

Staff and Parent Perceptions of Fairness, Bias, and Disparities in Child Support



Farhana Hossain
and Kyla Wasserman
November 2024



This report was prepared as part of the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration and evaluation, funded by the Office of Child Support Services, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. MDRC and its subcontractors—MEF Associates and the Center for Justice Innovation—are under contract with the Georgia Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Services to evaluate the PJAC demonstration project.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following organizations and individuals that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Arnold Ventures, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JPB Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Sandler Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our website: www.mdrc.org.

Staff and Parent Perceptions of Fairness, Bias, and Disparities in Child Support

Farhana Hossain and Kyla Wasserman

November 2024

OVERVIEW

The child support program aims to secure financial support for children whose parents live apart. The program helps custodial parents (who live with their children) obtain financial support from noncustodial parents (who live outside the household) by establishing child support orders and collecting and distributing child support payments. Parents in the child support program who do not make their child support payments can be subject to enforcement measures, including civil contempt of court proceedings.

Research has found racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic differences in child support outcomes: Noncustodial parents of color and those with low incomes are more likely to fall behind on child support payments, accrue child support debt, and experience enforcement actions. This report presents an analysis of interviews with 34 child support program staff members and 21 noncustodial parents in Michigan and Virginia, focusing on how child support guidelines, policies, and practices may contribute to potential disparities in parents' experiences and outcomes in the program, and on where there is the potential for bias against parents with different characteristics. The study engaged a specific subset of parents who have long and complex child support trajectories, who have struggled to meet their obligations consistently, and who have been referred to court for civil contempt at least once for not paying child support. Findings include the following:

- Nearly all parents interviewed for this study said that they had experienced unfair treatment in the child support program. Their perception of unfair treatment stemmed from enforcement actions they considered overly punitive; difficulties they experienced in navigating the child support process and communicating with the program; order amounts that made it difficult to meet their own needs; and feelings of not being heard and not having a say in how decisions were made in their cases. Most felt that the child support program is biased against noncustodial parents and favors custodial parents, and these perceptions were often tied to fraught relationships between parents. Interviewees did not report experiencing racial bias in their interactions with child support agencies or caseworkers; about half of the parents believed that race played a role in how they were treated by the judicial system when their cases went to court.
- Unlike parents, child support staff members do not believe that the child support program is biased in favor of custodial parents and said that their focus is on making sure that children have the financial support they need to thrive. However, most acknowledged that support orders often do not reflect what parents with low incomes can truly pay after meeting their basic needs. A majority of the interviewees said that guidelines and practices related to order establishment may contribute to disparities between parents with low incomes and those who are more affluent, including lower payment compliance among the former parents and higher rates of experiencing enforcement actions. Most staff members do not believe that child support guidelines, policies, and practices contribute to gender, racial, or ethnic disparities in child support outcomes.

- Staff members identified various ways in which institutional capabilities and practices at child support agencies—such as case management structures, communication practices, caseload sizes, and the level of discretion available to caseworkers in decision-making—can lead to differences in parents’ experiences. While staff members said that there was a lot of variation in how different caseworkers engage with parents and how they use the discretion available to them to make enforcement decisions, most did not feel that bias played a role in how workers approached their cases or in any potential outcome disparities.
- Staff members acknowledged that parents with low incomes and parents of color often face structural barriers to employment and child support payment, particularly in obtaining quality jobs that pay well. Many said that parents with limited education and with involvement in the legal system faced difficulties in securing higher-wage, steady work. Some said that unstable housing and transportation problems, as well as physical and mental health challenges, affected parents’ ability to earn. But the majority simultaneously emphasized parents’ responsibility to overcome those barriers, and perceived unemployment or underemployment to be a matter of choice. They often categorized noncompliant parents into two types—those deserving or undeserving of leniency—based on individual assessments of parents’ willingness to communicate with the program, engage in employment or supportive services, take any jobs they could find no matter the pay or benefits, or make partial payments. They often used language that could be construed as biased against poor people, reinforcing stereotypes of noncustodial fathers who did not want to work, who did not want to help themselves, and who did not care for their children.
- While staff members and parents differed in their perceptions of fairness and bias in the child support program, the conversations revealed areas of consensus between the two groups on how the program could be fairer to parents. These areas included: setting orders to reflect parents’ ability to pay; better addressing fluctuations in parents’ incomes and circumstances when enforcing and modifying orders; reforming policies that make it difficult for parents to pay off child support debt, such as charging high interest rates; improving how the program communicates with parents and helps them navigate their cases; and providing parents employment and other services to help them address challenges to employment and nonpayment. Many staff members also emphasized the need for “early intervention,” or better communication practices and processes to help parents understand the child support program and their obligations early in their engagement with it, to potentially avoid nonpayment, debt accrual, and other challenges down the line.

A forthcoming quantitative analysis that complements this qualitative study will assess racial, ethnic, gender, and earnings-level disparities at different points in the child support process in Michigan and Virginia. Taken together, the findings from the qualitative and quantitative studies can offer insights into potential mechanisms to reduce disparities, where they exist.

CONTENTS

Overview	iii
List of Exhibits	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Chapter	
1 Introduction	1
Conceptual Framework	4
Research Questions	7
Data Sources and Methods	8
Roadmap to the Report	9
2 Programs and Sample Characteristics	11
Overview of Participating Programs	11
Staff Interviews	14
Parent Interviews	15
Limitations	17
3 Staff Perspectives on Disparities	19
Institutional Factors	20
Individual Discretion	25
Structural Factors	33

4	Parent Perspectives on Fairness and Bias	37
	Perceptions of Fairness	38
	Perceptions of Bias	43
5	Discussion	49
	Summary of Findings	49
	Putting Parent and Staff Recommendations in the Context of Evidence	54
	Looking Forward	57
	References	59
	Earlier MDRC Publications on PJAC	63



EXHIBITS

Figure

1.1	Core Child Support Functions	2
1.2	Conceptual Framework	5
2.1	At a Glance: Distribution of Child Support Functions	12
2.2	Snapshot of Parent Interviewees	16
3.1	Conceptual Framework	20

Box

1.1	Overview of the PJAC Demonstration	4
3.1	How Child Support Orders Are Determined	21
3.2	Staff Voices on Child Support Order Guidelines	23
3.3	Child Support Caseworkers on How Their Identity and Experiences Influence Their Approach	31

3.4	Employment and Supportive Services	35
4.1	Parent Voices: Economic Hardship and Ability to Pay Child Support	42
4.2	Parent Voices: Perceptions of Gender Bias in Child Support	45
4.3	Parent Voices: Perceptions of Racial Bias in Child Support	46
5.1	The Five Key Elements of Procedural Justice as Applied to the Child Support Context	54
5.2	Evidence from Employment Programs for Noncustodial Parents	56



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the support of many individuals and organizations. We thank staff members at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, for their helpful comments on previous drafts and their review of the study design, including Michael Hayes, Tanya Johnson, and Melody Morales at the Office of Child Support Services, and Megan Reid, Nicole Constance, and Elaine Sorensen at the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation.

We are grateful to several child support staff members in Michigan and Virginia for helping us coordinate outreach for staff interviews. They include Kim Kerns at the Michigan Office of Child Support; Amy Rebideaux and Tracy Bankhead at the Muskegon County Friend of the Court in Michigan; and Michelle Franco, Kimberly Lancaster, and Ashley Jester at the Virginia Division of Child Support Enforcement.

We want to acknowledge the contributions of many MDRC staff members, past and present, who made this report possible. Melanie Skemer served as an invaluable guide throughout the report process, supporting the research design, analysis planning, and writing. Danielle Cummings, Elizabeth Saldaña, and Louisa Treskon provided vital ideas and contributions to the research design and analysis framework. Jenny Hausler provided essential support in identifying parents who were eligible for interviews and tracking outreach. Raul Armenta, Jayce Helpley, Niko Leiva, and Elizabeth Saldaña provided valuable assistance with data collection and analysis.

This report benefited greatly from review by Danielle Cummings, Joshua Malbin, Melanie Skemer, and Louisa Treskon, who provided insightful comments. We thank Joshua Malbin, who edited the report; Ann Kottner, who designed it, formatted it, and prepared it for publication; Jayce Helpley, who fact-checked it; and Made-lyne Lynam, who coordinated its production.

Finally, we would like to extend our gratitude to the parents and child support staff members in Michigan and Virginia who shared their perspectives and experiences with us for this report. Their voices are invaluable to this study, and we are deeply appreciative of their contributions.

The Authors

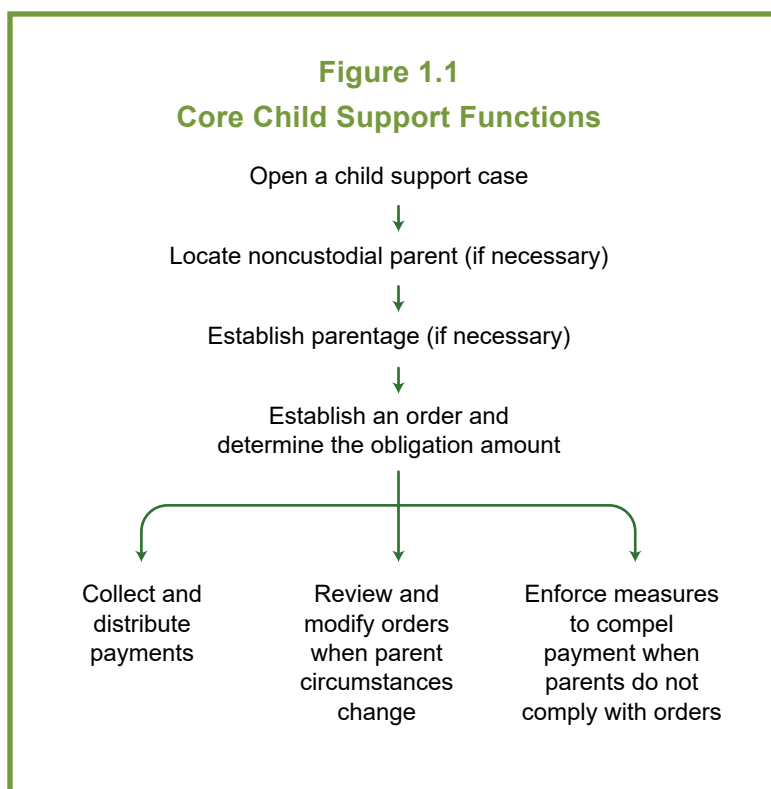
1 Introduction

The child support program aims to secure financial support for children whose parents live apart. The program helps custodial parents (who live with their children) obtain financial support from non-custodial parents (who live outside the household) by establishing child support orders and collecting and distributing child support payments.¹ Parents in the child support program who do not make their child support payments can be subject to enforcement measures such as interception of tax refunds, seizure of bank accounts, suspensions of driving or occupational licenses, civil contempt of court proceedings, and even jail time. (See Figure 1.1 for core child support program functions.)

In 2018, about half of all Black and over a quarter of Hispanic children in the United States lived with a custodial parent and had a noncustodial parent who lived outside the household, com-

¹ A variety of coparenting and custody relationships exist among parents who live apart. In the child support context, the custodial parent has primary physical custody of the child, meaning the child resides in the same household as the parent most of the time. The noncustodial parent does not reside with the child most of the time but may have allowance for visitation or parenting time (where the parent spends some time with the child). Noncustodial parents may or may not have child support orders. This report focuses on noncustodial parents who have child support orders, and unless specifically noted, all mentions of parents refer to noncustodial parents who are ordered to pay child support.

Figure 1.1
Core Child Support Functions



pared with about 20 percent of White children.² Among children in families who receive services from the child support program, over 80 percent live with their unmarried mothers, and a majority live in poverty or near poverty.³ The child support literature also describes racial and ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic differences in child support receipt and debt: Compared with White custodial parents, Black and Hispanic custodial parents are more likely to be without child support orders and receive a smaller share of the support they are due when they do have an order.⁴ And noncustodial parents of color and those with low incomes are more

likely to fall behind on child support payments, accrue child support debt, and experience enforcement actions.⁵ One study found that parents with less than \$10,000 in annual earnings owed 70 percent of all child support debt.⁶

Research suggests that these differences in child support participation and outcomes have been shaped by various historical and structural factors inside and outside the child support program.⁷ For example, decades-long economic changes have reduced the number of well-paying jobs for workers without a postsecondary credential, particularly among men.⁸ These changes, combined with systemic racial disparities in hiring, wages, and law enforcement, have made it more difficult for non-White parents with limited educations to earn enough consistently to support themselves and meet their child support obligations.⁹

² Grall (2020).

³ Sorensen (2021).

⁴ Grall (2020).

⁵ Grall (2020); McDaniel, Woods, Pratt, and Simms (2017); Kim, Liptrot-Ploch, and Meyer (2024).

⁶ Sorensen, Sousa, and Schaner (2007).

⁷ Kim, Liptrot-Ploch, and Meyer (2024); Berger et al. (2021).

⁸ Binder and Bound (2019).

⁹ Quillian, Pager, Hexel, and Midtbøen (2017); Quillian and Lee (2024); Wilson and Darity (2022); Ghandnoosh and Barry (2023); Office of Child Support Services (2024).

Child support guidelines, policies and practices can exacerbate these challenges by setting orders above a parent’s actual ability to pay and by taking enforcement measures that may create additional barriers to payment, such as jail time. Studies have consistently found that the main reason for nonpayment of child support is inability to pay the order amount. But policies and practices that are perceived to be overly complicated and punitive also affect noncustodial parents’ compliance with the program.¹⁰ For example, research suggests that having to navigate a complex process to modify order amounts when circumstances change or being ordered to pay child support to offset the cost of public benefits paid to custodial parents may lead to lower cooperation with the program and lower payments.¹¹ In addition, qualitative studies have documented that noncustodial parents—most of whom are fathers—feel unfairly stigmatized as bad parents or “deadbeat dads,” which contributes to their negative view of the child support program.¹²

Robust research is lacking on whether there is unequal treatment of different groups in the child support program and how much that unequal treatment may contribute to disparities in child support outcomes based on race, ethnicity, gender, and earnings. This report presents an analysis of interviews with child support program staff members and noncustodial parents in Michigan and Virginia, focusing on how child support guidelines, policies, and practices may lead to potential disparities in parent experiences and outcomes in the program, and on where there is the potential for differential treatment due to bias against parents with different characteristics.¹³ Specifically, it seeks to explore the potential for bias and disparities within the child support program from the perspective of parents and staff members and how that potential relates to their perception of the program’s fairness.

This qualitative study complements a separate, quantitative analysis of disparities in child support processes and outcomes, as well as potential factors contributing to those disparities. Together, these analyses aim to identify whether disparities exist within the child support program and, if they do, to explore the underlying factors contributing to those disparities so they can be addressed and remedied—making child support a more equitable program where parents’ race, gender, and income have no influence on their outcomes.

The study was conducted with funding from the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) and is a supplemental project of the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration.¹⁴ (Box 1.1 provides more information about PJAC and its relationship to this study.)

¹⁰ Cancian, Kim, and Meyer (2021); Berger et al. (2021).

¹¹ Berger et al. (2021). When custodial parents and their children receive public assistance—for example, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families—those parents must assign their right to receive support to the state and must cooperate with child support order-establishment and enforcement efforts. When a state collects child support for a parent receiving public assistance, it can keep the money to reimburse itself and the federal government. States also have the option to pass through some of the child support payments to the custodial parent and child without owing the federal government its share of child support payments. See National Conference of State Legislatures (2023).

¹² Landers (2021); Battle (2018, 2019); Vogel (2020a, 2020b).

¹³ Child support outcomes include outcomes related to order establishment and amounts, order modifications, payment compliance, debt accrual, and enforcement actions, including contempt referrals.

¹⁴ At its inception in 1975, the Child Support Enforcement program’s primary purpose was to recover the cost of cash assistance given to single parents who, in theory, would not have needed public assistance if they were part of a

BOX 1.1 Overview of the PJAC Demonstration

Developed by OCSS, the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration project integrated principles of procedural justice (the idea of fairness in processes) into enforcement practices in six child support agencies across the United States as an alternative to standard contempt proceedings.

Child support programs can refer nonpaying parents to the legal system for civil contempt of court. Parents eligible for contempt generally have not paid their support obligations in several months and have experienced other enforcement actions compelling them to pay. If parents do not begin making child support payments following a contempt filing, they may face legal repercussions, including continued court action and jail time.

PJAC services aimed to address noncustodial parents' reasons for nonpayment, promote their positive engagement with the child support program and the other parent, and improve the consistency and completeness of their payments. In the demonstration, parents who had reached the point of contempt referral were randomly assigned to one of two research groups:

- The PJAC services group, who were offered PJAC services as an alternative to contempt referral
- The business-as-usual group, who were not offered PJAC services and proceeded with the standard contempt process

Relationship of this Report to PJAC

This study recruited noncustodial parents and child support program staff members associated with two agencies that participated in the PJAC demonstration: the Michigan Office of Child Support (Muskegon County office) and the Virginia Division of Child Support Enforcement (Richmond and Newport News district offices). Researchers recruited parents from PJAC's business-as-usual group, who had more traditional or typical experiences with the child support program than those who received PJAC services. This group's extensive experiences with child support enforcement, including a high likelihood of participation in civil contempt proceedings, made them well suited to offer perspectives on enforcement, and on services such as order establishment and modification.

Conceptual Framework

As noted above, various factors inside and outside the child support program can affect parents' experiences in the program and may contribute to differences in outcomes for parents with different characteristics. These factors can include structural ones outside the program; institutional ones related to the child support program; and practices by individuals who implement child support guidelines and policies and make decisions about cases (as illustrated in Figure 1.2).

two-parent household. The public child support program has expanded into a multifaceted program that, while still pursuing public-assistance cost recovery, provides a variety of services and promotes self-sufficiency and parental responsibility. To reflect these shifting priorities, the federal agency that oversees the national child support program changed its name from the Office of Child Support Enforcement to the Office of Child Support Services in 2023. See Tollestrup (2024).

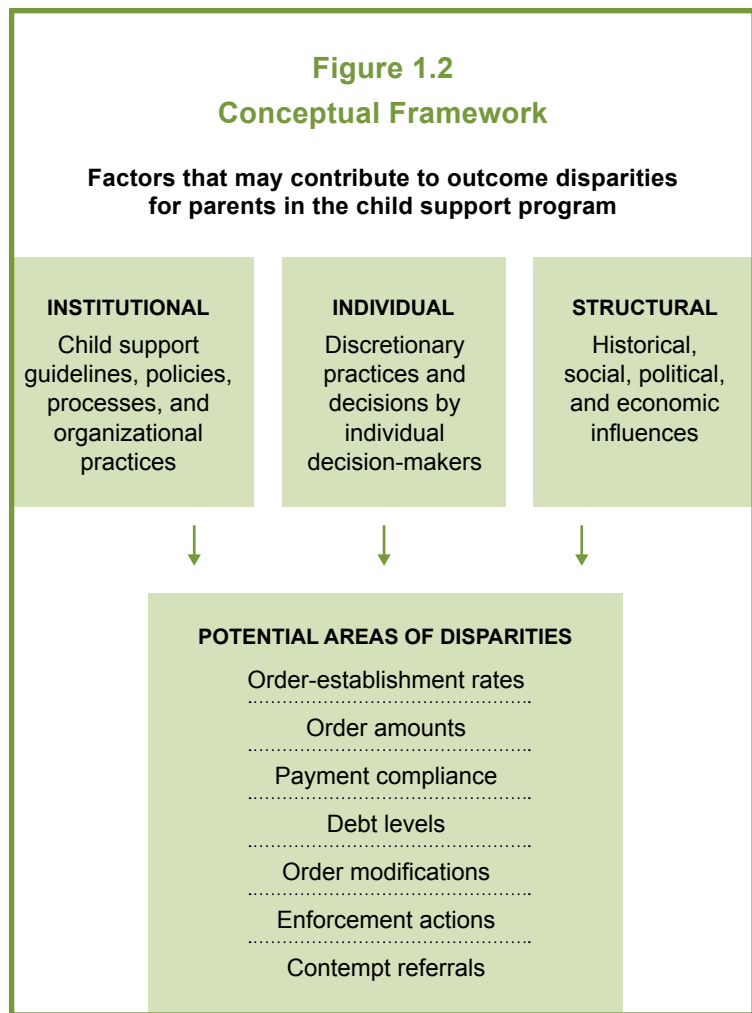


➤ **STRUCTURAL factors** are the “large-scale historical, social, political, and economic factors that shape disparities in society.”¹⁵ Research shows that barriers to child support payment for non-custodial parents include limited education, limited employment opportunities, low wages, physical and mental health challenges, housing and transportation insecurity, and legal system involvement.¹⁶ Structural factors that disproportionately affect people of color and low-income people may have contributed to those barriers. For example:

- Shifts in the labor market, including a loss of manufacturing jobs and the decline of unions, have made it much more difficult for people with limited education to earn a living wage to support families.¹⁷
- Tough sentencing laws dramatically increased incarceration rates, and formerly incarcerated individuals face discrimination in hiring and housing, and restrictions on occupational licenses and certain types of jobs.¹⁸

These and many other structural factors make it harder for some individuals and families to thrive than others, and differential experiences and outcomes in the child support system may reflect those inequities.

➤ **INSTITUTIONAL factors** refer to guidelines, policies, processes, and organizational practices that shape the experiences and outcomes of parents in the child support program. While federal policies dictate core aspects of how child support orders are established, mod-



¹⁵ Fiske et al. (2002, p. 2); Farmer (2004).

¹⁶ Vogel (2019); Berger et al. (2021).

¹⁷ Binder and Bound (2019).

¹⁸ Sibilla (2020); Lartey (2023); Western and Sirois (2017); Lake (2021); Cullen (2018).

ified, and enforced, states and localities have considerable flexibility in making decisions regarding their implementation. For example, each state has child support guidelines to determine the amount a noncustodial parent should pay. These guidelines are designed for consistency of implementation across localities and staff members, to reduce bias, and to improve fairness. States use the same formula for every child support case, and there is generally no room for child support workers to adjust order amounts (although judges can often deviate from guidelines).¹⁹

While child support guidelines aim to be fair and neutral, parents with low incomes often pay a larger share of their income compared with parents who have moderate or higher incomes.²⁰ One study found that parents in the Maryland child support caseload who earned a \$50,000 median income were ordered to pay 14 percent of their earnings as child support, while parents earning a \$6,000 median income were ordered to pay 61 percent of their income.²¹ In addition to guidelines and policies, processes and practices at child support agencies and family courts that guide the implementation of those policies can also lead to different experiences and outcomes. For example, parents with low literacy levels and limited resources may find it difficult to navigate complex processes and interpret written communication from child support, affecting their communication with the program.²²

- **INDIVIDUAL discretion** can lead to variations in practices that can influence parent experiences in the child support program. Research has found that the discretion of individual actors in systems is associated with disparate treatment and outcomes across identity groups in the labor market, in housing, and in the criminal legal system.²³ But there is little research on how the level of discretion allowed and exercised among child support actors may affect outcomes for parents.
- Individuals who make decisions on child support cases include:
 - **Workers in state and local child support agencies**, such as state and local agency leaders, caseworkers, and managers who supervise (and often train) caseworkers. These staff members have varying levels of discretion and authority to make decisions about child support cases, depending on the structure of state and local programs, their use of automated processes to communicate with parents and to initiate different types of enforcement actions, and their relationships to the judicial system.²⁴ For example, most child support programs automatically report delinquent payments to credit bureaus and intercept tax refunds, but caseworkers can deploy some enforcement actions at their discretion, such as seizing bank accounts or placing liens on assets. Discretionary

¹⁹ Tollestrup (2024).

²⁰ Landers (2021).

²¹ Demyan and Passarella (2018).

²² Farrell, Anzelone, Cullinan, and Wille (2014).

²³ Glaser (2024); Kutateladze and Andiloro (2014); Pager and Shepherd (2010).

²⁴ Selekmán and Johnson (2019).



actions can leave room for individual biases, implicit or explicit, to influence caseworkers' enforcement and service decisions.

- **Individuals in the judicial system, such as judges and prosecutors.** Family courts play a vital role in the child support process, and the extent of their involvement with state and local child support agencies varies widely. States may use a judicial or administrative process, or a combination of both, to establish, modify, and enforce child support orders. Administrative procedures generally allow workers in child support agencies to have more discretion and authority to make decisions about cases, while judicial procedures require judges to make or approve decisions.²⁵ How court actors use the discretion allotted to them may greatly affect parent experiences and outcomes.
- For this study, the research team focused on understanding how staff members at child support agencies use their discretion, and not those in the judicial system.

Research Questions

In this context and using this framework, this study sought to gain information on individual child support workers' discretion, the institutional factors that influence their decisions, and the ways those decisions affect parent experiences in the program. Specifically, the data collection focused on capturing program staff and parent perspectives on the extent to which bias can play a role in staff decision-making, in terms of staff members' conscious or unconscious preference for a certain group or certain characteristics (as such preferences could influence their actions on cases and create room for outcome disparities for different groups of parents). The study also explored how staff members' and parents' experiences are connected to how fair they believe the program to be. This report addresses the following research questions.

1. How do child support staff members...
 - a. ...perceive the way decisions are made on child support cases? What level of discretion or control do they have over cases?
 - b. ...think bias affects cases? Have they observed biased actions taken on cases?
 - c. ...perceive fairness in the child support program? How do their experiences shape their perceptions?
 - d. ...view structural-, institutional-, and individual-level factors affecting parents' experiences and outcomes?
2. How do noncustodial parents in the child support program...
 - a. ...perceive the way decisions are made on child support cases?

²⁵ Selekmán and Johnson (2019).

- b. ...think bias affects cases? Do parents perceive biases in their interactions with child support?
- c. ...perceive fairness in the child support program? How do their experiences shape their perceptions?

The data collection for this study focused on specific child support functions described in Figure 1.2—primarily order establishment, order modification, enforcement, and court referrals for contempt—and decision-making and parent experiences related to those functions. The research team did not focus on the process for establishing parentage for child support orders, although that process may also be a potential area of disparity.

Data Sources and Methods

Between October 2023 and January 2024, the research team conducted semistructured, virtual interviews with noncustodial parents and child support staff members associated with two child support agencies that participated in the PJAC demonstration: the Michigan Office of Child Support (Muskegon County) and the Virginia Division of Child Support Enforcement (Richmond and Newport News District Offices).²⁶ Interviews were voluntary—parents and staff members had a choice to participate or not. Details on outreach, recruitment, and sample characteristics are described in Chapter 2.

Interviews with Noncustodial Parents

As discussed in Box 1.1, the research team recruited parents from PJAC’s business-as-usual group in the two states: those who had not paid their support obligations for a period, were likely to have experienced various enforcement actions to compel them to pay, and were eligible to be referred to court for civil contempt proceedings at the time of PJAC enrollment. Parents in the business-as-usual group were not offered PJAC services as an alternative to the contempt process, and about 90 percent of this group in each state were sent to court for a contempt hearing within a year after study enrollment.²⁷ Twenty-one parents participated in the interviews: 8 in Michigan and 13 in Virginia.

Interviews with Child Support Program Staff Members

The research team interviewed 34 program staff members for the study: 7 in Michigan and 27 in Virginia. The interviews included staff members in varying roles (caseworkers, supervisors, and agency leaders) and functions (establishment, modification, enforcement, and court connection). Two district offices in Virginia participated in the study, contributing to a larger sample in the state. Also, child support functions and decision-making processes are structured and staffed differently in the two states, which led to differences in who participated in the interviews (see Chapter 2).

²⁶ In a semistructured interview, the interviewer asks the interviewee open-ended questions from a protocol/list of formal questions that align with the research questions.

²⁷ Skemer (2023).



Interviews were transcribed and coded in Dedoose, a mixed-methods analysis program, and analyzed to identify common themes and patterns. Parent interviews from both states were pooled for analysis, as they focused less on local policy and practice and more on interactions with the program. Staff interviews were analyzed separately by state due to differences in agency structure and sample. The lead qualitative researcher took responsibility for intercoder reliability and reviewed all analysis findings for accuracy. The data collection for this study was not designed to draw detailed comparisons between the states or localities with respect to program implementation or parent engagement, but to reveal examples of institutional and individual practices that can affect parents' experiences. This report pools data and analysis from both states to highlight common themes and findings, and highlights any major differences between states when relevant to the research questions.

Roadmap to the Report

The rest of the report presents findings from the parent and staff interviews. Chapter 2 summarizes the child support programs that participated in the study and provides the characteristics of the parents and staff members in the interview samples. Chapter 3 presents an analysis of staff perspectives on the potential for differential experiences and disparities in outcomes for different groups of noncustodial parents, including their views on the role of bias in decision-making and perceptions of fairness to families. Chapter 4 presents parent perspectives on fairness and bias in the child support program. The final chapter summarizes the main findings from the study and discusses recommendations from parents and staff members to improve fairness and equity in the child support program.

2 Programs and Sample Characteristics

Overview of the Participating Programs

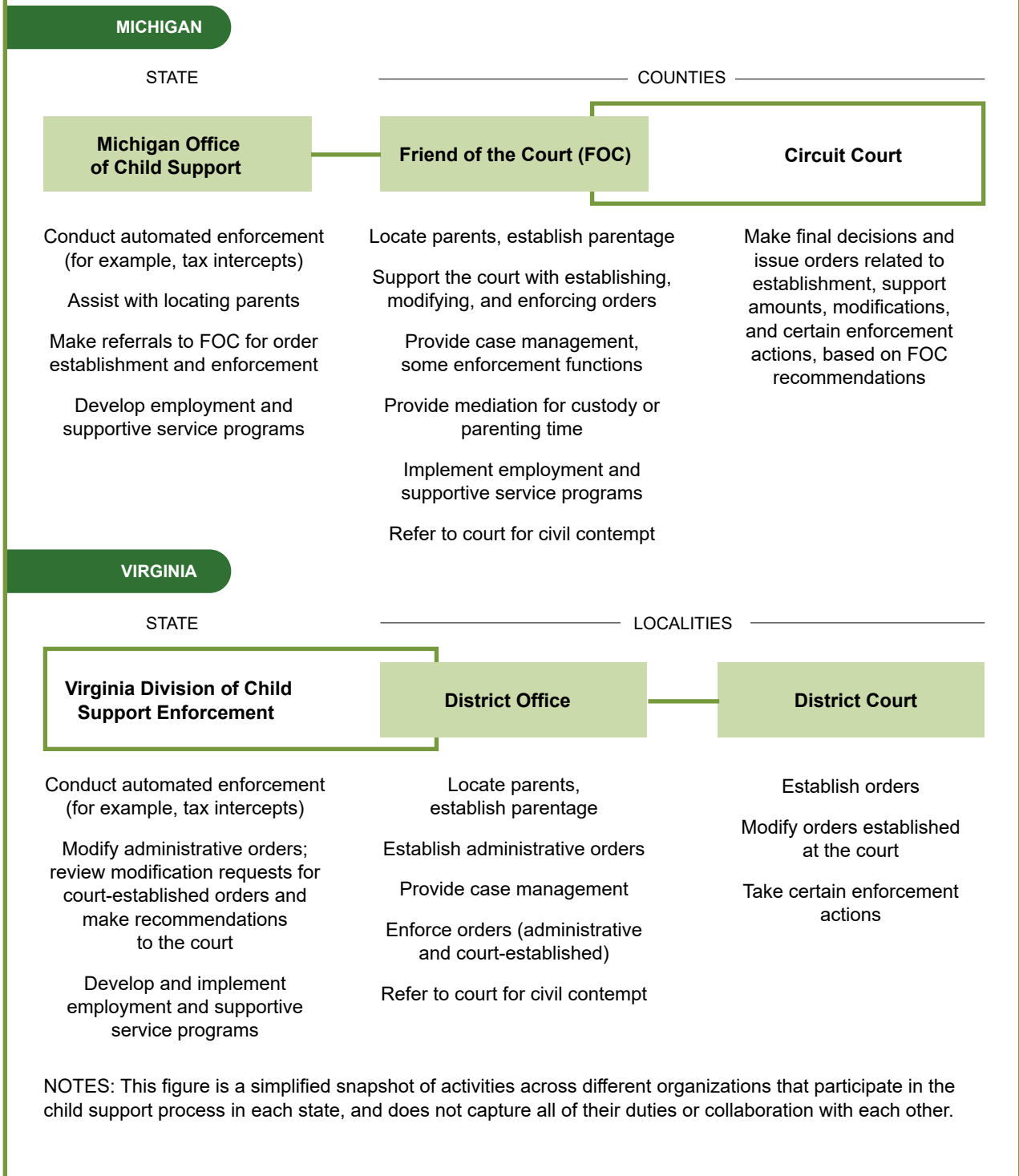
Child support programs across the country vary in terms of how core functions and decision-making authority are distributed across state and local offices, in their use of administrative and judicial procedures, in their case management models, and in their parent-engagement practices. An understanding of how the programs are structured is important context for the findings from the staff and parent interviews presented in subsequent chapters. Figure 2.1 presents snapshots of the program in each state.

Michigan

In Michigan, child support orders are established, modified, and enforced through a judicial process, where family court judges have final authority on many decisions. The day-to-day operations of child support at the local level are managed by county child support offices called the “Friend of the Court” (FOC). Integrated into family courts that are part of the state’s circuit court system, the FOC investigates and makes recommendations to the court on matters related to custody, parenting time, and child support, and judges issue orders after assessing these recommendations. Michigan has a philosophy of “one family, one court” and aims to have the same judge hear cases about all family court matters, including child support, with the goal of better integrating decisions that affect the family, such as those related to support obligations, abuse and neglect, custody and parenting time, and orders of protection.

FOC’s duties include enforcing orders, making recommendations on order modifications, and setting up automatic income withholding through employers. After cases are established, they are monitored by caseworkers for basic maintenance and enforcement; cases are referred to another set of caseworkers when they become eligible for contempt of court. The state child support agency—the Michigan Office of Child Support—is responsible for administering fed-

Figure 2.1
At a Glance: Distribution of Child Support Functions



eral child support funds on behalf of the state, setting statewide policies, and coordinating centralized and automated procedures (such as tax intercepts and mailings to parents). The state office may also help with locating noncustodial parents, providing information about paternity establishment, and routing cases to local FOC offices to establish or enforce support orders, among other duties. In addition, the state office develops and designs special and grant initiatives—such as programs to promote noncustodial parent employment—that are implemented at the local level.¹

There are FOC offices in all 83 counties in Michigan. Muskegon County participated in the study, and seven FOC staff members from the Muskegon FOC were interviewed.

Virginia

In Virginia, the state's Division of Child Support Enforcement oversees 13 local district offices and works closely with the child support division in the Office of the Attorney General on legal aspects of the program. Many of the core child support functions, including locating parents, establishing parentage, establishing orders, and enforcement, are led by the local offices. Departments that modify orders and provide employment and other supportive services to parents are centralized at the state level. The appeal process for parents who seek to contest decisions made by the district offices is also conducted at the state level. Different caseworkers handle different parts of the child support process such as order establishment, modification, and enforcement. Once an order is established by an establishment worker it moves to an enforcement worker (though a parent may have no contact with that enforcement worker until nonpayment issues make the case eligible for enforcement actions).

Virginia's child support program is described as a hybrid, because it uses both administrative and judicial processes to establish, modify, and enforce orders. A large share of cases administered by the child support agency in Virginia go through judicial processes for modification and enforcement because the child support order was established in court (as part of a divorce and custody proceeding, for example). Caseworkers also refer noncustodial parents to court for civil contempt when administrative enforcement actions do not yield payment. Attorneys in the state's Office of the Attorney General represent the child support program in court, along with district-based staff members who act as liaisons for the child support program.

Two of the 13 child support district offices (Richmond and Newport News) and the state child support agency participated in the study, and 27 staff members across all three offices were interviewed.

¹ For information on state and FOC duties, see Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support (n.d.).

Staff Interviews

Recruitment

Staff members who had worked in their roles for at least two years in the participating child support agencies in Virginia and Michigan were eligible to participate. The team sought to interview staff members: (a) at different organizational levels to capture the perspectives of leaders, managers, and workers who engage with parents on their child support cases directly; and (b) with roles in different child support functions, including the establishment and modification of orders, case management, and enforcement. A major goal was to capture how staff members engage parents and decide on cases at different points in the child support process, and how institutional factors may affect those decisions. In each state, a lead researcher worked with representatives from the child support agency to identify a pool of eligible staff members across several relevant roles and child support functions. The researcher emailed and called eligible staff members to invite them to participate in interviews.

Interview Sample

- **In Michigan**, recent turnover at the Muskegon FOC led to a small pool of eligible staff members, and the limited availability of those eligible staff members made it challenging to recruit them quickly. The research team conducted seven interviews, representing leaders and supervisors, caseworkers with general case management functions, and caseworkers who specialize in enforcement. Workers involved in order establishment or modification did not participate in interviews.
- **In Virginia**, the research team interviewed 11 staff members at the Newport News district office; 9 at the Richmond district office; and 7 at the state office where order modification and supportive services for parents are centralized. Across all three offices, 3 interviewees were in leadership positions; 7 managed teams of caseworkers in different roles; and 17 were caseworkers who specialized in order establishment, modification, enforcement, or court assistance.

In the full staff sample, 22 staff members identified themselves as Black (65 percent of interviewees), 11 as White (32 percent), and one as being of more than one race. All but 3 of the interviewees (91 percent) identified their gender as female. Demographic information is not broken down by state or by role to protect the identity of staff members who participated in the interviews. According to information shared by staff members about the overall racial, ethnic, and gender composition of workers in the programs, the interviewee sample in Virginia was representative of the general makeup of the participating offices there (majority Black and female). The sample in Michigan was less representative of the broader population of child support workers in the county (majority White and female).



Parent Interviews

Recruitment

For this study, noncustodial parents were recruited from the business-as-usual group in the PJAC demonstration. PJAC enrolled parents who were at least 18 years old; had a child support order in Michigan or Virginia; and had a case eligible to be referred to contempt.

Within the business-as-usual group, eligibility for this study was narrowed to parents who as of September 2021:²

- Lived in Michigan or Virginia
- Had a contempt referral in the 12 months following their enrollment into the PJAC study
- Were not incarcerated
- Had no family violence indicated on any case for which they were the noncustodial parent
- Used English as their primary language

Between October 2023 and January 2024, the research team sent a letter about the study to 875 eligible parents, and attempted to reach over 300 of those 875 parents by phone call or email. Despite this intensive, multimodal outreach strategy, and despite the offer of a \$50 Visa card to participate in an interview, parents from the PJAC business-as-usual group were difficult to engage. The research team set a goal of interviewing 60 parents but was only able to interview 21 during the data-collection period.

Interview Sample

The parents who participated in interviews had similar characteristics to the overall PJAC sample in Michigan and Virginia. They all had long case histories and had experienced some enforcement actions, most had child support debt, and most were men in their 30s and 40s. Figure 2.2 provides a snapshot of the parent interview sample.

The research team did not collect consistent data on case characteristics due to variations in parents' child support trajectories and willingness to share certain aspects of their journeys. For example, some parents were more open than others in talking about experiences with incarceration and their relationships with custodial parents than others. When parents had multiple cases, the research team focused on understanding their experience with one or two of the cases and their perception of the child support system more broadly. The sample characteristics presented here provide important context for understanding parents' perspectives in subsequent chapters but may not present a com-

² The PJAC demonstration ended in September 2021, and that is the last month MDRC collected data on PJAC study participants.

plete picture of the sample members' cases. For example, a few parents in the sample voluntarily noted that their child support cases were opened when their custodial coparents applied for public cash assistance; other parents in the sample may have also had cases tied to public assistance, but they did not explicitly say so.

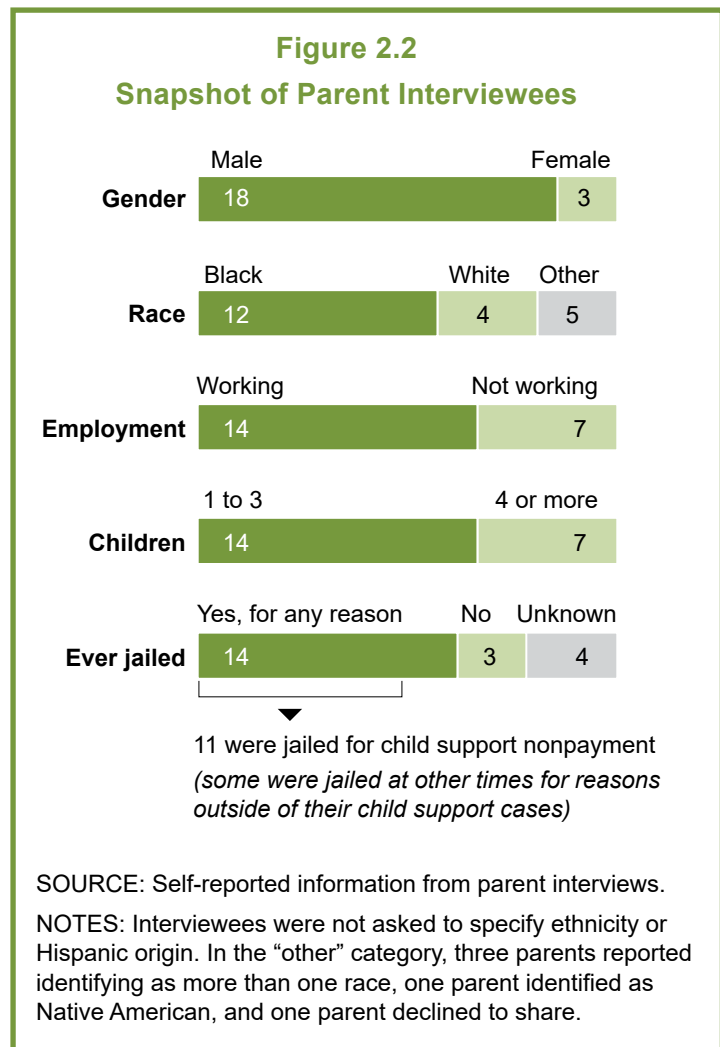
➤ **Demographics.** Interviewees ranged in age from 27 to 54, with a mean age of 41. All but three interviewees identified as men. Twelve interviewees said they were Black, four were White, one was Native American, and three identified as being of more than one race.

➤ **Employment.** About two-thirds of parents reported that they were working at the time of the interview; a few noted working multiple jobs. Some worked in food service, and others in construction, warehousing, and truck driving. Many described a history of inconsistent employment in low-wage or informal “under-the-table” jobs. Of the seven who were unemployed, three said they could not work for health reasons: one was receiving disability benefits from Social Security and two were applying for disability benefits.

➤ **Living situation.** Most interviewees lived with another person. Eleven lived with a romantic partner (such as a girlfriend or spouse) and five lived with a family member (such as a mother or grandmother). Four interviewees lived on their own; one lived in recovery housing where he was receiving treatment for substance use.

➤ **Children.** About two-thirds of the parents had one to three children, and the rest had four or more children. Nine interviewees lived with at least one child.

➤ **Child support debt.** About three-fourths of parents shared that they had child support debt at the time of the interview, and debt amounts ranged from \$600 to over \$100,000. It is likely that all parents had child support debt at some point before the interview because all had



at least one contempt referral during the PJAC study period for not making sufficient payment on their child support orders.

- **Enforcement experience.** All parents in the sample were referred to contempt at least once between 2018 and 2021. Most also reported other experiences with enforcement actions during the interviews, including driver's license suspensions and tax return intercepts. Just over half of the interviewees reported being jailed at some point for not paying child support.

Limitations

It is important to note that the recruitment and sample characteristics presented here limit whether the findings in this report can be assumed to be generally representative.

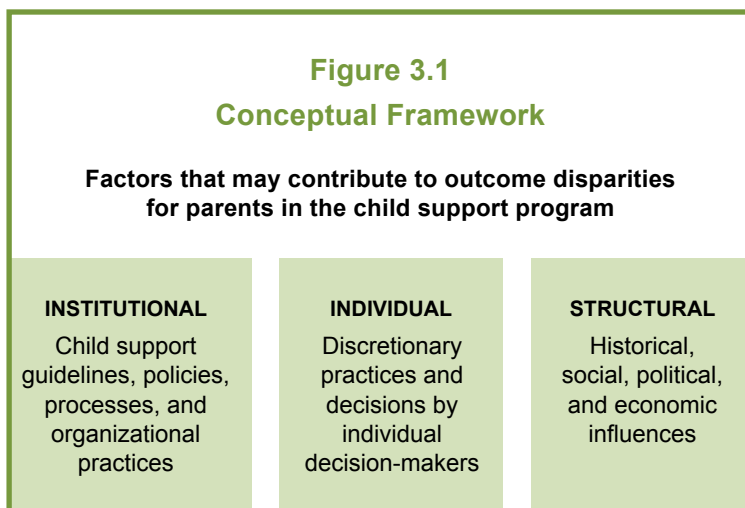
- Noncustodial parents who participated in this study are not representative of the broader child support population. They were recruited from a specific population of noncustodial parents (the PJAC business-as-usual group) with long and complex child support trajectories and were likely to have experienced civil contempt proceedings. Such respondents may have different perspectives on the child support program than parents with higher incomes, shorter histories with child support, or fewer experiences of enforcement. Those who voluntarily participated in the interviews may also differ from the population represented in the PJAC business-as-usual group.
- Research suggests that custodial parents' views of the child support program can be different from noncustodial parents'.³ Interviews with custodial parents were not within the scope of this study.
- Child support programs across the United States vary in size, structure, and culture. The Michigan and Virginia child support agencies that elected to participate in the PJAC demonstration, and in this supplemental study, may not represent agencies across the United States or even other localities in their respective states. Staff members who volunteered to participate in the study also may not represent average child support staff members in these states.
- In both states, legal and judicial workers—including prosecutors, attorneys, mediators, and judges—play big roles in the establishment, modification, and enforcement of child support, and the study did not engage these groups. These staff members work outside of the child support program and the research team did not have access to them. It was also not within the scope of this study to explore how the legal system and judicial discretion may affect parents' experiences and outcomes.

³ Vogel, Dennis, Hostetter, and Shager (2023); Treskon and Groskaufmanis (2022); Sellev and Johnson (2021); Bloomer, Sipe, and Ruedt (2002).

3 Staff Perspectives on Disparities

This chapter presents an analysis of program staff interviews on the potential for disparities in child support experiences and outcomes and of staff members' perceptions of the program's fairness, using the conceptual framework discussed in the first chapter. (Figure 3.1 presents a snapshot of the conceptual framework.) A majority of staff members felt that institutional factors, particularly guidelines and practices related to calculating order amounts, might contribute to income-based disparities in outcomes. For example, parents with lower incomes might be referred to contempt at higher rates than parents with higher incomes. They also felt that individual bias among program staff members did not play a role in any potential disparities.

During interviews, staff members often expressed conflicting views when discussing disparities, bias, and fairness. For example, when asked whether child support guidelines were fair to noncustodial parents, a majority said yes. But they also identified ways guidelines in their states might be unfair to parents, and suggested ways to improve fairness for parents with low earnings. This difference reflects the tensions they face in trying to balance the needs of children and parents, navigating relationships between parents who are rarely on good terms, and engaging noncustodial parents who are often distrustful of the program and hesitant to



provide information about their life circumstances to child support workers. Staff members often struggled with the question of how to make child support guidelines, policies, and practices fair for the entire family and to balance the needs of children and noncustodial parents in low-income households. These complexities and conflicts are highlighted in the discussion below.¹

Institutional Factors

- **A majority of staff members interviewed said order-establishment guidelines may contribute to outcome disparities between parents with lower and higher incomes, including lower payment compliance and higher enforcement rates among the former.**

Staff members said that child support orders often did not reflect what noncustodial parents could truly pay, and were generally too high for parents with low incomes—taking too large a share of their income and affecting their ability to meet basic needs.² (Box 3.1 describes how order amounts and ability to pay are determined.)

The most frequently shared concerns among staff members in both states were that the guidelines:

- Did not sufficiently factor in the noncustodial parents' expenses for basic needs and recent increases in the cost of living
- Used gross income—not the net income that parents take home after taxes and other deductions—which may overestimate the money parents have available to contribute to child support
- Allowed the use of imputed income—or estimates as to what the child support agency or court thinks noncustodial parents could earn in the job market—and not parents' actual earnings.³ For example, in Michigan, Friend of the Court (FOC) staff members said that a

¹ This report generally reports findings as broad proportions of staff members or parents who described an experience or opinion: “most” (75 percent or more), “a majority” (between 51 percent and 74 percent), “some” (between 25 percent and 50 percent), and “few” (fewer than 25 percent).

² This perception aligns with findings from the larger demonstration: All parents in the study were assessed as having the ability to pay their orders, but the study found that many parents struggled with obtaining and maintaining consistent employment that paid enough for them both to meet their own basic needs and to make payments in the amounts they were ordered. See Skemer (2023); Treskon and Groskaufmanis (2022). For more information on ability-to-pay determinations, see Cummings (2020).

³ The guidelines in both Michigan and Virginia were last updated in 2021. See Virginia Department of Social Services (2024a); State Court Administrative Office, Friend of the Court Bureau (2021).



BOX 3.1

How Child Support Orders Are Determined

Order-establishment guidelines: Federal law gives states the authority to develop and update child support guidelines, and requires that the guidelines be reviewed every four years.* Both Virginia and Michigan use an “income shares” model to calculate order amounts, where the incomes of both parents, the number of children, and additional expenses such as childcare and health insurance, are considered in determining a total obligation for the child. That number is then prorated between the parents based on their proportion of the total combined income, and an order is established.† The guidelines are applied to all parents who obtain a child support order, whether or not they are in the child support program. Child support agencies use the guidelines to calculate order amounts for parents who are in the child support program.

Ability-to-pay considerations: Federal rules require that child support workers screen for a parent’s ability to pay when calculating a child support order amount and referring a parent for civil contempt. However, each state sets its own policy for how to determine ability to pay, and assessments can often be subjective.‡ In the absence of financial information from parents (for example, pay stubs) or employers, child support workers often check state and national employment databases or scan social media for evidence of income in recent months.§ Interviews for this study (and findings from the PJAC demonstration) suggest that evidence of parents’ ability to pay often comes down to absence of evidence of their inability to pay (for example, because they are receiving disability benefits or have been incarcerated for more than 180 days). Difficulty paying due to low earnings, unemployment, or health challenges not substantiated by documentation are not seen as evidence of a parent’s inability to pay.¶

Income imputation: State guidelines may allow orders based on imputed income if the noncustodial parent is found to be capable of earning but is not actually earning. For example, in Virginia, the child support program may impute income to set an order if a parent “quits a job without a good cause or is fired for cause” by using an average of any earning information on file for the previous year.¶ Federal rules require that income imputations take into consideration specific circumstances of noncustodial parents to the extent known, including their employment and earnings and educational attainment, and the context of the local labor market.¶ For example, in Michigan’s guidelines, a judge may consider “the prevailing wage rates and number of hours of available work in the local geographical area.”§§

*National Child Support Engagement Association (2021).

†Office of Child Support Services (2021).

‡Office of Child Support Services, Division of Policy and Training (2017).

§Skemer (2023).

¶Cummings (2020).

¶Virginia Department of Social Services, Division of Child Support Enforcement (2024b).

¶Office of Child Support Services (2016).

§§State Court Administrative Office, Friend of the Court Bureau (2021).

judge could set orders for a parent with no earning information by imputing 40 hours per week at \$15 per hour, which is the wage at a McDonald's near the FOC offices and an amount well above the local minimum wage (around \$10 per hour in 2023).⁴

In Virginia, some staff members also felt that guidelines did not sufficiently factor in geographic differences in the cost of living and childcare expenses, which they said might also lead to geographic disparities in outcomes related to compliance and enforcement.⁵

Staff members were less likely to point to enforcement policies as a potential factor contributing to disparities in child support outcomes for noncustodial parents with low incomes; even enforcement staff members mostly pointed to child support guidelines when discussing potential disparities. Most staff members said that parents' early experiences with child support during the order-establishment process often set the tone for their engagement in the program and subsequent enforcement experiences. If orders do not reflect parents' ability to pay, they are likely to fall behind and face enforcement. Staff members also said that parents were more likely to not pay or communicate with the program if they considered their order amounts to be unrealistic or if child support workers could not reach them.⁶ These factors all explain why staff members seemed to consider the guidelines and practices related to order establishment to be the biggest influence on noncustodial parents' child support experiences and outcomes, including enforcement.⁷ (Box 3.2 provides staff voices on child support guidelines.)

Many interviewees acknowledged that some enforcement measures, particularly suspending parents' driver's licenses or sending them to court for contempt proceedings where they could face jail time, could create barriers to employment and exacerbate disparities for parents with low incomes.⁸ However, both states rarely suspended parents' driver's licenses anymore at the time of the interviews, and caseworkers had limited ability to suspend driver's licenses for nonpayment without court involvement. Additionally, some staff members in Virginia said that charging parents interest for unpaid obligations (currently at the rate of 6 percent per year) was an unfair policy, especially when the debt was owed to the government for providing public assistance to custodial parents and children.⁹

⁴ Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (2023).

⁵ When a custodial parent works and needs childcare, the cost of childcare is factored into child support calculations and is a part of the noncustodial parent's support obligation. This practice occurs in both states but only staff members in Virginia discussed it as a potential factor in outcome disparities. One parent in Virginia also discussed the inclusion of childcare costs as a factor in his financial hardships and ability to pay child support.

⁶ These staff sentiments echo findings from existing research, which has found low compliance for child support orders that take up a high proportion of the earnings of parents with low incomes. Meyer, Ha, and Hu (2008); Hodges, Meyer, and Cancian (2020).

⁷ The study team was unable to interview staff members responsible for setting and modifying orders in Michigan, who may have had different perspectives on this topic.

⁸ At the same time, many caseworkers in both states lamented the loss of driver's license suspension as an administrative enforcement tool, saying that even the threat of restriction or suspension of a parent's driver's license was effective in getting disengaged parents to communicate with child support and get them on a path to compliance.

⁹ Michigan FOC interviewees did not mention interest rates in the state as a source of disparity or unfair treatment of parents. A judge may order that a surcharge be added to overdue payments on January 1 and July 1 of each year, with a variable rate based on the Michigan Department of the Treasury's T-note rate (about 4 percent at the time of the interviews) plus an annual rate of interest equal to 1 percent. For more information about how interest rates affect child support debt, see Gebrekristos and Cummings (2024).



BOX 3.2

Staff Voices on Child Support Order Guidelines

“I think that we [should] have someone investigate and see that, hey, this person does not have that ability to make that type of money.... And then we right-size the order accordingly to the person, not just to some calculation that I throw into a machine or whatever and it spits out a number. You know, maybe come together with mom, dad, referee, or someone and say, ‘Hey, what can you pay? Let’s meet somewhere in the middle.’” —Caseworker, Michigan

“I’m looking at a case right now. This individual is paying \$269 a month. Let’s put that in perspective. That’s less than \$10 a day ... so, we’re giving this person \$10 a day to take care of a kid. That’s this kid’s lunch, and then maybe the other parent takes care of dinner. That \$10 a day is not taking care of breakfast, somebody else gotta figure out breakfast. We haven’t even got to clothes, school supplies, field trips. \$10 a day, all you’re doing is paying for lunch. That’s it. But that’s what the formula said is fair and just.” —Agency leader, Michigan

“When you see that a client pays, say, \$600 a month for childcare and [a parent’s] income is, let’s say on average, it’s a minimum-wage income. A minimum-wage order right now in Virginia is around \$230 a month if you work 40 hours a week at minimum wage. But then you add childcare into that, and that \$232 order will jump up to a \$400 or \$500 order. And I don’t think that that’s fair.” —Caseworker, Virginia

“I think some of the guidelines are ridiculous. I mean, I don’t know how you can end up with a \$300 order with an income of \$1,500 a month. I mean, if your income was \$1,500 a month, forget about the mortgage. And if you have a car note, and what about everything else? Now, you’ve got \$1,200 to live off of. The average rent is \$1,200 to \$1,500 for one bedroom. But I’ll say that, but then I also have moms who work three jobs because the dad won’t pay.... So, six in one hand, half a dozen in the other. But I do feel like sometimes the guidelines aren’t fair.” —Caseworker, Virginia

“The way that that process is established ... that would be the place where the disparity comes in.... Non-custodial parents still have to be able to sustain themselves. When they see these orders ... it just becomes a matter of, ‘I can’t take care of me if I have to pay this.’ So [the potential for disparities] starts there. And depending on how you have that conversation [with the noncustodial parent] and you facilitate that event [can determine outcomes]. Some orders are done without the noncustodial parents being present, you know? We have to impute their wages because they didn’t submit the information, they didn’t participate in the appointment, or whatever the case may be. So, an order is done without their permission or involvement because we don’t need your permission.... That sets the tone as well [for their engagement with child support].” —Caseworker, Virginia

Most staff members did not believe that institutional factors contributed to gender, race, or ethnic disparities in outcomes for noncustodial parents. In other words, they did not expect child support guidelines, policies, and organizational practices to produce better outcomes for female noncustodial parents than male noncustodial parents, for example. About a quarter of the staff members in Virginia interviewed said that they expected racial disparities in payment compliance due to parents of color facing more challenges in the labor market.

- **Staff members identified various ways that institutional capabilities and practices at child support agencies—such as case management structures, caseload sizes, and communication norms—could lead to variations in parent engagement and experiences.**

Processes and practices at the state and local levels affect how noncustodial parents engage with the child support program and what they experience.

- **Staffing levels and caseload size.** All three local child support offices in this study—Richmond and Newport News in Virginia and Muskegon Friend of the Court in Michigan—were understaffed due to turnover and retention challenges in recent years, leading to larger-than-normal caseloads for workers. Caseload sizes can vary by function and can fluctuate from year to year depending on staffing levels. For example, in Virginia, order-establishment workers reported caseloads of 400 to 500 cases at one time, and enforcement workers reported between 900 and 1,300 cases; enforcement workers in Michigan also have thousands of cases in their caseloads. Staff members in Michigan said that they had little time to work cases until the cases were already at a crisis point and routed to contempt, and suggested that earlier intervention might keep cases from going down this path. In Virginia, staff members expressed similar sentiments, with one worker saying that the staff was “only putting out fires.” Many Virginia staff members also said that every day they needed to make a priority of the cases that required their immediate attention, which often meant cases where custodial parents are most vocal. “You’re just addressing the person who’s saying I need the help the loudest,” said one worker.
- **Communication practices.** Staff members in both states said that communication norms and practices at agencies could make it easier or harder for parents to engage with the program, acknowledging that the complex and technical child support process could be difficult for many parents to navigate. For example, in Michigan, when parents called the Friend of the Court, they were routed through an automated phone system through which they might eventually reach a representative. This person might be different each time they called, resulting in different and inconsistent information. Staff members in both states said that written communication such as mailed letters and notices could be difficult to comprehend, especially for parents with limited education, and might not facilitate engagement. At the time of the interviews, the program in Virginia had recently increased efforts to improve communication with noncustodial parents, asking caseworkers to share their direct numbers with parents (not just the main office line) and emphasizing outreach attempts through phone calls (not just mailings). The implementation of these directives seemed to vary by district office and caseworker, and some caseworkers said that high caseloads did not allow for intensive or personalized outreach and communication with parents.
- **The dispersion of child support functions and decision-making across workers.** Both states assigned different functions (such as establishment, enforcement, modification, and supportive services) to different workers, and parents had to engage different departments and workers for different parts of the process. When combined with large caseloads and fre-



quent turnover among caseworkers, this segmentation did not allow for much relationship building between parents and workers and could lead to a fragmented experience for parents. Most staff members said that specializing in specific functions allowed caseworkers to build subject-matter expertise in one area of a complex program and increased the quality and consistency of services in that area. At the same time, many said that specialization in one area left workers without sufficient understanding of the guidelines for other functions, which could negatively affect their ability to support parents. For example, a modification worker in Virginia said that she often received referrals for parents who did not meet eligibility criteria to be considered for a modification and had to send those parents back to enforcement—an experience that could lead to disengagement and disparities.

It was not possible to assess whether institutional factors that lead to variations in parent experiences can also contribute to systemic disparities in outcomes for certain groups of parents. What staff conversations indicated was that staffing levels and practices that affect communication and the navigability of the program—and not just policies and guidelines related to establishment and enforcement—could contribute to outcome disparities by making it more challenging for some parents to engage with the program than others. Interviewees in both states repeatedly emphasized the challenges of reaching and communicating with noncustodial parents who struggled with payment and debt, and felt that disengagement was likely to worsen parent outcomes because workers made decisions about cases without up-to-date knowledge of parents' circumstances. Many caseworkers felt that engaging parents in conversations was critical to getting them to comply. Institutional factors that lead to variations in caseworker communication and interaction with parents, and vice versa, may contribute to disparities.

Individual Discretion

At the level of individual program actors, the study largely focused on child support caseworkers and explored two questions: (1) What level of discretion or control do caseworkers have over cases, and (2) how much room is there for potential bias to influence caseworker decisions that can lead to outcome disparities? Bias refers to the preference or disregard for a group or characteristic that might lead to disparate treatment. Bias can be conscious or unconscious, and actions taken based on either type of bias can be obvious or subtle. The availability of discretion alone does not signal biased actions or deviation from guidelines, but high levels of discretion in implementing policies may allow more room for individual biases to influence decisions, potentially leading to disparities. Research has found that discretion by individual actors in systems is associated with disparate treatment and outcomes across identity groups in the labor market, in housing, and in the criminal legal system.¹⁰ For example, high discretion available to police officers for stop-and-search decisions is associated with racial disparities in law enforcement outcomes such as higher rates of traffic stops for Black drivers than White drivers.¹¹

¹⁰ Kutateladze and Andiloro (2014); Pager and Shepherd (2010).

¹¹ Charbonneau and Glaser (2021); Nowacki and Spencer (2019).

The Use of Discretion

➤ Caseworkers can exercise discretion in limited but important ways to shape parent outcomes.

Discretion available to caseworkers varies according to their role and child support function, and the broader program structure in which they operate. Caseworkers in Virginia generally have more discretion in establishing, modifying, and enforcing orders than those in Michigan, where most decisions require judicial approval. In both states, caseworkers who enforced orders felt they had more discretion than those who established or modified orders, areas where caseworkers said they were beholden to “the formula” or the state’s guidelines for order calculation. In Virginia, caseworkers who worked on review and modification of existing orders said that they exercised discretion about whether to proceed with modifying orders if the outcomes were not what the requesting party expected. For example, noncustodial parents typically request modifications when seeking a decrease; if caseworkers found that calculations based on parents’ updated financial circumstances suggested an increase, they would generally let the requesting noncustodial parents know that their orders would increase if the modifications were finalized and that they had a right to withdraw the review.¹²

Child support programs have thresholds for initiating enforcement actions, and certain periods of nonpayment and overdue amounts can trigger eligibility for different enforcement actions such as asset seizures or contempt referrals. Enforcement workers noted the following instances where they could exercise discretion, among others:

- In both states, caseworkers may offer noncustodial parents more time to make a “good-faith” payment, and may even accept partial payment to prevent enforcement actions. Caseworkers described using this kind of discretion in cases where noncustodial parents were in communication with them, and the workers believed that the parents were genuinely trying to be compliant or to change their financial situations (for example, by looking for a job). Caseworkers noted that these arrangements were time-limited, as they could not accept partial payment indefinitely in lieu of an order modification; however, they had discretion in deciding how long they would hold off enforcement actions.

Specific practices related to these activities varied by caseworker, in terms of the amount they accepted in partial payments to delay enforcement or how much money they would let parents keep in their bank accounts if they seized some amount to pay off what parents owed. Caseworkers’ assessments of parents’ willingness to pay or their level of effort varied greatly from worker to worker. When discussing caseworker discretion and variations in enforcement actions, one caseworker in Virginia said: “Everybody is different. Some people are hard-line and that’s fine for them.... I don’t like to kick people when they are down. If I see you’re making an attempt and it’s something that I can do that won’t cause me to lose my job, I’m gonna do that. If the monthly obligation is \$450 a month and you give me \$200, \$300

¹² In this example, the nonrequesting custodial parents would also get a notice informing them that the review was terminated, and they would have 10 days to make contact with the agency to say they would like for the agency to proceed with the review.



a month, I'm not taking any actions.... That don't mean the next worker won't because in the guidelines they can. Not saying that they are bad, because they are doing what policy said. However, I am, too, because he's still making a payment.”

- In Virginia, a majority of enforcement workers interviewed said that they were likely to delay referring a case to court for contempt if a parent was in communication with them and made a partial payment, or if the parent was unemployed, but engaged in supportive services to gain employment. Some caseworkers said there were limits to their authority in this area, as they could not prevent court involvement if the custodial parent on the case filed a motion to take the case to court.
- If parents were arrested for not appearing at a contempt hearing, enforcement caseworkers in Michigan had discretion to decide whether they should be released from jail. If a worker decided not to release a parent, the parent went before a judge who decided whether the parent would stay in jail and if so for how long. When making this decision, interviewees said that their judgment was influenced by payment history, parent circumstances, past interactions with the parent, and anticipation of judicial action. For example, a caseworker said that she might release a parent who was homeless or who reported a medical issue. Conversely, she was likely to hold a parent who had recently been released from jail but who took no actions to start paying or a parent who she felt was giving her “the runaround” and not being “sincere about working with the program.”
- **Across all functions, a major area of discretion and variation in caseworkers' practices is their approach to parent outreach and communication.**

Caseworkers' efforts to reach parents varied in persistence and intensity, as did their approach to communication. For example, some caseworkers said they were more likely than others to try to find up-to-date telephone numbers for parents, sometimes through contact with relatives. Some placed greater importance on educating parents and said that they were more likely than others to see helping parents navigate the child support process as a core function of their role. Some described making greater efforts than others to display compassion and care in their interactions, acknowledging that noncustodial parents often feel a loss of dignity when dealing with the program and its staff. Many staff members believed that communication could be a major factor determining whether parents interacted with the program, and if so, how—which they believed affected payment and enforcement outcomes. As a result, discretionary practices related to outreach and communication might shape outcomes. For example, if caseworkers could not reach parents or engage them in sharing their financial information voluntarily, those parents might have orders established based on imputed income that did not reflect their true ability to pay. A few enforcement workers in Virginia said that they had found many cases where parents were unaware of having a child support case until they accrued debt and received notifications for enforcement, and that this problem occurred more often for cases opened when custodial parents applied to receive cash assistance.

- **Local agency leaders and managers in both states encouraged staff members to use their discretion and take an individual approach to case management and enforcement, customizing decisions based on a parent's context.**

Leaders and supervisors both said they wanted workers to take account of the individual circumstances and contexts of cases—applying “common sense” to enforcement decisions and not treating cases in a “cookie-cutter” manner. For example, one leader in Virginia said that she discouraged caseworkers from seizing the bank accounts of noncustodial parents who were paying consistently through automatic wage withholding but who had high levels of debt because in the past they had not paid well. She said: “When staff go in to look at what they can do to collect on that [debt] faster, they need to use common sense and they need to be very thorough and look at that information to say, wait a minute, that’s the rest of their paycheck. I’m not touching that. So, if they’re on a wage withholding, and you’re looking to take their checking account, that’s the rest of their disposable earnings. You would not want to do that.” And one caseworker in Michigan said that: “My boss always tells me, it’s not cookie-cutter answers you can give, you have to look at every single case different.... Like, you have to really look at their background, you have to see what they’ve gone through in life.” However, despite leaders’ encouragement and expectations, not all caseworkers did take account of parents’ circumstances in enforcement. For example, in Virginia, some said they froze bank accounts when they determined that the eligibility threshold for that enforcement action had been reached, but others said they might look at previous payment patterns and overall payment history before doing so, as suggested.

While most staff members valued having some autonomy to implement policies and procedures, and to make decisions they believed were best on specific cases, conversations revealed conflicting views on how a customized versus a standardized approach to case management and enforcement might shape parent outcomes. Some caseworkers expressed concerns that customizations based on staff discretion could lead to inconsistent application of policies within localities in a state and contribute to disparities in parent outcomes. Some felt that striving toward consistency through the rigid application of guidelines and policies might lead to disparities because those decisions would not reflect the needs and circumstances of individual families. Some felt that it was possible to customize case decisions to a family’s context while setting standards for parent engagement and communication that took a more consistently supportive approach to helping them navigate their cases.

However, many staff members also felt that the size of their caseloads simply did not let them spend as much time to deliberate and customize as they might want to. Most instances where they described customizing enforcement actions to be more lenient were cases where they were able to communicate with noncustodial parents about their challenges and assessed them to be making an effort.



- **Staff members in both states said that judges in family courts had discretion and authority to deviate from guidelines in ways that child support program staff members did not.**

Courts play a central role in the child support program in both states. A majority of staff members interviewed said that judges had more choices than they did in deciding the direction of a case and influencing a case's outcome. For example, in Virginia, a staff member said that a “judge has the discretion to say whether or not they’re going to impute the state minimum wage to [a parent], which would not change their child support amount all that much, or impute the wages that they earned prior, which can make their support go up.” In Michigan, judges can deviate from the child support guidelines if they consider the order amount to be unrealistic or assess that a different amount would be in the best interest of the child. Judges can also send parents to jail for contempt, which can greatly affect a parent’s trajectory inside and outside of the program.

Staff members said that they observed wide variation in how judges used their discretion to decide cases, which could lead to disparities in child support outcomes. While most did not connect the use of judicial discretion to bias, many said that judges were known to have distinct viewpoints and approaches that shaped their decisions and led to variations in parent outcomes from court to court. For example, one staff member in Virginia said: “Some judges are more apt to put people in jail for nonpayment of support. And then you have a complete opposite in other [judges] who’ve never put anyone in jail. They give [parents] 1,001 chances. Some judges can’t stand it when people don’t pay their child support and they’re not willing to give chances. Others, in my opinion, give too many chances.” And a staff person in Michigan said: “I have four judges that deal with family cases in my county. You can walk into judge A’s courtroom with your motion, and you make your argument, and judge A will rule XYZ. You could walk into judge B’s office and have that same motion, same argument, and you’re gonna get ruling ABC. And it’s because they’re human, judges are human. You’re dealing with people who have different life experiences.” Some staff members also said that judges often had knowledge about a case’s history that could play a role in how they customized decisions. “They’ve been there from the initial order or from the custody hearings and the divorce decrees, and so they know all the behind-the-scenes information that we aren’t privy to because we weren’t in those hearings,” a caseworker in Virginia said.

It was not within the scope of this study to explore how judicial discretion may affect parents’ experiences and outcomes. Judges were not interviewed for this study and may have a different perspective on how courts may or may not contribute to differential outcomes for parents.

Perceptions of Bias

- **Most staff members did not believe that bias from individual workers in the child support program played a role in potential outcome disparities.**

Staff members acknowledged that their identity and life experiences shaped the way they viewed and approached their work with parents, primarily in how they communicated and engaged parents

in conversations about their cases. But they did not believe that bias related to their identity or experiences affected actions or decisions on child support cases in ways that could lead to outcome disparities. When asked whether any aspects of their identity affected how they approached their work, staff members most frequently mentioned their role as a parent (16 staff members), their race (6), and their gender (4):¹³

- Those who said their identity as a parent influenced their work generally said that their parenting experiences helped them keep their focus on the well-being of the children at the center of the cases but also to understand the challenges that parents face. Seven (21 percent of the interviewees) said that their experiences as custodial parents influenced their work, and one staff person said that his experience as a noncustodial parent influenced his work.
- Nearly all staff members who said their racial identity shaped their approach were Black, and they generally spoke of recognizing the structural and institutional barriers that Black parents faced inside and outside of the child support system (primarily incarceration, unemployment, poverty, and lack of support in navigating the child support program).
- Staff members generally mentioned their gender in relation to their parenting status or race; for example, how being mothers or being Black women influenced their work with parents. (Box 3.3 shares voices from staff members on this topic.)

Staff members often highlighted how various dimensions of their identity—gender, race, socioeconomic status, parenting status, and family structure, among others—shaped their approach to child support in complex and intersectional ways.¹⁴ For example, one female caseworker spoke about identifying with custodial mothers because of her own experiences as a single, custodial mother; she also said that she understood challenges faced by Black noncustodial fathers due to her race and family's experience with biased policing and incarceration. Another female caseworker who spoke about understanding the experiences of custodial mothers due to her own experience as one, also said that she understood how noncustodial fathers might struggle to meet their child support obligations because her current husband was a noncustodial father. One male caseworker said that he realized that most child support orders cover only a small share of the true cost of caring for a child, while also acknowledging the challenges that some parents with low incomes face in paying their full orders.

A majority of the interviewees did not feel that bias based on one's identity and experience affected how staff members made decisions, and thus played any role in shaping disparities. As previously discussed, they believed that some child support guidelines and policies might contribute to disparities, but they also believed that program staff members implemented guidelines and policies fairly and

¹³ Other factors that they said influenced the way they think about their work include religion, family upbringing, work experience, experience with domestic violence, and experience with poverty. For example, one staff member said that her religious background made her more compassionate and less judgmental in the way she engaged parents. Six of the 34 staff members interviewed said that their identities or personal experiences did not shape their approach to their work.

¹⁴ The concept of intersectionality broadly refers to how different facets of one's identity (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) can overlap and shape one's experiences of the world, including one's experience of bias and discrimination in society. See Crenshaw (2017); Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas (2015).



BOX 3.3

Child Support Staff Members on How Their Identity and Experiences Influence Their Approach

“I’m very defensive of my children and, therefore, I fight hard for children in my work because it’s about the kids. The parents get very emotional, but I have to remind them this is about the kids, so you guys need to stop.” —Caseworker, Virginia

“A lot of African American fathers are in the child support system, and they don’t sometimes have a voice, and I recognize that. And when I’m dealing with folks of my own race, I try to be empathetic with them ... and help because a lot of people do not understand the program, they don’t understand the terminology, they don’t understand what’s happening to them. And I like to take the time that’s not taken for a lot of people to explain and let them know what’s going on.” —Caseworker, Virginia

“Coming from a two-parent household and transitioning into a one-person household and seeing the struggles between what happens when its two parents and when it goes down to one. It plays a role in it how I approach my work. My mom was a single parent. Her and my dad separated. My mom started the process with child support but because it never went anywhere, she never pushed it. She did what she could do with what she had.... We were fortunate that we had family to lean back on. Some of my clients don’t have that.” —Caseworker, Virginia

“Just being African American female, I have a lot of sympathy and empathy.... I’ve had family members that were incarcerated, that are incarcerated.... I had one that was incarcerated, he got out and he’s doing wonderful. People go through things, and I understand the things that they go through. I empathize because in some way I’ve experienced it, or I know someone that is directly impacted. I try to approach my work in a way where whether it’s the noncustodial parent or the custodial parent, I’m always empathetic.” —Caseworker, Virginia

“I was a single mother, so I can identify with our custodial parents when it comes to raising a child by yourself and needing the support of a father. Then I later married and now I’m a wife. I still can identify with men trying to take care of their children and having a hard time. And just identifying with, of course, me being a Black woman and married to a Black man and mostly a lot of my clients are Black men, I can identify with their struggles in different ways.” —Caseworker, Virginia

“My whole perspective about parenthood changed with the experience of having a kid. I had my daughter and I realized things like, oh, I’m paying \$250 a week in day care. I mean, I’ve actually told clients that I pay \$250 a week just to come here and talk to you about your case while you’re complaining about \$269 a month. And again, that’s just day care. That isn’t meals, that isn’t clothing that she’s outgrowing or anything like that.” —Agency leader, Michigan

“For a long time, our staffing didn’t reflect the community. I think it should. I think it impacts people’s interaction with our office. A lot of or several of the people [in our office] didn’t live in Muskegon proper. They live, like, on the lake and they had lake homes and they had boats.... They had no clue what some of the people that we serve would be talking about when they come into the office of the difficulties and struggles. Not just African American people, poor people in general. It was obvious to me, as a staff member, so I know people that came into the office could feel that. I was always one that talked to people. You have to treat people like human beings. They’re human beings.” —Agency leader, Michigan

without bias. At the same time, many suggested that noncustodial parents, particularly Black fathers, might not be treated with compassion and empathy, and found their peers' approach to be lacking when it came to communicating with parents who struggled and helping them navigate the complex child support process. Given staff members' emphasis on communication to improve outcomes for parents, their view that bias did not play a role in shaping disparities contrasts with their perception that how parents were treated could directly influence their willingness to engage with the program.

Many staff members acknowledged that noncustodial parents often perceived the child support program to be biased when the staff people with whom they interacted did not share their racial, ethnic, or gender identity. But most of these staff members said that parent perceptions of racial or gender bias did not reflect what they believed was happening. For example, a White caseworker in Michigan said: "We mostly deal with African Americans here, and there are people that come in and they don't want to deal with White people, point blank.... So, you try to get to their understanding that—I'm listening, I'm here. I don't look at you as a different race, I look at you as a person and I'm here to try to help you."

A small share of interviewees (18 percent) said that bias based on one's identity and experience could affect how program staff members worked on cases, and they pointed to gender and parenting status. Four caseworkers in Virginia said that female caseworkers who have been custodial or single parents might take actions based on their experiences; and two in Michigan said that the largely female staff members in the county might more readily identify with custodial parents, which could affect their work. For example, one interviewee in Michigan felt that female staff members might be more trusting of information from custodial parents (most of whom are women) because of their shared experiences as women or as mothers. And one interviewee in Virginia said: "Over the years, I've definitely seen case managers work their cases with a stigma present themselves, you know, because they're a single mother, or they may have a case themselves in another office.... It all plays a role in [how they work]. It does."¹⁵ Four staff members interviewed in Virginia also said that they believed parents experienced bias in the judicial system based on their observations of how judges and prosecutors treated parents and decided on their cases.

- **While most staff members said that bias did not play a role in their decision-making, they often stereotyped noncompliant parents as those who did not want to work or who did not care for their children.**

Staff members frequently shared the sentiment that "every case is different," but most still broke noncustodial parents with compliance challenges into two groups: (1) those who were willing to pay but struggled with low incomes or navigating child support, and (2) those who were simply unwilling.

¹⁵ As noted above, some of the interviewees who were single mothers or who had child support cases as single mothers (either when they were interviewed or in the past), said that their experiences influenced their approach to work in that they identified with many custodial parents' circumstances and made a priority of the needs of the child, but they did not believe that there was any bias in their decision-making on cases. The connection between gender and bias toward custodial parents was also challenged by some female interviewees who expressed unsympathetic views toward custodial mothers, often saying that they used or "weaponized" the child support system to punish noncustodial parents with whom they had conflicts.



Parents who were not able to meet their orders but communicated with their caseworkers about their challenges and described their efforts to pay (such as searching for jobs) were more likely to be perceived as willing but unable to pay. But those who did not engage with caseworkers or respond to their communication attempts were generally viewed as parents who were unwilling to pay, and less deserving of leniency when making enforcement decisions. Many workers generalized what they perceived to be unwillingness to comply with child support orders as parents not wanting to care for their children, reinforcing a stigma that many parent interviewees said they perceived in their interactions with child support. An enforcement worker in Michigan said that high caseloads could reduce staff time to pay attention to the specifics of a case and might lead to slotting parents into typical roles or patterns a staff member had observed on cases in the past, fostering actions based on stereotypes—an example of how an institutional factor can contribute to biased action at the individual level.¹⁶

Unless parents had a documented inability to work (such as receiving disability benefits or being incarcerated), a majority of the staff interviewees saw not having a job as a choice, and a sign of unwillingness to try to meet their obligations. Discussions of parents' barriers to work often revealed sentiments that could be construed as bias against poor people. For example, one caseworker in Michigan said that parents not paying their orders often did not have access to jobs or could not find jobs with the skills that they had, but she simultaneously characterized many of these parents as "entitled" because "they've lived off the world of food stamps and cash assistance." It was not possible to assess the extent to which these types of sentiments affected the decisions caseworkers made on cases.

Structural Factors

- **Most staff members acknowledged that noncompliant parents often faced structural barriers to well-paying jobs, but emphasized parents' individual responsibility to overcome those barriers.**

Staff members often spoke about challenges related to structural inequities that hampered parents' ability to meet their obligations and increased enforcement and debt, particularly for parents with low incomes and parents of color. Many described how parents who had limited education and who had been involved in the legal system faced difficulties in securing higher-wage, steady work. Some said that unstable housing, transportation problems, and physical and mental health challenges affected parents' ability to earn.

At the same time, a majority of the staff members in both states—regardless of race or gender identity—emphasized individual responsibility and choice in overcoming those barriers and meeting child support obligations. Many viewed unemployment and underemployment as a choice, and some interviewees said that parents should accept any low-wage work they could get to try to meet their child

¹⁶ Research in the health care and legal system settings suggest that high caseloads and workloads can lead to less deliberate decision-making and increase the influence of unconscious bias, because workers do not have the time to consider individual facts and tend to rely on impressions formed through past experiences. Johnson et al. (2016); Kricheli-Katz and Weinshall (2023).

support obligations, even if these jobs were not what they wanted to do. For example, a caseworker said: “They don’t wanna take a McDonald’s job or a Burger King job. They wanna start off making some kind of higher amount of money that they think they deserve.” Another said: “There are plenty of jobs out there. The thing now is people feel entitled that they don’t have to work a certain type of job. I have folks that would rather work no job than work at McDonald’s.” Another caseworker talked about parents in her caseload facing employment barriers due to a history with the legal system, but concluded that if parents were not employed it was because they did not want to help themselves: “We are in Richmond City and there’s a lot of people that have charges. But we also have places that do hire people with felonies, but, you know, it’s either they wanna help themselves or they don’t. You can only refer them, and they have to make the effort.”

➤ **Views on how the child support program should support parents to address structural barriers to employment and nonpayment were mixed.**

A majority of the staff members interviewed said that the child support program should help parents get jobs and address challenges that pose barriers to employment (such as recovering from substance use and mental health issues or finding stable housing). Both Michigan and Virginia have invested in initiatives to provide employment, training, and other supportive services to parents to improve parents’ ability to meet their obligations and increase support payments. (Box 3.4 provides a snapshot of these supportive services.)

However, while they agreed on the basic principle of offering these services, program staff members had mixed opinions about the efficacy of the services in improving child support outcomes. Many considered the services to be helpful but said that parents who needed help were reluctant to engage with them when they were referred; some were critical of the way these services affected compliance and enforcement; and a few thought that some parents used these programs to delay payment and avoid enforcement. For example, one caseworker in Michigan reported instances of parents quitting their jobs to receive free training through the employment program; another in Virginia thought that delays in enforcement and payments when noncustodial parents were in training or receiving employment services were unfair to the custodial parents. She said: “I think it does a disservice to the custodial parent because ... we’re focusing so much on trying to do something for [the noncustodial parent] and trying to make it a more pleasant experience for him. But the bottom line is while we’re doing all that, [the custodial parent] is still not getting her child support. And we’re pretty much telling her, ‘Suck it up and wait.’ She’s waited all this time, and I just feel that that’s unfair to her.”

The interviews highlighted an inherent tension between the child support program’s core functions of collecting and enforcing child support payments and its efforts to enhance parents’ ability to meet their obligations, which often requires time for training, searching for a job, and receiving other services that affect a parent’s ability to pay child support in the short run. Staff members often expressed conflicting views on the topic—saying that child support should provide employment and supportive services but not wanting to stop enforcement actions while parents engage in these services, and questioning the efficacy of the services while also saying the services make the program fairer by supporting parents who struggle. Many staff members viewed parents’ unwillingness to



BOX 3.4 Employment and Supportive Services

MICHIGAN

The Michigan Office of Child Support, the Michigan Office of Labor and Economic Opportunity, and regional MichiganWorks! Association offices run the Gain Employment, Maintain and Support (GEMS) program in selected counties across the state. GEMS connects noncustodial parents having difficulty meeting the terms of their orders with employment, training, and other supportive services. In Muskegon County, parents who are referred to contempt are eligible for the program: Parents can voluntarily enroll in the program when their cases are referred for contempt, or they can be ordered to participate by a judge. While participants are enrolled in the program, their cases are moved to a “community enforcement officer” who carries a smaller caseload, works closely with parents to help them navigate their obligations, and connects them to local resources when necessary. Community enforcement officers may help parents remove or lift enforcement actions or try to review and modify their orders. Parents may also earn financial incentives for meeting program milestones. If parents do not engage with the program, contempt proceedings can resume, and their cases are moved to a traditional contempt enforcement officer’s caseload. Muskegon County FOC is also exploring supportive approaches for working with parents taking part in recovery court, a special court docket designed for people facing nonviolent criminal charges who have substance or alcohol use disorder (for example, setting orders to zero while parents participate in recovery treatment).

VIRGINIA

The child support agency operates the Family Engagement Services (FES) program, which offers case management, employment, and other supportive services to noncustodial parents. Parents who face two or more barriers to child support payment—such as unemployment, limited education, housing instability, histories of legal system involvement, substance use disorders, or physical or mental health challenges—are eligible to receive services. Caseworkers in local child support offices can refer parents to the program, which is centralized at the state office; parents can enroll in services on their own by making contact with the program; and judges can order parents to participate in the program as an alternative to incarceration for failure to pay.

While parents are enrolled in the program, enforcement of their cases is transferred to an FES case manager who carries a much smaller caseload than traditional enforcement workers (about 300 compared with 1,000 or more). The FES case manager creates individual plans to support parents; refers them to other public agencies and community-based organizations for employment, training, and other services; and helps parents navigate their child support cases (for example, by requesting order modifications or facilitating case conferences with custodial parents to discuss access and visitation issues). For parents who owe child support debt to the state, the program offers incentives for participation, where a share of parents’ debt owed the state is forgiven for meeting certain engagement goals and making payments. The child support agency has established partnerships through which it can refer parents to various public agencies (including regional workforce development agencies), community-based organizations, and training providers.

participate in employment or supportive services as a sign of them not caring about their children or not trying enough to meet their obligations, rather than considering whether these services were accessible to parents and met their specific needs and circumstances. For example, one caseworker in Virginia said: “Most of them don’t want to take part [in the employment and supportive services program] because they’re obligated to something ... job fairs, attending programs. But if someone is really engaged with their children and taking care of that child, then they won’t turn down that program.” One staff member in Michigan said: “When somebody says they didn’t have a job, I walked them down the hallway to the job placement person [from a temp agency outside of the court] so that they can get a job. Now you find out who really wants a job and who really wants to make excuses. If you really want to take care of your child, let’s look at what your barriers are and how can we achieve those types of things. You have to want it, though.”

Many staff members also felt that offering employment and supportive services made the child support program fairer, and expressed that they were less likely to be lenient in their enforcement actions because parents had services available to them to help them get jobs. For example, one caseworker in Virginia said: “You basically get the same story over and over. ‘I don’t have a job. I don’t have a job.’ And I explain to them that’s not good enough. There are plenty of jobs out here.... And we have a program to help them. So it shouldn’t be an excuse.”



4 Parent Perspectives on Fairness and Bias

While the staff interviews for this study explored how institutional practices and individual discretion may lead to disparities in the child support program, interviews with parents focused more broadly on discussing their perception of fairness and bias in the program, to identify additional structural, institutional, and individual level factors that may lead to disparities. All parents in the interview sample had been referred for contempt of court for not paying their child support obligations within the year following their enrollment into the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) study. Most were men in their 30s and 40s. They had child support debt ranging from \$600 to over \$100,000 at the time of their interviews. More than half of the parents had been jailed for not paying child support. Findings in this chapter thus represent the viewpoints of a specific subset of noncustodial parents with long and complex child support trajectories, who had struggled to meet their obligations consistently in the past.

Perceptions of Fairness

- **Nearly all parents interviewed for this study said that they had experienced unfair treatment in the child support program.**

Their perception stemmed from enforcement actions they considered overly punitive, difficulties they experienced in navigating the child support process and communicating with the program, order amounts that made it difficult to meet their own needs, a perceived lack of control or agency in case decisions, and a perception that the program was biased toward custodial parents. While parents agreed with child support's broader goal of ensuring the well-being of children, their experiences with the program and enforcement practices led to a perception that the child support program largely functioned to punish noncustodial parents. Interviewees often emphasized what they felt were severe and disproportional consequences for nonpayment. These consequences included interception of tax refunds and pandemic "stimulus" funds,¹ threats and incidences of incarceration and driver's license suspension, and child support debt that accumulated—sometimes without their knowledge—and had interest rates so high that they couldn't get out from under it. For example, one parent discussed how the interception of his pandemic stimulus check contributed to his homelessness. Two fathers in Virginia with child support debt of over \$100,000 described being stuck in a never-ending cycle of debt due to the interest rate imposed on missed payments. One parent said that he found out that he had a child support order only when he was arrested for not paying and for failing to appear as required in court for a contempt hearing. Another said that his case was opened when the custodial parent applied for cash benefits, and that by the time he was aware of the case, he was already \$10,000 in debt.

Some interviewees considered enforcement practices such as driver's license suspension and incarceration to be unfair because they could lessen a parent's ability to pay.² One parent in Virginia said: "Sending someone to jail is not gonna make them pay child support ... because you are in jail. How are you gonna pay it if you're locked up?" Another said: "They got my license, so how do y'all expect me to

¹ At the onset of the pandemic, the federal government expanded unemployment insurance benefits for workers and provided pandemic economic assistance (that is, stimulus payments), intended to help them get through a challenging and unpredictable financial period. Child support agencies withheld a portion of noncustodial parents' unemployment insurance benefits, intercepted one stimulus payment, and intercepted additional taxable income from both of those sources. See Gebrekristos and Cummings (2024).

² Both states have tried to limit the use of driver's license suspension in recent years. Parents have to be found in contempt by a judge before caseworkers can initiate procedures to suspend their licenses. Many staff interviewees in both states said this requirement may have the unintended consequence of increasing contempt referrals, which can lead to jail time for parents, because caseworkers cannot use license suspension as an enforcement tool before making a contempt referral. Agency leaders and supervisors in Virginia emphasized that staff members are guided to "exhaust all administrative enforcement actions" before referring a case to court for contempt, and that caseworkers are required to follow a checklist to ensure that they have met certain criteria related to efforts to reach noncustodial parents and address barriers to child support payment by referring them to Family Engagement Services (described in Box 3.4). A few caseworkers questioned the efficacy of these efforts to reduce contempt referrals. One said: "Has [the checklist] helped lower cases going to court? No. It hasn't.... No way that every [caseworker] is doing that [checklist] in its entirety because it's so lengthy." Taken together, staff interviews in both states pointed to a need to build stronger evidence on the outcomes of policy and practice changes intended to make the child support program fairer.



work? And then every time I go to court is jail time coming with it, like, they put me more in debt than anything. They just sent me to jail on everything.” One parent said that the constant fear of these consequences can have a significant effect on one’s mental health: “Fighting to not get your license suspended, trying to stay out of jail is always on the back of your neck.... If you don’t pay your car note or your cell phone bill, they get cut off or whatever. But you can fight for it to get it turned back on. With this situation, when you mess up, it just has such a harsh repercussion behind it.” Similarly, a few other parents said that the fear of these consequences contributed to a reluctance to engage with child support when they struggled to keep up with support orders.

Echoing these parents’ sentiments, some staff members also said that the punitive perception of child support led many parents to cut off communications with the program when they faced difficulties making payments, creating a cycle where they faced increasingly harsh enforcement actions and debt loads that made it even harder for them to meet their obligations and led to even more avoidance of the program. One staff person said: “[Parents] are constantly running from us because they think that if they show up [at the child support offices] they are going to get arrested.”

- **A majority of the parents described not having a clear understanding of the different functions of the child support program, or the reasons behind decisions and actions taken in their cases. This lack of understanding was often due to difficulties in navigating the child support process and communicating with the child support staff, which negatively affected parents’ perception of fairness.**³

Parents often were not clear on how order amounts are set, how enforcement decisions are made, and why specific decisions were made on their cases. For example, one interviewee could not understand why he owed interest payments on cases where he said he did not currently owe any money: “All three child support cases are in zero balance, but they ... still trying to force me to make interest payments. Why am I making payments if my cases are zero balance? That right there released me from all obligations. So why do you still have me on record for having to pay interest?” Another said that he did not understand why the full amount of his latest payment was not applied to his obligation: “Recently, I paid a \$200 payment, and they only counted me for, like, \$113. I’m like, where did the other \$80 happen to? That \$87?”⁴

Most parents could not identify a dedicated caseworker or staff person they worked with; many called the main child support number in their state or locality to reach someone and often talked to a different person each time. Some parents talked about difficulties in trying to communicate with child support about their cases or in getting the support they needed. One said: “There’s, in theory, someone who could help you resolve this, but the people who answer the phone are not necessarily

³ The PJAC demonstration tested services that sought to address the difficulties described by parents in navigating the child support process and in understanding how decisions are made. However, the parents who participated in this study were in the business-as-usual group and were not eligible to receive those services. The final chapter of this report puts the findings from this study in that context with a discussion of what was learned in the PJAC evaluation. See Skemer (2023).

⁴ The research team did not discuss cases of parent interviewees with child support, or analyze administrative data on order amounts, debt, or payments to explain what these parents experienced.

putting you in touch with that person and they can't answer your questions." Another said: "I could call the caseworker and see what I'm ought to do, but they barely answer the phone. They always ignoring peoples, and they're not helpful neither. They're not helpful.... We don't have nobody we can call, to talk to somebody faster."

These descriptions recalled findings from caseworker interviews that staffing levels and large case-loads could make it difficult for caseworkers to provide timely assistance to parents, and that communication practices among caseworkers could vary widely (with some workers more likely than others to make themselves available to parents for assistance). The only parent in the study who reported working with a caseworker for a few years said that the worker's approach to communicating with him made him engage with the program more consistently, echoing some of the emphasis interviewed staff members placed on the value of engaging parents with compassion and empathy: "She was able to see your energy, learn your heart, see if you really love your children.... She was really able to work with me. So, if I said, 'Hey look, I'm going to be late, and I promise you I have [the payment] in on this day.' If I got it in on that day, I would call her and because I was trying to show [that] I do care."

Some parents in Michigan said the complexities of the judicial context in which the child support program operates made the process difficult to navigate, and that affected their ability to participate by presenting their side and understanding what was happening with their cases—a sentiment that was also shared by some staff members at the Muskegon County Friend of the Court. One parent said: "Not everyone's been through a court system, not everyone knows how the courts work, and they're kind of confusing. And to be honest, to navigate the system, whether it be through, like, walking into the court even or getting to the child support site.... I'm not the smartest tool in the shed, but I did graduate top of my class, and it's hard for me." Two interviewees in the state said that not being able to afford a lawyer also put them at a disadvantage compared with more affluent parents, and that without lawyers they would not get a fair deal in a process they perceived to be partial to custodial parents.

➤ **Most parents reported that they struggled to afford living expenses and other bills after paying their child support orders.**

All parents in the study could not meet their obligations at some point, and most pointed to unemployment, low wages, and what they considered unreasonable order amounts as the reasons why they could not pay the full amount. Most parents described frustration and hardship related to their order amounts, which they said often left them with little to meet their own basic needs; some parents discussed relying on help from family members or partners to make ends meet. Interviewees generally felt that child support orders did not consider how involved they were in their children's lives, including the money they spent when children were with them, or their financial needs.⁵

⁵ Many noncustodial parents make informal contributions—both monetary and in-kind—to children in combination with formal child support or as an alternative to formal child support. These contributions include food, clothing, and school supplies, but estimates of informal support range widely across data sets. Emerging evidence suggests that informal support is more strongly linked to noncustodial parents' time with their children than formal child support. See Waller, Emory, and Paul (2018).



A few parents expressed some unwillingness to pay child support but when they did, these sentiments were often intertwined with struggling to afford their obligations. A handful of interviewees mentioned that they could not work due to health issues such as substance use and injuries, but struggled to justify their inability to pay to child support's standard as they did not qualify for disability benefits. A few interviewees also discussed how the amounts they owed remained rigid and unresponsive to changes in their income or employment, and expressed frustration that child support did not consider changes in their incomes when calculating their order amounts or debts.⁶ About 40 percent of the parents interviewed had tried to modify at least one order, and about half of those parents had succeeded in getting modifications. Some parents found the process for order modification to be difficult to navigate, and a few others said that they did not pursue modification for fear of making things worse for themselves. (Box 4.1 shares voices of parents on their financial hardships and ability to pay child support.)

- **Most parents felt they had little to no control over the direction or outcomes of their cases, with many expressing feelings of hopelessness, dejection, and powerlessness in their dealings with child support. These feelings were often tied to parents' perception that their perspectives were not sought or included in decisions about their cases and that the program was partial to custodial parents.**⁷

Many child support workers believed that communicating with the program could help noncustodial parents take control over their cases (by allowing them to explain their circumstances, negotiate partial payments, or seek supportive services, for example). But parents often said that they did not feel like child support staff members, which for them included court actors, took their concerns seriously, or that their perspectives were factored into the decisions about their cases, which contributed to their feeling no control. These experiences led parents to feel that there was no value in communicating with child support to share their concerns or circumstances, or to “push back” or “appeal” when they felt that decisions were unfair to them.⁸ A majority expressed feeling that child support program actors did not investigate the circumstances, context, or details of their cases enough before

⁶ Child support staff members often shared parents' perception that the rules about order modification were rigid and unresponsive to parents' circumstances. For example, one caseworker in Virginia lamented that she had to deny an early order review request from a parent who was laid off because he violated company policy by using a cell phone at work. The caseworker said she had to consider this event to be a voluntary termination or voluntary unemployment because the company policies and procedures outlined the norms for phone usage, but the parent said he was not aware that cell phone usage violated company policy.

⁷ PJAC services were intended to increase opportunities for parents to share their perspectives and express their concerns, and PJAC case managers learned about tools and techniques to help parents make their voices heard. The PJAC evaluation found that the majority of the parents interviewed in the PJAC services group felt that their voices were listened to when interacting with child support, unlike parents in this study who were in the business-as-usual group. However, many in the PJAC services group also distinguished the opportunity to share their perspectives from believing that their perspectives mattered when decisions were made about their cases—something that parents in this study also did, with many saying that their perspectives were not factored into decision-making. See Treskon and Groskaufmanis (2022), and see the final chapter of this report for a discussion of this study's findings in the context of those from the PJAC evaluation.

⁸ As previously discussed, communication practices vary by child support office and caseworker and the experiences of these parents could have been shaped by staff members who were less inclined to be collaborative in their approach. Parents often also lumped judges and prosecutors with child support agency staff members when they discussed a lack of control and voice in the process.

BOX 4.1

Parent Voices: Economic Hardship and Ability to Pay Child Support

“I was willing to pay, I just couldn’t afford what they wanted me to pay and then be able to live also. You know, myself, as a person has to be able to live. I have to be able to pay my own bills and feed myself and be able to get back and forth to work also.... Whatever is extra after that, I can understand [child support] taking 60 percent of that, but not making it to where I can’t even live and function as a human being.... [When I was paying \$1,500 toward debt each month for past-due support], I couldn’t eat. I was going over to my aunt’s, and she was feeding me. I’d have to ride a pedal bike in the wintertime because I couldn’t afford to pay for gas or insurance on my vehicle.” —Michigan parent

“I have to work several jobs to get a full check, in order to buy food, in order to buy clothes. I ain’t bought no pair of shoes in almost two or three years, and that was help [from] my family.... I ain’t able to take care of my kids like I want to because the child support payments get their payments first.” —Michigan parent

“Day care make it expensive as heck.... When [the custodial parent] used day care so they can work, it makes the price [go up]. I was paying \$600. I couldn’t afford my car, I couldn’t afford nowhere to live, I couldn’t afford food, I couldn’t afford to do nothing. I ended up in the hospital on my deathbed. And I’m just now coming around getting my strength back.” —Virginia parent

“I think it’s unfair how much they charge a person. When mine was about \$600, \$650—to me, it was very high. They were calculating off of hours that were predicted, but not for sure going to be worked. They were calculating my child support off of 50 hours. There was overtime calculation in there too, and I didn’t always work 50 hours.... At the time, some bills would get left unpaid. I actually had really good credit at the time, but I was putting stuff on credit cards and then I maxed all those out and those never got paid.” —Michigan parent

“It just became overwhelming: I would either have money to survive and be able to see my kids physically and let my [child support debt] build up no matter what that meant. [Other option was] to not be able to afford to live myself, and supply for my kids when I had them, things like food.... It was a choice.... It was surviving or paying the courts.” —Michigan parent

deciding on order amounts or enforcement actions, and that decisions got made hastily and with little consideration of factors they perceived as potentially justifying different outcomes.

For many parents, having child support debt also contributed to a feeling of having no say in what happened on their cases and a sense of resignation about the outcomes because they did not feel they would be able to pay off their debts during their lifetimes, barring a major change in their financial circumstances such as “winning the lottery.” One parent whose child support case began when his coparent received public assistance said that he had been paying his debt to the state for more than 19 years. A few said that policies and procedures governing child support, particularly certain automated enforcement actions and guidelines related to order establishment and modification, made them feel like they had no say in what happened on their cases. For example, one parent noted that there was no way he could have stopped his tax refund from



being intercepted to pay off his child support debt.⁹ Another parent felt no control because she could not meet the order amount she owed while caring for other children who lived with her. “I had no control, to be honest.... The little bit of cash I get, I have to get my other kids stuff and whatnot, clothes and everything. So, it’s kinda too hard for me.” Expressing similar sentiments, another parent said that parents can have control over their child support cases when things are going well for them, but not when they experience difficulties, because the guidelines are inflexible to fluctuations in parents’ financial and life circumstances: “Because [of] state laws and how laws are interpreted, I have no control. But I guess I do got kind of control of, you know, as long as you pay on time and do what you’re supposed to, you probably wouldn’t have no issues, but sometimes life happens, obstacles occur. Sometimes you fall down and have to get back up.”

While most interviewees did not think that they could control their child support outcomes, some reported taking concrete actions to prevent enforcement or pay down debt, showing some ability to influence what happened with their cases. For example, four interviewees reported that they were able to prevent their driver’s licenses from being suspended by talking to a judge and setting up a payment plan or making a one-time, lump-sum “purge” payment. Two interviewees reported successfully paying down tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of debt, and six interviewees felt confident in their ability to pay down their debt. Parents who were working at the time of the interviews were more likely to report they were confident about their ability to pay down their debt.

For many interviewees, feeling a lack of control and agency was linked to their relationships with custodial parents and issues related to custody and visitation. For example, two interviewees said that not seeing their children despite making child support payments contributed to their feelings that they had no control over their child support cases. Echoing some staff interviewees in Virginia who said that custodial parents often took cases to court even when the program’s staff chose not to, one parent said that he felt no control because his coparent often took him to court for reasons he did not consider valid: “I was taken to court anytime your bitter baby mama hears ... that they can go down to the courthouse without even sufficient evidence and file whatever they want to file or whatever another baby mama say in the cubicle at the call center that your baby mama working at.” Similarly, another parent said that he was recently referred to court for contempt due to nonpayment, and he attributed that decision to the custodial parent: “[It was] just the mother of my kids being nasty, kept calling about how I’m not paying.” These sentiments also highlight that noncustodial parents’ negative perception of the child support program is often intertwined with their negative perceptions of their coparents and the conflicts in their relationships.

Perceptions of Bias

- **Most parents felt that the child support program is biased against noncustodial parents and favors custodial parents, and these perceptions were often tied to fraught relationships between the parents.**

⁹ Child support agencies are required by federal law to intercept a noncustodial parent’s federal and state tax refunds to collect past-due support.

Perceptions of bias were largely based on the limited extent to which noncustodial parents felt their perspectives were considered by child support workers and court actors, and the belief that custodial parents had greater control of decision-making in their cases.¹⁰ Parents in the study frequently reported feeling as if decisions had been made about their cases before they weighed in, that decisions were made based only on the claims of the custodial parent, that program staff members or judges were more likely to consider custodial parents' concerns than those of noncustodial parents, and that their needs were never considered. For example, one parent described walking into a court room and being told that he was going to jail before he could explain his side of the story. Other parents echoed similar stories of being jailed after judges asked custodial parents what they wanted to have happen, which made interviewees feel like only the custodial parents' perspectives had been considered. One parent said: "I have no control. None at all.... Whatever the mother says goes, my say-so don't matter. That's how it feel to me. A judge don't listen to what I say. If I have my opinion, it don't matter. It's like they go off of what the mother says."

Since most parents in the study were men (and their custodial coparents were women), perceptions of custodial parent bias were closely tied to perceptions of gender bias: Fathers in the study generally felt that that child support favored women and mothers and that these biases showed up in gendered expectations about men's presumed ability to earn and serve as "providers." Many noncustodial fathers in the study felt that the largely female workers who dealt directly with parents were biased against them, stereotyped them as absent fathers who did not take care of their children, and were only concerned with the needs of custodial mothers. However, three female noncustodial parents perceived no gender bias, and suggested that program staff members were generally unsympathetic to noncustodial parents, even women. One of the three female noncustodial parents in the study felt that the program's staff "looked down" on her because she was a mother who owed child support and had significant debt due to nonpayment. (See Box 4.2 for parent voices on perceptions of parenting and gender bias in the child support program.)

➤ **Parents did not report experiencing racial bias in their interactions with the child support agencies or caseworkers, but about half of the interviewees believed that race played a role in how they were treated by the judicial system when their cases went to court.**

As previously discussed, all interviewees had been referred to courts for civil contempt proceedings between 2018 and 2021 after a period of nonpayment of child support, and many said they had served time in jail for noncompliance. In general, parents did not feel that they experienced racial bias in their interactions with program staff members outside of the judicial system, and that gender and child custody status were bigger sources of what they perceived to be unfair and biased treatment from child support workers.

¹⁰ The PJAC model incorporated services to increase parents' perception that the child support program is neutral and does not take sides. Among parents in the PJAC services group who were interviewed for the evaluation, findings suggest that PJAC services increased the share of noncustodial parents who felt that child support was neutral in making decisions. Many noncustodial parents who did not think child support was neutral felt it was biased in favor of custodial parents, which is aligned with what parents in this study expressed. For more on PJAC services, see Skemer (2023) and Treskon and Groskaufmanis (2022).



BOX 4.2

Parent Voices: Perceptions of Gender Bias in Child Support

“It’s mostly women that work in [child support] offices.... When it comes to the men, they just don’t wanna deal with it. Because it’s like, ‘Oh, here’s another one. Here’s another not taking care of his kids.’ [But] that’s not the case at all.” —Male parent, Virginia

“I think it’s kind of biased, to be honest. All women work in child support. So, when another woman [talks with] child support, they gonna agree with that woman at all costs.” —Male parent, Virginia

“It [being male] might have a lot to do with why they expected me to pay so much so fast basically. I think they expect more of the men, to basically work and provide and do all this than they do with females.” —Male parent, Michigan

“I feel like they should stop looking at fathers like second-class citizens. It’s like they put the mothers up on a pedestal and the fathers will always be down below.” —Male parent, Michigan

“[The message from the child support program is that] the noncustodial parent doesn’t have any needs, shouldn’t have any needs, and that their job is to pay. Whereas you’re taking away their job as a parent. A parent’s job, yes, is to support their child financially. Of course, we don’t have a choice. That’s the world we live in, money runs everything. But a noncustodial parent is just as important to the child and should be to the courts as well. You can’t say one parent is more important and has more needs than another parent and you’re alienating that parent. You’re not giving that parent an opportunity to still be a parent. There is no difference. Just because I’m a noncustodial parent doesn’t mean I’m not an active, up-front parent.” —Female parent, Michigan

When discussing their experiences with child support at the courts, Black parents (most of whom were in Virginia) felt that they received worse treatment, less leniency, and harsher punishment for nonpayment of child support than White parents, including more frequent incarceration. For example, one parent said that a prosecutor representing the child support program referred to him as a “deadbeat” dad—a racialized stereotype of fathers who are largely absent from their children’s lives—when he went to court after not being able to pay child support at the onset of the pandemic.¹¹ A few caseworkers in Virginia shared similar stories from their observations at the court and anecdotes shared by parents in their caseload. One said that a parent once “came to the office crying after court and said, [a prosecutor] called him a deadbeat. And he said ‘I’m not a deadbeat dad. I spend plenty of time with my children. I may not have the money to pay child support, but my children are with me every weekend. I’m doing things with my children.’”

A few White parents in the study agreed with the sentiment that the child support program treated parents of color more harshly, based on their observations. One White parent in Michigan said: “They don’t do that stuff for the White people, for the most part, usually Blacks or Mexicans that they do

¹¹ Rambert (2021).

that to,” when talking about punitive enforcement and incarceration for nonpayment of child support. (See Box 4.3 for parent voices on perception of racial bias.)

BOX 4.3

Parent Voices: Perceptions of Racial Bias in Child Support

“Every time you turn around, when I was locked up, I seen guys, it was the same color as me and they was going through the same thing. You get six months. That’s too long, that’s too much to be locked up for some child support that you can’t pay because you locked up.” —Black male parent, Virginia

“I know people that owe more over six grand in child support, and they never been to jail or never went in front of a judge or none of that. And I don’t know who’s going to bring race in this ... but my first time going in front of a judge for not making a couple payments, she gives me a year.” —Black male parent, Virginia

“When I get locked up for child support, I don’t even see no different kind of race. It’s always African American that’s mostly getting time for child support.... When I got the seven and a half months, I really thought, like, the judge wasn’t listening to nothing I had to say, like she already had her mind made up because I’m only in court [for] 10 minutes. They just said that I won’t pay because I ain’t had no job. So, she already made a decision that we gonna lock you up.” —Black male parent, Virginia

As for addressing perceived bias, most parents in the interview sample did not think a bias-free child support program was one where everyone was treated the same (for example, by having a formula dictate their child support orders or enforcement actions automatically taken). Echoing many of the staff members interviewed, they wanted the decision-makers in the child support program (which they considered judges, prosecutors, and other judicial staff members to be a part of) to consider a family’s specific circumstances and the well-being of the noncustodial parent along with that of the children and the custodial parents.

Some interviewees felt that the child support program should be used only when a parent refused to help with the costs of raising a child, which did not align with their image of themselves as parents. These parents preferred an approach where they could support their children directly and without the involvement of a government agency. For example, one parent felt that because he was paying for the custodial parent’s living expenses during their separation, he had demonstrated his willingness to support his child financially outside of the child support program and that a formal child support order was not needed. However, staff members said that child support cases were often opened by custodial parents when coparents could not agree on financial support arrangements for their children on their own, and that parents able to agree on informal or formal arrangements typically did not involve the child support program. Interviews with staff members and noncustodial parents revealed these underlying differences in perceptions of the program’s goals that affect their engage-



ment with one another, where both groups agree on making sure the children are supported but differ on what the program's role should be.

When discussing how child support could be fairer to noncustodial parents, interviewees spoke about the need to better consider the basic needs of parents; make it easier to navigate the child support process and adjust their orders when they fall on hard times; provide options to reduce high debt; and shift from punitive enforcement actions to a more supportive approach to help them increase their ability to pay, including employment programs and other supportive services.¹² These recommendations are discussed in the concluding chapter.

¹² Nearly 30 percent of the parents interviewed (6 of 21) suggested that child support should provide supportive services, including employment programs. They seemed to be unaware that both states offered employment and supportive services to noncustodial parents, suggesting a gap in communication about these services to parents who may need or want them.

5 Discussion

This chapter summarizes findings from the study and shares recommendations from staff members and parents on improving fairness and equity in the child support program. It also presents a brief discussion of existing research evidence to provide context for the findings and recommendations, including evidence from the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration that tested the efficacy of incorporating procedural justice principles (the idea of fairness in processes) into child support practices as an alternative to contempt.

Summary of Findings

Parent and Staff Perceptions

The study engaged a specific subset of noncustodial parents with long and complex child support trajectories, who have struggled to meet their obligations consistently, and who have been referred to court for contempt at least once due to nonpayment of their child support. These parents found the child support program intimidating and its processes difficult to navigate. Most did not have consistent contact with an individual staff person in the child support

program and did not know who their caseworkers were. For many parents, their only form of communication with child support was through the letters they received from the program, or when they went to court for contempt proceedings. They felt that their voices were not sought or included in decisions about their cases, and that the program did not sufficiently account for their financial and life circumstances in setting their order amounts or using enforcement actions.

Parents largely felt that the program actors, including caseworkers and judges, unfairly viewed them to be inferior parents who did not care about their children because of their custody status, and felt they were prone to make decisions biased in favor of custodial parents. Many Black parents felt that judicial child support processes also exposed them to racial bias from legal system actors such as judges and prosecutors. These experiences shaped parents' perception of fair treatment, and in many cases, made them less likely to engage or interact with the child support program—potentially affecting the outcomes and trajectories of their cases. Noncustodial parents' perception of unfair treatment and bias in the program was also frequently intertwined with their often-negative relationships with custodial parents.

Exploration of the child support guidelines, policies, processes, and practices during staff interviews provided insights and context for how the parents described their experiences and perceptions. Most staff members did not believe that the program was biased in favor of custodial parents or that institutional factors related to the program contributed to gender, race, or ethnic disparities in outcomes for noncustodial parents. Nearly all said that their focus was on the well-being of children and making sure they have financial support to thrive, which could make them seem to take the side of custodial parents.

At the same time, most staff members acknowledged that parents with low incomes face structural barriers to employment and child support payment, and that support orders often did not reflect what parents could truly pay after meeting their basic needs. A majority said guidelines for determining order amounts might create disparities in outcomes, including lower payment compliance and higher rates of enforcement among parents with low incomes, relative to those who were more affluent. Most staff members felt that the enforcement actions available to them were not effective in compelling parents to pay if they could not afford their orders and might even lead parents to further disengage from the program—a sentiment that was also shared by some parents. Staff members conceded that the child support process could be difficult to navigate for parents, and that communication practices at the institutional and individual level could affect noncustodial parents' ability and willingness to engage with the program.

A majority did not believe that the biases of individual workers in the child support program led them to favor one group of parents over others, and those who participated in the study were generally sympathetic to the struggles many parents faced in meeting their obligations. However, staff members also often categorized noncompliant parents into two types—those deserving or undeserving of leniency—based on their assessments of parents' willingness to communicate with the program, engage in employment or supportive services offered by the program, take any job they could find no matter the pay or benefits, or make partial payments. Caseworkers often equated parents' lack



of communication with the child support program as a signal of “not trying,” while also saying that many parents received uncaring and uncompassionate treatment from other caseworkers, judges, or prosecutors when they did communicate. But parents who fell behind on payments or accumulated debt said that they were hesitant to contact child support for fear of repercussions or judgment. While acknowledging the structural inequities noncompliant parents faced, most staff members held parents personally responsible for their inability to pay and considered unemployment, underemployment, and nonpayment of child support to be a matter of choice. They often used language that could be construed as bias against poor people—invoking stereotypes of noncustodial fathers who did not want to work, who did not want to help themselves, and who did not care for their children.

Many staff members were also conflicted about how the program can balance fairness to noncustodial parents with low incomes and custodial parents, who generally live with the children and are responsible for the day-to-day expenses of caring for them. It is important to note that custodial parents were not interviewed for this study and would probably have different perspectives on fairness and bias in the child support system based on their experiences. For example, in interviews for the PJAC evaluation, custodial parents who said that their order amounts were unfair usually thought the amount was not sufficient to help with the costs of raising a child.¹

Parent and Staff Recommendations

While staff members and parents differed in their perceptions of fairness and bias in the child support program, common themes arose from the conversations with the two groups on how the program could be fairer to parents. These areas of consensus included:

- **Setting orders to reflect parents’ ability to pay.** Staff members and parents both highlighted that when parents have low incomes, child support orders can take a large share of those incomes, and affect parents’ ability to sustain themselves. Staff members asserted that child support guidelines should better consider noncustodial parents’ basic needs, reflect cost-of-living increases, and use their after-tax, net incomes for calculations. Conversations also suggested that agencies may benefit from stronger guidance on how to assess parents’ ability to pay and how to consider parents’ specific circumstances when establishing orders (particularly when imputing wages to establish order amounts), which may also require improvements to the systems agencies use to capture employment information. These findings align with ones from the larger PJAC demonstration.²
- **Better addressing fluctuations in parents’ incomes and circumstances when enforcing and modifying orders.** Parents spoke of many instances where they felt that the program was inflexible during their times of need and when their financial and life circumstances changed, which cemented their perception that child support does not care about the

¹ Treskon and Groskaufmanis (2022).

² Skemer (2023); Gebrekristos and Cummings (2024).

well-being of noncustodial parents. Similarly, many staff members emphasized the need for more flexible order-modification and enforcement policies and practices when parents “fall on hard times,” including when parents face physical and mental health crises or when they face sudden financial challenges. Child support policies allow for orders to be reviewed and modified when parents’ financial circumstances change, but staff members and parents suggested that the program could do more to streamline and speed up the modification process so that orders match parents’ current ability to pay.³ Many parents with low incomes also participate in informal work arrangements, including short-term gig work and self-employment, where income fluctuations are common.⁴ Staff members said that these jobs are not usually subject to automatic wage withholding, and that the child support program should consider ways to modernize its withholding policies and processes to align with changing realities of work.

- **Making it easier to pay off child support debt.** Parents spoke about the negative effects of child support debt on their economic, physical, and mental well-being—echoing an emerging body of research that shows that a high child support debt burden can have harmful consequences for low-income men’s child support payments, formal employment, relationships with coparents and children, and mental health.⁵ Many staff members and parents also said that high debt amounts make it likelier for parents to stop communicating with the program or making payments because they feel resigned to its existence and hopeless about paying it off. Both of the states that participated in this study have adopted policies to avoid having parents accrue debt when they are incarcerated (as required by federal law), and both offer programs to help parents pay off debt they owe the state. Parents in Michigan can request a payment plan and negotiate to have the interest reduced or waived if they make regular payments. Virginia offers a program where a small portion of a parent’s debt owed to the state is forgiven in exchange for regular payments or participating in the Family Engagement Services program (described in Box 3.4). However, interviews for this study and findings from the PJAC evaluation suggest that a lack of outreach and communication about these programs, eligibility limits, barriers to entry such as documentation requirements, and requirements that parents make steady or consecutive payments make it difficult for parents with low incomes and high debt burdens to participate in debt-compromise programs.⁶ Some staff members in Virginia also said that the child support program should

³ Order modifications typically require evidence of a change in the financial, employment, or custody circumstances that dictate order amounts. The PJAC demonstration offered services to help parents in the PJAC services group navigate the modification process, but PJAC’s ability to increase rates of order modification was limited, as only a subset of parents were likely to meet the criteria for modification. See Skemer et al. (2022).

⁴ A 2022 study by the Office of Child Support Services found that noncustodial parents were more likely to participate in the gig economy than other workers. In 2017, one in seven working noncustodial parents was “performing gig work as their main job,” which included being an independent contractor, working on call, working for a temporary agency, and working for a contract company. Sorensen (2022).

⁵ Robbins, Waller, Nepomnyaschy, and Miller (2022); Cancian, Heinrich, and Chung (2013); Miller and Mincy (2012); Turner and Waller (2017).

⁶ Phillips (2021).



not charge interest on past-due payments (whether those payments were owed to the state or to custodial parents), to help parents accrue less debt and make it easier for them to pay down their balances; a few said that the agency should consider strategies to negotiate debt-compromise agreements between parents for debt owed to custodial parents.⁷

- **Improving communication with parents.** Staff members frequently emphasized the importance of communication, but echoed parents in highlighting that the program could do better. They suggested that agencies consider reduced caseloads, guidance and training for caseworkers on more active and customer-service-oriented communication about the child support process, and a practice of hiring workers who better represent the demographic characteristics and experiences of noncustodial parents. Many also emphasized the need for “early intervention,” or better communication practices and processes to help parents understand the child support process and their obligations early in their engagement with the program, to potentially avoid nonpayment, debt accrual, and other challenges down the line. Parents did not like having to speak with different people at call centers, hotlines, or child support offices to get to the person who could help them with their specific needs, and many felt they were always speaking with people who had no direct knowledge of their cases, who did not understand or care about their perspectives, and who could not clearly explain things they needed help with. Staff members generally empathized with the parents but stressed that staffing levels and high caseloads made it difficult to create single points of contact for parents. For example, Virginia asked caseworkers to share their direct numbers with parents, but with caseloads of over 1,000 cases, many workers said that it was not possible for them to give individual attention to everyone in a consistent or timely manner.
- **Supporting parents with employment and other services.** About one-third of the parents interviewed felt that the child support program should take a more supportive approach to helping them address challenges to nonpayment, rather than taking punitive enforcement actions when they could not pay. Both states in this study have invested in initiatives to provide employment-oriented services to parents, and a majority of the staff members interviewed for this study felt that child support agencies should play a role in helping parents secure jobs and address barriers to employment such as substance use and transportation challenges. But there was a lot of disagreement among program staff members about how these services should be designed, particularly regarding how the program should approach enforcement while parents are in a training or recovery program and are not able to work.

⁷ The PJAC evaluation tested strategies to help parents negotiate child support debt owed to custodial parents but fewer than 10 percent of noncustodial parents in the PJAC services group received forgiveness of debt owed to custodial parents. PJAC case managers found it challenging to broker agreements between parents, but found that introducing the option of forgiveness to custodial parents and explaining why they might waive or compromise on debts owed to them and bringing parents together to discuss an agreement were beneficial strategies for overall parent engagement. See Phillips (2021).

Putting Parent and Staff Recommendations in the Context of Evidence

Some of the improvement strategies and interventions that parents and staff members suggested—particularly those related to improving communication, making child support services easier to navigate, and providing employment-related support—have been tested and evaluated. Findings from these evaluations are discussed below to provide context to what staff members and parents recommended.

Procedural Justice

Parents in this study often invoked concepts of procedural justice (as described in Box 5.1) during interviews: They said that the lack of respect, voice, neutrality, and helpfulness they perceived from the child support program, and their difficulties in understanding the child support process, made them feel that the program was biased and unfair. These feelings of bias and unfairness influenced whether they communicated with the program, and if so, how, which may have affected their child support outcomes. The PJAC demonstration incorporated procedural justice principles into child support enforcement and tested many of the improvement strategies suggested by parents and staff members, including smaller caseloads that let parents receive more individual case management focused on their own case histories and a collaborative approach that engaged parents in determining solutions and increased outreach and communication with parents.⁸

However, the evaluation found that while interpersonal interactions with child support staff members improved for parents who received PJAC services, their overall perceptions of the child support program remained negative.⁹

BOX 5.1 The Five Key Elements of Procedural Justice as Applied to the Child Support Context

- **Respect:** Parents should believe they were treated with dignity and respect and their concerns were taken seriously.
- **Understanding:** Parents should understand the child support process and have their questions answered.
- **Voice:** Parents should have a chance to be heard by sharing their perspectives and expressing their concerns.
- **Neutrality:** Parents should perceive the decision-making process to be impartial.
- **Helpfulness:** Parents should feel that the child support agency was helpful and interested in addressing their situations.

⁸ Treskon, Phillips, Groskaufmanis, and Skemer (2022).

⁹ Treskon and Groskaufmanis (2022).



PJAC services also did not improve parents' compliance with their child support obligations.¹⁰ These findings suggest that parents' sense of fairness in the child support process and their ability to comply with their obligations may be tied more to having order amounts that are within their financial reach, and that improved experiences with child support staff members cannot address the structural barriers to payment that many of them face.¹¹

Despite the PJAC evaluation results, parents in this study highlighted that they want and deserve to be treated fairly and with respect; procedural justice can be a useful framework for the child support program to achieve those ends. In addition, PJAC is an example of applying procedural justice to child support at a late stage, after parents have had substantial, formative interactions with the program and have become eligible for contempt.¹² Most staff members in the current round of interviews felt that the child support program could improve payment compliance and other outcomes by better engaging, educating, and supporting parents in the early stages of their interactions with the program, before they found themselves in a cycle of nonpayment, enforcement, and debt. It is possible that interventions that aim to incorporate procedural justice earlier in the child support process could prove more effective than PJAC.¹³

Employment Services

Very few employment programs led by child support have been evaluated using random assignment evaluations, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the effects of these programs on noncustodial parents' employment, earnings, or child support compliance.¹⁴ A Congressional Research Service review of employment programs led by child support concluded that “there is no rigorous evidence that spending on employment services is less effective than alternative collection strategies,” and that many child support practitioners believe from experience that these programs are more effective at improving compliance for parents who face employment barriers than punitive enforcement tools—something that a lot of staff members and parents in this study also believe.¹⁵ (Box 5.2 provides a summary of recent evidence from employment programs led by child support.)

Findings from this study are consistent with existing research showing that it is a challenge to shift child support's culture from its historical focus on collections and enforcement to working in new ways to support parents with employment and other barriers. It is particularly difficult to over-

¹⁰ Skemer (2023).

¹¹ Treskon and Groskaufmanis (2022); Skemer (2023).

¹² Skemer (2023).

¹³ Child support agencies that participated in the PJAC Peer Learning Sites (PLS) initiative developed strategies and materials to integrate procedural justice-informed approaches into child support processes such as order establishment, order modifications, and enforcement prior to contempt. These sites identified opportunities to use procedural justice to make communication and processes clearer and more helpful to parents early in their engagement with child support. PLS initiatives were not rigorously evaluated, and the efficacy of the initiatives is not known. For more information on PLS and procedural justice see Wurmfeld (2022).

¹⁴ For a recent review of child support-led employment programs, see Office of Child Support Services (2024).

¹⁵ Landers (2020), p. 7.

BOX 5.2

Evidence from Employment Programs for Noncustodial Parents

Recent demonstrations of employment programs for noncustodial parents found mixed results but show promise.

- The Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) used random assignment to test the effectiveness of child support-led employment programs for noncustodial parents who were behind in their child support. Demonstration programs offered a package of services: short-term employment services, case management, enhanced child support services, and parenting classes. The evaluation found that CSPED programs brought parents' orders more in line with their ability to pay, improved parents' satisfaction with child support services, and increased parents' sense of responsibility for children, but had no effect on child support compliance. For more information see Cancian, Meyer, and Wood (2019).
- Two demonstrations—the Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration (ETJD) and the Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration (STED)—used random assignment to test the effectiveness of offering short-term subsidized employment to individuals who wanted to work but struggled to secure consistent employment. Four of the demonstration programs targeted noncustodial parents. The evaluation found that during the final year of a 30-month follow-up period—a span that occurred after nearly all participants had left subsidized employment—two of the four programs targeting noncustodial parents increased participants' earnings, and one of the four increased the amount of child support parents paid. For more information, see Barden et al. (2018); Cummings and Bloom (2020).
- STED also examined longer-term impacts on employment and earnings (after eight years) for two of the four programs that targeted noncustodial parents. The analysis found that one program maintained effects on earnings through a fourth year of follow-up data collection, and although effects on earnings tapered off after this point, a positive pattern of earnings increases persisted for six years after study enrollment. In that program, the child support agency was closely involved and implemented an incentive policy of routinely reducing order amounts in exchange for program participation. For more information see Cummings (2023); Cummings and Bloom (2020).
- The Families Forward Demonstration (FFD) tested the effectiveness of offering free occupational training for in-demand jobs, employment services, additional comprehensive support, and responsive child support services to noncustodial parents. An analysis of child support outcome measures for program participants before and after program enrollment found that the trends in child support payments for participants improved relative to their preenrollment trends. While more rigorous testing is needed, the FFD model shows some promise for connecting parents to jobs in their chosen career paths and for improving their relationships with the child support system. For more information, see Wasserman, Freedman, Rodney, and Schultz (2021).



come mistrust among parents and build organizational capabilities for a different kind of operations (staffing, culture, processes, etc.) with limited funding.¹⁶ Findings from this study also highlight that parents who cannot afford to pay child support face many structural barriers to employment and well-being outside of the program—issues that the program cannot solve on its own. However, some parents in the study wanted help overcoming their barriers to payment, and more research is needed to learn how the child support program can more effectively connect them to services that improve their earnings and payment status. Evidence from other studies suggests that when employment and training programs collaborate with child support agencies to integrate responsive child support services—making it easier for parents to engage in training and employment and to navigate their child support obligations—they may generate better outcomes than they do when child support agencies are not closely involved.¹⁷

Looking Forward

This qualitative study identified various ways institutional factors (child support guidelines, policies, processes, and practices) and individual discretion by actors in the child support program can lead to variations in parent engagement and experiences. More research is needed into the ways child support policies and practices lead to payment and enforcement outcomes for parents with different characteristics. For example, there is limited research on the effectiveness of different enforcement tools for collecting payments, including which tools are effective for parents with different case characteristics and payment patterns. Evidence is also needed on how different organizational practices—such as the distribution of caseloads (for example, one caseworker handling a case from opening through closure versus having different caseworkers handle different parts of the process), the use of automation, or the extent of caseworker discretion—affect child support outcomes for different groups. Efforts to improve fairness in the child support system should be accompanied by rigorous and systemic efforts to assess their effectiveness.

A forthcoming quantitative analysis that complements this qualitative study will assess racial, ethnic, gender, and earnings-level disparities at different points in the child support process in Michigan and Virginia. The analysis will look at whether there are disparities in order-establishment, modification, and enforcement outcomes for different groups of noncustodial parents, which this qualitative study cannot address. Taken together, the findings from the qualitative and quantitative studies can offer insights on potential mechanisms to reduce potential disparities.

¹⁶ Noyes, Vogel, and Howard (2018); Vogel (2019); Vogel and Hossain (2023); Wasserman, Freedman, Rodney, and Schultz (2021).

¹⁷ Landers (2020).

REFERENCES

- Barden, Bret, Randall Juras, Cindy Redcross, Mary Farrell, and Dan Bloom. 2018. *New Perspectives on Creating Jobs: Final Impacts of the Next Generation of Subsidized Employment Programs*. New York: MDRC.
- Battle, Brittany Pearl. 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.
- Battle, Brittany Pearl. 2019. "'They Look at You like You're Nothing': Stigma and Shame in the Child Support System." *Symbolic Interaction* 42, 4: 640-668.
- Berger, Lawrence M., Maria Cancian, Angela Guarin, Leslie Hodges, and Daniel R. Meyer. 2021. "Barriers to Formal Child Support Payment." *Social Service Review* 95, 2: 312-357.
- Binder, Ariel J., and John Bound. 2019. "The Declining Labor Market Prospects of Less-Educated Men." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33, 2: 163-190.
- Bloomer, Stacey R., Theresa Ann Sipe, and Danielle E. Ruedt. 2002. "Child Support Payment and Child Visitation: Perspectives from Nonresident Fathers and Resident Mothers." *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 29, 2.
- Burgess, Diana J. 2010. "Are Providers More Likely to Contribute to Healthcare Disparities Under High Levels of Cognitive Load? How Features of the Healthcare Setting May Lead to Biases in Medical Decision Making." *Medical Decision Making* 30, 2: 246-257.
- Cancian, Maria, Carolyn J. Heinrich, and Yiyoon Chung. 2013. "Discouraging Disadvantaged Fathers' Employment: An Unintended Consequence of Policies Designed to Support Families." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 32, 4: 758-784.
- Cancian, Maria, Yoona Kim, and Daniel R. Meyer. 2021. *Who Is Not Paying Child Support?* Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty.
- Charbonneau, Amanda, and Jack Glaser. 2021. "Suspicion and Discretion in Policing: How Laws and Policies Contribute to Inequity." *UC Irvine Law Review* 11, 5.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé, Neil T. Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds. 2015. *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*. New York: The New Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 2017. *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings*. New York: The New Press.
- Cullen, James. 2018. "Sentencing Laws and How They Contribute to Mass Incarceration." Website: <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/sentencing-laws-and-how-they-contribute-mass-incarceration>.
- Cummings, Danielle. 2020. "Who Is at Risk of Contempt of Court for Child Support Noncompliance?" New York: MDRC.
- Cummings, Danielle. 2023. "Effects of the Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration on Earnings After Eight Years." New York: MDRC.
- Cummings, Danielle, and Dan Bloom. 2020. *Can Subsidized Employment Programs Help Disadvantaged Job Seekers? A Synthesis of Findings from Evaluations of 13 Programs*. OPRE Report 2020-23. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Deyman, Natalie, and Letitia L. Passarella. 2018. "Maryland: 2017 Snapshot of Noncustodial Parents." Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland School of Social Work.
- Farmer, Paul. 2004. *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor (Volume 4)*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Farrell, Mary, Caitlin Anzelone, Dan Cullinan, and Jessica Wille. 2014. *Taking the First Step: Using Behavioral Economics to Help Incarcerated Parents Apply for Child Support Order Modifications*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Fiske, Amelia, Ilaria Galasso, Johanna Eichinger, Stuart McLennan, Isabella Radhuber, Bettina Zimmerman, and Barbara Prainsack. 2022. "The Second Pandemic: Examining Structural Inequality Through Reverberations of COVID-19 in Europe." *Social Science and Medicine* 292, 114634: 1-11.
- Gebrekristos, Semhar, and Danielle Cummings. 2024. *The Child Support Program's Response to the Pandemic and Economic Assistance: A Look at Three Sites in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration*. New York: MDRC.
- Ghandnoosh, Nazgol, and Celeste Barry. 2023. *One in Five: Disparities in Crime and Policing*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project.
- Glaser, Jack. 2024. "Disrupting the Effects of Implicit Bias: The Case of Discretion and Policing." *Daedalus* 153, 1: 151-173.
- Grall, Timothy. 2020. *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2017*. Washington DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Hodges, Leslie, Daniel R. Meyer, and Maria Cancian. 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.

- Johnson, Tiffani J., Robert W. Hickey, Galen E. Switzer, Elizabeth Miller, Daniel G. Winger, Margaret Nguyen, Richard A. Saladino, and Leslie R. Hausmann. 2016. "The Impact of Cognitive Stressors in the Emergency Department on Physician Implicit Racial Bias." *Academic Emergency Medicine* 23, 3: 297-305.
- Kim, Yoona, Katarina Liptrot-Ploch, and Daniel R. Meyer. 2024. *Racial and Ethnic Disproportionality and Disparity in Child Support: A Scoping Review*. Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty.
- Kricheli-Katz, Tamar, and Keren Weinshall. 2023. "Judging Fast or Slow: The Effects of Reduced Caseloads on Gender- and Ethnic-Based Disparities in Case Outcomes." *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies* 20, 4: 961-1,004.
- Kutateladze, Besiki Luka, and Nancy R. Andiloro. 2014. *Prosecution and Racial Justice in New York County - Technical Report*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice.
- Lake, Jaboa. 2021. Center for American Progress. "Preventing and Removing Barriers to Housing Security for People with Criminal Convictions." Website: <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/preventing-removing-barriers-housing-security-people-criminal-convictions/>.
- Landers, Patrick A. 2020. "Child Support Enforcement-Led Employment Services for Noncustodial Parents: In Brief." Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.
- Landers, Patrick A. 2021. *Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Nonresident Parents*. Washington DC: Congressional Research Service.
- Lartey, James. 2023. The Marshall Project. "How Criminal Records Hold Back Millions of People." Website: <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2023/04/01/criminal-record-job-housing-barriers-discrimination>.
- McDaniel, Marla, Tyler Woods, Pratt Eleanor, and Margaret Simms. 2017. *Identifying Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services: A Conceptual Framework and Literature Review*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- Meyer, Daniel R., Yoonsook Ha, and Mei-Chen Hu. 2008. "Do High Child Support Orders Discourage Child Support Payments?" *Social Service Review* 82, 1: 93-118.
- Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support. n.d. *Understanding Child Support: A Handbook for Parents*. Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Health & Human Services, Office of Child Support.
- Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity. 2023. "Minimum Wage Set to Increase January 1, 2024." Website: <https://www.michigan.gov/leo/bureaus-agencies/ber/wage-and-hour/minimum-wage-january-2024>.
- Miller, Daniel P., and Ronald B. Mincy. 2012. "Falling Further Behind? Child Support Arrears and Fathers' Labor Force Participation." *Social Service Review* 86, 4: 604-635.
- National Child Support Engagement Association. 2021. "Quick Facts: Child Support Guidelines." McLean, VA: National Child Support Engagement Association.
- National Conference of State Legislatures. 2023. "Child Support Pass-Through and Disregard Policies for Public Assistance Recipients." Website: <https://www.ncsl.org/human-services/child-support-pass-through-and-disregard-policies-for-public-assistance-recipients>.
- Nowacki, Jeffrey S., and Tyrell Spencer. 2019. "Police Discretion, Organizational Characteristics, and Traffic Stops: An Analysis of Racial Disparity in Illinois." *International Journal of Police Science and Management* 21, 1: 4-16.
- Noyes, Jennifer L., Lisa Klein Vogel, and Lanikque Howard. 2018. *Final Implementation Findings from the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) Evaluation*. Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty.
- Office of Child Support Enforcement. 2016. "Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization in Child Support Enforcement Programs 81, 93492 (Dec. 20, 2016) (amending 45 CFR Parts 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 307, 308, and 309)." Washington, DC: Office of Child Support Enforcement.
- Office of Child Support Enforcement. 2021. *Essentials for Attorneys in Child Support Enforcement*. Washington DC: Office of Child Support Enforcement.
- Office of Child Support Enforcement, Division of Policy and Training. 2017. *Final Rule Summary*. Washington DC: Office of Child Support Enforcement.
- Office of Child Support Services. 2024. "Employment and Training Services for Noncustodial Parents in the Child Support Program 89, 47109 (May 31, 2024) (amending 45 CFR parts 302, 303, and 304)." Washington, DC: Office of Child Support Services.
- Pager, Douglas and Hana Shepherd. 2008. "The Sociology of Discrimination: Racial Discrimination in Employment, Housing, Credit, and Consumer Markets." *Annual Review of Sociology* 34: 181-209.
- Phillips, Douglas. 2021. "Reducing Child Support Debt in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) Demonstration." New York: MDRC.
- Quillian, Lincoln, and John J. Lee. 2023. "Trends in Racial and Ethnic Discrimination in Hiring in Six Western Countries." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120, 6.

- Quillian, Lincoln, Devah Pager, Ole Hexel, and Arnfinn H. Midtbøen. 2017. "Meta-analysis of Field Experiments Shows No Change in Racial Discrimination in Hiring over Time." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in the United States of America* 114, 41: 10,870-10,875.
- Rambert, Omarr K. 2021. "The Absent Black Father: Race, The Welfare-Child Support System, and the Cyclical Nature of Fatherlessness." *UCLA Law Review* 68, 1.
- Robbins, Nathan L., Maureen R. Waller, Lenna Nepomnyaschy, and Daniel P. Miller. 2022. "Child Support Debt and the Well-Being of Disadvantaged Fathers of Color." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 84, 5: 1,366-1,386.
- Selekman, Rebekah, and Amy Johnson. 2019. *An Examination of the Use and Effectiveness of Child Support Enforcement Tools in Six States*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica.
- Sellew, Charlie, and Ashley Johnson. 2021. *Parent Perspectives in the Child Support Program*. Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Support Division.
- Sibilla, Nick. 2020. *Barred from Working: A Nationwide Study of Occupational Licensing Barriers for Ex-Offenders*. Arlington, VA: Institute for Justice.
- Skemer, Melanie, Jennifer Hausler, Olivia Williams, Louisa Treskon, and Jacqueline Groskaufmanis. 2022. *A Comparison of Approaches Informed by Procedural Justice and Traditional Enforcement in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration*. New York: MDRC.
- Skemer, Melanie. 2023. *Testing a New Approach to Addressing Nonpayment of Child Support: Effects of the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration*. New York: MDRC.
- Sorensen, Elaine. 2021. *Characteristics of Custodial Parents and Their Children: Who Receives Child Support (IV-D) Services and Who Doesn't?* Washington, DC: Office of Child Support Enforcement.
- Sorensen, Elaine. 2022. *Noncustodial Parents and the GIG Economy*. Washington DC: Office of Child Support Enforcement.
- State Court Administrative Office, Friend of the Court Bureau. 2021. *2021 Michigan Child Support Formula Manual*. Lansing, MI: State Court Administrative Office, Friend of the Court Bureau.
- Tollestrup, Jessica. 2024. *Child Support Enforcement: Program Basics*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.
- Treskon, Louisa, and Jacqueline Groskaufmanis. 2022. "Parents' Reflections on Their Experiences with the Child Support Program in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration." New York: MDRC.
- Treskon, Louisa, Douglas Phillips, Jacqueline Groskaufmanis, and Melanie Skemer. 2022. *Procedural Justice in Child Support Enforcement: Lessons from an Implementation Study of the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration*. New York: MDRC.
- Turetsky, Vicki. 2019. *Reforming Child Support to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families*. Baltimore, MD: The Abell Foundation.
- Turner, Kimberly J., and Maureen R. Waller. 2017. "Indebted Relationships: Child Support Arrears and Nonresident Fathers' Involvement with Children." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 79, 1: 24-43.
- Virginia Department of Social Services. 2024a. "Child Support Guidelines Review Panel." Website: <https://www.dss.virginia.gov/family/dcse/panel.cgi>.
- Virginia Department of Social Services, Division of Child Support Enforcement. 2024b. *Program Manual*. Glen Allen, VA: Virginia Department of Social Services.
- Vogel, Lisa Klein, Alexis M. Dennis, Liesl Hostetter, and Hilary Shager. 2023. *New Approaches to Child Support Services: Custodial Parent Perspectives*. Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty.
- Vogel, Lisa Klein, and Samina Hossain. 2023. "Child Support Agencies as Connectors." *Journal of Human Services* 43, 1.
- Vogel, Lisa Klein. 2019. *Challenges and Opportunities for Engaging Noncustodial Parents in Employment and Other Services*. Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty.
- Vogel, Lisa Klein. 2020a. "Barriers to Meeting Formal Child Support Obligations: Noncustodial Father Perspectives." *Children and Youth Services Review* 110: 104764.
- Vogel, Lisa Klein. 2020b. "Help Me Help You: Identifying and Addressing Barriers to Child Support Compliance." *Children and Youth Services Review* 110: 104763.
- Waller, Maureen R., Allison Dwyer Emory, and Elise Paul. 2018. "Money, Time, or Something Else? Measuring Nonresident Fathers' Informal and In-Kind Contributions." *Journal of Family Issues* 39, 13: 3,612-3,640.
- Wasserman, Kyla, Lily Freedman, Zaina Rodney, and Caroline Schultz. 2021. *Connecting Parents to Occupational Training: A Partnership Between Child Support Agencies and Local Service Providers*. New York: MDRC.
- Western, Bruce, and Catherine Sirois. 2017. "Racial Inequality in Employment and Earnings After Incarceration." Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Department of Sociology.

Wilson, Valerie, and William Darity Jr. 2022. *Understanding Black-White Disparities in Labor Market Outcomes Requires Models That Account for Persistent Discrimination and Unequal Bargaining Power*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

Wurmfeld, Kate. 2022. *Procedural Justice in the Child Support Process: An Implementation Guide*. New York: MDRC.

The Child Support Program's Response to the Pandemic and Economic Assistance: A Look at Three Sites in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration
2024. Semhar Gebrekristos and Danielle Cummings

Child Support Amidst the Pandemic: Changes to Service Delivery at Three Sites in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration
2024. Sofia Torres and Danielle Cummings

Who Benefits Most from Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt in the Child Support Program?
2024. Jennifer Hausler and Charles Michalopoulos

Comparing the Costs and Benefits of Two Approaches to Addressing Nonpayment of Child Support: Results from the Benefit-Cost Analysis in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration
2023. Louisa Treskon.

From Grant-Funded Study to Enduring Practice: How Agencies in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration Continued Their Work After Research Ended
2023. Keri West.

Testing a New Approach to Addressing Nonpayment of Child Support: Effects of the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration
2023. Melanie Skemer.

Parents' Reflections on Their Experiences with the Child Support Program in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration
2022. Louisa Treskon and Jacqueline Groskaufmanis.

A Comparison of Approaches Informed by Procedural Justice and Traditional Enforcement in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration
2022. Melanie Skemer, Jennifer Hausler, Olivia Williams, Louisa Treskon, and Jacqueline Groskaufmanis.

Procedural Justice in the Child Support Process: An Implementation Guide
2022. Kate Wurmfeld.

Procedural Justice in Child Support Enforcement: Lessons from an Implementation Study of the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration
2022. Louisa Treskon, Douglas Phillips, Jacqueline Groskaufmanis, and Melanie Skemer.

Integrating Procedural Justice Principles into Child Support Case Management: How Staff Members Experienced the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) Demonstration
2021. Jacqueline Groskaufmanis.

Reducing Child Support Debt in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) Demonstration
2021. Douglas Phillips.

Civil Contempt of Court for Child Support Noncompliance at the PJAC Demonstration Sites
2021. Louisa Treskon and Melanie Skemer.

Procedural Justice Principles in the Midst of a Major Disruption: What Several Months of COVID-19 Revealed in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) Demonstration
2020. Peter Baird, Michael Hayes, Sharon Henderson, and Tanya Johnson.

Working Toward a Resolution: Facilitating Dialogue Between Parents Using Principles of Procedural Justice
2020. Riley Webster.

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
2020. Danielle Cummings.

Using Principles of Procedural Justice to Engage Disconnected Parents
2020. Yana Kusayeva.

Incorporating Strategies Informed by Procedural Justice into Child Support Services: Training Approaches Applied in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) Demonstration
2019. Zaina Rodney.

A New Response to Child Support Noncompliance: Introducing the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Project
2019. Caroline Mage, Peter Baird, and Cynthia Miller.