to fall into arrears when they do not have sufficient income to pay.

Given the interactions between race, class, and income (e.g., Brinig, 2017), it is not surprising that noncustodial parents of color are more likely to have arrears (Meyer et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2024; Horowitz et al., 2022). For instance, using data from the Wisconsin child support program, Meyer and colleagues (2020) found that consistent nonpayers of support (i.e., those with three consistent months of nonpayment) disproportionately identified as non-Hispanic Black or "other." This finding is echoed in Kong and colleagues' (2024) study, which used Wisconsin Court Record Data on cases filed between 2007 and 2013 and found that Black

noncustodial parents are disproportionately overrepresented in the noncustodial parents who do not make any child support payments or only make partial payments. Moreover, Horowitz and colleagues used administrative data from the Minnesota State Court Administrator's Office and the Minnesota Department of Human services between 2004 and 2016 and found that Black fathers were disproportionately more likely to have criminal legal debt, child support debt, and both jointly ("dual debt"). In addition, Black and American Indian fathers were more likely to have higher monthly debt balances (across criminal legal debt, child support arrears, or both) than other racial groups (Horowitz et al., 2022).

Order Burden

As mentioned in the subsection on "Order Establishment," child support arrears also grow faster and larger for noncustodial parents who have high order levels relative to their income (i.e., burden) and consequently fail to make payments. As discussed by Meyer & Riser (2023), low-income noncustodial parents who owe more than they can afford may become discouraged and give up on paying child support. Hodges and colleagues (2020) found that for Wisconsin families whose first child support orders were set between 2010 and 2012, increases in burden were associated with declines in compliance rates. Evidence from Wisconsin Court Record Data (collected between 2007 and 2013) found that when orders exceeded 50% of earnings, noncustodial parents were significantly more likely to fall into nonpayment or make only partial support payments (Cancian et al., 2021). Barriers to child support payment are exacerbated when noncustodial parents have obligations to multiple children (Vogel, 2020a; Cancian et al., 2021; Hodges et al., 2020). And the receipt of public assistance impacts debt accumulation, too. As a result of both low income and the requirement to cooperate with child support in order to receive TANF, Medicaid, and, in some states, other benefits, noncustodial parents whose families received benefits are more apt to have child support debt (Cancian & Meyer, 2018; Rivera et al., 2023; Pate, 2016; Dinan, 2023; Renno, 2021). Thus, data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing study—a longitudinal survey following approximately 5000 children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large cities (in 15 states) throughout the United States—shows that noncustodial fathers whose children's mothers currently or formerly received TANF and/or Medicaid had 38% and 17% higher odds, respectively, of accruing child support debt compared with those families without public assistance involvement (Cozzolino, 2018). Looked at somewhat differently, a recent examination of the implementation and effectiveness of child support cooperation requirements in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) found that cooperation requirements did not significantly increase child support payments (Holcomb et al., 2024).

Interest Charges on Arrears

Unpaid child support generates other charges that contribute to child support arrears. This includes fees, costs and interest charges. According to a 2020 paper from the *Criminal Justice Law Review* of UCLA School of Law, interest is the most important factor driving the significant

growth of arrears in several states (Turetsky & Waller, 2020). Interest charges on unpaid child support range from 12% to no interest charge at all, which is the case for 20 states and the District of Columbia, and another four states that have published interest charges ranging from 6%–12% but do not collect them (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022). Although many states regard interest on child support as an incentive to encourage timely payments as well as a penalty for those who do not make payments, reducing or eliminating it is one way that states can slow the growth of arrears. Meyer and Riser (2023) showed that following the 2014 reduction in the interest placed on child support arrears from 1% to 0.5% in Wisconsin, non-Hispanic Black noncustodial parents experienced a significantly greater reduction in their monthly accumulation of total arrears than either non-Hispanic White or Hispanic noncustodial parents ($46 monthly compared to $28 and $33). Results also showed that the policy change led to increases in payments for non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic White and Hispanic noncustodial parents, although non- Hispanic Black noncustodial parents' payments increased by a smaller amount than both non-Hispanic White and Hispanic noncustodial parents ($14 monthly compared to $26 and $32). Thus, while Black noncustodial parents paid more under the new interest rate, their response was lower than their White counterparts. According to the authors, this outcome may be explained, at least in part, by Black noncustodial parents' disproportionate experiences of discrimination in the labor market and mass incarceration, which—even with more favorable interest rates charged on arrears—limit their ability to pay (Meyer & Riser, 2023). State policy on interest area is dynamic and in 2021, Illinois announced that it would no longer charge interest on unpaid child support because it disproportionately affects low-income families and people of color in its caseload (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022; Hancock, 2020).

Public Benefits and Child Support Arrears

Several researchers (e.g., Pate, 2016; Dinan, 2023) link racial and ethnic disparities in child support arrears to the racial composition of public benefits caseloads (Turetsky & Waller, 2020). Pate's (2016) study of fathers of children receiving TANF in Madison, Wisconsin, found that Black fathers owed roughly three times more in arrears than White fathers ($9,167 vs. $2,747), largely due to income disparities—Black fathers earned approximately $10,000 less annually. These findings were reinforced by Renno (2021), who used statewide administrative data and found that although Black residents comprised under 10% of Wisconsin's population, they represented nearly 40% of the child support caseload. Among those with arrears, Black, Native American, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander fathers were significantly overrepresented, while White, Asian, and multiracial fathers were underrepresented.

Similar trends were found in New York City, where over 90% of noncustodial parents in the child support program identified as Black or Hispanic when race was known (Dinan, 2023). Dinan (2023) reported that Black and Hispanic parents were approximately twice as likely as

White parents to owe $500 or more in arrears to the state. Dinan attributed these disparities to the racial makeup of New York's public benefits caseload, which reflects broader systemic inequalities in income and wealth by race and ethnicity.

Consequences of Child Support Arrears

Research consistently demonstrates that the accumulation of child support arrears has detrimental effects on noncustodial parents' financial stability, health, and employment outcomes. Using data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Robbins et al. (2022) found that a 1% increase in arrears was significantly associated with greater likelihood of material hardship, including any hardship (3 percentage points), food insufficiency (1 point), housing difficulties (1 point), limited access to medical care (1 point), and difficulty paying bills (2 points). Among noncustodial fathers with a high arrears burden (i.e., 16% debt-to-income), these associations were even more pronounced: compared to those with no arrears, they experienced significantly higher rates of hardship (26%), food insufficiency (11%), housing difficulties (18%), limited access to medical care (8%), and difficulty paying bills (19%).

These financial pressures also coincide with adverse health outcomes. Robbins et al. (2022) found that increased arrears were associated with elevated risks of poor physical health and depression (1 percentage point each), rising to 9 percentage points among fathers with high arrears. Similarly, Turner and Waller (2017) reported that both the presence and amount of arrears were longitudinally linked to fewer weeks worked and higher levels of depressive symptoms. Taken together, these findings suggest that the accrual of child support debt undermines noncustodial fathers' wellbeing in ways that can further destabilize their employment and economic security.

Preventing and Reducing Child Support Arrears

To reduce debt, scholars have recommended preventing, modifying, or eliminating interest on unpaid child support obligations (e.g., Chen & Harper, 2023; Turetsky & Waller, 2020; Turner & Waller, 2017). Meyer and Riser (2023) showed that following the 2014 reduction in the interest charged on child support arrears from 1% to 0.5% in Wisconsin, non-Hispanic Black noncustodial parents experienced a significantly greater reduction in their monthly accumulation of total arrears than either non-Hispanic White or Hispanic noncustodial parents ($46 monthly compared to $28 and $33). They also paid more child support under the lower interest rate, although it was not as robust as their White counterparts.

Another approach involves the implementation of debt forgiveness programs for state-owed arrears (Battle, 2021; Battle, 2023; Turner & Waller, 2017). Although OCSS reported that 45 states and the District of Columbia had policies to reduce or compromise child support debt owed to the state in 2018, most operated on a limited, case-by-case basis with case selection, processing, and treatments determined by the individual caseworker. Still other state programs

offered debt relief in exchange for a lump-sum payment or a full payment of current support over a very protracted period of time—terms that are typically beyond the capacity of most child support debtors and certainly those that are low-income (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022). According to a more recent compilation, only ten states and the District of Columbia had programs that were more "robust and innovative." They typically operate on an agency-wide basis, have established criteria for eligibility that require evidence of unemployment, incarceration, or disability to explain debt accumulation, and key debt relief to the payment of current support and/or participation in a relevant employment, education, or training program (Ascend at the Aspen Institute & GOOD+ Foundation, n.d.).

An evaluation of five "robust and innovative" programs, three of which were comprised almost entirely of Black noncustodial parents in the District of Columbia, Illinois, and Maryland, found that payment of current support following program participation improved significantly. All three programs offered high rates of forgiveness of state-owed arrears in exchange for complete payment of current support for relatively short periods of time: 100% after six months (Illinois); 50% after one year and 100% after two-years (Maryland); 25% after six months, 50% after one year, 75% after 18 months, and 100% after two years (District of Columbia). And although there is almost no information on forgiveness of family-owed arrears, which comprises 80% of arrears in the child support program, this same evaluation found that the small numbers of custodial parents asked about possible forgiveness of family arrears were more likely to be interested in the idea than opposed to it (Pearson et al., 2012).

Child Support Enforcement

Administrative Enforcement Actions

When noncustodial parents fall into arrears (to the custodial parent and/or the state) child support enforcement tools are used to encourage payment. Enforcement tools may be federally mandated (including the use of automatic income withholding, tax refund offsets, license suspension, the seizure of assets and benefits, credit reporting, insurance match, passport denial, civil contempt) or used at state option (lottery intercepts, interest on arrears, publication of delinquent noncustodial parents, or employment services) (Selekman & Johnson, 2019). The extent and the order in which various enforcement mechanisms are used, as well as the level of arrears that trigger them, vary considerably by state and/or county (Selekman & Johnson, 2019; Vogel et al., 2025). Nevertheless, "aggressive" child support enforcement actions are justified by images of the "deadbeat dad" (i.e., those who are able but unwilling to pay) (Battle, 2018; Brito et al., 2015; Brito et al., 2020; Cancian, 2021) and have been further framed as essential tools for compelling those deadbeat dads to share economic resources with their children. This objective of child support policy—and the assumptions about why fathers fail to pay support—were primarily based on the experiences of White, middle-class families

and reflected the race and class positions of key advocates and policy makers who supported the program's 1996 expansions as part of welfare reform (Cancian, 2021).

In light of more recent research on the disproportionalities and disparities that underly the accumulation of debt by many noncustodial parents (e.g., Cancian et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2020; described in the previous section), it has become apparent that those who many who face child support enforcement actions are unable to support their children. Using court-based ethnography and in-depth interviews with lawyers, litigants, and judges, Brito (2019) highlighted how exorbitant debt is owed by noncustodial fathers who have no and low income. She reported that judges and lawyers rarely saw cases where the noncustodial parent qualified as "able but unwilling" (i.e., the stereotypical "deadbeat dad"), meaning that they clearly had the means to pay the child support owed and chose not to pay it (Brito, 2019). These findings are similar to those from research obtained from the federal Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration project, which showed that those noncustodial parents who were referred to the program in lieu of contempt had, on average, $5,000 in formal earnings in the last year (Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022). PJAC case managers commonly described that inconsistent, low-wage employment, as well as challenges to obtaining employment, served as significant barriers to payment for noncustodial parents (Cummings, 2020). Moreover, 85% of noncustodial fathers who are incarcerated for nonpayment of child support live in poverty (Zatz et al., 2016).

Brito and colleagues (2015) argue that the child support enforcement system attempts to be colorblind, but as a result ignores important contextual issues faced by people of color. Several researchers (e.g., Battle, 2023; Brito, 2019; McDonald, 2022) have further argued that child support enforcement (re)produces gender, racial, and class stereotypes around parenting, as noncustodial parents of color tend to receive disproportionate child support enforcement actions relative to their inclusion in the arrears population (e.g., McDonald, 2022; Renno, 2021; Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022; Solmeyer et al., 2024). Renno (2021) used data from the Wisconsin child support program to examine racial and ethnicity disproportionalities of several enforcement tools—driver's license suspension, professional license suspension, recreational license suspension, lien dockets (property liens), credit bureau reporting, and seizure of financial accounts. She and found that, compared to both the general population and the noncustodial parent population in Wisconsin, Black individuals were overrepresented in being subject to all administrative enforcement actions (Renno, 2021). She also found that the strength of disproportionality was consistently higher for Black, Native American, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander noncustodial parents than their White counterparts; Black noncustodial parents were five times more represented in *any* enforcement action relative to their representation in the Wisconsin population (Renno, 2021). This evidence is consistent with that from Minnesota, which showed that American Indian (42%) and Black (29%)

noncustodial parents were far more likely to have their driver's licenses suspended than White noncustodial parents (19%) (Solmeyer et al., 2024).

To address perceived inequities such as those described above, in 2021, the Minnesota child support program launched a six-month Child Support Driver's License Suspension Pilot across 12 counties (Solmeyer et al., 2024). Its core aim was to reform how driver's license suspensions were used as a punitive measure for noncustodial parents who failed to make child support payments. Specifically, the pilot counties were given discretion to override automated suspension triggers based on case assessments and used procedural justice-informed approaches to reduce inappropriate or counterproductive suspensions and improve customer service. In this intervention, child support workers reviewed individual circumstances before proceeding with license suspension to determine if it would be effective or harmful; workers were also trained to contact parents proactively, assess their barriers to payment, and provide support. Finally, workers tested alternate approaches, such as using payment agreements without upfront "good faith" payments, graduated payment plans, suppression of suspensions when appropriate, and referrals to services, such as arrears management and public assistance. Although the pilot study led to a slight short-term decline in payment compliance, Solmeyer and colleagues (2024) highlighted the success of the pilot on reducing several disparities in the driver's license suspension process in Minnesota. Namely, the study showed a greater increase in payment agreements, suppression (stopping) of the license suspension, and connection to arrears management services among Black noncustodial parents in comparison to White noncustodial parents. It also found a greater decrease in license suspension for Black noncustodial parents than it did for White noncustodial parents.

Civil Contempt and Incarceration

Research (Aminu, 2019; Zatz et al., 2016; Cozzolino, 2018) has also shown that people of color are disproportionately held in civil contempt for child support nonpayment when compared to their White counterparts. Data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a nationally representative sample of children born in 20 U.S. cities from 1998–2000, showed that Black noncustodial fathers are disproportionately incarcerated for nonpayment of child support—at a rate 10 times higher than other noncustodial fathers (Zatz et al., 2016). Also using data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Cozzolino (2018) found that Black noncustodial fathers make up 68% of the sample of noncustodial fathers incarcerated for child support debt. Even after accounting for noncustodial fathers' child support debt owed, relationship, demographic, and employment characteristics, Black noncustodial fathers were still 1.17 times more likely than White noncustodial fathers to be incarcerated for child support debt (Cozzolino, 2018).

Brito and colleagues (2020) discussed that low-income men of color who are jailed for contempt are often assumed to be unwilling to find employment—an assumption that is more

consistent with the experiences of higher-income, White men in the formal labor market. In turn, Brito and colleagues (2022) argue that civil courts normalize, legitimize, and perpetuate the extraction of resources from poor, predominately Black communities and support the accumulation of White wealth. Similarly, Cammett's (2022) law review article examined how U.S. child support laws disproportionately impact incarcerated parents, particularly those from low-income and Black communities. Cammett introduces the concept of a "shadow law"—a parallel legal system that enforces child support through punitive measures rather than focusing on the welfare of children. Cammett emphasizes that these punitive measures disproportionately affect Black parents, exacerbating existing racial and economic inequalities. The enforcement mechanisms often ignore the structural barriers these parents face, such as limited employment opportunities and systemic discrimination.

Importantly, Aminu (2019) reviewed the cumulative negative impact of child support laws on low-income parents of color to show how racial disparities around employment, education, and the child support program policies and practices additively create a culture where low-income noncustodial parents of color are more likely than other noncustodial parents to be incarcerated for nonpayment of child support. The review focused on racial disparities in 1) the wage gap, 2) college completion rates, 3) guidelines which impute a minimum wage at full-time employment on noncustodial parents regardless of their employment status and accrue interest, 4) the failure of child support offices to report changes in employment status, and 5) the adverse emotional and mental effects of the father being absent for their children. Based on their review of research in these five areas, Aminu (2019) concluded that noncustodial parents of color, in comparison to White and Asian fathers, are more likely to be incarcerated for non-payment, which often continues the cycle of violence and leads to declining family relationships.

Several researchers (Brito, 2019; Battle, 2023; Cammett, 2022; Meyer et al., 2020; Selekman & Johnson, 2019) have concluded that aggressive child support enforcement is essentially useless when collecting child support from no- or low-income fathers without stable, consistent employment and/or financial assets. Using data collected between 2010–2012 from the Wisconsin child support program, Meyer and colleagues (2020) found that noncustodial parents with lower earnings, fewer quarters of employment, those who were ever incarcerated in the five years before the child support order, who identify as non-Hispanic Black or "Other" (compared to non-Hispanic White), and live in Milwaukee (i.e., a large, urban city, which typically have higher percentages of Black and Hispanic residents (Battle, 2023)) had a lower likelihood of beginning to pay support following enforcement actions. Moreover, Selekman & Johnson (2019), who interviewed child support experts in six states (i.e., Delaware, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, North Dakota, South Carolina), reported that enforcement is likely only successful for those parents who have the financial means to pay support. According to one expert in their study, "enforcement is wholly ineffective for noncustodial parents who have no

ability to pay, which is about 30%–40% of noncustodial parents in the child support program. For these noncustodial parents, enforcement tools only drive them to hide from the system rather than figuring out how to work within the system." For those "willing but unable" to pay noncustodial parents, capital-building tools are likely to be the most effective.

Consequences of Enforcement

Not only are child support enforcement actions regarded as ineffective, but authors have argued that they may exacerbate the employment disparities that low-income fathers of color face, making it more difficult for them to repay their debts (e.g., Battle, 2023). Using data from Wisconsin, Vogel and colleagues (2025) found that, following all enforcement action, Black and Hispanic noncustodial parents experienced worse compliance and lower employment and earnings than White noncustodial parents. Using data from Wisconsin (Meyer et al., 2020), the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (McLeod & Gottlieb, 2018), and the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Program (CSPED) (Berger et al., 2021), authors found that license suspension (Meyer et al., 2020; Berger et al., 2021) and incarceration (Berger et al., 2021; McLeod & Gottlieb, 2018) were associated with a lower likelihood of noncustodial parents' payment of child support. Moreover, results from CSPED, which was a large-scale random-assignment evaluation that enrolled more than 10,000 noncustodial parents across 18 locations in eight states in 2012, identified that, among a sample of noncustodial parents who experienced difficulty meeting their child support obligations, over half identified transportation barriers—which included suspension of a license—as a barrier to employment—and consequently, lower employment, earnings, and child support payments (Berger et al., 2021). This supports arguments (e.g., Cadigan & Kirk, 2020; McDonald, 2022) that a license suspension limits the noncustodial parent's ability to maintain employment, an issue that is particularly harmful in rural areas (Cadigan & Kirk, 2020; McDonald, 2022). Another negative impact of driver's license suspension for people of color is the higher risk of fines, court appearances, and even jail as a result of driving without a license (McDonald,2022).

Incarceration for unpaid child support disproportionately affects people of color and those with low incomes, compounding existing economic disadvantages (Haney, 2018; Middlemass & Josephson, 2021; Zatz et al., 2016). A cyclical relationship exists between incarceration and child support debt, where one reinforces the other, further hindering noncustodial fathers' social and financial stability (Haney, 2018; Turetsky & Waller, 2020). Cammett (2022) highlights how welfare reforms and mass incarceration have led to systems where incarcerated parents accumulate unpayable child support debts that continue to grow during imprisonment, resulting in additional legal burdens upon release.

Evidence from the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) and the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) also show that having a criminal record reduces future child support payments, largely due to employment challenges. Berger et

al. (2021) found that non-Hispanic Black CSPED fathers were most affected by these barriers, earning less and paying less support compared to other groups. In the SVORI sample, Link and Roman (2017) similarly found that higher child support debt after incarceration was linked to reduced legitimate employment, further perpetuating economic instability.

Given the interactions between low incomes, incarceration, and child support debt, research suggests that incarceration does not work as a child support enforcement tool (McDonald, 2022). "Jail is appropriate for someone who is actively hiding assets, not appropriate for someone who couldn't pay the order in the first place," Turetsky told the New York Times in 2015 (as cited in Robles & Dewan, 2015). Although limited information is available about the prevalence or cost of using incarceration as a child support enforcement tool, it is widely believed to be cost ineffective (Turetsky & Waller, 2020). Turetsky & Waller (2020) note that the majority of incarcerated parents who accumulate child support debt are in prison or jail for reasons unrelated to child support enforcement; in these cases, the policy focus should be on preventing and reducing the accumulation of uncollectible arrears during prison.

FEM Rule Changes

In recognition of the ineffective (or even counterproductive) nature of enforcement tools for "willing but unable" fathers' child support payments, the federal Office of Child Support Services released policy guidance via the 2016 Final Rule (Vogel et al., 2025). The Final Rule required states to establish guidelines for the use of civil contempt, and to:

1. Screen noncustodial parents to determine their ability to pay
2. Provide courts with any relevant information about the obligor's ability to pay to facilitate the court's determination of ability to meet any purge conditions (including payment)
3. Provide notice to the obligor that ability to pay "constitutes the critical question in the civil contempt action" (i.e., make clear to the obligor that ability to pay is at the crux of the civil contempt determination) (Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization of Child Support Programs, 2016)

Vogel and colleagues (2025) used a mixed-methods approach to examine the use of license suspension and civil contempt pre- and post-OCSS Final Rule in Wisconsin. Prior to the Final Rule changes in Wisconsin, the study found that while general enforcement letters were commonly issued to noncustodial parents in Wisconsin, more severe enforcement actions like license suspension and contempt proceedings were far less frequent. Over time, license suspensions slightly increased, especially among those already on the lien docket, whereas contempt actions declined—likely due to updated federal and state guidance requiring more steps before pursuing contempt. Use of these enforcement tools varied by county size and noncustodial parent characteristics, with smaller counties and low-income noncustodial parents

more likely to experience such actions. Importantly, there were generally no positive associations between enforcement actions and improved child support compliance, earnings, or employment; in some cases, negative associations were observed. Qualitative findings emphasized a shift among agencies toward engagement and outreach over punitive measures, with staff highlighting early intervention and communication as more effective approaches (Vogel et al., 2025).

Modification of Child Support Orders

Modifications for the General Population

One way to avoid the accumulation of child support arrears is to match the child support order to the noncustodial parent's financial situation, which can change over time. A change in financial situation is more likely to occur among low-wage workers, and low-wage workers are more likely to be workers of color (Social Security Administration, 2022). Studies find that Black noncustodial fathers have particularly low rates of adjustments to their support orders (Ha et al., 2010).

Order modification can be particularly important to a parent who recently lost their job or had an involuntary reduction in income. An appropriate and timely order modification can foster payment and avoid triggering enforcement actions. The modification process typically entails first reviewing the order and, if appropriate, adjusting that child support order. Although each state has their own review and modification criteria, federal regulation requires state processes that vary for three case types depending upon whether they involve the receipt of TANF (and an assignment of support) or the incarceration of the noncustodial parent. However, once orders are set, noncustodial parents may encounter challenges obtaining modifications (Brito, 2019; Vogel et al., 2022). One earlier study found that Black noncustodial fathers have particularly low rates of adjustments to their support orders (Ha et al., 2010).

CPR has not discovered recent child support research that publishes disproportionalities in order reviews or modifications. This is probably more indicative of a dearth of research tracking modifications specifically by race and ethnicity and for other subgroups. The few studies noting modification rates among the entire child support caseload of a state or county generally find low modification rates (e.g., Passarella, 2024). For example, a study of Maryland child support orders established in 2010 found that only 26% were modified by 2019 (Passarella, 2024). The failure to modify order particularly among parents of color is also indirectly evident in racial ethnic differences in the amount of arrears owed in various studies (e.g., Meyer et al., 2020, Cancian et al., 2021; Horowitz et al., 2022). Further, the racial and ethnic differences in TANF and incarceration rates (due to racial and ethnic differences in poverty and institutionalized inequities) underscore that the modification process should be reviewed when looking at child support activities through an equity lens.

Outside the 36-month period required for review of TANF orders or parental notification or learning of incarceration, states have a lot of discretion in their modification procedures and criteria. One 2021 policy paper (NCSEA Research Subcommittee, 2021) highlights state policy choices that can make the modification process more user-friendly, timely, and efficient. This ranges from broadening the definition and criteria that must be met for a review outside the 36-month period (e.g., change in income or another change in circumstance) and lowering the quantitative thresholds for a change (e.g., at least a $50 change) to how a state gathers information from the parents to document change in circumstances and uses it to calculate support during the review and adjustment process. There has not been in-depth research on how these state variations affect the frequency and number of modifications among noncustodial parents of color or other populations of interest to this study. Nonetheless, a few behaviorally informed demonstration projects have found procedural changes can increase the number of reviews and modifications. For example, Ohio tested streamlining its modification process through its OCSS Behavioral Intervention for Child Support Services (BICS) grant in the mid-2010s (Baird & Miller, 2019). The evaluators (Baird & Miller, 2019) found simplification of the review form to be completed by parents and other changes increased the percentage of completed order reviews by 15 percentage points in one of the demonstration counties.

Modifications following Incarceration

As mentioned previously, incarceration—particularly for people of color—is a significant impetus for debt accumulation. Specifically, because incarceration (in general) has been shown to disproportionately impact people of color and with low incomes, incarceration for nonpayment of child support can exacerbate economic disadvantages (Haney, 2018; Middlemass & Josephson, 2021; Zatz et al., 2016). Incarceration and child support debt have been long identified as reciprocal processes, where feedback loops of disadvantage worsen noncustodial fathers' social and financial integration (Haney, 2018; Turetsky & Waller, 2020). These feedback loops reinforce the "imprisonment of debt" (i.e., punished for being poor and accruing arrears) and "debt of imprisonment" (i.e., facing higher arrears and worse economic outcomes following incarceration) (Haney, 2018). These reciprocal processes have been tested in several studies (McLeod & Gottlieb, 2018; Link & Roman, 2017). Using data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study, researchers found that noncustodial fathers with histories of incarceration had over two times higher odds of having any support arrears than fathers who do not (McLeod & Gottlieb, 2018). This study also showed that Black, Hispanic, and "Other" noncustodial fathers had 1.16 times, 1.08 times, and 2.05 times (respectively) greater odds of having arrears following incarceration when compared with White incarcerated noncustodial parents. These authors argue that the process is discriminatory (Spjeldnes et al., 2015).

As discussed in Costanzo (2018), without modification, child support debt continues to accrue while parents are unable to earn an income in prison. This results in overwhelming financial

burdens upon release, increasing the risk of recidivism. Even 20 years ago, a study of 350 parolees in Colorado demonstrated that they had an average balance of $16,651 in arrears (Pearson, 2004). Moreover, in a study of more than 16,000 noncustodial parents incarcerated due to child support debt, researchers found that, even after controlling for factors such as age, education, and prior participation in 12-step programs, Black fathers—but not with White fathers—had higher post-release recidivism (Spjeldnes et al., 2015). Child support debt, incarceration for child support debt, and post-release recidivism, have been shown to impede noncustodial parents of color's financial contributions to their children over time (Charles et al., 2024).

According to Turetsky & Waller (2020), few states automatically reduce support orders during incarceration, although most states require incarcerated parents to request modification. Haney (2018) described the structural disadvantages faced by incarcerated parents, leading to deeper financial and social inequities. Based on court interviews with incarcerated individuals across three states (i.e., California, Florida, and New York), Haney (2018) mentioned three broad inequities. First, and foremost, she identified knowledge gaps, such that many incarcerated parents are unaware of their rights regarding child support modifications. The legal system assumes they have the capacity to navigate these processes, but their lack of access to information deepens existing inequities. Specifically, Haney mentioned, "These barriers were evident for incarcerated parents in Florida, and in my interviews with 50 of them, not one father was even aware that modification was an option." Haney (2018) also identified the difficulty incarcerated parents face in petitioning courts for child support modifications. This raises equity concerns because individuals who lack legal knowledge or resources are disproportionately disadvantaged in asserting their rights. She also identified structural barriers, such that incarcerated parents face significant challenges in organizing their legal cases, obtaining necessary documentation, and testifying from prison. These barriers reinforce systemic inequities, as those with fewer resources or legal support suffer greater financial and legal consequences. This inequity was raised by Vogel (2022) in her examination of the perceptions of fairness in the child support program. She noted that incarcerated noncustodial parents described their first communication about child support as receiving paperwork via mail. These noncustodial parents perceived that their situations made it especially difficult to obtain information and help.

A collaboration between the Washington State Division of Child Support and the Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) research team aimed to increase the number of incarcerated noncustodial parents in Washington who applied for modifications to reduce the amount of their child support orders. The team provided parents with materials to make them aware that they may be eligible for order modification and to move them to action. Results showed that these materials led to a 32 percentage point increase in the number of parents requesting a modification and a 16 percentage point increase in the number of incarcerated

parents receiving a modification to their child support orders within three months (Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation (OPRE), 2018a). Results were similar in Texas, such that the program redesigned the mailings informing these parents of the option to apply for an order modification (OPRE, 2018b). The redesigned materials also resulted in a significant increase in applications at relatively low cost (OPRE, 2018b).

As mentioned in Section 2, in 2016, OCSS issued rules requiring child support agencies to either review and adjust orders or notify parents of their right to a review when a parent is incarcerated for 180 days or more (U.S. DHHS CMS, 2016). States with laws that automatically adjust support upon incarceration are exempt. Incarceration can no longer be treated as voluntary unemployment when setting or modifying support orders. Currently, 21 states automatically initiate a modification of support upon learning that the obligor is incarcerated for a specific period of time. Seven states provide the parties notice that the case is eligible for a review of the order upon learning that the obligor is incarcerated, and six states automatically abate or adjust support by operation of law upon learning the obligor is incarcerated (NCSEA, 2024).

Following the OCSS 2016 Final Rule, which prohibited child support agencies from counting incarceration as voluntary unemployment (thus making it ineligible for order modification), Costanzo (2018) found that Wisconsin child support agencies still had difficulty modifying orders for incarcerated individuals. As of 2017, Costanzo (2018) found that child support agency practice and approaches to incarcerated noncustodial parents were in flux in Wisconsin and practice varied across the state, some of which could be attributed to county context, including size, agency structure, and local courts.

A qualitative analysis of the Milwaukee Prison Project conducted by Noyes and colleagues (2017) highlighted some of the benefits of undertaking a systematic and proactive approach to modifying the orders of incarcerated noncustodial parents. These authors found that compared with other Wisconsin counties that lacked systematic processes for suspending or reducing child support orders for incarcerated parents, holding open the child support orders of incarcerated parents in Milwaukee County both reduced their arrears balances at the time of their release, and potentially improved their post-release payments of child support. Further, the child support enforcement system would also benefit from an increased likelihood of collecting current support, reducing arrears, and preventing the accumulation of additional debt subsequent to the release of incarcerated parents.

Parent Interactions with Child Support Staff

High caseloads and automated system processing afford few opportunities for parents and child support caseworkers to communicate and engage with one another. A recent study by Vogel and Hossain (2023) found that child support agency staff in Wisconsin often manage extensive caseloads, averaging 728 cases per worker. According to a recent blog post by Elaine Sorensen (2024b), who analyzed 2023 data of the Current Population Survey Child Support Supplement, 39% of custodial parents experienced long wait times or were unable to get through when attempting to contact their local child support office. Additionally, 37% noted that their calls or emails were not returned (Sorensen, 2024b). These issues are indicative of overburdened systems struggling to maintain adequate communication with families.

As described in Kusayeva's (2020) project brief on the Procedural Justice Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration project, it also can be challenging for child support staff to engage with noncustodial parents who are emotionally disconnected from the child support program. Lisa Klein Vogel used mixed-methods data from the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) with both staff (2019; 2020a) and noncustodial fathers (2020b) to show that many noncustodial parents' engagement with the child support program is directly associated with how they feel they are perceived by the agency and staff. According to staff, parents who disengage with the program are often seen as "the bad guy" rather than as individuals who need assistance to meet their obligations. This perception can feel demeaning, demoralizing, and demotivating to noncustodial parents.

Relatedly, Vogel (2020a) used CSPED data to identify barriers to compliance in the formal child support program. She reported that one child support agency staff member in her study explained that noncustodial parents sometimes feel they are viewed in one dimension—defined solely by their inability to make payments—while their other positive qualities go unrecognized. Noncustodial fathers tended to agree, reporting that child support staff saw them as "all the same" or "just another deadbeat." They said it was alienating to be viewed in this manner, a reason why they disengaged with the formal system, and that they did not expect to be treated fairly if they did engage (Vogel, 2020b). Battle's (2019a) study of qualitative interviews with noncustodial parents highlighted similar points, such that that many noncustodial parents expressed feeling dehumanized, surveilled, and shamed. Interactions with enforcement agencies left them feeling invisible or worthless, reinforcing internalized stigma (Battle, 2019a). These findings are similar to those identified in McDonald, Lemmons, and Arroyo's (2024) book chapter on Black fathers and state family-centered interventions. The authors discuss the historical and systemic factors that have shaped the experiences of Black fathers, highlighting how institutional policies have often marginalized their roles within families (McDonald, Lemmons & Arroyo, 2024).

Vogel (2020a) found that child support and partner agency staff in CSPED frequently observed a sense of mistrust from noncustodial parents toward the child support program. This distrust stemmed from past experiences, including instances where agencies falsely presented offers of assistance that turned out to be "sting" operations, leading to the arrest of parents who were behind on their payments (Vogel, 2020a). Another source of mistrust was uncertainty about whether the funds collected would reach and benefit their children (Vogel, 2020a).

Many studies using both qualitative and quantitative data from Wisconsin (e.g., Kim & Meyer, 2021; Vogel, 2019; Vogel et al., 2022) have found that parent perceptions about the fairness of the child support program are shaped by their understandings and experiences with it. For example, between October 2023 and April 2024, the University of Wisconsin's Institute for Research on Poverty conducted focus groups with primarily low-income Black fathers in Milwaukee County who had child support arrears (Walsh & Quince, 2024). Participants expressed feelings of hopelessness about their situation, often driven by overwhelming child support debts (Walsh & Quince, 2024), which discouraged them from seeking help. They highlighted a strong need for clear information and practical guidance—resources they felt were lacking. Trustworthy referral sources were seen as crucial for engaging with services, and participants emphasized the importance of having their various needs acknowledged and addressed in a coordinated way. Vogel's (2019) dissertation research using CSPED data further highlighted a need for clearer communication and educational support to help noncustodial parents understand their obligations. Results from the PJAC demonstration project highlighted that challenges around lack of information are exacerbated when one or both parents lack trust in the program and its services due to past experiences or lack of understanding (Kusayeva, 2020).

One way to build trust in the child support program is to assign workers smaller caseloads and allow them to offer parents services designed to address some of the barriers to payment that they face (Kusayeva, 2020; Veldman et al., 2019; OCSS, 2019). Kim & Meyer (2021) used data from CSPED's evaluation to determine whether noncustodial parents randomly assigned to receive a package of extra services—including enhanced child support, case management, employment, and parenting services—were more likely to report fair treatment than those assigned to a control group for business-as-usual child support services. This research (Kim & Meyer, 2021) suggests that enhanced services (as prescribed through CSPED) led to perceptions of fairer treatment, and procedural justice principles explained perceptions of fair treatment. Importantly, additional research (Hausler & Michalopolous, 2024) found that certain groups of parents benefited more from case management with a specific focus on procedural justice. Parents with higher earnings, recent payments, and simpler cases benefited more than parents with lower earnings, less recent payments, and more complex cases (Hausler & Michalopolous, 2024), which suggests that the parents most in need of services may still be left out.

Limited research (Kim & Meyer, 2021) explicitly assessed whether noncustodial parents of color disproportionately perceive lower fairness than other parents. This research (Kim & Meyer, 2021) suggested that noncustodial parents of color typically perceive low fairness in the child support program. They found that that non-Hispanic Black noncustodial parents were less likely to report fair treatment in the child support program than non-Hispanic White noncustodial parents, which are in line with findings from earlier research (e.g., Brito et al., 2015).

Parent Interactions with Legal Staff

Brito's (2020) ethnographic research based on interviews and courtroom observations explored how judges and government attorneys operate within the family court systems that handle child support enforcement cases involving low- and no-income noncustodial fathers. Through this work, she (Brito, 2020) highlighted that not only do courts often deal with high case volume, disadvantaged litigants, and significant disparities in legal representation, but notably, that the administration of justice in such courts is multifaceted and heavily influenced by the personal beliefs and approaches of legal staff. These patterns were also found in the national CSPED demonstration where many noncustodial parents felt that courts perceived and treated them as criminals, rather than parents in need of assistance (Vogel, 2020b). The racial differences between legal actors (nearly all White) and noncustodial parents held in contempt for nonpayment of support (nearly all non-White) (Anderson et al., 2022; Brito et al., 2015) raise further questions about biases and lack of understanding in the court room. Several studies using court-based ethnographies from Michigan (Anderson et al., 2022) and Wisconsin (Brito et al., 2015) argue that Black families are systematically disadvantaged in the family court system due to entrenched racial bias, cultural misunderstandings, and the criminalization of poverty. Specifically, they argue that Black parents, especially mothers, are disproportionately surveilled, penalized, and separated from their children, often based on flawed assumptions about their parenting and economic status. Fathers in Brito's study regularly highlighted race-based surveillance and discriminatory hiring practices as key reasons for their unemployment and underemployment, which were further exacerbated by (likely) biases of the legal teams (Brito et al., 2015). According to the article,

> Not only do most legal professionals fail to take the racial reality of the labor market into account in their approach to child support enforcement cases, but they also ignore accounts of these experiences in the courtroom. Rather, they expect (noncustodial father) and other obligors like him to follow a particular narrative—one where they admit that they could be doing more in their employment search—and refuse to truly hear statements and experiences that challenge that narrative.

Anderson and colleagues (2022) highlight the lack of legal representation and meaningful voice for Black families in the Michigan court system and call for comprehensive reforms centered on racial equity. These include investing in community-based supports, implementing anti-racist

judicial training, improving data transparency, and prioritizing family preservation over punitive interventions. Boggess's (2017) policy paper highlights a specific recommendation that family courts "implement client-centric court practices… including differentiated case management, and innovative trial procedures" (Knowlton, 2016).

Addressing Parents' Needs through Employment Support and Parenting Time Help

With few exceptions, the child support program does not systematically provide two supportive services—employment and parenting time services—that could substantially enhance low-income parents' experiences with the child support program. The lack of supportive services in these two areas reinforces a misunderstanding of noncustodial parents' abilities to pay and ignores their parenting time situation and concerns. More to the point, the exclusion of these supports subsequently limits the ability of noncustodial parents of color to comply with their child support orders and remain positively engaged with the system and their children. Unemployment is the primary reason many noncustodial parents fail to pay child support (National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), 2019; McCann, 2019). In fact, an earlier study from Sorensen and colleagues (2007) found that 70% of unpaid child support debt is owed by parents with no or low reported earnings. Mincy and colleagues (2016) found that, even after accounting for custodial mothers' races, local unemployment rates were associated with decreased compliance with child support (OCSS, 2020; OCSS, 2022a).

According to the federal Office of Child Support Services, 13% of noncustodial parents experience prolonged periods of unemployment. A study conducted in Colorado revealed that difficulty finding employment was the leading barrier to paying child support for one-third of the noncustodial parents surveyed (NCSL, 2019). This issue is particularly critical since income withholding accounts for 75% of all child support collected annually. Researchers (e.g., Berger et al., 2021; Cancian et al., 2021; Cuesta & Cancian, 2015; McLeod & Gottlieb, 2018; Middlemass & Josephson, 2021; Pate, 2016) consistently argue that the child support program should provide or make available services to address employment barriers for the parents they serve (OCSS, 2024b).

Researchers have found that unemployment is a particular barrier for people of color. Pate (2016) conducted interviews with 20 noncustodial fathers (and mothers, when possible) of children receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits in Dane County, Wisconsin. These interviews aimed to learn more about the relationship between access to employment opportunities and the ability to manage child support debt among participants in this sample. Noncustodial low-income Black fathers in this sample reported several barriers to making steady child support payments, including issues with employment, housing, and criminal justice system involvement. Although Black fathers reported many of the same barriers as White fathers in this sample, the two groups faced differences in their access to resources. While White fathers were often able to use connections to employment and other family

resources, which allowed them to avoid arrearages, this was not the case for Black fathers. Both Pate (2016) and Rodriquez (2016) suggest that racial discrimination in hiring practices is a barrier to noncustodial parents of color's employment and child support compliance.

Although some states have used diverse funding sources to help noncustodial parents address barriers to payment that stem from unemployment and/or underemployment (e.g., surplus TANF funds, 1115 waivers and demonstration grants, child support incentive funds), no systematic mechanism exists to address these issues. In fact, until recently, employment services were not allowable expenditures of federal financial participation (FFP) child support funding. Effective January 13, 2025, OCSS implemented a new rule that allows state and Tribal child support agencies to use FFP to provide employment and training services to eligible noncustodial parents (OCSS, 2024b). This initiative aims to enhance the effectiveness of child support programs by addressing employment barriers that noncustodial parents may face, thereby promoting consistent child support payments. Parenting time (i.e., "visitation") is an area where never-married parents, who are disproportionately parents of color (Salas-Betsch, 2024), are significantly impacted by a lack of services. When married parents end their relationships, the state is responsible for formalizing the dissolution of that relationship, and state family law statutes have procedures in place to determine both child support and parenting time arrangements in a single court process and order. On the other hand, when never-married parents end their relationships, the issues of child support and parenting time are typically bifurcated, and never-married parents must generally navigate an entirely different court process for parenting time orders than the one through which they receive child support orders (NCSL, 2016). This can be costly, confusing, and time consuming for both parents and court systems and particularly burdensome for parents of color who have high rates of nonmarital birth (52% and 69% of births to Hispanic and Black women, respectively as compared with 24% for White women) (Wildsmith et al., 2018). Parenting time services are not allowable child support activities and agencies are not able to draw down 66% matching funds to help parents develop parenting plans, resolve parenting time disagreements or find services that may be able to help. This exception to this is the ability to make *de minimis* expenditures, which are relevant for only a very few jurisdictions that use standard parenting time schedules that can be easily incorporated into a child support order. In 1997, in response to research showing the high incidence of parenting time problems among parents in the child support program and the relationship between parenting time and child support payment, Congress created the Access and Visitation (AV) Grant Program (Pearson, 2015). Since then, OCSS has provided an annual allocation of $10 million to states and territories to operate programs to help noncustodial parents gain access to and visitation with their children (OCSS, 2024a). Funding for individual states ranges from a low of $100,000 to approximately $1 million (OCSS, 2022b). In 2023, more than 66,000 parents participated in AV program services making the per-case budget to support families with parenting time issues extremely low (OCSS, 2024a). With nearly one million new child support orders being established each year, many parents in the

child support program in most geographical settings lack access to resources and services to help them establish safe and structured parenting time arrangements.

Conclusion

The literature that directly pertains to equity in the child support program is limited, with few studies explicitly focusing on disparities by race or ethnicity. Most existing research highlights how child support policies disproportionately harm low-income parents of color, often ignoring their economic challenges and enforcing punitive measures like incarceration, license suspension, and interest accrual on debt. These enforcement practices are viewed as reinforcing racial and class-based inequities. The literature, as identified through both qualitative and quantitative studies, reveal that for custodial parents, disparities are linked to public assistance programs, with Black and Hispanic parents more likely to enter the program through TANF and face retention of child support by the state instead of direct family benefit. In addition, noncustodial parents of color face higher rates of enforcement actions, unmanageable child support orders, and limited access to modifications.

SECTION 4: REVIEW OF STATE EQUITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Equity assessment tools are designed to explicitly consider equity issues in making decisions about policies, practices, programs, and budgets. In general, equity assessments consist of several activities that often include disaggregating data to identify potential disparities, reviewing policies and procedures to identify possible inequities, the engagement of populations believed to be affected by inequity, and other activities. In short, they are more than just the measurement of disproportionalities. Equity assessments can be conducted at several different points of time. For example, Minnesota recently used its tool to assess the potential impact of proposed changes to their child support guidelines formula. It can also be used to analyze whether a current policy or process has disparate and inequitable outcomes (e.g., driver's license suspension policies).

Equity assessments are relatively new, particularly to human service programs and child support programs. This section summarizes equity assessment tools/frameworks for child support programs that are being used in Colorado and Minnesota and those being developed and refined in California and Michigan.[10] The discussion also draws from two other publications that inform data analysis, which is one component of an equity assessment. This includes a conceptual framework for using data from human service programs (including child support programs) that was developed for a federal Administration for Children and Families project (Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation, n.d.) and the disproportionality index used by the Wisconsin child support agency to educate the committee reviewing the state child support guidelines formula on racial and ethnic disparities in the child support program (Renno, 2021). As a reminder, disproportionality implies a difference of some kind, whereas a disparity (or inequity) implies unfairness and injustice.

Exhibit 7 shows a general definition of equity assessments that was developed by the federal government for human service programs. However, states may have their own definition. For example, Michigan (which calls it an equity impact assessment)

Exhibit 7: Definition of Equity Assessment

Equity assessments are systematic examinations of available data and expert input on how various groups—especially those facing inequity or disparities—are or likely will be affected by a policy, program, or process. They aim to minimize unintended adverse outcomes and maximize opportunities and positive outcomes.

(Source: U.S. DHS, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. (2022). *Conducting Intensive Equity Assessments of Existing Programs, Policies, and Processes* Retrieved from https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/dd148f52c519a5bcc4fde76b4932f53b/Intensive-Equity-Assessment.pdf.)

[10] CPR also conducted an online search to find equity assessment tools in use by other states and tribes but found nothing. Based on discussions between several directors of the child support programs through this grant opportunity, it is believed that most states do not have tools. In addition, if a state has a tool, it may be an internal document rather than a public-facing document. In this circumstance, the tool would not be located. Subsequent research may want to survey states and tribes, which may require more time and resources and Paperwork Reduction Act clearance.

specifies that the process should "authentically engage with communities and partners to co-create solutions that lead to equitable outcomes." (Michigan DHHS, 2024). The engagement of communities is also common to the equity assessment tools that were reviewed in California, Colorado, and Minnesota.

An equity assessment tool may be part of an equity assessment toolkit (although not always called that) that addresses why to use it, who is to use it, when to use it, and other considerations for users of the equity assessment tool (Exhibit 8).

Exhibit 8: Typical Contents of Equity Toolkit

Equity assessments toolkits often include:

- A framework/assessment tool that consists of various steps for conducting an equity assessment
- Instructions for completing the assessment
- Training materials
- Mission and purpose statement, and other background information
- Glossary of equity terms

To be clear, the primary research question being answered in this section is what are the equity assessment tools/frameworks for child support programs that are being used in Colorado and Minnesota and those being developed and refined in California and Michigan? To review these equity assessment tools/frameworks, we first compare their general purpose and structure, then we summarize their common structure and examine some of the detailed logistics of their development and use.

Background Information: Equity Statements and Action Plans

To frame each state's equity assessment tool, we first searched for the state's equity statement and/or equity action plan on their website. We limited it to websites for multiple reasons.[11] California publishes a detailed equity action plan, which is called a roadmap, on its website. As observed from their websites, Colorado and Minnesota's equity statements flow from their mission statement or guiding principles (see Exhibit 9 for each state's equity statement or action plans). An equity statement, however, does not have to flow from a mission statement or guiding principles. The equity statement can stand alone (see Michigan's equity statement in Exhibit 9).[12]

A state could have both an equity statement and equity action plan. For example, although the Michigan website does not call it an action plan, it does identify an equity assessment tool and

[11] Websites provide a definitive data source and sufficient background information. Although a survey of states may provide more thorough information, some states are in the process of developing or improving their approach to equity so their materials are still in draft form; asking for the information may not yield the same results in every state because of differences in terminology as well as nuanced meanings (e.g., equity action plan compared to equity roadmap) and would require more time and resources and possibly Paperwork Reduction Act clearance.

[12] This is important because it appears not all states child support agencies have mission statements or at least do not have mission statements published on their websites.

a child support community advisory board that engages parents in the development of child support policies[13] as being important to creating equitable child support policies and outcomes.

[13] More details about the Michigan Child Support Community Advisory Board can be found on the Michigan website: https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/adult-child-serv/child-sup/our-partners/diversity-equity-and-inclusion. More information about the Michigan Advisory Board will be provided through this project's documentation since the Advisory Board will be leveraged in Michigan's piloted equity assessment being conducted for this Project. Also, Michigan's experiences with its Advisory Board are also informing the development of a similar Advisory Board for Minnesota through this project.

Exhibit 9: Equity Statements and Action Plans Published on the Websites of California, Colorado, Michigan, and Minnesota

State	Name of State Child Support Program (and parent agency)	Landing Page of Equity Statement or Action Plan	Equity Statement or Action Plan Published on Website
CA	Department of Child Support Services (under the Health and Human Service Agency)	Dedicated Page to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion[14]	**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Roadmap** *See website for detailed bullets under Priority One, Two, and Three* **Priority One**: Workforce Capacity Building **Priority Two**: Disaggregate Employee and Customer Data **Priority Three**: Disadvantaged Community/Customer Engagement **Priority Four**: Programmatic and Policy-Equity by Design • Implement Equity Impact Statement and Assessment requirements for all Child Support Services' projects, memos, demands, and initiatives • Design an equity lens toolkit to use as a foundational tool to apply to programmatic decisions • Review existing policies and procedures with an equity lens to identify existing languages that are barriers to DEI, as well as any harmful language • Develop Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Moments toolkit for meetings, similar to OSHA ("Take 2"): "Think, Ask, Know, Execute" (TAKE)

[14] See https://dcss.ca.gov/dei-roadmap/.

			• Facilitators take a few minutes in staff meetings to review a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion learning moment • Design a best practice toolkit for outreach to historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities • Conduct a department wide equity audit and develop strategies based on results
CO	Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) under the Department of Human Services (DHS) Office of Economic Security (OES)	Guiding Principles of OCSS[15]	**Value: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion** Principle: We believe in treating people equitably, so all families have the opportunity to reach their full potential. We offer child support services that value and respect the diversity of the State of Colorado and are committed to continuing to learn and grow in this area.
MI	Office of Child Support (OCS) under the Department of Health & Human Services	Dedicated Page to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion[16]	**Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at the Office of Child Support** The Michigan Office of Child Support (OCS) is making diversity, equity, and inclusion a part of our culture. That includes moving towards claiming an anti-racist and multi-cultural identity. We lead our work explicitly though not exclusively with race because racial inequities have been baked into the creation and ongoing policies of all human services programs, including child support. Unless it is otherwise countered, racism operates at individual, institutional and structural levels and therefore is present everywhere. We also lead with race because we know if we can solve for racial inequities, we will also address other dimensions of identity that are marginalized. Advancing equity requires addressing all areas of marginalization and understanding the interconnected nature of what we are pushing against. We are: • Building our capacity to address equity and inclusion in child support.

[15] See https://childsupport.state.co.us/guiding-values-principles.
[16] See https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/adult-child-serv/child-sup/our-partners/diversity-equity-and-inclusion.

			• Reckoning with the ways this program has helped and harmed families throughout its history. • Envisioning new ways of being with each other and those we serve that are inclusive and increase understanding. **Equity Impact Assessment Tool** Equity Impact Assessment (EIA) is a process that guides leaders to examine the full implications of programs, policies, procedures and other decisions on marginalized populations. The tool is a process used in decision-making that follows a list of formalized steps to intentionally identify and reduce potential harm for racial/ethnic minorities and other marginalized populations by engaging authentically with priority populations and stakeholders to co-create and increase equitable outcomes. It offers an opportunity to reduce and eliminate racial/health disparities, enact harm reduction, and advance equity for all. Steps in the tool include proposal, data, community engagement, analysis & strategies, implementation, accountability and communication. OCS has adopted MDHHS's accepted EIA Tool. OCS's work continues in an effort to help mitigate unintended and intended negative consequences and enhance positive ones in the development of its policies and programs. **Child Support Community Advisory Council** *See website for details*

MN	Child Support Services under Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF)	Mission and Vision of DCYF[17]	**Mission and Vision** The Department of Children, Youth, and Families was established to bring together programs to better serve children, youth, and families. As a new agency established in July 2024, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families is undergoing a strategic planning process to draft an agency mission and vision. Based on input from community and partner engagement, the work of the DCYF Implementation Office's Vision for Policy and Equity Workstream, existing division strategic plans and originating agency strategic plans, a draft mission and vision statement have been created. These statements may change throughout the agency's ongoing and future strategic planning process. **Vision:** (Draft Recommendation) A Minnesota where all children, youth, and families are valued, treated equitably and thriving. **Mission:** (Draft Recommendation) To advance equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families through transformative, partnership-driven policies, programs and practices.

[17] See https://dcyf.mn.gov/about-us/mission-and-vision. The reason that the recommendations are in draft form are that Minnesota just created DCYF on July 1, 2024, as part of a reorganization. Previously, the Minnesota child support agency was under Department of Human Services. DCFY, as a newly established agency, is still refining itself as well as its website.

Some states may have an equity statement and/or equity assessment plan but do not publish them on their websites. The information available from Minnesota also has the additional limitation of the child support agency recently moving under a newly created department, the Department of Youth, Children, and Families, that was cementing its vision and structure, as well as developing and publishing information for its website when this report was written.

On its website, California has identified four priorities for building diversity, equity, and inclusion. Among other things, California Priority Four directly links to the development and use of equity assessment tools. It requires the implementation of an equity impact statement and assessments for all projects, memos, demands, and initiatives within the child support agency. Priority Four's overarching objective is to redesign the child support agency with an equity lens and institutionalize equity in all future policy and programmatic decisions. California's other three priorities concern the development and use of diverse employees, the development and analysis of disaggregated data to inform and monitor the impact of child support policies and practices across demographics, and the engagement of disadvantaged communities and customers to improve equity in the child support program.

As shown in Exhibit 9, California and Michigan explicitly mention their equity assessment tools on their websites while Colorado and Minnesota do not—at least at the time that this report was written. One benefit of publishing it is transparency. One limitation is keeping it updated. Both Colorado and Minnesota have improved their equity assessment tools over time as they gained working knowledge from applying it.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at the organizational level above the child support agency—that is the parent agency or department above child support—also help the development of diversity, equity, and inclusion frameworks and actions at the child support agency level. For example, the Michigan child support program is adapting an equity assessment tool developed by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) that originated to address equity issues in health programs (Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Diversity Committee, 2018). The Michigan child support program is using a multi-phase approach to operationalize the tool and make it specific to child support.

Some of these initiatives are linked to or influenced by a directive from the governor (MN Exec. Order No. 19-01, 2019). For example, in 2022, the California governor issued an executive order requiring all agencies and departments to develop or update their strategic plan to reflect the use of data analysis and inclusive practices to advance equity and engage and gather input from California communities that have been historically disadvantaged and underserved (CA Exec. Order No. 16-22, 2022). There was also a similar governor directive of the Michigan DHHS (which is the department above the child support agency) in 2020, although the directive focused on health inequities (MI Exec. Order No. 2020-9, 2020) Michigan DHHS began its

initiative before the directive. The Minnesota governor has issued a series of executive orders concerning equity (MN Exec. Order No. 23-12, 2023).

Basic Structure of Equity Assessment Tools

Exhibit 10 provides a conglomeration of the activities of the equity assessment tools reviewed. The activities are not sequential. This includes tools at the department level for Colorado, Michigan, and Minnesota as well as earlier child support agency-specific assessments in Minnesota. It considers a draft of the California tool that is being developed for the child support agency but has not been finalized. The conglomeration also considers both newer and older versions of the Colorado and Minnesota tools. Not all states include each activity, or the same activity description shown in Exhibit 8. Appendix B provides copies of state tools. Except for the Michigan DHHS tool, none of these tools are available publicly online.

Exhibit 10: Overview of Basic Structure of Equity Assessment Tools Used in Child Support

Typical Activity	Equity Assessment Question or Brief Description of Activity
Proposal or Reason	This is the desired outcome of the policy change, or the intended purpose of the existing policy/procedure being evaluated.
Identify Populations Most Likely to be Impacted	A pulldown list can be used in the Minnesota and California tool with the option to check multiple boxes and write-in other populations.
Identify Groups in the Program/Partnering Agencies Likely to be Impacted	Some of the options are contracts and procurement, legal, and operations. This is unique to the Minnesota tool but was also implicit in the Michigan framework.
Data	How is the priority population represented in your program data? Based on the data and other research is the priority population negatively under/overrepresented? What groups will experience a greater benefit, experience a greater burden, or be left out?
Community Engagement	Has the priority population or their community been engaged in this assessment? What is their input?
Analysis	What are the expected outcomes/impact to the priority population? Which groups will experience a greater benefit, experience a greater burden or be left out?

Formatting	Is the existing or proposed language easy to understand? Are acronyms explained or written out? Does it use inclusive people-first and gender-neutral language?
Implementation	Do identified staff/teams have the resources to implement the proposal? If not, what steps will be taken to ensure necessary resources are provided? How will changes to be communicated?
Accountability or Monitoring	What is the plan for monitoring the outcomes?
Summary Statement	Both the Minnesota legislative tool and planned California tool require a short narrative summarizing the findings.

The Minnesota equity tool has been applied in several areas, including legislative changes to the state child support guidelines formula, medical support provisions, and procedures related to license revocation. Additionally, Minnesota has conducted equity assessments within its agency. For instance, it reviewed the outcomes for noncustodial parents who met the arrears criteria for driver's license suspension actions. Similarly, the Colorado tool has been used for various agency rule changes, such as those concerning electronic signatures on administrative orders, clarifying county options for arrears compromise and recovery of genetic testing costs, disallowing debt establishment for inappropriate referrals, and removing gendered language.

Proposal/Reason. Most tools require a short title for the proposed policy change or a reason for the assessment, along with concise context or background information. Some tools also specify who is making the request. Both Colorado and Minnesota completed one assessment that covered multiple issues (e.g., Minnesota's assessment addressed three proposed changes, while Colorado's assessment covered five).

Identify Priority Populations. Not all tools require the identification of priority populations. One strength of doing so is that it guides data analysis and community engagement. However, a potential downside is that it may assume which populations are priorities.

Identify Groups within the Program/Partnering Agencies Likely to be Impacted. Not all tools require identifying groups within the program or partnering agencies that may be impacted. This step acknowledges that policy changes can affect both the organization internally and its external partners.

Data. Some tools are designed to use program data to determine the extent of the impact on priority populations. Minnesota, for example, used disaggregated data from its automated child support program to reveal racial and ethnic disparities in caseloads, arrears amount, and noncustodial parents with suspended driver's licenses. It compared this to data on the racial and ethnic composition of the state's overall population and the population charged or convicted of driving with a suspended license for reasons other than child support arrears. However, program data does not always contain the information needed for an equity assessment. In contrast, Colorado's assessment relied on national data, noting that Colorado's demographic trends were similar to national trends.

Community Engagement. Community engagement typically involves obtaining input from parents and caretakers with active child support cases in the state during the assessment process. Most of the completed assessments also recognized input from community organizations (e.g. fatherhood programs and Legal Aid), workgroups, local child support and human service offices, and affected partners and divisions (e.g., IV-D attorneys and the technology team). Some of the completed assessments also identified plans for community engagement, though this step was not always completed at the time of drafting the statement.

Analysis. The analysis generally layers the policy issues on top of the findings from the data analysis and the community engagement. It is the heart of the assessment.

Formatting. Not all tools include formatting guidelines. In the completed example from Colorado, language and narrative changes to the proposed rule were summarized to enhance clarity, including the removal of gendered language.

Implementation. Implementation details are not required by all tools. This step often links to both the internal impact and the potential effects on partnering agencies of implementing the policy, procedure, or whatever is subject of the equity assessment. Colorado's implementation plans included creating training and communication strategies, updating agency forms, issuing an announcement about the changes, and undertaking other relevant activities.

Accountability and Monitoring. Some but not all tools cover plans for accountability and monitoring. California's proposed tool includes monitoring. California proposes to evaluate the impact within six months to one year after implementation.

Summary Equity Impact Statement. Not all tools require a summary equity impact statement. The advantage of such a statement is that it standardizes the way assessments are summarized.

However, it may also add an extra step that could be unnecessary if the summary is not used by others.

Development and Application Logistics

The development and application of equity assessment tools involve several logistical considerations.

Who Developed the Equity Assessment Tool, How, and Why?

Some equity assessment tools/frameworks were developed from committees dedicated to advancing equity in state programs. For example, the Michigan equity assessment tool/framework is evolving through the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) Office of Equity and Minority Health, which piloted an equity assessment tool across four MDHHS health programs. The Michigan Office of Child Support (OCS) has formed a workgroup to implement the tool at the child support level in phases. The first phase involved creating an OCS Community Advisory Council. The second phase tested incorporating an equity lens into agency checklists for reviewing materials intended for publication,[18] and proposed policy changes by posing a set of general questions to the responsible workgroups. The third phase, which was underway at the time of this report, includes multiple goals such as integrating data.

Similarly, the California DCSS Office of Equity has drafted an equity assessment tool as part of a toolkit that includes instructions and training. The long-term strategic goal, in alignment with a 2022 directive from the Government of California, is to embed equity into the decision-making process and ensure that all agency decisions are made through an equity lens.

Many of the developers relied on a published tool by the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), which is a network of government jurisdictions committed to advancing equity).[19] Minnesota's current tool was developed through a collaborative effort of equity directors within DHS programs.

When Is an Equity Assessment Conducted?

The timing of an equity assessment varies. As of the writing of this report, Colorado and Minnesota have used their equity assessment tools for policy changes. In Minnesota, this included changes requiring legislative approval. However, the use of these tools can extend beyond policy assessments. California's long-term goal is to apply equity assessments to all major decision-making processes. To support this, the DCSS Office of Equity is developing an online tool to request an equity assessment, which considers various contexts (e.g., policy

[18] The Michigan child support agency has a set of processes for reviewing materials intended for publication for clarity, readability, and other desirable features of publications.
[19] See https://www.racialequityalliance.org/who-we-are/our-approach.

decisions, executive decisions with program-wide impacts, projects or initiatives, hiring and recruitment, division-specific decisions, and budget considerations). This tool is designed not only for use by DCSS executive offices and divisions but also at the local child support level, at their discretion, which is significant given that California's child support program is administered at the county level.

Michigan intends for equity assessment to inform changes in government policies or regulations, budget allocations, new programs, and other decisions (Michigan DHHS, 2024). Minnesota also intends for its tool to be used for a wide range of activities. Michigan, however, clarifies that the tool is not intended for hiring and promotion decisions.

Who Conducts the Assessment and How?

Equity assessments are typically conducted according to a set of instructions and training materials. In California, the DCSS divisions and executive offices are responsible for completing the assessments, guided by instructions and training developed by the DCSS Office of Equity. This training is offered through a web-based learning platform (i.e., Blackboard). Employees responsible for incorporating equity considerations into their work are required to complete it.

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services tool emphasizes three-pronged foundational training:

1. Equity principles (focusing on establishing a baseline knowledge)

2. An overview of the equity assessment framework (focusing on building framework to lead equity work)

3. Implicit bias in decision making (focusing on identifying the impact of implicit bias in decision making)

During its initial attempt to integrate an equity lens into agency checklists used for developing materials and reviewing proposed policy changes, Michigan identified a need for additional background information and training among child support professionals involved in these processes. As a result, Michigan recommends developing web-based training on equity concepts and the assessment process and virtual instructor-led training for staff conducting the assessments (e.g., workgroup leads and business analysts). Minnesota's newly established division, the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), plans to train all staff on its equity assessment tool over the next year as part of its transition.

Who Are the Populations Addressed?

An equity assessment tool/framework does not have to identify the populations that are addressed; rather, they can be identified by the equity impact statement or in the toolkit, at the

time of the request for an equity assessment, or as part of the actual equity assessment. The California tool allows for the population to be identified at the time of the request (e.g., individuals with limited English proficiency is the population considered in the development of a language access plan). California's framework also identifies a comprehensive list of populations and provides an additional "other" category:

- Race and ethnicity: people and communities of color
- Disability: individuals with physical health, mental health, learning disorders, or any other condition that causes impairments
- LGBTQI+ communities including non-binary or gender non-conforming individuals
- Military or veterans: individuals currently or formerly in any branch of the armed forces (including National Guard and Coast Guard)
- Language/literacy: individuals with limited English proficiency (ESL)
- Currently or formerly incarcerated individuals
- Underemployed or unemployed people
- Age specific groups
- Socio-economic status: individuals with lower income levels
- Education: individuals without a high school diploma or GED
- Unsheltered individuals or those with unstable living arrangements
- Other groups.

What Is the Process for Engaging the Community?

Community engagement can take many forms. This may include engaging existing community groups, conducting focus groups, using technological tools designed for community engagement,[20] the use of advisory councils at the agency or department level, and other vehicles. Michigan's instructions (referred to as "policy scope") address whether community engagement is critical, preferred, or not necessary for each assessment project and the method used for engagement.[21]

All the reviewed states have developed or are in the process of developing community advisory councils that can be used for equity assessments. For example, Colorado's council is at the human services department level,[22] while Michigan's council is at the child support agency

[20] For example, California's DCSS's preliminary plan also calls for the use of Ethelo, an engagement technology to be used by government agencies and other organizations in their decision making.
[21] See Michigan Office of Child Support. (Rev. 2/14/23). *Policy Scope Document.*
[22] For more information about the Colorado Department of Human Services Family Voice Council, see https://cdhs.colorado.gov/family-voice-council.

level, with both states providing stipends to participants. California and Minnesota are establishing their councils at the child support agency level, with Minnesota's council being developed through this grant. In addition, as a result of the transition to DCYF, Minnesota is also establishing a community advisory council at the agency level as well.

The first phase of Michigan's equity assessment framework involved establishing a council. Formed in 2020, the council started by reaching out to residents with child support cases, inviting them to "help ensure the office is fair and works for everyone" (Sutfin, 2020). The Michigan child support agency established a charter for the council that has been updated over time (Michigan DHHS Office of Child Support, 2023). It outlines the council's purpose, scope, approach, membership, operations, communications, evaluation process, authorizations and approvals, and other aspects of the council. Among other early accomplishments, the Michigan council provided input that has improved the agency's process for handling child support complaints and replaced the term "customers" with "case members, program participants, and care takers" to be more language sensitive (Wheaton, 2021). Currently, the Michigan council reviews OCS policy changes (e.g., changes to publicly facing OCS forms) and performs other duties.

Other Tools for Analyzing Disparities in the Child Support Program

This section focuses on tools and frameworks designed for data analysis in the context of equity, specifically, conceptual frameworks or tools for determining whether a racial and ethnic "difference" observed in the data suggests a racial and ethnic disparity.

Federal Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation, n.d.)

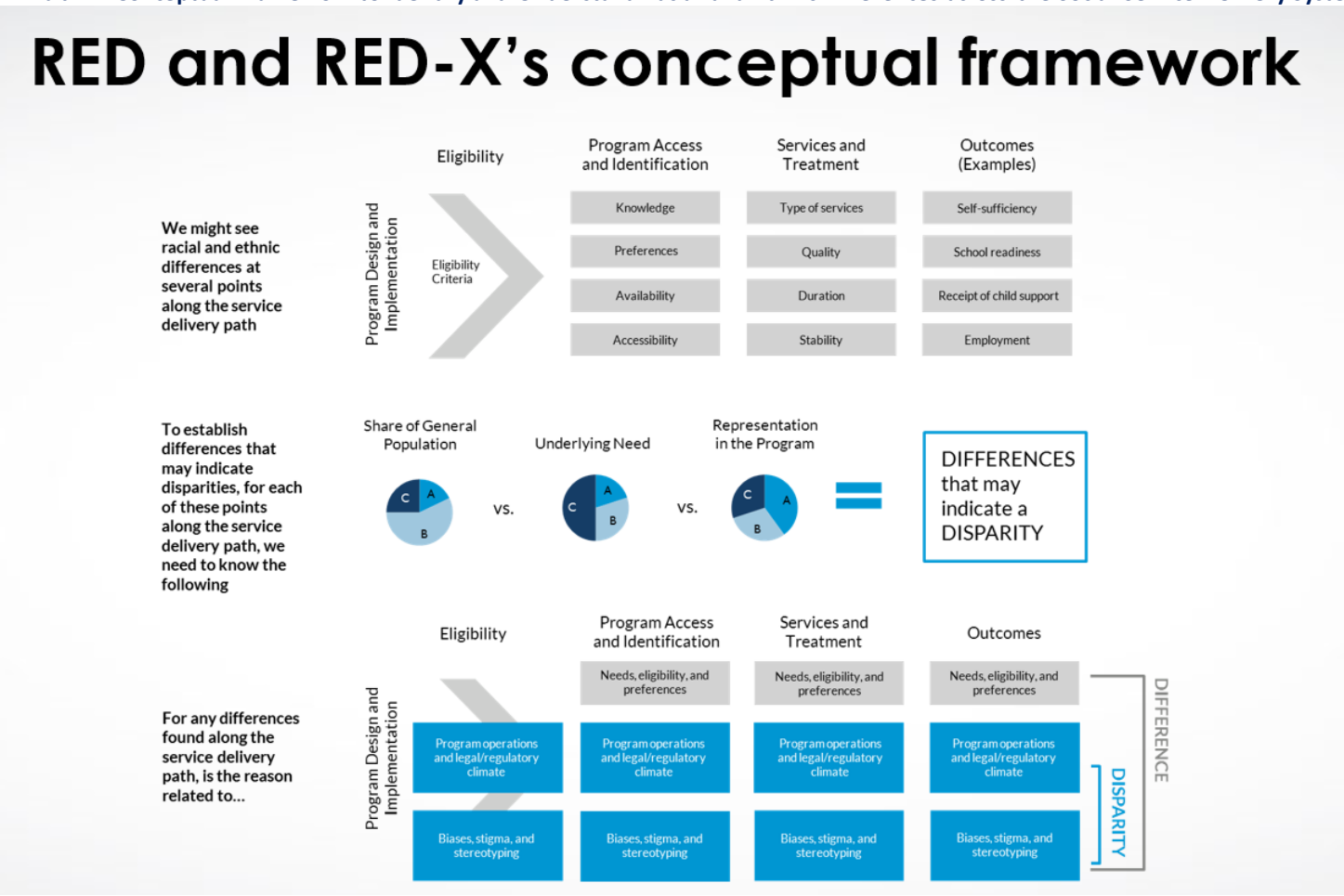
The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation (OPRE) engaged in at least two projects pertaining to racial and ethnic disparities in human services programs in the last decade (Clum & Daniels 2024). From 2015–2017, OPRE engaged in Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services (RED) project. The follow-up project, RED-X seeks to identify and understand racial and ethnic differences across the social service delivery system of ACF programs (Clum & Daniels, 2024).

OPRE also contracted with the Urban Institute to summarize existing research on racial and ethnic disparities within six ACF human services programs, including child support, and to develop a conceptual framework for distinguishing racial and ethnic "disparities" from "differences" (McDaniel et al., 2017). The framework serves a related but distinctly different purpose than the equity assessment tools reviewed in this section. While state equity assessment tools are designed to address equity in decision-making related to policies, practices, programs, and budgets, the Urban Institute framework aims to deepen the

understanding of racial and ethnic disparities in access to services, treatment, and outcomes in human service programs.

McDaniel and colleagues (2017) suggest a framework to examine differences and disparities at different points along the service path. They focus on underlying need, access to services, services received, and outcomes. McDaniel and colleagues (2017) note that racial and ethnic differences may be observed in the general population eligible for services, the general population with need for the service, and those represented in the program. Exhibit 11 illustrates this conceptual framework as refined in the RED and RED-X projects. In turn, McDaniel and colleagues (2017) suggest that these differences may indicate a disparity, but not in every comparison. For example, McDaniel and colleagues (2017) suggest that differences between eligibility and need may indicate program operations and legal and regulatory climate issues or could indicate issues with biases, stigma, or stereotyping.

Exhibit 11: Conceptual Framework to Identify and Understand Racial and Ethnic Differences across the Social Service Delivery System



Source: Clum & Daniels (2024)

The McDaniel et al. (2017) framework focuses on the underlying needs of families seeking services. This is sensible from the perspective of a family voluntarily seeking child support services but becomes less straightforward when discussing equity issues among noncustodial parents and mandated cooperation with the child support program. Clum and Daniels (2024) emphasize that racial and ethnic differences from over or underrepresentation may also indicate a disparity that is negative or harmful. For example, an analysis of racial and ethnic differences in the TANF program may be appropriately examined with regards to the needs of families with children who have low income, while the analysis of racial and ethnic differences in driver's license revocation for delinquent child support payments may be appropriately examined with regards to the harm on noncustodial parents who have low income.

Recognizing the limitations of data that are currently available, McDaniel and colleagues (2017) also include several recommendations related to data to better support analysis of racial and ethnic differences, and the exploration of analytical techniques that can reliably estimate racial and ethnic differences. Specifically, they recommended improvements to data collection and the quality of the data collected. The study also recommended that the field should systemically estimate underlying population need, measure and assess program access and participation by race and ethnicity, measure and assess service and treatment by race and ethnicity, and measure and assess outcomes by race and ethnicity.

Wisconsin Disproportionality Index (Renno, 2021)

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) presented a study to its child support guidelines review committee that is relevant to this discussion. The presentation focused on racial disproportionalities within the child support program, utilizing administrative data and a systematic tool—the disproportionality index. The findings indicated that certain demographic groups were overrepresented in the child support program and overrepresented for enforcement actions.

The DCF presentation used definitions of disparity and disproportionality in its presentation. Disparity was defined as an inequitable outcome and disproportionality as the overrepresentation of individuals of color compared to their proportion in the general population. The analysis revealed that Black noncustodial parents subjected to child support enforcement actions were overrepresented relative to both the general Wisconsin population and the child support program population. The DCF researchers calculated a disproportionality index by comparing the percentage of noncustodial parents in each racial group at a specific decision point to the percentage of adults in that racial group in the general population. Ratios above 1.0 indicated overrepresentation, while ratios below 1.0 indicated underrepresentation. For example, the index for Black noncustodial parents with child support arrears was 4.50, while it was 0.45 for White noncustodial parents. Disproportionality indexes were also created

for driver's license suspensions, professional license suspensions, credit bureau reporting, lien dockets, recreational license suspensions, and financial account seizures. They consistently identified Black, Native American, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander noncustodial parents as overrepresented. The analysis also noted that race information was missing for about one-third of the noncustodial parents. Renno (2021) did not address how to adjust the disproportionality index for when race information was missing but acknowledged that missing data in race categories greatly limited the interpretability of the research.

Similarities and Differences

Each of these tools (McDaniel et al., 2017; Renno, 2021; Clum & Daniels, 2024) suggest a comparison of racial and ethnic differences at a certain point such as service delivery or child support enforcement action to racial and ethnic differences to the general population, the population in need, or the population who could be potentially harmed. The challenge is which differences should be compared. For example, does it make sense to compare racial and ethnic differences among noncustodial parents with child support enforcement actions to the racial and ethnic differences for the entire population, the child support caseload, the child support caseload eligible for the enforcement action, or another population? Exacerbating the issue is enforcement actions may be tied to whether the order amount reflects the noncustodial parent's actual ability to pay. There could also be racial and ethnic differences in order establishment and order modification policies.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Equity assessment tools are designed to incorporate equity considerations into program decision-making. Although relatively new and not yet widely used in human services, including child support programs, there is growing interest in these tools. Currently, only a few states are using or developing equity assessment tools specifically for child support, and most of these tools originate from the parent agency (e.g., Department of Human Services). Despite differences, the tools share common elements, such as policy or budget analysis, data analysis, and community engagement. Three of the four states with these tools are in the process of developing, refining, or tailoring them specifically for child support, including the creation of parent councils or engagement with existing councils to pilot the assessments. Overall, these tools are still in the formative stages of development. States are still developing the logistics of implementing them (e.g., when to implement, train staff on how to implement them). As states continue to refine their tools and gain experience in implementing equity assessments, there will be much to learn from their efforts.

Besides equity assessment tools that are used by program administrators, researchers have not figured out how to use empirical data to identify inequities. One approach is to compare racial and ethnic differences at a certain point such as service delivery or child support enforcement

action to racial and ethnic differences to the general population or the eligible child support population. The challenge is determining what populations should be compared to be informative at identifying inequities.

Recommendations for Future Research. As more states develop, refine, and use equity assessments in their child support programs, a more thorough analysis of these tools is warranted. In addition, researchers should compare populations in a variety of ways; share that information with program administrators, parent groups, and other stakeholders; then listen to what they find helpful. This could be an iterative process that eventually leads to more meaningful analysis.

Section 5: Recommendations to Advance Equity in the Child Support program

Many inequities in the child support program are a function of structural barriers that low-income parents of color experience in American society. As McDonald, Lemmons & Arroyo (2024) note, relative to their White counterparts, Black parents experience higher rates of unemployment, lower wages and earnings, lower levels of educational achievement and attainment, higher rates of residential segregation, lower-quality healthcare, higher rates of incarceration, and other disparities that negatively affect their wellbeing, their economic mobility, and their children's future. Remedying these issues will require interventions that go well beyond the confines of the child support program and deal with longstanding structural inequities in our economy and continued efforts to eliminate laws and practices that contribute to these disparities. Although child support policies and practices cannot be expected to address these broader issues, they can be revised to reduce certain inequities in the child support program and improve the treatment that parents of color experience.

The child support program has a demonstrated capacity to promote and discourage the development and use of a variety of policies and practices. Since 1998, states have operated under five congressionally mandated performance measures keyed to program purposes: paternity establishment, order establishment, collections on current support, arrears forgiveness, and cost effectiveness. Data on these measures are maintained by states and regularly audited for completeness and reliability. States are rewarded for strong performance and may incur penalties for not meeting performance thresholds. The program is credited with stimulating the program's dramatic improvements during the past 27 years (Sorensen, 2016a).

While implementation of some policies and practices to enhance equity might be associated with increases in at least two current performance measures (paternity establishment and payment of current support) encouraging states to adopt more targeted measures to increase equity or bring effective pilot practices to scale would likely be augmented by the adoption of an explicit performance measure that focuses on achieving equity. To this end, it would make sense to engage Congress to expand the goals of the child support program to include improving equity and adopt a framework where states might be legitimately incentivized to pursue policies and programs that remove barriers to parents of color who engage with the child support program and promote their success. The following recommendations that have emerged from this literature review outline some of the items that might be incorporated in a new performance measure for this purpose.

Improve Communication, Service Provision, and Procedural Justice

Child support programs have large caseloads, high levels of automated case processing and limited customer relations interventions. Demonstration projects funded by OCSS have

consistently shown that early, clear, and friendly communication with clients helps to improve client perceptions of the child support program and increases the chances of successful client outcomes. To this end, it is recommended that child support programs pursue early first contacts with child support clients, before relationships have become adversarial (e.g., Baird & Miller, 2019; Glosser & Gaffney, 2019; Veldman et al., 2019). In addition to the adoption of early intervention policies, child support programs should use behaviorally informed communication strategies to ensure that their messages are informative and clear so that clients are not confused about the child support process and what is expected of them (Baird & Miller, 2019; OPRE, 2018b). Still a third area of recommended case management is the delivery of enhanced child support services. This includes expedited review of child support orders, order modification if appropriate, temporary abeyance of certain enforcement tools, and reductions of past-due amounts of child support owed to the government (state-owed arrears). As the CSPED demonstration project illustrated, enhanced child support services were associated with short-term reductions in child support order amounts and payments but also small increases in payment compliance and large increases in satisfaction with child support services (Cancian et al., 2022). As a consequence of beliefs that child support is unfair (Vogel, 2020a; Vogel, 2020b), non-Hispanic Black parents have been found to pay less child support and have lower levels of compliance with child support orders than non-Hispanic White parents. As a result, authors have suggested that improving procedural justice will increase perceptions of fairness among disadvantaged groups and ultimately lead to higher child support payments (Kim & Meyer, 2021; Vogel et al., 2022).

Provide Employment Programs and Address Employment Barriers

The most common recommendation for reducing inequities in the child support program is providing employment programs and addressing employment barriers (e.g., Berger et al., 2021; Cancian et al., 2021; Cuesta & Cancian, 2015; McLeod & Gottlieb, 2018; Middlemass & Josephson, 2021; Nepomnyaschy & Miller, 2022; Pate, 2016; Rodriquez, 2016; Spjeldnes et al., 2015). Recommendations to remove employment barriers include enforcing anti-discrimination laws in employment (Rodriquez, 2016), improving access to transportation services (Berger et al., 2021), establishing a public works program (Pate, 2016), and expunging criminal justice records to improve employment outcomes for ex-offenders (Berger et al., 2021).

One important step in this direction is the recent adoption of the Rule on Employment and Training Services for Noncustodial Parents in the Child Support Program that became effective January 13, 2025 (OCSS, 2024b). It offers state and Tribal child support agencies the option to use federal financial participation (FFP) to provide a variety of employment training services to eligible noncustodial parents. It is directly responsive to labor market patterns showing the declining ability of noncustodial parents to pay child support, the labor market difficulties that less-educated men experience, drops in their real hourly earnings, and increases in rates of

incarceration among noncustodial parents of color. It is also responsive to literature showing the effectiveness of providing employment and training services to unemployed and underemployed noncustodial parents and the positive outcomes they yield in child support payment rates, amounts and regularity (OCSS, 2024b). Going forward, it will be important to monitor the extent to which state and Tribal child support agencies opt to establish noncustodial parent employment programs, the racial and ethnic composition of the parents that engage in these programs, and the outcomes that they yield in employment, earnings, and child support payments.

Base Orders on Ability to Pay and Conduct Research on In-Kind Support

More than half of the studies examined in this literature review offered recommendations regarding economic fairness and the payment of support. Specifically, scholars have recommended that the child support program should base orders on the ability to pay (Brito, 2019; Pate, 2016; Rodriquez, 2016). Basing orders on the ability to pay typically means basing orders on actual income rather than imputed earnings (Pate, 2016; Rodriquez, 2016). Fortunately, the 2016 administrative rule adopted by OCSS requires that states generate child support orders based on factual income information rather than attributing income based on the minimum wage and other assumptions that may be unrealistic and consider the parents' subsistence needs (OCSS, 2016). The modernization rule also prohibits states from treating incarceration as voluntary unemployment or excluding incarceration as a basis for modifying child support orders—a practice that nearly one-third of states pursued until recently (Meyer & Warren, 2011). It will be important for child support agencies and researchers to monitor the extent to which child support programs adopt the practices espoused in the modernization rule and abandon income imputation and other practices that run counter to determining actual earnings and basing orders on them.

A second, less common recommendation deals with recognizing in-kind support (Chen & Harper, 2023; Rodriquez, 2016), which is understood as providing the noncustodial parent with credit for a variety of non-cash payments related to child-rearing (Rodriquez, 2016). To date, no literature examines the use and impact of in-kind child support, particularly as it pertains to different racial and ethnic groups, although a pilot project is being launched in the child support agency in San Francisco (Hahn et al., 2023). Research is needed on the extent to which in-kind support options are used by various racial and ethnic groups, the types of child support order agreements that they inspire, levels of satisfaction by custodial and noncustodial parents that are subject to these orders, their sustainability over time, and their efficacy in supporting children and ensuring child wellbeing.

Eliminate Interest and Expand Debt Forgiveness

The negative consequences of arrears have led some states to consider ways to decrease their level and rates of growth (Meyer & Riser, 2023). Authors have largely suggested reducing arrears in two ways: by reducing or eliminating interest on child support arrears and by forgiving child support debt.

Eliminate Interest on Child Support Arrears

Interest charges on unpaid child support range from no interest charge at all to 12% (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022). To reduce interest, scholars have recommended preventing, modifying, or eliminating interest on unpaid child support obligations (e.g., Chen & Harper, 2023; Turetsky & Waller, 2020; Turner & Waller, 2017). State policy on child support interest charges is dynamic. Twenty states and the District of Columbia do not charge any interest, four additional states with statutory charges do not collect them (i.e., Maine, Colorado, Kentucky and Washington), and in 2021 Illinois announced that it would no longer charge interest on unpaid child support because it disproportionately affects low-income families and people of color in its caseload (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022; Hancock, 2020).

Debt Forgiveness

Another significant recommendation regarding child support arrears is the implementation of debt forgiveness or amnesty programs for state-owed arrears (Battle, 2021; Battle, 2023; Turner & Waller, 2017), which could provide substantial relief to noncustodial parents burdened by unpaid child support. Based on a database compiled by OCSS in 2018, 45 states and the District of Columbia had policies to reduce or compromise child support debt owed to the state. However, most of these programs operate on a limited, case-by-case basis with case selection, processing and treatments determined by the individual caseworker. Still other state programs offer debt relief in exchange for a lump-sum payment or a full payment of current support over a protracted period of time—terms that are typically beyond the capacity of most child support debtors and certainly those that are low income (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022). According to a more recent compilation, only ten states and the District of Columbia had programs that were more "robust and innovative." They typically operate on an agency-wide basis; have established criteria for eligibility that require evidence of unemployment, incarceration, or disability to explain debt accumulation; and key debt relief to the payment of current support and/or participation in a relevant employment, education, or training program (Ascend at the Aspen Institute & GOOD+ Foundation, n.d.). An evaluation of five innovative child support programs, which offered substantial forgiveness of state-owed arrears in exchange for consistent payments over short timeframes, resulted in improved payment of current support (Pearson et al., 2012). The authors of the evaluation concluded that debt compromise programs should be expanded and more strategically implemented to improve

Confidential

child support compliance, reduce uncollectible arrears, and support low-income noncustodial parents (Pearson et al., 2012).

Although 80% of arrears in the child support program are owed to families, with just 20% owed to the state, only a few programs (i.e., California, Mayland, Michigan, Minnesota, New York City) reach out to custodial parents to see if they would be willing to compromise or forgive unpaid arrears. In 2015, Tennessee enacted legislation allowing custodial parents to forgive child support arrears owed to the family after 12 months of complete payment (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022). There is almost no information on forgiveness of family-owed arrears although as part of the above noted evaluation of five robust debt compromise programs (Pearson et al., 2012), researchers found that the small numbers of custodial parents asked about forgiveness of family arrears were more likely to be interested in the idea than opposed.

Reduce the Use of Punitive Enforcement Practices for Low-Income Parents

In lieu of the exclusive use of traditional enforcement remedies, child support agency leaders and staff in Wisconsin favor the use of supportive services for noncustodial parents who fail to make their child support payments, especially actions that link them to employment. While they believe that these approaches can be ultimately more effective, they acknowledge that service-oriented approaches to address nonpayment behaviors can be frustrating for custodial parents (Vogel, 2019; Vogel et al., 2022).

Reduce the Use of Driver's License Suspension as an Enforcement Mechanism

Many researchers favor removing driver's license suspension as an enforcement mechanism because of its impact on employment (Aminu, 2019; Pate, 2016; Rodriquez, 2016). Pate (2016) disapproves of its use because of its disproportionate impact on low-income men of color. During focus groups and interviews with men of color, driver's license suspension was repeatedly mentioned as a barrier to employment and faulted for making it difficult for them to meet their child support obligations and manage their basic living expenses (Pate, 2016; Rodriquez, 2016). Another study (Zatz & Stoll, 2020) recommended that reducing the use of drivers' license suspension as an enforcement measure could improve labor market outcomes among noncustodial parents.

More child support programs (e.g., counties in Minnesota and California, Georgia, Texas) have begun to adopt processes and procedures that essentially pause and review the circumstances of the noncustodial parent before an enforcement action is taken. As a result of the FEM Rule, child support workers are required to consider the noncustodial parent's ability-to-pay before a civil contempt action for nonpayment of child support is issued. Some states are also considering the ability to pay before suspending a driver's or professional license for

nonpayment of child support and before taking other enforcement measures (NCSL, 2024). These approaches militate against using driver's license suspension on an automatic basis once a nonpayment threshold has been reached and instead require that workers turn on an enforcement remedy after they have determined that it is appropriate (NCSL, 2024). Still other child support programs are conducting better outreach to noncustodial parents noticed of a potential driver's license suspension before the driver's license is suspended to give them the opportunity to negotiate a settlement payment (e.g., see Solmeyer et al., 2023).

Per Rivera et al. (2023), states may exclude some categories of parents—such as those with annual incomes less than 200% of the federal poverty line—from specific federally required enforcement methods. Eliminating practices such as suspending licenses for noncustodial parents with low incomes would likely make maintaining employment and earning income to make child support payments more feasible. Some states have signaled an interest in reducing barriers for parents with low incomes even further. For example, in Maryland, a bill was introduced in early 2023 to prevent the state Child Support Administration from suspending the driver's license of a noncustodial parent owing child support arrears if the parent's income is at or below 250% of the federal poverty guidelines.

As discussed in Section 3, Solmeyer and colleagues (2024) found that the pilot program conducted in Minnesota helped reduce several racial disparities in the driver's license suspension process. Specifically, Black noncustodial parents experienced larger gains than White noncustodial parents in accessing payment agreements, having suspensions stopped, and receiving arrears management support. They also saw a more significant decline in license suspensions. These outcomes are consistent with findings from studies of enforcement remedies conducted in Wisconsin, where many participants identified these strategies as their most effective means for encouraging child support payments among noncustodial parents who were behind in their payments (Vogel et al., 2025).

Reduce the Use of Incarceration as an Enforcement Mechanism

Another common recommendation (cited in almost a dozen articles) is to stop using incarceration as an enforcement mechanism (e.g., Battle, 2021; Battle, 2023; Brito, 2019; Rodriquez, 2016; Spjeldnes et al., 2015; Zatz, 2016; Zatz et al., 2016). For many child support scholars, punitive enforcement mechanisms are often counterproductive to the stated goals of the child support program, especially for low-income families of color (e.g., Aminu, 2019). The use of incarceration as an enforcement mechanism for low-income parents is often viewed as unfair, given their inability to pay (Boggess, 2017). Incarceration also makes it more difficult for these low-income parents to make their child support payments. It may damage parent–child relationships, making the enforcement mechanism ultimately detrimental to children (Boggess, 2017). Other studies have found that Black and brown fathers, in comparison to White and

Asian fathers, are more likely to be incarcerated for non-payment, which often leads to declining family relationships (e.g., Aminu, 2019).

Simplify and Expedite the Modification Process

Another common recommendation in the literature on enhancing racial equity in child support is to simplify and expedite the modification process for child support orders (e.g., Chen & Harper, 2023; McLeod & Gottlieb, 2018; Spjeldnes et al., 2015; Turetsky & Waller, 2020; Turner & Waller, 2017; Vogel et al., 2022). The recommendation extends to both incarcerated parents in the child support program and to parents in the general population.

Simplify and Expedite the Modification Process for the General Population

Although it has long been recognized that streamlining the modification process is in the best interest of children (McLeod & Gottlieb, 2018; Spjeldnes et al., 2018), that goal remains elusive and states vary widely in the conditions required for parents who wish to request a review, especially if their request falls outside the three-year cycle that is guaranteed under federal law. Specifically, in requests made sooner than three years, the requesting party must demonstrate a substantial change in income or other circumstances. A recent review found that most states (37) specify that a modification will only be granted if the new order that is calculated based on new income information or other circumstances would result in an order change of some specific magnitude that ranges from 10%–30%. On the other hand, 14 states adopt a more subjective approach and require a "significant" or "substantial" change in circumstances, criteria that are presumed to be less conducive to modification than objective standards (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022). State modification procedures also involve a variety of requirements including paperwork and documentation, notifications, and court hearings or administrative conferences (OCSS, 2020). The net result is that the process for modifying a child support order is typically lengthy and complex, presenting barriers to recently unemployed noncustodial parents who often proceed without attorney representation and may not understand how to complete generic forms correctly, secure a hearing date, and fulfill service requirements. Difficulties in navigating the process and corresponding delays can result in financial hardship, exposure to enforcement remedies, increases in the possibility of being charged with contempt, and strained family relationships. More to the point, they serve to impede the possibility of generating "evidence-based" orders that reflect an ability to pay, produce payments, and avoid the buildup of arrears (ACF, 2013).

Simplify and Expedite the Modification Process for Incarcerated Parents, Specifically

The barriers to modification are compounded for parents with child support orders who become incarcerated. Without intervention, orders continue to run and generate large arrears balances that become unpayable and cannot be absolved after the fact. Not surprisingly, most

of the literature on order modification for incarcerated parents focuses on making the process easier. For example, McLeod and Gottlieb (2018) recommend that correctional facilities and child support offices consider implementing mechanisms to educate fathers about child support debt and its consequences and to make the modification process more accessible to fathers once they are incarcerated. Similarly, Spjeldnes and colleagues (2015) recommend setting child support orders, modifications, and automatic payment amnesty for incarcerated fathers to ensure child support payments are easier to make after release. Others have also recommended automating the reduction of support orders for incarcerated parents (Turetsky & Waller, 2020) in order avoid the generation of debt and make it easier for parents to maintain family relationships once they are released from prison. The policy reforms recommended by Cammett (2022) incorporate many of these ideas including suspending child support obligations during incarceration, reassessing debts accumulated during prison, and shifting the post-relief focus from punishment to supporting family stability and child wellbeing.

Reassess Cooperation Requirements and Implement Full Child Support Pass-through

Reassess Cooperation Requirements

There is a growing body of literature that advocates for reassessment and even elimination of the child support cooperation requirements for a variety of public benefits. For example, a cost-benefit analysis in Kansas examined administrative and cost data to assess the associated costs and net benefits of the SNAP cooperation requirement and found no benefit to families or to the government. The analysis found that the cooperation requirement did not yield new child support order establishments and/or reduced levels of SNAP benefits for custodial parents. Nor was the requirement associated with changes in the total annualized cost per SNAP participant subject to cooperation requirements (Holcomb et al., 2024). More to the point, in addition to the limited research on its effectiveness, there are concerns that mandatory cooperation for SNAP increases food insecurity for low-income families that do not, or are unable to, make child support payments (Llobrera, 2020). As of 2023, nine states had a cooperation requirement for SNAP recipients and one of those states, Michigan, recently ended that cooperation requirement in the fall of 2024 (Holcomb et al., 2024; USDA, 2024).

Research also suggests that the cooperation requirement for child care subsidy recipients can negatively impact families. For example, it often disproportionately burdens and excludes single-parent families from accessing child care subsidy supports. Additionally, there is no evidence that this cooperation requirement improves child support compliance. As of 2018, 23 states had child care cooperation requirements, although some states have removed the policy since then (ACF, 2013). Michigan, for example, removed their child care cooperation requirement in February 2024.

Research on the child support cooperation has extended to the TANF benefit as well. If the parent does not cooperate with child support and does not receive a good cause exemption, the family will be ineligible for at least 25% of its TANF benefits and states and tribes have the option to further reduce or terminate the TANF benefit. In terms of Medicaid, the parent will be penalized (commonly referred to as sanctioned), but their children can continue to receive Medicaid. Based on the higher sanctioning rate for Black families in Illinois, Kaplan et al. (2022) recommend reassessing the cooperation requirement for applicants for public assistance and other federal benefit programs and shifting away from it. For different reasons, Cancian & Doar (2023) reaches a similar conclusion. They argue that mandating cooperation despite a custodial parents' best judgment may not be in the best interest of the child and constitutes too great a loss of privacy and autonomy. Nevertheless, there is disagreement about whether cooperation should be mandated. Supporters argue that the absence of a mandate may increase conflict associated with establishing paternity and pursuing child support, make it more difficult for custodial parents to access child support, deprive the child's family of financial resources, and be costly to taxpayers (Cancian & Doar, 2023).

Implement Full Pass-through

There is more consensus about whether the child support program should be used for cost recovery with most authors and practitioners arguing that collected child support should always directly benefit children and not be used to offset government costs. Indeed, several scholars have recommended implementing full child support pass-through (Boggess, 2017; Chen & Harper, 2023; Kaplan et al., 2022; Rodriquez, 2016). This represents a major departure from the historical purpose of the child support enforcement system which was designed to offset the costs of public assistance received by those children. Due to falling TANF caseloads, the proportion of total child support retained from current TANF cases declined from 25% in 1996 to 4.4% in 2022. Nevertheless, in 2023, the child support program held back more than $896 million from low-income families to reimburse the government for TANF costs. A growing number of advocacy and professional organizations view cost recovery policies as increasing financial precarity and disproportionately impacting single mother-headed families of color as well as harming the reputation and effectiveness of the child support program (McDonald et al., 2024). Seven states (California, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, New Mexico, Wyoming, Wisconsin) currently pass-through 100% of noncustodial parents' payments to custodial parents who were either current or former TANF recipients; on January 1, 2026, Washington will join the ranks of being a full pass-through state.

The limited research on the effects of full pass-through to current TANF recipients suggests that it is associated with increases in the payment of current support (Zolot et al., 2020; Cancian et al., 2008) and higher rates of paternity establishment (Cancian et al., 2007; Meyer & Cancian, 2001). More research is needed on whether full pass-through policies are associated with higher and more regular payments by noncustodial parents, lead to reductions in nonpayment,

Confidential

increase noncustodial parent employment levels, and reduce the rate at which family and state-owed arrears grow. We also need the results of 100% pass-through policies for different racial and ethnic subgroups and for states that have adopted new policies for current versus former TANF cases and the one state that has adopted 100% pass-through for both types.

Future Directions

Standardize Measures of Race and Ethnicity

More research on the issue of child support policy and low-income noncustodial parents with an equity lens is warranted. A necessary first step is the need to standardize the definition and methods of measuring the various racial groups, ethnicities, and other identities that are of interest. OCSS may want to consider adopting the newly issued OMB classification of race and ethnic identities, which has been extensively vetted and is now required for all new federal record keeping or reporting requirements that include racial or ethnic information. This includes compiling more national data on the incomes and race and ethnicities of noncustodial parents (and custodial families) as well as the other populations identified in Exhibit 1 and incorporating the standardized classifications that are adopted into the administrative child support programs maintained by states as required data fields.

Assess the Differential Impact of Policies, Programs, and/or Processes on Various Groups

Another area for future research is to understand the impact of the many programs and policies designed to promote equity. For instance, one primary area for future research pertains to the impact of the 2016 FEM Rule. It requires conducting research on the implementation of the 2016 FEM Rule and the extent to which its requirements to consider ability-to-pay prior to civil contempt and other actions have improved the situation for all low-income noncustodial parents regardless of their race or ethnicity. We also need to know the impact of the FEM Rule on order amounts and the accumulation of arrears for low-income noncustodial parents in general, incarcerated noncustodial parents, and those who have been paroled or released.

In addition, more research on the implementation and impact of using equity assessment tools in child support programs is needed. Although some research (e.g., Renno, 2021) has been conducted to show who is being disproportionately affected by child support policy, little is known about how they move the needle forward toward creating a more equitable space for marginalized populations. In other words, it is currently unclear as to whether equity assessments, or the specific components within them, advance equity for the populations they aim to support.

CONCLUSION

Program administrators, leaders, and researchers are at the early stages of understanding equity issues in the child support program. Although it is generally recognized that equity issues exist for both custodial families and noncustodial parents and that their equity issues differ, the field does not yet have well-established methods to measure these inequities nor well-developed and tested frameworks to address them and advance equity. This literature review establishes a foundation. It reviews the child support literature over the past 10 years, takes a deeper look at ability-to-pay issues because of the intersection of income differences and racial and ethnic differences in child support outcomes, and summarizes equity assessment tools in use or being developed in four states.

There are at least two action items that child support program might take both to improve policy and address bias. The first action is to develop and implement new performance goals that advance equity. To do this, researchers and policymakers must begin and continue to unravel the nature and source of disparities in the child support program. This would entail determining where the differences are specific to the low-income status of noncustodial parents, where they are specific to the parents' race and ethnicity (or another identity), and where and when they intersect. A second action is to revise the existing framework for measuring and rewarding performance in the child support program to incorporate these new performance goals that advance equity. This could involve adopting and measuring performance goals pertaining to the use of child support policies and practices required in the 2016 FEM Rule (and potentially others) that are supportive of equity. As such, it would extend the framework for performance measurement in the child support program that has been used with order establishment and collections over the past 30 years to incorporate and achieve new equity objectives.

Confidential

REFERENCES

Administration for Children and Families. (2013). Managing Child Support Arrears: An Evolving Discussion Framework, The Combined Summaries of ACF Regions I, II and III Meetings on Managing Arrears. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/managing_child_support_arrears_an_evolving_discussion_framework.pdf

Aminu, R. T. (2019). Redefining best interest of the child: The crushing impact of child support debts on low-income families in the minority communities. *Thurgood Marshall Law Review,* 43(2), 561. https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/thurlr43&i=581

Anderson, J., Brown, Z., & King, V. (2022). Black Families Overlooked, Misunderstood, and Underserved in the Family Courts. *Family Law Quarterly*, *56*(1), 77–94. https://law-journals-books.vlex.com/vid/black-families-overlooked-misunderstood-1035121260

Ascend at the Aspen Institute and GOOD+ Foundation. (n.d.). Reducing Arrears: Child Support Fact Sheet. https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ChildSupport_Arrears.pdf.

Baird, P., & Miller, R. (2019). Streamline or Specialize: Increasing Child Support Order Modification Review Completion in Ohio. *Center for Applied Behavioral Science at MDRC*. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/BICS_Ohio_Brief.pdf.

Battle, B. P. (2018). Deservingness, deadbeat dads, and responsible fatherhood: Child support policy and rhetorical conceptualizations of poverty, welfare, and the family. *Symbolic Interaction*, *41*(4), 443–464. https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.359

Battle, B. P. (2019a). "They Look at You like You're Nothing": Stigma and Shame in the Child Support System. *Symbolic interaction*, *42*(4), 640–668. https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.427

Battle, B. P. (2019b). "They're Stealing My Opportunity to Be a Father": The Child Support System and State Intervention in the Family [Doctoral dissertation, Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, School of Graduate Studies]. https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/60590/PDF/1/play/

Battle, B. P. (2023). The carceral logic of parental responsibility. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *85*(3), 679–700. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12902

Bea, M. D., Bartfeld, J., & Berube, A. (2024). Understanding the Neighborhood Contexts of Custodial and Noncustodial Parents in the Child Support System. *Institute for Research*

on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/CSRA-2022-2024-T8-Report.pdf.

Berger, L. M., Cancian, M., Guarin, A., Hodges, L., & Meyer, D. R. (2021). Barriers to formal child support payment. *Social Service Review*, *95*(2), 312–357. https://doi.org/10.1086/714370

Berger, L. M., Cancian, M., Guarin, A., & Meyer, D. R. (2019). Do low-income noncustodial fathers trade families? Economic contributions to children in multiple families. *Social Service Review*, *93*(2), 183–217. https://doi.org/10.1086/703447

Berrick, J. D. (2022). Imagining a new future: Elimination of child support obligations for child welfare-involved families. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, *16*(3), 295–301. https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2021.1999362

Boggess, J. L. (2017). Low-Income and Never-Married Families: Service and Support at the Intersection of Family Court and Child Support Agency Systems. *Family Court Review*, *55*(1), 107–119. https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12266

Brinig, M. F. (2017). Racial and gender justice in the child welfare and child support systems. *Law & Inequality*, *35*(2), 199. https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/lawineq/vol35/iss2/3

Brinig, M. F., & Garrison, M. (2018). Getting blood from stones: Results and policy implications of an empirical investigation of child support practice in St. Joseph County, Indiana paternity actions. *Family Court Review, 56*(4), 521–543. https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12365

Brito, T. L. (2020). Producing justice in poor people's courts: Four models of state legal actors. *Lewis & Clark Law Review*, *24*(1), 145–189. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3575154

Brito, T. L. (2019). The child support debt bubble. *UC Irvine Law Review*, *9*(4), 953–988. https://scholarship.law.uci.edu/ucilr/vol9/iss4/5

Brito, T. L., Pate Jr, D. J., & Wong, J. H. S. (2020). Negotiating race and racial inequality in family court. *IRP Focus*, *36*(4), 3–11.

https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Focus-36-4b.pdf

Brito, T. L., Pate, Jr., D. J., & Wong, J. H. S. (2015). I do for my kids: Negotiating race and racial inequality in family court. *Fordham L. Rev.*, *83*(6), 3027–3052. https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol83/iss6/7

Brogan & Partners (2023). Child Support Research Findings [PowerPoint slides]. *NCCSD/NCSEA/OCSS Joint Committee on Public Relations*. https://www.ncsea.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/National-Child-Support-Research_FINAL-NCSEA-003.pdf

Cadigan, M., & Kirk, G. (2020). On thin ice: Bureaucratic processes of monetary sanctions and job insecurity. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, *6*(1), 113–131. https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2020.6.1.05

California Governor Gavin Newsom. (2022). Executive Order No. 16-22. https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/9.13.22-EO-N-16-22-Equity.pdf

Cammett, A. (2022). The shadow law of child support. *Boston University Law Review*, *102*(7), 2237–2295. https://www.bu.edu/bulawreview/files/2023/02/CAMMETT.pdf

Cancian, M. (2021). APPAM presidential address: Reflections on who counts and why it matters. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, *40*(2), 324–347. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22302

Cancian, M., Doar, R. (2023). Child Support Policy: Areas of Emerging Agreement and Ongoing Debate. https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Child-Support-updated.pdf?x85095

Cancian, M., Guarin, A., Hodges, L., & Meyer, D. R. (2019). Characteristics of participants in the child support noncustodial parent employment demonstration (CSPED) evaluation. *Institute for Research on Poverty*, *University of Wisconsin–Madison*. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CSPED-Final-Characteristics-of-Participants-Report-2019-Compliant.pdf

Cancian, M., Kim, Y., & Meyer, D. R. (2021). Who is Not Paying Child Support? Report to Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. *Institute for Research on Poverty*. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CSRPA-2020-2022-T2.pdf

Cancian, M., & Meyer, D. R. (2018). Reforming policy for single-parent families to reduce child poverty. RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation. *Journal of the Social Sciences*, *4*(2), 91–112. https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2018.4.2.05

Cancian, M., Meyer, D. R., & Caspar, E. (2008). Welfare and Child Support: Complements, Not Substitutes. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *27*(2), 354–375. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.20328

Cancian, M., Meyer, D. R., & Roff, J. (2007). *Testing new ways to increase the economic well-being of single-parent families: The effects of child support policies on welfare participants* (Discussion Paper No. 1330-07). Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp133007.pdf

Cancian, M., Meyer, D. R., & Wood, R. G. (2022). Do carrots work better than sticks? Results from the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *41*(2), 552–578. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22370

Cancian, M., Shook Slack, K., & Youn Yang, M. (2010). "The Effect of Family Income on Risk of Child Maltreatment." *Institute for Research on Poverty*, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*, https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/the-effect-of-family-income-on-risk-of-child-maltreatment/

Charles, P., Landrum, G., Kim, Y., & Meyer, D.R. (2024). Incarceration, Child Support, and Family Relationships. *Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison.* https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CSRA-2022-2024-T11-05192024.pdf

Chen, Y., & Harper, K. (2023). Six strategies to design equitable child support systems. *Child Trends*. https://www.childtrends.org/blog/six-strategies-to-design-equitable-child-support-systems.

Clum, K. & Daniels, J. (2024). *Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services Analysis Execution Project (RED-X).* Presentation to the NCSEA Research Team.

Costanzo, M. (2018). Incarcerated Payers: A Review of Child Support Agency Practice. *Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison.* https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CS-2014-2016-T3c.pdf

Costanzo, M., Vogel, L. K., & Reilly, A. (2024). Default Orders, Income Imputation, and Implications for Child Support Outcomes. *Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison.* https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CSRA-2022-2024-T4-10162024.pdf

Cozzolino, E. (2018). Public Assistance, Relationship Context, and Jail for Child Support Debt. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, *4*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023118757124

Crowley, J. E. (2003). *The politics of child support in America*. Cambridge University Press.

Cuesta, L., & Cancian, M. (2015). The effect of child support on the labor supply of custodial mothers participating in TANF. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *54*, 49–56. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.05.006

Cummings, D. (2020). Who Is at Risk of Contempt of Court for Child Support Noncompliance? Characteristics of Parents Enrolled in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration. *MDRC*. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/ProjectBrief_3_final.pdf.

Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. (2005). Public Law 109 – 171**.** https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-109publ171/pdf/PLAW-109publ171.pdf

Demyan, N., & Passarella, L. L. (2019). Lifting Families Out of Poverty: Child Support is an Effective Tool for Maryland Families*. University of Maryland, School of Social Work, Ruth Young Center for Families & Children*. https://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/media/ssw/fwrtg/child-support-research/cs-caseload-special-issues/lifting_families_out_of_poverty.pdf

Dinan, K. (2023). *The Data Says . . . .* Presentation to the 2023 New York City Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) Policy Conference. https://www.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/services/child_support/2023-Policy-Conference-The-Data-Says.pdf

Few-Demo, A. L., & Allen, K. R. (2020). Gender, feminist, and intersectional perspectives on families: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *82*(1), 326–345. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12638

Freeman, R. B., & Waldfogel, J. (2001). Dunning Delinquent Dads: The Effects of Child Support Enforcement Policy on Child Support Receipt by Never Married Women. *The Journal of Human Resources*, *36*(2), 207–225. https://doi.org/10.2307/3069657

Gardiner, K., Tapogna, J., & Fishman, M. (2002). Administrative and Judicial Processes for Establishing Support Orders. Prepared for Department of Health and Human Services Office of Child Support Enforcement. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/dcl_03_15a.pdf

Garfinkel, I., Heintze, T., & Huang, C.-C. (2001). Child Support Enforcement: Incentives and Well-Being. *Joint Center for Poverty Research*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED454313.pdf

Garfinkel, I., McLanahan, S. S., Meyer, D. R., & Seltzer, J. A. (Eds.). (1998). *Fathers under fire: The revolution in child support enforcement*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Glosser, A., & Gaffney, A. (2019). Personalized Outreach Testing Early Parent Engagement in Washington's Child Support Program. *Center for Applied Behavioral Science at MDRC*. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/bics_wa_brief.pdf

Goldberg, J. S. (2015). Coparenting and nonresident fathers' monetary contributions to their children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(3), 612–627. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12191

Gonzalez Van Cleve, N., & Mayes, L. (2015). Criminal Justice Through "Colorblind" Lenses: A Call to Examine the Mutual Constitution of Race and Criminal Justice. *Law & Social Inquiry*, *40*(02), 406–432. https://doi.org/10.1111/lsi.12113

Grall, T. (2020). Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2017. *U.S. Census Bureau.* https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-269.pdf.

Ha, Y., Cancian, M., & Meyer, D. R. (2018). Child Support and Income Inequality. *Poverty & Public Policy*, *10*(2), 147–158. https://doi.org/10.1002/pop4.215

Ha, Y., Cancian, M., & Meyer, D. R. (2010). Unchanging child support orders in the face of unstable earnings. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *29*(4), 799–820. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.20534

Hahn, H. Pratt, E., & Sonoda, P. (2023). San Francisco's In-Kind Child Support Pilot. *Urban Institute*. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/San%20Francisco%E2%80%99s%20In-Kind%20Child%20Support%20Pilot.pdf

Hancock, P. (2020). State drops most child support interest charges. *The State Journal-Register*. https://www.sj-r.com/story/news/2021/03/04/state-drops-most-child-support-interest-charges/4582292001/#:~:text=The%20state%20is%20no%20longer,owed%20have%20been%20zeroed%20out.

Haney, L. (2018). Incarcerated fatherhood: The entanglements of child support debt and mass imprisonment. *American Journal of Sociology*, *124*(1), 1–48. https://doi.org/10.1086/697580

Hausler, J., & Michalopoulos, C. (2024). Who Benefits Most from Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt in the Child Support Program? *MDRC*. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Who_Benefits_Most_from_PJAC.pdf

Hodges, L., & Vogel, L. K. (2021). Too much, too little, or just right? Recent changes to state child support guidelines for low-income noncustodial parents. *Journal of Policy Practice and Research*, *2*(3), 146–177. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42972-020-00016-9

Hodges, L., Meyer, D. R., & Cancian, M. (2020). What Happens When the Amount of Child Support Due Is a Burden? Revisiting the Relationship between Child Support Orders and Child Support Payments. *Social Service Review*, 94(2), 238–284. https://doi.org/10.1086/709279

Holcomb, P., Selekman, R., Moore, Q., Glosser, A., Bardin, S., Ochoa, L., McInnis, N., Stepleton, K., Washburn, L., Campbell, S., Kalb, M., & Hutchinson, I. (2024). Evaluation of Child Support Enforcement Cooperation Requirements in SNAP. Final Report, Volume I–Main Report. *U.S. Department of Agriculture, Prepared by Mathematica.* https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/ops-snap-child-support-enforcement-vol1main-report.pdf.

Holifield, C. (2019). Executive Order 13563 Creates Access to Affordable Child Support Orders for Incarcerated Parents. *Texas A&M Journal of Property Law, 5*(3), 201–223. https://doi.org/10.37419/JPL.V5.I3.2

Horowitz, V. L., Spencer-Suarez, K., Larson, R., Stewart, R., Edwards, F., Obara, E., & Uggen, C. (2022). Dual debtors: Child support and criminal legal financial obligations. *Social Service Review*, *96*(2), 226–267. https://doi.org/10.1086/720016

Kaplan, K., Farooqui, S., Clark, J., Dobson, E., Jefferson, R., Kelly, N., Buitrago, K., Drew, K., Lira, A., Williams, M., Neuman, T., & Kim, Y. (2022). Temporary Assistance for Needy Families: Sanctioning and child support compliance among black families in Illinois. *Health Affairs*, *41*(12), 1735–1743. https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2022.00746

Kim, Y., Liptrot-Ploch, K., & Meyer, D. R. (2024). Racial and Ethnic Disproportionality and Disparity in Child Support: A Scoping Review. *Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CSRA-22-24-T7-01042024.pdf*

Kim, Y., & Meyer, D. R. (2021). Perceptions of Fair Treatment and Child Support. *Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison*. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CSRA-2020-2022-T4A.pdf

Knowlton, N. A. (2016). Stewards of the System, Leaders of Change. *The Family Law Bar*. the family law bar stewards of the system leaders of change.pdf

Kong, J., Riser, Q., Cancian, M., & Meyer, D. R. (2024). The long-term effects of formal child support. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *86*(4), 1034–1052. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12998

Kusayeva, Y. (2020). Using Principles of Procedural Justice to Engage Disconnected Parents. *MDRC*. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/PJAC_Engagemen_Outreach_Brief_Final.pdf

Landers, P. (2021). Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Nonresident Parents. *Congressional Research Service*. https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46942

Legler, P. K. (2000). The Impact of Welfare Reform on the Child Support System. In *Child Support: The Next Frontier* (pp. 46–65). Chapter, The University of Michigan Press.

Leopold, T. (2018). Gender Differences in the Consequences of Divorce: A Study of Multiple Outcomes. *Demography*, *55*(3), 769–797. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-018-0667-6

Link, N. W., & Roman, C. G. (2017). Longitudinal associations among child support debt, employment, and recidivism after prison. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *58*(1), 140–160. https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2016.1246892

Llobrera, J. (2020). Child Support Cooperation Requirements in SNAP Are Unproven, Costly, and Put Families at Risk. *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/2-7-19fa.pdf

Martinez-Schiferl, M., Zolot, T., & Desbien, L. (2019). "Effects of Child Support Full Pass through on Colorado Families in Need". *Poster Paper, Colorado Department of Human Services.* https://appam.confex.com/appam/2019/webprogram/Paper30963.html

McCann, M. (2019). Promoting Parental Employment to Boost Child Support. *National Conference of State Legislatures*. https://documents.ncsl.org/wwwncsl/Human-Services/Parental-Employment-Child-Support_v03_web.pdf?sv=2017-04-17&sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=Yu7DL5Vt1I3YENVSS4yRdw29cvBhpi49DcGfqLlswkI%3D.

McDaniel, M., Woods, T., Pratt, E., Simms, M, (2017). Identifying Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services: A Conceptual Framework and Literature Review. *Urban Institute*. https://www.urban.org/research/publication/identifying-racial-and-ethnic-disparities-human-services

McDonald, M. D. (2022). Enforcing Child Support: An Intersectional Analysis. [Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University]. *LSU Repository*. https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/5815

McDonald, M. & Ghertner, R. (2024). Child Support Engagement in Rural and Non-Rural Counties: More Engagement and Lower Amount Owed in Rural Areas. https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/3b42943e467f594df1fd8a95a0a01b87/child-support-engagement-rurality.pdf.

McDonald, M.D., Lemmons, B.P., & Arroyo, J. (2024) Chapter 8: The Marathon Continues: African American Fathers and State Interventions in the Family. *In* Alston, T. L., Lemmons, B. P., & Rollins, L. S. (Eds.) *Health, Parenting, and Community Perspective on Black Fatherhood: Defying Stereotypes and Amplifying Strengths.* Lexington Books.

McDonald, M., Martinez, S., Selekman, R., & Abendroth, E. (2024). Factors That Impact the Child Support Program's Role in Reducing Child Poverty: Convening Summary. *Assistance Secretary For Planning and Evaluation, Office of Human Services Policy*. https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/d3636e92120856f652a0d796d29a886d/factors-impact-child-support-programs.pdf.

McLeod, B. A., & Gottlieb, A. (2018). Examining the relationship between incarceration and child support arrears among low-income fathers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 94, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.09.022

Meyer, D. R. (1993). Child Support and Welfare Dynamics: Evidence from Wisconsin. *Demography*, *30*(1), 45–62. https://doi.org/10.2307/2061862

Meyer, D. R., & Cancian, M. (2001). *W-2 Child Support Demonstration Evaluation, Phase 1: Final report, Volume I: Effects of the experiment*. Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/csde-p1v1-full-report.pdf

Meyer, D. R., Cancian, M., & Waring, M. K. (2020). Use of child support enforcement actions and their relationship to payments. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 108, 104–672. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104672

Meyer, D. R., & Hu, M. C. (1999). A Note on the Antipoverty Effectiveness of Child Support Among Mother-Only Families. *The Journal of Human Resources*, *34*(1), 225–234. https://doi.org/10.2307/146309

Meyer, D. R., & Riser, Q. H. (2023). Slowing the 'vicious cycle': Reducing the interest rate on child support arrears. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *144*, 106712. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106712

Meyer, D. R. & Warren, E. (2011). Child support orders and the incarceration of noncustodial parents. *Institute for Research on Poverty. University of Wisconsin-Madison*. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Task7b-2011-12-Report.pdf

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support. (2023). Community advisory council. https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/-/media/Project/Websites/mdhhs/Adult-and-Childrens-Services/Child-Support/Advisory-Council-Charter.pdf?rev=58cb6ef77d3b4a389cc9946e10289088&hash=B8FED559698B1BA427BE60368FE7DD5F.

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. (2024). Equity impact assessment (EIA). (Jegede, B., & Murillo, Y.). https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/-/media/Project/Websites/mdhhs/Keeping-Michigan-Healthy/OEMH/MDHHS_2024-EIA-Brief.pdf?rev=35de8e757dc047b39077f3b149273d97&hash=294A1BA71AF553ABC24E806B5CE7A82E.

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Diversity Committee. (2018). Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan. https://www.michigan.gov/-/media/Project/Websites/mdhhs/Inside-MDHHS/Careers/MDHHS_Diversity_Equity_and_Inclusion_Plan.pdf?rev=4511fe873b194fa8bce6c8ff31c076b8.

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer. (2020). Executive Order No. 2020-9: Addressing Racism as a Public Health Crisis. https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/news/state-orders-and-directives/2020/08/05/executive-directive-2020-9

Middlemass, K., & Josephson, J. (2021). Child support enforcement, poverty, and the creation of the new debtor's prison. *Feminist Formations*, *33*(1), 96–116. https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2021.0005

Mincy, R. B., Miller, D. P., & De la Cruz Toledo, E. (2016). Child support compliance during economic downturns. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 65, 127–139. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.03.018

Minnesota Governor Tim Walz. (2019). Executive Order 19-01: Providing Equitable, Inclusive, and Effective Government for All. https://mn.gov/governor/assets/2019_01_09_EO-19-01_%28FINAL%29_tcm1055-364605.pdf

Minnesota Governor Tim Walz. (2023). Executive Order 23-12: Providing Equitable, Inclusive, and Effective Government for All. https://www.lrl.mn.gov/archive/execorders/23-12.pdf

Morgan, L. W. (1999). The Federalization of Child Support: A Shift in the Ruling Paradigm: Child Support as Outside the Contours of Family Law. *The Journal of American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers*. https://www.aaml.org/wp-content/uploads/the_federalization_of_child_support-16-1.pdf

National Child Support Enforcement Association (NCSEA). (2024). Quick Facts: Incarcerated Parents. https://www.ncsea.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Quick-Facts-Incarcerated-Parents-2024.pdf

National Child Support Enforcement Association (NCSEA) Research Subcommittee. (2021). Improving the Process for Modifying Child Support Orders: Findings from Previous Research and Selected Promising Practices. https://www.ncsea.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Improving-the-Process-for-Modifying-Child-Support-Orders-in-the-U.S._Nov-2021.pdf

National Conference of State Legislatures. (2024). Road to Reform: State Approaches to Addressing Debt-Based Driver's License Suspensions. https://www.ncsl.org/civil-and-criminal-justice/road-to-reform-state-approaches-to-addressing-debt-based-drivers-license-suspensions

National Conference of State Legislatures. (2019). Child Support and Employment Services. https://www.ncsl.org/human-services/child-support-and-employment-services

National Conference of State Legislatures. (2016). Child support and parenting time orders. Retrieved from http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/child-support-and-parenting-time-orders.aspx

Nepomnyaschy, L., & Miller, D. P. (2022). Expanding our understanding of public policies to support father involvement. In *Social Work Practice with Fathers: Engagement, Assessment, and Intervention* (pp. 147–167). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13686-3_9

Noyes, J. L., Cancian, M., Cuesta, L., & Salas, V. R. (2017). Holding Child Support Orders of Incarcerated Payers in Abeyance: Four Year Outcomes. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CS-2014-2016-T3b.pdf

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). (2024). *HHS Poverty Guidelines for 2024.* https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines

Office of Child Support Services. (2024a). Access and Visitation Mandatory Grant Program. *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families*. https://acf.gov/css/outreach-material/access-and-visitation-mandatory-grant-program

Office of Child Support Services. (2024b). Notice of Proposed Rulemaking: Employment and Training Services for Noncustodial Parents in the Child Support Program. *Federal Register.* 89 FR 47109–417120. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2024-05-31/pdf/2024-11842.pdf

Office of Child Support Services. (2024c). Section 1115 Waivers to Fund NCP Work Activities - Update. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/policy-guidance/section-1115-waivers-fund-ncp-work-activities-update

Office of Child Support Services. (2024d). Office of Child Support Preliminary Report 2023. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/fy_2023_preliminary_report.pdf.

Office of Child Support Services. (2024e). 2023 Tribal Child Support: Providing Support for Our Families. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/2023_tribal_infographic_website.pdf

Office of Child Support Services. (2023a). Advancing Equity in Child Support HHS-2023-ACF-OCSE-FD-0022. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/HHS-2023-ACF-OCSE-FD-0022.pdf

Office of Child Support Services. (2023b). How It Works. https://acf.gov/css/parents/understanding-child-support/how-it-works

Office of Child Support Services. (2023c). Office of Child Support Preliminary Report 2022. https://acf.gov/css/policy-guidance/fy-2022-preliminary-data-report-and-tables.

Office of Child Support Services. (2022a). *Final Rule Resources*. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/training-technical-assistance/final-rule-resources

Office of Child Support Enforcement. (2022b). Final Rule: Grants to States for Access and Visitation Programs. https://acf.gov/css/policy-guidance/final-rule-grants-states-access-and-visitation-programs

Office of Child Support Services. (2021). Child support-led employment programs. *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families*. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/map/child-support-led-employment-programs-state

Office of Child Support Services. (2020). *State by State - How to Change a Child Support Order*. https://acf.gov/css/map/state-state-how-change-child-support-order

Office of Child Support Services. (2019a). Highlights from the CSPED Characteristics and Final Implementation Reports. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/csped_characteristics_and_implementation_reports_highlights.pdf

Office of Child Support Services. (2019b). Parenting Time Opportunities for Children Research Brief. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/ptoc_research_brief.pdf

Office of Child Support Services. (2018). Annual Report to Congress FY 18. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/fy_2018_annual_report.pdf.

Office of Child Support Services. (2016). The flexibility, efficiency, and modernization in child support programs final rule. *Federal Register.* Page 93492, Volume 81, Number 244. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-12-20/pdf/2016-29598.pdf598.pdf

Office of Child Support Services. (2011). Appendix A: Legislative History of Child Support Enforcement. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/essentials_for_attorneys_3rd_appendix_a.pdf

Office of Child Support Services. (2006). Child Support Provision in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/policy-guidance/child-support-provision-deficit-reduction-act-2005#:~:text=Section%207311.,enacted%20on%20October%201%2C%202005.&text=Section%207310.,separate%20medical%20support%20proposed%20regulations

Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation. (2018a). Simplify, Notify, Modify: Using Behavioral Insights to Increase Incarcerated Parents' Requests for Child Support Modification. https://acf.gov/opre/report/simplify-notify-modify-using-behavioral-insights-increase-incarcerated-parents-requests

Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation. (2018b). Taking the First Step: Using Behavioral Economics to Help Incarcerated Parents Apply for Child Support Order Modifications. https://acf.gov/opre/report/taking-first-step-using-behavioral-economics-help-incarcerated-parents-apply-child

Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation. (n.d.). Racial and ethnic disparities in human services analysis execution project (2018–2026). https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/racial-and-ethnic-disparities-human-services-analysis-execution-project-2018-2021

Passarella, L. L. (2024). Child Support Modifications Among New Orders in Maryland. *University of Maryland, School of Social Work*. https://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/media/ssw/fwrtg/child-support-research/cs-caseload-special-issues/Child-Support-Modifications-among-New-Orders.pdf?&

Pate, D. J. (2016). The Color of Debt: An Examination of Social Networks, Sanctions, and Child Support Enforcement Policy. *Race and Social Problems*, *8*(1), 116–135. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-016-9167-8

Pearson, J. (2015). Establishing Parenting Time in Child Support Cases: New Opportunities and Challenges. *Family Court Review*, *53*(2), 246–257. https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12147

Pearson, J. (2004). Building Debt While Doing Time: Child Support and Incarceration. *Judge's Journal; 43*(1), 4–11.

Pearson, J., Thoennes, N., & Kaunelis, R. (2012). Debt Compromise Programs: Program Design & Child Support Outcomes in Five Locations. *Center for Policy Research*. https://centerforpolicyresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/Debt-Compromise-Improving-Child-Support-Outcomes-Final-Report-Nov-14-2012-1.pdf

Pearson, J. & Wildfeuer, R. (2022). Policies and programs affecting fathers: A state-by-state report. *Denver, Colorado: Center for Policy Research and Fatherhood Research and Practice Network*. https://www.frpn.org/asset/policies-and-programs-affecting-fathers-state-state-report-combined-pdf

Pew Research Center (2013). Chapter 4: Marriage and Parenting. A Survey of LGBT Americans Attitudes, Experiences and Values in Changing Times.

https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2013/06/13/chapter-4-marriage-and-parenting/#:~:text=LGBT%20Parents&text=Three%2Din%2Dten%20(31,have%20children%20under%20age%2018

Plotnick, R. D., & Kennedy, A. I. (2018). How accurate are imputed child support orders?. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *88*, 490–496. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.03.049

PRWORA: Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (1996). Pub. L. No. 104-193. https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/PLAW-104publ193

Renno, M. (2021). Racial Disparity and Disproportionality in Child Support [PowerPoint slides]. *Wisconsin Department of Children and Families*. https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/cs/guidance-documents/pdf/disproportionality-and-disparity-sept-2.pdf

Rivera, M., Cooper, N., Tatum, L., & Steiger, D. (2023). Administrative Actions for a Family-Centered Child Support Program. *Center on Poverty and Inequality Georgetown Law*. https://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Administrative-Actions-for-a-Family-Centered-Child-Support-Program-Oct2023.pdf

Robbins, N. L., Waller, M. R., Nepomnyaschy, L., & Miller, D. P. (2022). Child support debt and the well-being of disadvantaged fathers of color. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 84(5), 1366–1386. https://www.frpn.org/asset/child-support-debt-and-the-well-being-disadvantaged-fathers-color

Robles, F., & Dewan, S. (2015). Skip Child Support. Go to Jail. Lose Job. Repeat. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/20/us/skip-child-support-go-to-jail-lose-job-repeat.html.

Rodriquez, N. (2016). If I Had Money: Black Fathers and Children, Child Support Debt, and Economic Security in Mississippi. *Center for Family Policy and Practice*. https://cffpp.org/wp-content/uploads/If-I-Had-Money_Black-Fathers_Child-Support-Debt_Mississippi.pdf

Salas-Betsch, I. (2024). The Economic Status of Single Mothers. *Center for American Progress*. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-economic-status-of-single-mothers/.

Schram, S. F. (2005). Contextualizing racial disparities in American welfare reform: Toward a new poverty research. *Perspectives on Politics*, *3*(2), 253–268. https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759270505019X

Selekman, R., & Johnson, A. (2019). An Examination of the Use and Effectiveness of Child Support Enforcement Tools in Six States. *Mathematica, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE)*.

https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/private/pdf/262936/Child_Support_Enforcement_Tool_Issue_Brief.pdf

Shrider, E. & Creamer, J. (2023). Poverty in the United States: 2022. *U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Reports*. 60–280. https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-280.pdf.

Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 651. (1935). https://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title04/0451.htm

Social Security Administration. (2022). Earnings of Men Aged 20–59, by Age Group and Race/Ethnicity, 2020–2021. https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/factsheets/at-a-glance/earnings-men-age-race-ethnicity.html

Solmeyer, A., Kotasek, K., Loesch, Y., Barton, S., & Merrick, W. (2023). Minnesota's Driver's License Suspension Pilot Descriptive Report. *Management and Budget*. https://mn.gov/mmb/impact-evaluation/projects/drivers-license-suspension/

Solmeyer, A., Berger A., Kotaskek K., Loesch Y., & Merrick W. (2024). Minnesota's Driver's License Suspension Pilot Impact Evaluation Report. *Management and Budget*. https://mn.gov/mmb/assets/DLS%20impact%20report_Final%20%28accessible%29_tcm1059-632219.pdf

Solomon-Fears, C. (2016). The child support enforcement program: A legislative history. *Congressional Research Service*, *39*. https://hhowellwilliams.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/b11e1-solomon-fears_-the-child-support-enforcement-program-a-legislative-history_0-3.pdf

Sorensen, E. (2024a). Race and Ethnicity of Custodial Parents. *Office of Child Support Services, Office of the Administration for Children & Families.* https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/ocsedatablog/2024/07/race-and-ethnicity-custodial-parents.

Sorensen, E. (2021). Characteristics of Custodial Parents and Their Children. *Office of Child Support Enforcement*. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/characteristics_cps_and_their_children.pdf

Sorensen, E. (2016a). The Child Support Program is a Good Investment. *Office of Child Support Enforcement*.

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/sbtn_csp_is_a_good_investment.pdf

Sorensen, E. (2016b). The child support program is focused on performance. *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement*. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse

Sorensen, E., & Oliver, H. (2002). Child support reforms in PRWORA: Initial Impacts. Assessing the New Federalism Discussion Paper. *The Urban Institute*. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/60361/410421-Child-Support-Reforms-in-PRWORA.PDF

Sorensen, E., Pashi, A., & Morales, M. (2018). Characteristics of Families Served by the Child Support (IV-D) Program: 2016 U.S. Census Survey Results. *Office of Child Support Enforcement*. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/iv_d_characteristics_2016_census_results.pdf

Sorensen, E., Sousa, L., & Schaner, S. (2007). Assessing child support arrears in nine large states and the nation. *Urban Institute.* https://www.urban.org/research/publication/assessing-child-support-arrears-nine-large-states-and-nation.

Sorensen, E., & Zibman, C. (2000). To What Extent do Children Benefit from Child Support? Assessing the New Federalism Discussion Paper. *Urban Institute*. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/62036/309299-To-What-Extent-Do-Children-Benefit-from-Child-Support-.PDF

Spjeldnes, S., Yamatani, H., & McGowan Davis, M. (2015). Child support conviction and recidivism: A statistical interaction pattern by race. *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work, 12*(6), 628–636. https://doi.org/10.1080/15433714.2014.992697

Sutfin, L. (2020). Child support community advisory committee being formed. *Michigan Department of Health and Human Services*. https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/inside-mdhhs/newsroom/2020/10/20/child-support-community-advisory.

Taylor, D. (2020). Same-Sex Couples Are More Likely to Adopt or Foster Children. https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/09/fifteen-percent-of-same-sex-couples-have-children-in-their-household.html.

Threlfall, J. M., & Kohl, P. L. (2015). Addressing child support in fatherhood programs: Perspectives of fathers and service providers. *Family Relations*, *64*(2), 291–304. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12119

Tollestrup, J. (2024). Child Support Enforcement: Program Basics. *Congressional Research Service*. Report RS22380. https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS22380

Treskon, L., & Groskaufmanis, J. (2022). Parents' Reflections on Their Experiences with the Child Support Program in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration. *MDRC*. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/PJAC_Parent_Reflections.pdf

Turetsky, V. (2023). Centering Child Well-Being in Child Support Policy. *Good+Foundation and Ascend at The Aspen institute*. https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/A_Child.Support_Centering.Child_.WellBeing_revised_AF.pdf

Turetsky, V., & Azevedo-McCaffrey, D. (2024a). Directing Child Support Payments to Families, Not Government, Would Help Families Afford Basic Needs and Thrive. *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/10-8-24tanf.pdf

Turetsky, V., & Azevedo-McCaffrey, D. (2024b). Understanding TANF Cost Recovery in the Child Support Program. *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/1-3-24tanf.pdf

Turetsky, V., & Waller, M. (2020). Piling on debt: The intersections between child support arrears and legal financial obligations. *UCLA Criminal Justice Law Review., 4*, 117–141. https://escholarship.org/content/qt7vd043jw/qt7vd043jw.pdf?t=qcft7z

Turner, K. J., & Waller, M. R. (2017). Indebted relationships: Child support arrears and nonresident fathers' involvement with children. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 79*(1), 24–43. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26646143

Turner v. Rogers, 564 U.S. 431 (2011).

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025). Table A-2. Employment status of the civilian population by race, sex, and age. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm

U.S. Census Bureau (2024). Nation's Urban and Rural Populations Shift Following 2020 Census. *News Brief CB22-CN.25.* https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/urban-rural-populations.html#:~:text=Despite%20the%20increase%20in%20the,2010%20to%2020.0%25%20in%202020

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2021). Data Show U.S. Poverty Rates in 2019 Higher in Rural Areas than in Urban For Racial/Ethnic Groups.

https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=101903#:~:text=Across%20all%20races%20and%20ethnicities%2C%20U.S.%20poverty%20rates,percent%20for%20that%20demographic%20group%20in%20urban%20areas

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2024). Evaluation of Child Support Enforcement Cooperation Requirements in SNAP. https://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/resource-files/ops-snap-child-support-summary.pdf

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicaid Services. (2016). Final Rule: Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization in Child Support Enforcement Programs. *Federal Register.* 81 FR 93492. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-12-20/pdf/2016-29598.pdf

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General (2000). The Establishment of Child Support Orders for Low Income, Noncustodial Parents. OEI-05-99-00390. https://oig.hhs.gov/oei/reports/oei-05-99-00390.pdf

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. (2022). Conducting Intensive Equity Assessments of Existing Programs, Policies, and Processes. https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/dd148f52c519a5bcc4fde76b4932f53b/Intensive-Equity-Assessment.pdf

U.S. Senate Committee on Finance (1974). Social Services Amendments of 1974. p. 2. https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/social8.pdf

Veldman, P., Dechausay, N., & Durgan, A. (2019). Meeting and Reminders: Testing Approaches to Increase Child Support Payments in Colorado. *MDRC*. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/bics_co_brief.pdf

Vogel, L. K. (2020a). Help me help you: Identifying and addressing barriers to child support compliance. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *110*, 104763. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104763

Vogel, L. K. (2020b). Barriers to meeting formal child support obligations: Noncustodial father perspectives. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *110*, 104764. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104764

Vogel, L. K. (2019). Child Support Enforcement Tools and Their Relationship to Payments: A Review of County Policy and Practice. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CS-2016-2018-T4A.pdf

Vogel, L. K., Dennis, A. M., & Keita, N. (2022). Perceptions of Fairness in Child Support: 2020–2022 Child Support Policy Research Agreement: Task 4B. *Institute for Research on Poverty University of Wisconsin–Madison*. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CSRA-2020-2022-T4B.pdf

Vogel, L. K., & Hossain, S. (2023). Child support agencies as connectors. *Journal of Human Services*, *43*(1), 17–37. https://doi.org/10.52678/001c.85099

Vogel, L. K., Costanzo, M., Reilly, A., & Dennis, A.M. (2025). License Suspension and Civil Contempt as Enforcement Tools. *Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison.* https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/CSRA-2022-2024-T5-Report.pdf

Waller, M. R. (2002). *My baby's father: Unmarried parents and paternal responsibility*. Cornell University Press.

Waller, M. R., Emory, A. D., & Paul, E. (2018). Money, time, or something else? Measuring nonresident fathers' informal and in-kind contributions. *Journal of Family Issues*, *39*(13), 3612–3640. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X18783801

Walsh, T. & Quince, H. (2024). Collaborating to Provide a Gateway to Services and Supports for Noncustodial Fathers. *Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison*. https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CSRA-2022-2024-T13.pdf

Wheaton, B. (2021). MDHHS Child Support Advisory Council drives change in department: Diverse membership providing input to ensure fairness and transparency. *Michigan Department of Health and Human Services*. https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/inside-mdhhs/newsroom/2021/12/08/mdhhs-child-support-advisory-council-drives-change-in-dept-diverse-membership-providing-input

White, G. L., Banks, L., Briggs, H. E., Allen, J. L., & Lowe, T. (2021). The Effects of Child Support Payment Factors on Satisfaction With Levels of Parental Involvement by Noncustodial Fathers. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *31*(8), 851–859. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315211004744

Wildsmith, E., Manlove, J., & Cook, E. (2018). Dramatic increase in the proportion of births outside of marriage in the United States from 1990 to 2016. *Child Trends*.

https://www.childtrends.org/publications/dramatic-increase-in-percentage-of-births-outside-marriage-among-whites-hispanics-and-women-with-higher-education-levels.

Zatz, N. D. (2016). A New Peonage?: Pay, Work, or Go to Jail in Contemporary Child Support Enforcement and Beyond. *Seattle University Law Review, 39*(3), 927–955. https://ssrn.com/abstract=2730760

Zatz, N., Koonse, T., Zhen, T., Herrera, L., Lu, H., Shafer, S., & Valenta, B. (2016). Get to work or go to jail: Workplace rights under threat. Research Brief. *UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, UCLA Labor Center, A New Way of Life Reentry Project*. https://irle.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Get-To-Work-or-Go-To-Jail-Workplace-Rights-Under-Threat.pdf

Zatz, N. D., & Stoll, M. A. (2020). Working to avoid incarceration: Jail threat and labor market outcomes for noncustodial fathers facing child support enforcement. RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation. *Journal of the Social Sciences, 6*(1), 55–81. https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2020.6.1.03

Zolot, T., Martinez-Schiferl, M., Desbien, L., & Kauffman, M. (2020). Dollar for Dollar: Why the Child Support Pass-Through Makes Sense. *Policy & Practice*.