

CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Overview

The child support program operates under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act with the vision that children can count on their parents for the financial, medical, and emotional support they need to be healthy and successful even when they live in different households. The program functions in 54 states and territories, and 60 tribes. In FY19, the federal government provided 4.6 billion in payments to states and tribes to operate their child support programs. ACF's [Office of Child Support Enforcement](#) partners with federal, state, tribal, and local governments and others to promote parental responsibility so that children receive reliable support from both of their parents as they grow to adulthood.

State, tribal, and local child support agencies provide services to families, including:

- Locating noncustodial parents
- Establishing paternity
- Establishing and enforce support orders
- Modifying orders when appropriate
- Collecting and disbursing child support payments

ACF supports a number of research and evaluation activities as well as learning from a broad array of other activities such as performance management, technical assistance, stakeholder engagement, site monitoring, and continuous quality improvement. Under authority of Section 1115(a) of the Social Security Act, ACF administers grant-funded demonstration projects, waivers, and other research-related partnerships to produce the best outcomes for children and families involved with the child support program.

Past Research and Evaluation

Child support is an important income support for families. According to a 2018 U.S. Census Bureau survey, child support represents 42 percent of income for custodial parents with income below the poverty level who receive child support.¹² In recent years, the child support program has shifted its focus from welfare cost reimbursement to family support, with an emphasis on obtaining regular support for children and removing barriers to consistent payment. Prior research

ACF's Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) performance measures related to Child Support Enforcement:

Maintain annual child support distributed collections - *Performance Measure 20.1LT* ([p. 238](#))

Maintain the paternity establishment percentage (PEP) among children born out-of-wedlock - *Performance Measure 20A* ([p. 238](#))

Increase the percentage of IV-D (child support) cases having support orders - *Performance Measure 20B* ([p. 238](#))

Maintain the IV-D (child support) collection rate for current support - *Performance Measure 20C* ([p. 239](#))

Increase the percentage of paying cases among IV-D (child support) arrearage cases - *Performance Measure 20D* ([p. 239](#))

Maintain the cost-effectiveness ratio (total dollars collected per \$1 of expenditures) - *Performance Measure 20E* ([p. 239](#))

¹² Grall, T. (2020). *Custodial Mothers and Their Child Support: 2017*. U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Reports, P60-269. Detailed Tables. (Table 5). <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/families/2017/chlds17.pdf>



suggests that there is a positive correlation between noncustodial fathers' involvement with their children and their payment of child support.¹³ However, not all parents have the same level of financial security. Just like custodial parents, some noncustodial parents struggle to make ends meet.

An enduring question in the child support field is how to increase the reliability of child support payments among the different types of noncustodial parents who do not regularly pay child support: 1) those willing but unable to pay; 2) those unwilling but able to pay; and 3) those unwilling and unable to pay. Past ACF-supported research has attempted to answer this question using several different approaches. For example, the [Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration \(CSPED\)](#) was designed to increase reliable child support payments among noncustodial parents who were unable to pay their child support by providing them with child support agency-led employment programs. Programs were led by child support agencies and combined case management, enhanced child support services, employment services, and parenting classes with peer support. Other studies, such as the [Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency \(BIAS\)](#) and the [Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services \(BICS\) demonstrations](#), have examined how principles of behavioral economics can be applied to child support business practices to improve the reliability of child support payments through order modifications, parental involvement in order establishment, setting up automatic withholding on new child support orders, and other practices.

Research and Evaluation Stakeholders

In setting child support research and evaluation priorities, ACF takes into account legislative requirements and Congressional interests; the interest and needs of ACF, HHS, and Administration leadership; program office staff and leadership; ACF partners; the populations served; researchers; and other stakeholders. ACF routinely interacts with these stakeholders through a variety of engagement activities. These activities inform our ongoing research and evaluation planning processes.

Who

- State, territory, tribal, and local child support administrators and staff
- Child support training and technical assistance providers
- Employers
- Individuals and families engaging with the child support system
- Federal partners in HHS and other agencies, such as the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), the Department of Labor (DOL), and the Department of Justice (DOJ)
- Researchers and policy experts
- National organizations, such as the National Child Support Enforcement Association (NCSEA), the National Council of Child Support Directors (NCCSD), the Western Intergovernmental Child Support Engagement Council (WICSEC), the Eastern Regional Interstate Child Support Association (ERICSA), the National Tribal Child Support Association (NTCSA), the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and the National Center on State Courts

¹³ Peters, H. E., Argys, L. M., Howard, H. W., & Butler, J. S. (2004). Legislating Love: The Effect of Child Support and Welfare Policies on Father–child Contact. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 2, 255–274. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-004-5647-5>



- Partners in fatherhood programs, workforce development agencies, correctional institutions, re-entry organizations, and other human services programs

How

- Conferences and meetings, such as NCSEA Annual Policy Forum and Annual Leadership Symposium, NCCSD Annual Meeting, WICSEC Annual Conference, ERICSA Annual Conference, and NTCSA Annual Conference
- Regional meetings with IV-D Directors
- Engagement with child support training and technical assistance networks
- Surveys, focus groups, interviews, demonstration projects, waiver projects, and other activities conducted as part of research and evaluation studies
- Structured mechanisms for broad stakeholder engagement, such as a recent [Request for Information](#) in the Federal Register on innovative approaches and knowledge gaps related to enhancing nonresident parents' ability to support their children economically and emotionally.

Examples of Broad Questions

1. What strategies are effective at increasing the reliability of child support payments among the different types of noncustodial parents?
2. What strategies are most effective for improving employment and earnings among noncustodial parents with low income who are willing but unable to pay their child support?
3. How can child support programs improve communication and engagement with families, and build trust and confidence in the child support program?
4. How can programs apply principles of behavioral economics and procedural justice to child support business practices?

Examples of Recent and Ongoing Research and Evaluation Activities

	Broad Question			
	#1	#2	#3	#4
Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS)	X		X	X
Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS)	X		X	X
Building Evidence on Employment Strategies for Low-Income Families (BEES)	X	X		
Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED)	X	X	X	
Families Forward Demonstration (FFD)	X	X	X	
Intergovernmental Case Processing Innovation Grants			X	X
Procedural Justice Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC)	X		X	X
Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration (STED)	X	X		
Using Digital Marketing to Increase Participation in the Child Support Program			X	



- **Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS)**: was a national demonstration that explored the application of behavioral economics principles to child support services. BICS interventions addressed a range of child support challenges, including initial payments on newly established child support orders, parent engagement prior to and during order establishment, and the order review and modification process. (#1) (#3) (#4)
- **Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS)**: was the first major opportunity to apply a behavioral economics lens to human services programs that serve vulnerable families with low income in the United States. BIAS worked with four child support programs to design and test behaviorally-informed interventions that aimed to increase applications for child support order modifications, increase child support payments from noncustodial parents who do not have income withholding and need to take action to make a payment, and increase the percentage of parents who made child support payments and the dollar amount of payments made per parent. (#1) (#3) (#4)
- **Building Evidence on Employment Strategies for Low-Income Families (BEES)**: is evaluating the effectiveness of innovative programs designed to boost employment and earnings among Americans with low income, including noncustodial parents. BEES has a special interest in programs that are state-initiated and programs that serve adults whose employment prospects have been affected by opioid use disorder, abuse of other substances, or mental health conditions. (#1) (#2)
- **Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED)**: was a national demonstration designed to increase reliable child support payments among noncustodial parents who were unable to pay their child support by providing them with child support agency-led employment programs. Programs were led by child support agencies and combined case management, enhanced child support services, employment services, and parenting classes with peer support. (#1) (#2) (#3)
- **Families Forward Demonstration (FFD)**: is a Section 1115 waiver project designed to increase employment and earnings of noncustodial parents by providing short-term job skills training in high demand occupations. Along with the job skills training, FFD provides noncustodial parents with supportive employment services, financial capacity-building services, and enhanced child support case management. (#1) (#2) (#3)
- **Intergovernmental Case Processing Innovation Grants**: are testing how child support agencies increase payments and improve case processing efficiency and customer service on intergovernmental cases. Grantees are encouraged to apply principles of behavioral economics and procedural justice to their designed interventions. (#3) (#4)
- **Procedural Justice Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC)**: is a national demonstration testing whether incorporating procedural justice principles into child support business practices increases reliable child support payments and increases trust and confidence in the child support agency and its processes. Procedural justice is “fairness in processes that resolve disputes and result in decisions. Research has shown that if people perceive a process to be



fair, they will be more likely to comply with the outcome of that process whether or not the outcome was favorable to them”¹⁴ (#1) (#3) (#4)

- **Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration (STED)**: is evaluating the effectiveness of the latest generation of subsidized and transitional employment approaches for populations with low income. In two sites, the demonstration includes noncustodial parents and examines the impacts on child support payments. STED also includes an evaluation of the Paycheck Plus Demonstration in Atlanta, which provides a more generous refundable tax credit to eligible workers without dependent children, compared to the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). (#1) (#2)
- **Using Digital Marketing to Increase Participation in the Child Support Program**: is a demonstration testing digital marketing approaches and partnerships to reach parents that could benefit from child support services and to create or improve two-way digital communication and engagement with parents. (#3)

Future Directions for Research and Evaluation

The broad questions listed above will continue to drive much of ACF’s research and evaluation activity in this area. Future activities will also be informed by emerging findings from ongoing research and evaluation activities, other learning activities, and continued engagement with child support stakeholders. Responses to the recent Request for Information in the Federal Register on innovative approaches and knowledge gaps related to enhancing nonresident parents’ ability to support their children economically and emotionally are also expected to inform future learning efforts.

Examples of activities planned for the next few years include:

- Analyzing implementation, impact, and benefit-cost data from the PJAC Demonstration
- Supporting grantee-led evaluations of digital marketing campaigns and innovations in intergovernmental case processing
- Collecting information on how the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery affect PJAC programs, service delivery, and the noncustodial parents enrolled in the study
- Supporting grantee-led implementation and evaluations of interventions to educate teens and young adults about the financial, legal, and emotional responsibilities of parenthood

¹⁴ Swaner, R., Ramdath, C., Martinez, A., Hahn, J., & Walker, S. (2018). *What Do Defendants Really Think? Procedural Justice and Legitimacy in the Criminal Justice System*. New York: Center for Court Innovation. https://www.courtinnovation.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2018-09/what_do_defendants_really_think.pdf

