

INTRO

My research focused on the population of low-income non-custodial parents who are too poor to fulfill their child support orders. As most of you are well aware, changes in the mission of the child support system over the past decade have enabled agencies to pay special attention to these fathers and tailor enforcement to their needs. This has been done in two main ways. The first is to address the underlying reason for non-payment and the second has been to lower orders to increase payments. While both strategies have shown some effectiveness, I chose to focus my recommendations on that long-term goal of increasing ability to pay. But before I go into those recommendations, first I would like to provide justification for addressing this population at all.

WHY?

Firstly, poor NCPs make up 1/3 of the total child support payer population.

And they are not only a large portion, but their families are the most in need of child support, especially as many leave welfare.

And lastly, studies have shown that those fathers who pay more are also more likely to be involved in their child's lives.

WHAT HAS BEEN DONE TO INCREASE ABILITY TO PAY?

On a grand scale, perhaps the greatest efforts to address the poverty of NCPs have been the series of responsible fatherhood demonstrations run with the support of the OCSE over the past decade.

Although these demonstrations are a step in the right direction, they failed to significantly increase payments and therefore had little effect on child outcomes.

I have identified two main reasons that these demonstrations failed to produce the desired outcomes. The first is low recruitment and retention. Across the board evaluations cite difficulty recruiting participants and then keeping them in the program as the main barriers to success.

The second is low post-enrollment wages. As you can see from these chart here, participants in both Parent's Fair Share and the OCSE RFP had post-enrollment earnings below the poverty line.

HOW CAN WE DO IT BETTER?

In order to better serve low-income NCPs, I propose that child support agencies, with the OCSE's guidance, address both of these previous handicaps.

In order to increase both the number of fathers involved and ensure that they complete the program, participation should be mandatory and enforced by the courts. For the most part, participation in these programs has been voluntary and even in the Parents Fair Share demonstration when it was mandatory, NCPs faced no consequences for failing to show up or dropping out before completing the program. At some sites only 5% of those summoned showed up for their hearing with the court or administrative agency.¹ Further, a third of those who did show up and were mandated to participate never attended the program.²

Unfortunately, enforcing mandatory orders requires significant attention from judges and the court system to follow up with these NCPs. Because many judges see serious criminal cases as well as child support cases, those of low-income NCPs are often low on the list of priorities. One way some districts have been able to move NCP cases to the forefront is by creating separate dockets tailored to child support cases. These are known as "Fathering Courts." One of the longest running Fathering Courts is in Jackson, County Missouri, where collections increased by

¹ Doolittle, F. and S. Lynn. *Working with Low-Income Cases: Lessons for the Child Support Enforcement System from Parents' Fair Share*. Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, NY.(1998) cited in OCSE Responsible Fatherhood Programs: Client Characteristics and Program Outcomes (September 2003) 71

² Doolittle and Lynn cited in OCSE Responsible Fatherhood Programs: Client Characteristics and Program Outcomes (September 2003) 72.

over \$2 million dollars. Inspired by the success of this court and others like it, Washington DC recently started a fathering court of it's own this past spring.

While Fathering courts will help increase participation in employment services, they will not necessarily increase earnings. This will depend on the nature of the employment services to which NCPs are connected. In the past, programs have largely provided job search services. Unfortunately, the only jobs that such searches produce for most low-income NCPS are low-paying and often temporary jobs. They are a particularly disadvantaged population with low skill and education levels as well as a high incidence of criminal history. In order to have these programs be effective, they must focus on increasing the employability and wage-earning potential of NCPs. This will require a focus on training and education rather than job-search. I call this the wage-growth approach to employment services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to implement this dual model of mandatory participation orders and wage-growth employment programs, states and local agencies, with the support of the OCSE will have to take certain initiative.

1. The first step would be to establish Fathering Courts. This will require strong relationships with your local judiciaries and could be facilitated by grant money from the OCSE. States and local agencies should investigate this relationship-building and grant opportunities as a first step.
2. States and local child support agencies should also lobby for a new and improved set of responsible fatherhood demonstrations. One of the most direct ways this can be achieved is to support the Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act which was introduced by senators Bayh and Obama this past June which provides money specifically for employment programs for low-income NCPS.