

Family Support Issue Brief

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An Examination of the Use and Effectiveness of Child Support Enforcement Tools in Six States

Child support programs use various strategies called “enforcement tools” to collect critical monetary support for custodial families from noncustodial parents. The enforcement of child support is intended to encourage parental responsibility so that children receive financial, emotional, and medical support from both parents, even when they live in separate households. In 2018, the child support program collected \$27.4 billion from noncustodial parents on behalf of 14.7 million children. As of 2017, the child support program was the third largest public program that serves children in the United States, behind Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Office of Child Support Enforcement [OCSE] 2017).¹ The collection rate for current and past-due support in 2018 was around 65 percent nationwide, however, indicating that in nearly 35 percent of cases, noncustodial parents do not make child support payments.

Highlights

- Among the study states, there is no clear relationship between how states use enforcement tools and their child support collection rates.
- States reported that automatic income withholding and tax refund intercepts are the most effective tools for collecting child support.
- States reported that the effectiveness of enforcement tools is determined largely by noncustodial parents’ willingness and ability to pay child support.
- States value employment services as a way to increase ability to pay, but these services require other sources of funding and are costly to sustain.
- Administrative procedures and automated data systems can improve the efficiency of enforcement practice.
- Predictive analytics shows promise for improving the effectiveness of enforcement tools.

The purpose of this study is to learn about the variation in how states and localities implement enforcement tools (referred throughout as enforcement practice), examine the extent to which enforcement practice varies systematically across states that have different collection rates, and examine differences in the perceived effectiveness of enforcement tools for different noncustodial parent populations. Data for this study are qualitative and cover practices in six states. The study is limited in that it does not examine child support administrative data or other quantitative data sources. Future work should expand on this qualitative exploration and examine quantitative data sources.

We begin with a brief history of child support enforcement, followed by a description of findings from interviews with representatives from six state child support agencies and national policy experts. These interviews focused on the variation in and perceived effectiveness of enforcement practices. We conclude with a discussion of next steps for continuing to improve child support collection rates.

How we got here: A brief history of child support enforcement

Before 1974, child support fell strictly under the purview of states. During this period, enforcement practices varied greatly. The establishment of the federal Child Support Enforcement program in 1975 gave the federal government a number of responsibilities related to setting standards for program operations and oversight, whereas the states were responsible for operating the program. The primary purpose of the child support program in 1975 was to recover government costs of providing public assistance to custodial families and help custodial families become self-sufficient. Over time, Congress expanded the scope and strength of the child support program. Figure 1 shows a history of key legislation from 1975 to 1996. Table 1 describes commonly used enforcement tools enacted during this period.

In 1988, nine child support agencies participated in a federal demonstration, providing employment and training services, peer support groups, mediation services, and modified child support services

to noncustodial parents, as part of the Family Support Act (Miller & Knox, 2001). This demonstration project led to more research that examined the needs of noncustodial parents as well as the role of the child support program in noncustodial parents' employment decisions and their engagement with their children (Garfinkel, McLanahan, Meyer, & Seltzer, 1998; Bartfeld & Meyer, 1994; Mincy & Sorensen, 1998). In turn, policymakers examined how to use child support policies to foster and encourage noncustodial parents' employment, engage them in child support services, and improve their parent-child relationships. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 encouraged the establishment of parenting time orders when child support orders are established so that never-married noncustodial parents can simultaneously address issues related to spending time with their children, as is done for divorcing couples. In 2016, the Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization in Child Support Enforcement Program's final rule required state child support agencies to set accurate child support obligations based on the noncustodial parent's ability to pay. To reduce the rate of incarceration from inability to pay, the final rule also required

Figure 1. Key legislation from 1975 through 1996

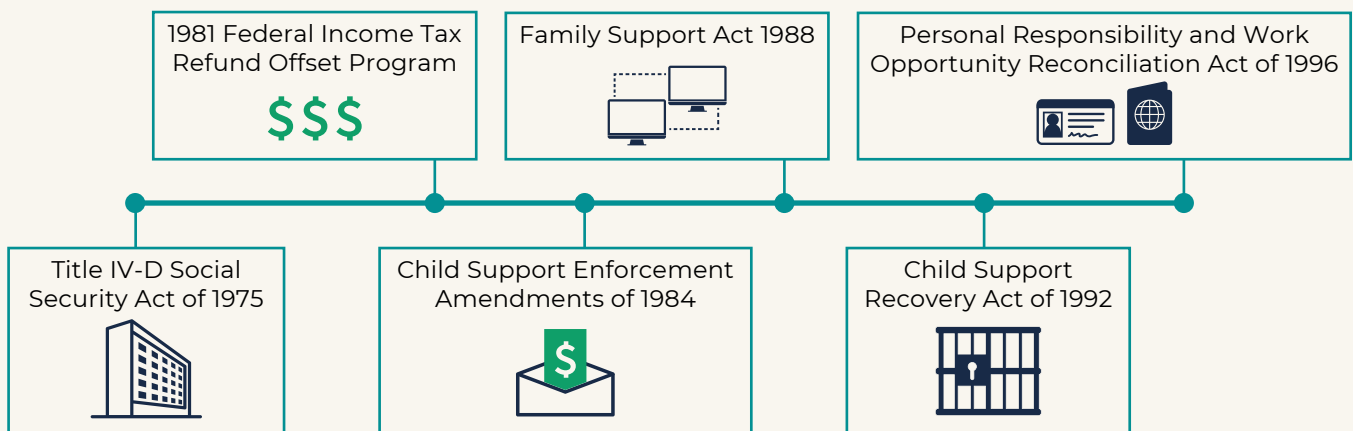


Table 1. Common child support enforcement tools

| CSE Tool | Description | Federally mandated or state option |
|--|--|------------------------------------|
| Automatic income withholding | Automatic deduction of current support order from noncustodial parent wages and earnings. | Federally mandated |
| Tax refund offset | Collection of past-due child support from interception of noncustodial parent state or federal income tax refunds. | Federally mandated |
| License suspension ^a | Suspension of drivers, occupational, or recreational licenses. | Federally mandated |
| Seizure of assets and benefits | Seizure of property or assets to pay for past-due child support. To facilitate this enforcement tool, states are required to share data with financial institutions to support the issuing of liens or levies on property and assets. States can also withhold payments from state benefits such as unemployment benefits. | Federally mandated |
| Credit bureau reporting | Reporting to credit agencies of noncustodial parents who are delinquent on child support payments. | Federally mandated |
| Insurance match | Comparison of information about parents who owe past-due child support with information maintained from insurers (or their agents) about insurance claims, settlements, awards, and payments to collect past-due support from parents who may be eligible for lump sum or other insurance payouts. | Federally mandated |
| Passport denial | Denial of passport applications if child support is owed. | Federally mandated |
| Civil contempt ^b | When a noncustodial parent fails to pay court-ordered child support, he or she may be charged with civil-contempt of court. Findings of contempt of court may lead to incarceration or participation in work-oriented programs. | Federally mandated |
| Lottery Intercept | Interception of lottery winnings or other casino winnings to pay child support. | State option |
| Interest on arrears | Interest charged on unpaid child support at the rate determined by state statute. | State option |
| Publication of delinquent noncustodial parents | Publicly available data that list noncustodial parents who are delinquent in child support payments. | State option |
| Employment services ^c | Programs developed to address the employment needs of noncustodial parents to increase their capacity to pay child support. These programs may include parenting education components to cultivate the noncustodial parents' willingness to pay support | State option |

^a States have the option to deny vehicle registration renewals.

^b All states have processes for making criminal nonsupport a felony or misdemeanor. This option is rarely employed by states.

^c Federal matching funds through Title IV-D may not be used to provide direct employment services. However, state child support agencies may use Section 1115 waivers or incentive payments to provide employment programs for noncustodial parents. Child support agencies are also encouraged to partner with TANF-funded programs to provide employment services to noncustodial parents (OCSE, 2018; OCSE, 2019; Office of Family Assistance [OFA], 2018).


agencies to establish criteria for using civil contempt proceedings based on the noncustodial parents ability to pay. Finally, OCSE has recently invested in several innovation grants designed to engage and support noncustodial parents in the child support program; three of the grants are the Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services Demonstration Program, the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt, and the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration Program.

In the next section, we describe enforcement tool practice in six states. The experiences of these states shed light on how implementation practices may vary across states with different program structures and context. We also discuss how states view the effectiveness of enforcement tools.

The use of enforcement tools today: The experience of six states

We identified six states that varied on several key program characteristics: Delaware, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, North Dakota, and South Carolina (Figure 2). Using this variation in program characteristics and enforcement practice, we explored the extent to which state characteristics and practices are related to higher or lower current and arrearage collection rates. For instance, we sought to understand whether states that use administrative procedures for enforcing child support tend to have collection rates above or below the national average. We asked the states about all enforcement tools except for criminal and civil contempt proceedings because the latter were beyond the scope of this study.

Figure 2. Study state characteristics



| | Delaware | Indiana | Iowa | Mississippi | North Dakota | South Carolina | National |
|---|-----------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------------------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| Caseload size | 77,759 | 272,789 | 167,846 | 291,717 | 37,380 | 194,451 | 14,228,533 |
| Child support process^a | Judicial | Judicial | Administrative | Judicial | Judicial | Administrative | — |
| Program structure^b | State run | County operated | State run | State run; operated by vendor | State run | State run | — |
| Current support collections rates | 60.1 | 65.3 | 73.6 | 53.6 | 72.8 | 54.9 | 65.43 |
| Arrearages collections rates^c | 54.8 | 73.3 | 70.3 | 58.1 | 65.1 | 62.3 | 64.11 |

^a The use of administrative or judicial procedures to establish and enforce child support orders.

^b State-level administration and operation of the program or state-level administration and county-level operation of the program.

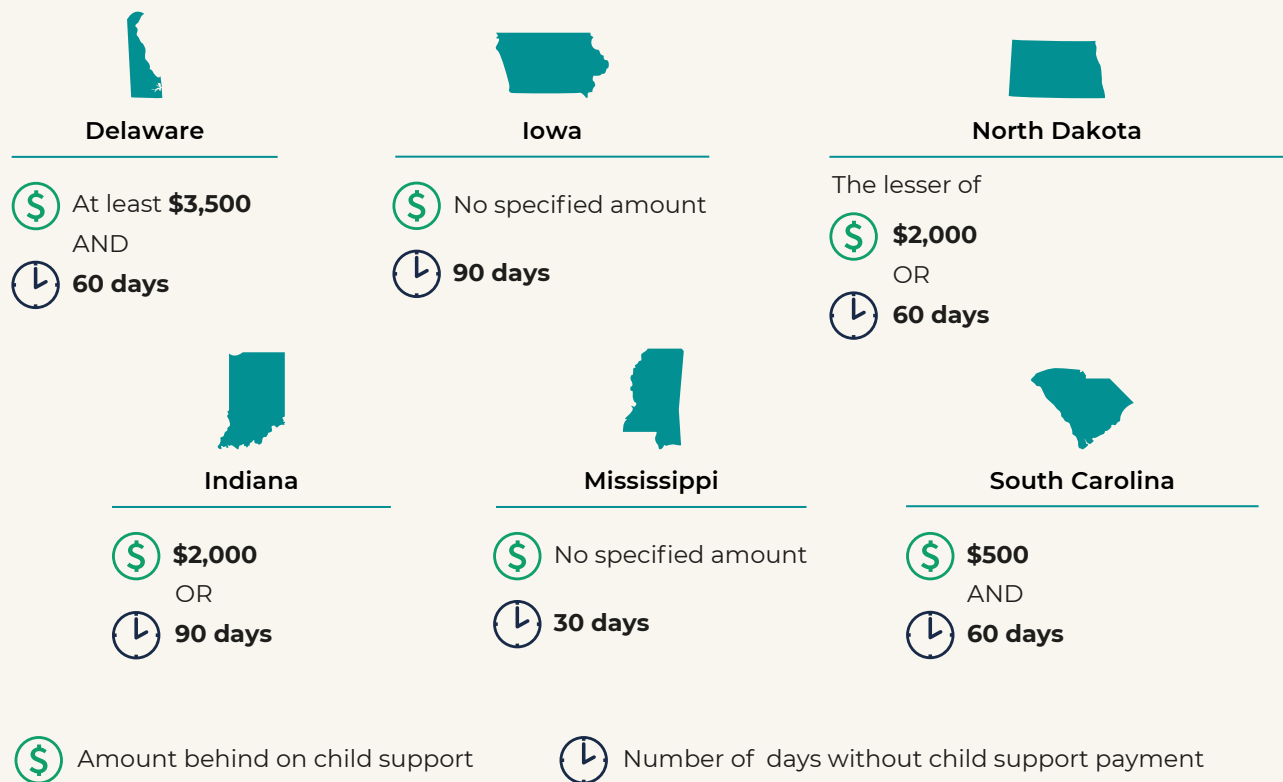
^c Arrearages are past-due child support payments.

All study states use the federally mandated enforcement tools. Among the state-option tools, three states use lottery intercepts, and one state publishes the names of delinquent noncustodial parents. Other enforcement actions reported by the study states include suspending a motor vehicle title and registration and waiving interest on arrears. All of the study states described partnerships to refer noncustodial parents to employment programs. Although these employment programs are not funded with Title IV-D federal matching funds, they may be funded by child support incentive payments or other sources, including TANF funds. The number of people served by these programs varies depending on program availability and the overall size of the caseload. Half of the study states have services available to noncustodial parents throughout the state, and in the other half of states programs are located only in specific counties. These employment-focused programs frequently include a

parenting education component that aims to improve the noncustodial parents' relationships with their children in addition to helping them find a job.

Beyond some differences in the tools states use, there are also differences as to when the tools go into effect—for some tools, this is determined by the federal government, and for other tools, the states determine this. For example, the federal government requires that once a noncustodial parent is \$500 past due in his or her support for non-assistance cases (\$150 for assistance cases),² the federal tax refund intercept goes into effect. The federal government also sets a threshold of \$2,500 of past-due support for passport denials. These two federal thresholds are the same for all states. Differences emerge when states have the flexibility to set their own thresholds for when a tool goes into effect. For example, Figure 3 shows the study states' thresholds for when a license may be suspended.

Figure 3. State-by-state comparison of eligibility criteria for license suspension



Exploring variation in enforcement practice

Central to this study is the question of how enforcement practice varies across states. The following five areas of variation emerged through our conversations: (1) judicial versus administrative procedures, (2) the use of automated procedures, (3) the extent of caseworker discretion, (4) centralized versus county-level decision making, and (5) the model for case assignments.

States using administrative procedures allow caseworkers to initiate enforcement actions without approval from a judge. States using judicial procedures require judges to approve the initiation of enforcement actions.

- **Judicial versus administrative procedures.** When a case requires enforcement, states may use administrative or judicial procedures to initiate enforcement. Administrative procedures allow child support caseworkers to establish and enforce orders without approval from a judge. States that use judicial procedures require approval from a judge to establish and enforce orders. However, not all states that use judicial procedures to establish orders are required to engage with the courts for enforcement actions; they can implement many enforcement tools at the administrative level. For example, Delaware uses judicial procedures to establish and enforce orders; however, the state uses administrative procedures for license suspension, tax refund intercepts, benefits intercepts, and lottery winnings offsets. Additionally, all states go through the court system if they are charging a noncustodial parent with criminal nonsupport or civil contempt of court. Therefore, although state procedures might be categorized as judicial or administrative, enforcement practice may not align perfectly with this categorization. Delaware and Indiana both report being “judicial” states, but they use administrative procedures for at least some enforcement tools.

- **The use of automated procedures.** Child support programs develop procedures for implementing enforcement actions. Programs can use their computer system to automate enforcement tools or they can use manual procedures. Manual procedures require program staff to identify cases appropriate for enforcement and to initiate enforcement tools. Programs can automate child support enforcement in two ways. First, computer systems can automatically notify noncustodial parents and caseworkers about the potential for enforcement through letters and alerts, but caseworkers must initiate the action after notification. Second, computer systems can initiate the use of enforcement tools by automatically sharing information with other systems, such as sending a request to a motor vehicle agency to suspend a license or sending a request to both the Internal Revenue Service and OCSE to intercept a tax refund.

All but one study state used automated procedures for some, if not all, of their enforcement tools. One state that does not have an updated computer system created an external tool that automates license suspensions statewide. Another state that recently implemented a state-of-the-art computer system described it as follows: “[It] hopefully allows employees to focus on the hard-to-enforce cases that need more attention while the system handles the normal day-to-day activities. We hope that employees are becoming stronger case processors as they shift their attention to the cases that are more difficult to enforce and collect from.”

- **Extent of caseworker discretion.** States rely on the discretion of caseworkers to initiate and suspend enforcement actions, particularly for tools that states feel are more severe. For example, in the case of license suspensions, three study states allow caseworkers to determine the appropriateness of license suspension for a given case and allow staff to agree upon a payment plan to avoid suspending licenses. These states use manual procedures for reviewing cases that meet the threshold for license suspension because, as one respondent noted, they view it as “an intense

remedy and want to allow for as much discretion as possible." Moreover, these states try not to suspend the licenses of noncustodial parents who have recently been released from incarceration because they "don't want to create additional obstacles to returning to society." The remaining three states automatically suspend licenses. In these states, caseworkers exercise discretion in reinstating licenses if the noncustodial parent is making a good faith effort to comply with the child support order, if the noncustodial parent is participating in a parenting program, or if the noncustodial parent can prove that he or she was unable to respond to the notice of suspension because of extenuating circumstances, such as incarceration or deployment.

- **Centralized versus county-level decision making.**

State-to-state differences in where decision-making authority rests (or originates) also create variation in enforcement practice. State child support programs that operate at the county level noted that enforcement practice varies substantially across counties. One state reported that standard implementation of enforcement tools statewide is challenging when there is extreme variation in local practice. In an effort to standardize practices, some states have centralized enforcement staff so that one set of staff is responsible for implementing enforcement tools across the entire state. One respondent reported that centralizing enforcement responsibilities made the child support program "more equitable in the application of the various tools." States have also focused on automating more enforcement tools to reduce county-to-county variation in practice.

- **The model for case assignments.** The way in which child support programs assign responsibilities to caseworkers also differs across states. There are generally two approaches to doing this. In one approach, one caseworker handles a case from opening through closure. This approach can be labor intensive, requiring caseworkers to understand all aspects of the child support program. It can also facilitate stronger parent-caseworker relationships over time. In the second approach,

programs segment the caseload based on job function or on case characteristics. The advantage of this approach is that a caseworker's specialized knowledge can lead to efficiencies in case processing. In a study state that assigns cases from opening through closure, respondents feel that this approach improves "continuity of relationships." Three study states segment their caseload by function. Two study states vary in caseload assignment approach by county, with staff from smaller counties working a case throughout the life of the case, given their small caseloads, and staff from larger counties segmenting the caseload by function. The remaining three states segment by function statewide. One state reported a 5 percent increase in establishing orders two years after it moved to segmenting by function. No study states segmented their caseloads by case type. For instance, no state assigned a specific set of staff to the "hard-to-work" cases in which noncustodial parents are chronically unemployed.

Although the variation described above might prompt questions about what is "best practice," we did not observe a clear relationship between enforcement practice and the collection of current or past-due support. That is, states that have collection rates above the national average used the same enforcement tools as states that have collection rates below the national average. Additionally, factors such as automated systems, caseworker discretion, centralized versus county-level decision making, or caseload segmentation do not appear related to whether a state has higher or lower collection rates. Among our study states, however, more states with current support-collection rates below the national average use judicial procedures, though states that use judicial procedures to initiate enforcement often use administrative procedures for implementing enforcement tools. Thus, there may be other factors related to the use of judicial procedures that influence compliance with child support. For example, using judicial procedures to modify orders can be a slower process than using administrative procedures to do the same. If noncustodial parents cannot modify their orders in a timely fashion, then

there may be lower rates of compliance with child support. Indeed, one state indicated that it might be able to see more individuals and establish more cases if it was not a judicial state.

Which tools are effective and for whom?

Although the variation in enforcement practice appears to be unrelated to state-level collection rates, it is still important to understand which enforcement tools are effective and the degree to which this effectiveness may vary by noncustodial parent characteristics. This understanding can inform (1) the allocation of limited program resources, (2) decision making that achieves the best programmatic outcomes, and (3) strategies that improve family and child well-being. To guide this exploration of which tools work best and for whom, we categorized enforcement tools by their purpose. The first category of tools is intended to collect support, which we refer to as “collection tools.” The second category is “compliance tools,” which are designed to motivate compliance by creating a disincentive to noncompliance. The third category is “capital-building tools,” which are strategies for providing holistic services that increase the chances for sustained compliance over time. The following discussion focuses on the effectiveness of different enforcement approaches and on how effectiveness varies across noncustodial parents.

Collection tools. Collection tools automatically collect current and past-due support, such as automatic income withholding and tax refund intercepts. Also included in this category is the seizure of assets and benefits, as well as intercepting lottery winnings. These tools require little interaction between the parent and the child support program, and collection of support occurs automatically from any available source of money.

The study states reported that the most effective enforcement tool for obtaining regular, current support payments is automatic income withholding. Respondents noted that 70 to 79 percent of collected child support comes from automatic income withholding. Respondents also reported that tax refund

intercepts are an effective enforcement tool, though they noted that it is only used to collect lump-sum, past-due payments. Two study states estimated that approximately 11 percent of their collections come in through tax refund intercepts. Respondents noted that income withholding is not an effective way to obtain child support from an unemployed noncustodial parent or from a noncustodial parent who is working “off the books.”



Collection tools

Automatic income withholding, tax refund intercepts



Compliance tools

License suspension, passport denials, credit bureau reporting



Capital-building tools

Employment programs

Compliance tools. Compliance tools are designed to motivate noncustodial parents to comply with child support by creating disincentives to noncompliance, including license suspension, passport denials, and credit bureau reporting. Such tools penalize the noncustodial parent for not paying, and they create “pain points” that should incentivize the noncustodial parent to become compliant with child support. However, respondents raised concerns as to whether some of these compliance tools create additional barriers to employment and thus reduce child support payments in the long term.

Estimating the effectiveness of these enforcement tools can be challenging for three reasons. First, it can be difficult to isolate the impacts of individual enforcement tools, as multiple tools can be in place at the same time. For instance, a noncustodial parent may have a suspended license and be reported to credit bureau agencies at the same time. Second,

enforcement actions may be coincidentally timed with another factor that may increase payments. For instance, a noncustodial parent may obtain a new job at the same time that he or she receives a notice of license suspension. It would be difficult to ascertain if payment were a result of new employment or because of receiving a notice of license suspension. Third, because of the timing of notification of enforcement actions, initiation of enforcement actions, and payment receipt, it can be hard to determine whether the notification about the potential of enforcement action or the initiation of enforcement actions causes a change in “payment behavior.”

Only one state provided estimates of child support collected from all license suspensions. In state fiscal year 2018, this state collected \$6.6 million from all license sanctions, representing 2 percent of their overall collections that year. Another state reported that in the six months after hunting license suspensions, they saw collections increase by 50 percent, although they could not provide an estimate of the amount of support collected. Study states reported that driver’s license suspensions are useful for encouraging unemployed and underemployed noncustodial parents to pay child support, as having a driver’s license is important for getting a job, whereas passport denials can motivate noncustodial parents who travel abroad. One state in which enforcement practice varies considerably across counties reported that the effectiveness of license suspensions varies by geographic area. The respondents in this state noted that in rural areas, license suspensions are more effective because in these communities “everyone knows if someone gets their license suspended and why,” but “in urban communities, many noncustodial parents may already have their licenses suspended for other reasons.” Despite challenges estimating the effectiveness of compliance tools, respondents described that payments in response to the use of compliance tools tend to be large, one-time payments and do not encourage regular current-support payments.

Capital-building tools. The study states noted that traditional, administrative enforcement tools might not address the underlying challenge of making

regular, complete child support payments. According to one respondent, “Enforcement tools are efficient and sufficient in our collection goals, but there are customers out there that need something different.” For noncustodial parents who face barriers to finding and keeping a job, practices include “right-sizing” orders (i.e., setting orders based on the noncustodial parent’s ability to pay), setting zero-dollar orders for incarcerated and recently released noncustodial parents, and making referrals to parenting and employment services to build a noncustodial parent’s social and human capital. These practices can also be effective at encouraging longer-term compliance with child support.

Assessing the effectiveness of capital-building tools in the study states is largely anecdotal at this time, as many of these policies and programs are new, and some are not funded through federal child support funding. However, one state that participated in a national evaluation of employment and fatherhood services for noncustodial parents reported collecting three times as many arrears payments than it had usually collected when it established relationships with noncustodial parents and offered employment programming. Another study state with a statewide employment program targeted to noncustodial parents finds that, for program participants, the child support paid increased by 43 percent, and the frequency of payments rose by 32 percent (Peterson, Gee, & Fleming, 2019). The states spoke highly of these programs, acknowledging that they meet the needs of noncustodial parents and help them to pay their child support more fully and more regularly. However, states also reported that the need for alternative funding sources and the high cost of these programs make them difficult to sustain.

Noncustodial parent characteristics

Respondents reported that enforcement approaches may be more or less effective depending on the noncustodial parent’s ability and willingness to pay. One policy expert noted, “If you think that [noncustodial parents], who are not paying, are unable to pay, you start from a very different place than if you assume that they just don’t want to pay, and start sending letters and suspending their permits and licenses.”

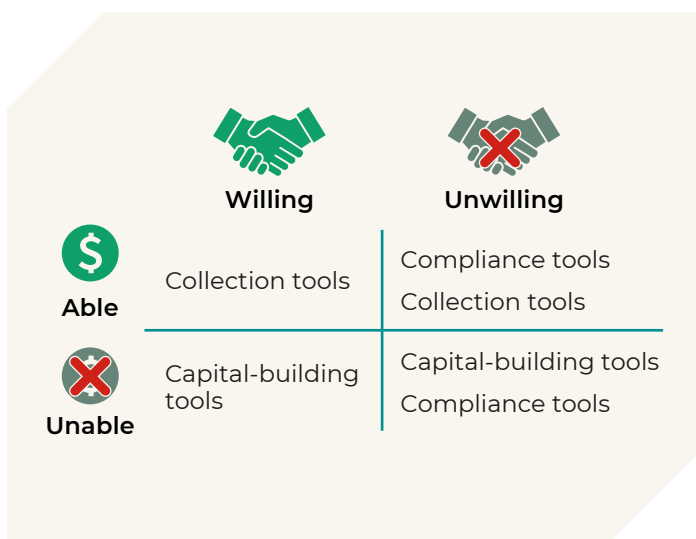
Indeed, some noncustodial parents are willing and able to pay child support, and the use of collection tools with this population is likely to be most effective, as these tools automatically collect current and past-due child support. Another expert stated, "Most noncustodial parents like income withholding because they do not have to write a separate check and worry about making payments on time every month." However, this expert also noted that "enforcement is wholly ineffective for noncustodial parents who have no ability to pay, which is about 30 to 40 percent of noncustodial parents in the child support system. 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 these willing but unable noncustodial parents, capital-building tools such as participating in employment programs are likely to be most effective. Noncustodial parents who are able but unwilling to pay are likely to be motivated to comply with child support by compliance tools. Noncustodial parents who are unwilling and unable may need a multipronged enforcement approach in which compliance tools are used to encourage them to cooperate with child support, and capital-building tools are used to expand their capacity to pay child support.

The study states indicated that caseworkers are encouraged to consider the ability and willingness to pay child support when determining when

enforcement actions are necessary. One state respondent reported, "Workers have discretion and will look into a case to see if the noncustodial parent has the ability to pay." Another state respondent said, "The caseworker has the discretion to decide whether to move forward once the system flags a case for potential license suspension. The caseworker looks to see if there is some explanation about the willfulness of not paying." Moreover, several states reported that workers are able to lift enforcement tools if a noncustodial parent is actively looking for work or making a good faith effort to comply with the child support program. This consideration of the ability and willingness to pay represents a cultural shift from an enforcement-focused child support program to a program that takes a more holistic approach to serving a family.

Looking toward the future: Achieving higher rates of compliance with child support

Understanding the effectiveness of enforcement tools for collecting child support payments, including which tools are effective for which populations, is critical to the ability of the child support programs to improve the economic well-being of children and families. However, according to the 2018 Preliminary Data Report (OCSE, 2019), the average rate of current support collections across the country was 65 percent, indicating room for child support programs to improve their success at collecting child support. This study begins to explore the question of enforcement tool effectiveness by selecting a small number of states that represent variation in child support program and policy contexts. However, due to the small sample size and qualitative nature of the data, this study is limited in its ability to provide policymakers the data needed to develop enforcement policies that will increase collections and lift more families out of poverty. With state administrative data, future studies should examine the frequency of enforcement tool use, child support collections, payment behavior, and noncustodial parent employment characteristics.



Future Key Research Questions

- How does the effectiveness of enforcement tools vary by the employment status of noncustodial parents?
- How does the effectiveness of enforcement tools vary by the amount of child support owed?
- Which enforcement tools are most the cost-effective?
- To what extent does the unemployment rate influence the effectiveness of enforcement tools?
- Do states that segment their caseload by type of case have higher or lower collection rates than states that segment their caseload by task?

In the absence of studies on the effectiveness of traditional enforcement tools, OCSE has funded program improvement projects that encourage the development of alternative strategies for improving compliance with child support, including the use of behavioral interventions, the provision of employment and fatherhood services, alternatives to contempt, and the enhanced use of parenting time orders. The Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration evaluation, a study examining the impacts of providing enhanced child support services, employment services, and parenting services to noncustodial parents, found no impacts on child support compliance one year after enrollment but increased satisfaction with the child support program, likelihood of getting a job, and higher earnings (Cancian, Meyer, & Wood, 2019). More information is needed on the longer-term impacts of this program and other similar ones. Moreover, these projects do not isolate and study the effectiveness of traditional enforcement tools or how the use of such tools can be improved.

At the state-level, there have been recent efforts to increase program efficiency and performance, leading to the application of predictive analytics to the child support world. For example, state programs can use predictive analytic models to identify which noncustodial parents will be most likely to require enforcement actions. These models can also be used to determine how likely a noncustodial parent with a particular set of characteristics will be to pay child support, given the application of certain enforcement tools. None of the states featured in this study report using predictive analytics at the time of this study, but one state reported that it is building a tracking system that will include some predictive analytic capabilities. Another state reported that it has a data warehouse that allows for data analysis but not formal predictive analytics.

Predictive analytics is the use of historical data to predict the likelihood of an event.

Two child support agencies beyond the sample for this study—one in Pennsylvania and the other in Orange County, California—have had recent success using predictive analytics to improve child support collections. Their models have enhanced the efficiency of programs in their respective locations and have helped caseworkers to make decisions about how to serve noncustodial parents (Knell, 2012; Eldred & Takayesu, 2013). To identify key predictive variables, future work on building predictive models should also consider collecting data from noncustodial parents on the factors that were central to their payment behavior. Although predictive analytics requires a significant initial investment to analyze existing data and build the models, the potential payoff is high.

Though predictive analytics has notable advantages, child support programs should not view the use of predictive analytics as a panacea and should continue to value caseworker experience (Coco, 2019). Furthermore, for states with limited ability to build predictive models in the near term, developing approaches to segment caseloads by case type (hard-to-work cases, for example), offer another promising strategy, which capitalizes on caseworker experience. For example, in a study of case segmentation in Washington, the likelihood of collections, the number of months of collections, and actual payments increased among noncustodial parents assigned to receive services from a dedicated unit that focused on cases with state-owed arrears (Plotnick, Glosser, Moore, & Obara, 2015). Additionally, future work should include independent ethical reviews, transparency, and regular community engagement.

Critically examining the extent to which enforcement practice is effective and for whom is a key step in ensuring that the child support program continues to serve families effectively. This is particularly important, given the changing landscape of family dynamics, population demographics, and economic conditions. We found that despite the variation in practice across states, the differences do not appear related to current or past-due support collection rates. However, policymakers and stakeholders need more research on the effectiveness of enforcement tools, primarily through an examination of case-level data. As states update their data systems, they should consider tracking and reporting on the initiation, duration, and support collections for each enforcement tool. These enhancements to data systems increase the possibility of being able to analyze administrative data to answer the key question of enforcement effectiveness across noncustodial parent sub-populations. In turn, programs will be able to better identify which tools are effective for which noncustodial parents, creating a more efficient allocation of program resources and improved program outcomes.

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Endnotes

¹ Unlike Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which provide government-funded benefits to families, child support facilitates the transfer of private funds from one individual to another.

² Assistance cases refer to those cases in which the custodial parent is receiving TANF or Medicaid. In these cases, the state and federal government keep a portion of the child support payment and a portion is passed through to the family. Nonassistance cases are those cases in which the custodial parent is not receiving TANF or Medicaid, allowing the family to keep all paid child support. For more information, visit <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/state-policy-pass-through-disregard-child-support.aspx>.

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