Overview of a Conceptual Model to Support the Implementation of Equity Assessments in Child Support Systems

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Background

This equity assessment conceptual model is designed as a framework for conducting equity assessments in state, Tribal, and local IV-D child support agencies (see the Glossary). It is made available through the Advancing Equity in Child Support project funded by the Federal Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) and led by three states—Minnesota, Michigan, and California. Child Trends will use an iterative process to co-design and finalize the conceptual model with the states. Child Trends will also incorporate feedback from project partners including CGI, the Center for Policy Research (CPR), Research in Action, the National Fatherhood Initiative, and a consortium of nine states and one Tribe participating in this project. This draft summarizes the model's current stage of development as of May 2024. We anticipate finalizing the model and its accompanying assessment questions by Spring 2025.

Describing an Equity Assessment

Conducting an equity assessment within a child support system is the systematic examination of existing or future policies, programs, and practices to promote equity in that system. As conceptualized for this project, the equity assessment, a key component of the conceptual model, is designed for state-level, government-run, child support agencies. As such, an equity assessment helps identify strengths and gaps in child support policies, programs, and practices that facilitate or hinder the promotion of wellbeing for individuals and groups. These individuals and groups include those who interface with systems such as the workforce that delivers child support services as well as families eligible for them. Equity assessments are guided by empirical evidence, on the ground experience, and community voice. To the right we provide definitions of key terms that are important for understanding the equity assessment process.[1]

Understanding and Defining Equality and Equity

Equality and equity are distinct but interrelated concepts.

Equality refers to providing the same resources, opportunities, and treatment to all individuals and groups regardless of if the resources, opportunities, and treatment are needed or right for them.

Equity refers to the differential provision of resources, opportunities, and treatment to individuals and groups in a way that considers facilitators and barriers to circumstances or conditions. The end goal is to enable the achievement of their highest level of wellbeing and capacity.

The Importance of Equity Assessments for Child Support Systems

Child support systems have long prioritized enforcement of child support orders as an approach to the reduction of child poverty and to recover government-funded public assistance spending on families in poverty. Decades of research finds that child support systems increase child support payments and reduce child poverty,[2,3] particularly among children whose parents have stable and sufficient earrings.[4]

However, child support systems are often not as successful in reducing poverty for children whose parents are in unstable employment, have low incomes, and/or have barriers to employment.[5] Some child support enforcement tools can adversely affect the wellbeing of those parents and children. For example, prior findings suggest drivers' license suspension can create barriers to employment[6] and lower the likelihood of beginning to pay support.[7]

Child support systems also have embedded costs and barriers for families accessing services. For example, families receiving public assistance benefits may not receive all monies collected by the state from parents ordered to pay support because those dollars are used to reimburse the state's costs for public assistance. In other cases, child support policies have been cited as being particularly burdensome and rigid, making it difficult for families to understand policies, access services, and advocate for their and their children's wellbeing.[8]

Child support systems also operate in a larger economic and social context in which the resources that allow families to thrive are distributed unequally across populations by race, ethnicity, gender, class, immigration status, and other characteristics. For example, the pandemic-related recession disproportionately affected Black, Hispanic, and Native American workers in the form of higher levels of unemployment.[9,10] Child support systems can buffer or exacerbate the effect of issues like this based on the ways in which they make decisions and policies related to enforcement actions.

Approaches to child support enforcement that do not take contextual issues and individual circumstances into account can have implications for the ways in which equity is operationalized within child support systems and for family wellbeing. Conducting a formal equity assessment is one way to examine and attend to this need.

Document Overview

This resource provides a high-level overview of a draft conceptual model for conducting an equity assessment in child support systems. We begin by highlighting the levels of policy and practice under which an equity assessment takes place (Step 1). We then define and provide a cursory overview of key activities one must engage in to conduct an equity

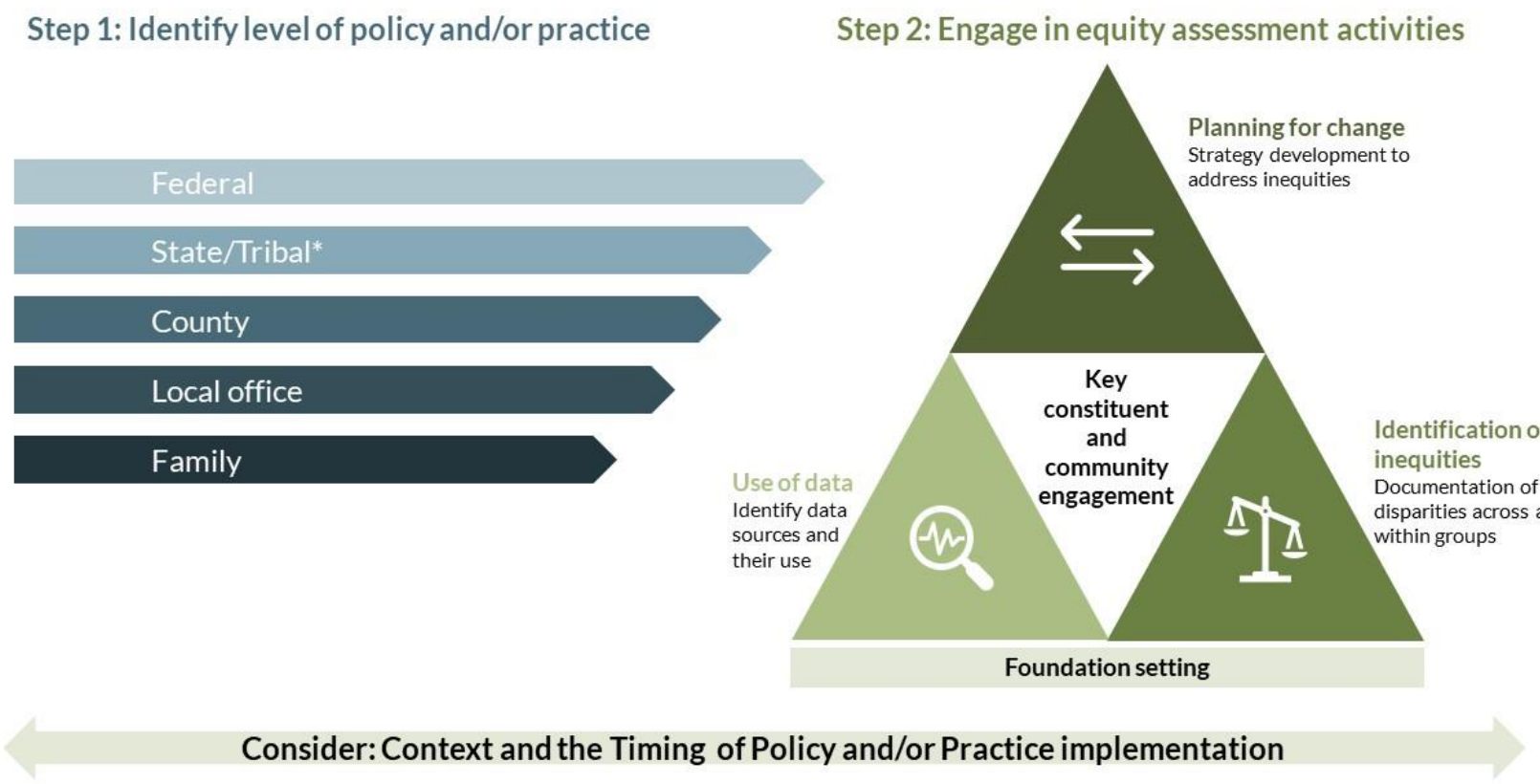
assessment (Step 2). Step 2 starts by describing the foundation setting, which serves as the basis for the other equity assessment activities. We then move to explaining a core facet of the equity assessment model—engaging with key constituents and community. After reviewing the foundation and engagement activities of the model, we define, describe the importance of, and provide select questions and discussion points for the remaining key equity assessment activities: planning for change, identification of inequities, and use of data. Finally, we transition to a discussion of the role of context and timing when conducting equity assessments and end with a brief conclusion.

Overview of the Equity Assessment Conceptual Model

In this section we provide an overview of a draft conceptual model for conducting an equity assessment within a child support system (Figure 1). As designed, there are two distinct and complementary steps to the equity assessment. The first step—illustrated on the left-hand side of the visual—highlights the various levels of policy and/or practice on which an equity assessment may occur. The second step—illustrated on the right side of the visual—lays out the foundational, core, and key activities of the equity assessment. Underlying the model is an arrow that encapsulates the role that context and timing play in the assessment process.

Figure 1. Draft Conceptual Model for Conducting a Child Support Equity Assessment

Figure 1. Draft Conceptual Model for Conducting a Child Support Equity Assessment



* As set forth in the U.S. Constitution, American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal Nations are sovereign entities that maintain a unique and legal, nation-to-nation relationships with the federal government. There are currently 61 Tribal child support programs funded by federal dollars (including Title IV-D of the Social Security Act), and their designation impacts how their policies are designed and implemented.*11*

Step 1 of Implementing an Equity Assessment: Understanding and Identifying Levels of Policy and Practice

As noted above, equity assessments are conducted within a larger ecosystem. For child support systems, there are multiple levels of policy and/or areas of practice where an equity assessment can occur. Step 1 of the draft conceptual model illustrates the hierarchal and interrelated relationships among policies and practices. It highlights the fact that federal child support policies inform policies and practices in state, county, and local offices that directly affect families. Tribes are in a unique position as they are sovereign entities that have legal, nation-to-nation relationships with the federal government that impact how policies are designed and implemented.[11] The visual also shows how the different levels of the system interact with each other, though the strength of the influence varies depending on the level. For example, state and local child support systems are part of federal-state partnerships established in Title IV-D of the Social Security Act, which plays an important role in informing the set of policy options that can be considered in an equity assessment. In some cases, local child support agencies must adhere to federally mandated laws and policies, while in other cases, agencies can create their own policies and/or can use discretion to shape federal and/or state level policies. The devolution of federal and state policies to the local level for instance, can result in variations in local level cultures, norms, and policies that might influence the way an equity assessment is conducted, as well as its findings.

Step 2 of Implementing an Equity Assessment: Engaging in Equity Assessment Activities

The development of the equity assessment is an iterative process. This means that the assessment should be reviewed and refined to assess its relevance, validity, comprehensiveness, and utility for understanding equity related issues over time. As currently conceived, the draft conceptual model will be used to:

1. help identify the main policies, practices, and/or constructs of exploration for the equity assessment;
2. guide the approach to conducting the equity assessment (e.g., assessment design, individuals/groups included, data collection processes, etc.); and
3. inform the data analysis, interpretation, development, and dissemination of equity assessment products.

Here we provide a high-level overview of the foundational, core, and key equity assessment activities as well as select contextual issues and timing considerations that may affect the equity assessment process. It is important to note that each of the equity assessment activities are interrelated, influence each other, and should not occur or be considered in isolation.

Overview of Foundational, Core, and Key Equity Assessment Activities

Foundational Activity: Assessment Planning

To begin an equity assessment, participants should outline a clear and actionable plan to guide the process. The plan should include tasks such as identifying who will be on the assessment team, developing clearly articulated and measurable definitions for what equity means, considering the potential interest and commitment from key constituents and communities about the assessment process, identifying the resources, time, and capacity needed to undertake the effort, and determining the scope of work.

The plan is a roadmap for the assessment work and can be used as a regular "touchpoint", enabling the assessment team to refer back to and revisit the assumptions underlying the assessment. This review process helps to ensure that the assessment approach, activities, and findings are contributing to the articulated goals.

Sample Assessment Questions and Discussion Prompts: Assessment Planning

- **What are the key goals and objectives of your policy change?**
- **Does your team have a clearly articulated definition of equity?**
- **What are the historical and/or contextual issues that may need consideration during the planning process?**
- **Who will you engage to inform and execute the equity assessment?**
- **Whom will you be responsible to for reporting the progress and results of the equity assessment?**

Core Activity: Key Constituent and Community Engagement

Child support systems are complex and have a significant influence on families and their wellbeing. Given this importance, identifying individuals and groups with a vested interest in the implementation of the equity assessment and the results is important for:

- Building support for the assessment process, including ensuring interested parties understand and are invested in its goals;

- Providing an opportunity for diverse voices and perspectives to inform the goals and direction of the assessment;
- Enhancing assessment activities and deliverables;
- Fostering a sense of inclusion by keeping constituents and communities informed about any shifts or changes; and
- Increasing understanding, acceptance, and utilization of the assessment findings.

Engaging stakeholder perspectives in meaningful and sustained ways is important for meeting the goals of the project and should occur early on and throughout the life of the project. Depending on expertise, interest, and availability, the individuals identified may be engaged at different levels and stages of the assessment.

Sample Assessment Questions and Discussion Prompts Key Constituent and Community Engagement

- **What is the composition of individuals (e.g., staff members, community residents, families, community leaders, policy makers, other key decision-makers) that you need at the table to inform your work?**
- **When and at what phase(s) of the equity assessment process will you engage with key constituents and the community?**
- **What structure and/or process will you use to garner feedback and/or make decisions?**
- **How will you ensure the culture and climate of engagement is respectful and inclusive of varying and diverse perspectives?**
    - How will you address power differentials among key constituents and community members?
    - How will leadership be shared?
- **How will decisions be communicated back to key constituents and community members?**

Key Activity: Planning for Change

Planning for change is the process of identifying and laying out data and decision points to enable findings from the equity assessment process to be catalyzed into practice. This includes translating findings into actionable steps and identifying opportunities, challenges, and tradeoffs that need to be made when initiating the change. This activity also includes developing recommendations that are in alignment with research, best practices, key constituent and community feedback, and context—all activities that are a key part of the equity assessment process.

Once recommendations to address inequities have been articulated, critical examination of the recommendations alongside proposals to address inequities and how they will support the intended outcomes is a crucial next step. This should include consideration of who needs to be involved to support the change process and unintended consequences. For example, proposals to address one inequity could potentially result in other types of inequities occurring for the same or different people or groups, so care should be taken to explore this possibility.

Sample Assessment Questions and Discussion Prompts Planning for Change

- **What are the objectives of the change you are considering?**
  - How do they correspond to the equities and inequities identified in the equity assessment?
- **Does your desired change require capacity building and/or workforce development?**
- **Are the changes that you are considering short-term, long-term and/or permanent?**
  - What actions are required for implementation of these changes?
- **What legislative, regulatory, and/or administrative effort is necessary to make this change?**

Key Activity: Identification of Inequities

Identifying differential outcomes in a policy or practice for particular populations or groups is a key goal for this activity and at the heart of the equity assessment process. Key to this process is understanding what disparities and disproportionalities exist, which can then help to identify the areas where inequities might be present. Consideration of the source(s) of possible inequities, for example, whether they might stem from internal or external factors in the child support system and how they may be shaped by federal, state, or local policies for instance, or by child support agency, community and/or family context are all important factors for informing this activity.

Sample Assessment Questions and Discussion Prompts: Identification of Inequities

- **How do outcomes defined earlier differ across key demographic and socioeconomic subgroups?**
    - Characteristics such as sex, age, race and ethnicity, tribal affiliation, whether child was born in a nonmarital relationship, number of children in the household of the parent ordered to pay support, home languages, employment and earnings, income and poverty, current/prior program participation, etc. are possible variables to pay attention to.
- **What steps will be taken if the data collected during this activity is limited, in conflict with each other, and/or or does not identify inequities?**
- **What level of evidence will the team need to be comfortable drawing conclusions and/or acting on the evidence uncovered.**

Key Activity: Use of Data

Data are important for equity assessments because they can be used to reveal disparities, disproportionalities, and relationships between different variables or outcomes of interest. In rarer instances, data can also help to understand the causal effects of a policy, program, or intervention in relationship with equity.

Engagement in this activity should include identification of the types of data and measures that can be used to capture the outcomes of interest. Attention to data sources, the sample or population from whom the data are drawn, and the methods used to collect and analyze are also important to examine. This type of planning will ensure that underlying patterns can be summarized, aggregated, or estimated in ways that can inform policy or practice strategies moving forward.

Sample Assessment Questions and Discussion Prompts: Use of Data

- **What data sources and/or methods are suitable for answering questions about equity in your assessment process?**
    - Sample Data Sources
        - Quantitative administrative data (e.g., federal child support performance measures), qualitative administrative data (e.g., case notes, customer support scripts, court documents, etc.), data from other systems (e.g., TANF, the criminal justice system)
        - Cross-sectional data (a snapshot of data for a specific timeframe), longitudinal data (data that tracks individuals/families over time)
    - Sample Data Methods
        - Surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, etc.
- **What individuals are responsible for inputting and/or providing data for each of these sources?**
    - What perspectives do they bring to the assessment?
- **What demographic, socioeconomic, and/or other characteristics of individuals and/or families are available that can help shed light on equity related issues?**

Attention to the Role of Context and Timing Alongside Policy Implementation

Many influences can affect how an equity assessment is conceptualized, designed, undertaken, received, and regarded. Our draft model includes the role of context and timing as important influences in the equity assessment process. Contextual factors and their relevance will vary based on issues such as the equity assessment purpose, setting, participants, and dissemination audiences. Here we highlight two factors: (1) historical, social, and economic issues and (2) intersecting systems to showcase how context can affect the equity assessment process. We then turn to timing and the ways in which temporal considerations play a role in policy and/or practice implementation. Taken together, context and timing are important factors that shape both the equity assessment process as well as its findings.

Historical, Social, and Economic Issues

The ability to pay child support is predicated on the notion that parents have access to systems, resources, and supports that enable them to care for themselves and their children. Important in this assumption is a widely held ideology in the U.S. that the financial support of children is a private responsibility, which means that parents must have access to income and resources in amounts that facilitate caretaker and child stability. Historically, systemic racism and discrimination borne out of occurrences such as the colonization and genocide of Native American people[12] and the enslavement of Black people in America[13] have negatively affected access to employment and other resources such as education, housing, and political power (among other things) in ways that have hindered individual and family stability and thriving.[14]

Artifacts of this history are still at play today for Native and Black Americans, as well as other minoritized and marginalized populations including Hispanic people.[15] Issues such as police brutality, labor exploitation, and a lack of access to safe and affordable housing are currently depressing the ability of these and other minoritized and marginalized populations to access resources that enable them to adequately care for their children.

Intersecting Systems

Child support is one system in a large constellation of systems with which families interface. For instance, a family may be connected to the child support system in addition to being involved with other programs such as TANF or the criminal justice system. Though public, each of the aforementioned systems (as well as others), have their own rules and regulations that affect the ways in which policies in the agency of focus (in this case child support) are enacted.

Consideration of the varied and often multiple systems that intersect with child support is important because inequities in intersecting systems may have an impact on one's engagement in the child support system. For example, the U.S. penal system imprisons people who are minoritized and marginalized at disproportionately higher rates than those who do not share this status.[16] This occurrence can negatively affect the children of these individuals since they are generally unable to earn income at the levels needed to support their children when they are incarcerated.[17]

Timing of Policy Implementation

Like context, timing is also an important variable to consider when conducting an equity assessment. Approaches to the equity assessment process may differ depending on whether one is identifying, formulating, implementing, or evaluating a particular policy or practice. For example, an equity assessment conducted at the conceptualization or

beginning phase of a policy might focus on exploration of key constituent and community members to ensure the right voices are at the table and partnerships and collaborations can be created and maintained in service of the policy or practice. During the implementation phase of a policy or practice, however, one might focus on facilitators and barriers to the policy or program's reach, which could inform and enable mid-course corrections such as the identification of unintended consequences of a policy or practice that may have equity related consequences for certain individuals or groups.

Equity Assessment Implications

These factors—historical, social, and economic context, intersecting systems, and the role of context and timing of policy implementation—are not immediate issues that a child support focused equity assessment can address. An equity assessment can, however, take into consideration the ways in which child support policies might be designed to mitigate the impact of these types of issues on parents, which has the potential to better support family and child outcomes.

Conclusion

This draft equity assessment conceptual model provides a framework that can be applied and/or adapted for an equity assessment in child support systems. Though useful as a tool, it is important to note that the development of the model is an iterative process and the model will be refined as we learn more from states, Tribes, and key constituents and communities about its relevance and use in their specific contexts. It is also important to note that the model is a simplification of interrelated and complex systems that are highly contingent upon each other and do not operate in isolation. As such, when using the conceptual model as a guide, it must be acknowledged that it is only a starting point for a far more complex reality.

Working Glossary

This glossary presents key terms and definitions of those terms as they are used throughout this resource. The glossary is a living document and will be refined and updated as our work progresses and evolves.

Disparity: occurs when a group of people (racial, ethnic, religious, etc.) who experience a circumstance or situation (e.g., program access/participation, employment status, home ownership, etc.) is not equal to the ratio of another group experiencing the same thing.

Disproportionality: occurs when a group is out of proportion from others based on that group's representation in the general population. A group can have disproportionately high (overrepresentation) or low (underrepresentation) numbers relative to a program or service.

Equality: refers to providing the same resources, opportunities, and/or treatment to all individuals regardless of if the resources, opportunities, and/or treatment are needed or right for them.

Equity: refers to the differential provision of resources, opportunities, and/or treatment to individuals and groups in a way that considers facilitators and barriers to circumstances or conditions. The end goal is to enable achievement of the highest level of wellbeing and/or capacity.

Federal performance measures: refers to the five measures—paternity establishment percentage, percent of cases with a child support order, current collections performance, arrearage collections performance, and cost effectiveness performance level—required as part of the performance and incentive system established in the Child Support Performance and Incentive Act of 1998 (CSPIA). State child support programs are evaluated for federal incentive funds based on these measures.

IV-D child support agencies: refers to agencies within child support systems established through the enactment of Title IV-D of the Social Security Act (1975). IV-D child support agencies serve cases that either apply directly to the agency for services or are referred to the agency by a public assistance program such as TANF. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) authorized Tribes to establish and enforce child support orders to gain access to IV-D resources; currently, there are 60 comprehensive Tribal IV-D agencies throughout the United States.[18]

Marginalized people: refers to individuals who are excluded or discriminated against socially, economically, and/or politically because of characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, ability status, religion, sexual orientation, and/or socioeconomic status. The exclusion and discrimination leads to limited access to opportunities and results in

unequal access to and treatment in U.S. systems such as education, employment, housing, healthcare, political, and justice.

Minoritized people: refers to individuals whose race, ethnicity, religion, culture, or other characteristics are considered by more powerful people to be subordinate. Native American/Indigenous; African American/Black; Hispanic, Asian—and their sub-populations have been minoritized by White people in the U.S. Notably, minoritized status does not necessarily correlate to population size but does indicate less power.

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