



The Limited Reach of the Child Support Enforcement System

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Executive Summary

The Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program is a 40-year-plus partnership of national, state, and local governments that promotes economic self-sufficiency for single-parent families in hopes of supporting the well-being of children living with only one parent. The CSE program works to achieve this goal by locating absent parents, establishing paternity, creating financial and medical support obligations that the absent parent must contribute, and enforcing those obligations. Because the child support system has been politically popular, administratively effective, and beneficial for children, one would expect the program to expand over time. But a look at the data suggests the opposite is true: the CSE program's reach has been declining for at least a decade.

A detailed examination of two decades' worth of data shows a clear divergence between the official child support caseload, which peaked more than a decade ago and has been declining ever since, and the population of child support-eligible families, which has been essentially unchanged for the past two decades. This yawning gap shows a reduction in the CSE program's reach because it serves a smaller share of families with children who could benefit from it. The bulk of this reduction is due to the dramatic decline in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) caseloads, thus shrinking the pipeline of mandatory child support cases, coupled with the real or apparent decline in earning capacities of low-income, undereducated noncustodial parents. More generally, recruitment is hampered by a lack of awareness, ability, or willingness to engage with child support among those who could benefit but are not receiving TANF.

One policy approach that might help is identifying one or more substitute programs to compel needy families to cooperate with child support. Another

would be improving the CSE program's image and function so that more families voluntarily use its services, including those who believe the noncustodial parent is not currently in a position to pay. Major policy recommendations include:

- Automatic enrollment in the CSE program at family law court for those getting divorced (opting out is possible) and for unmarried parents who fail to sign the paternity acknowledgment;
- Automatic enrollment for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients, with appropriate exclusions and the ability to opt out if they choose;
- Eliminating loopholes in the performance management system that allow states to avoid serving some of the neediest families; and
- Workforce development for low-income noncustodial parents with a proper funding stream to improve their ability to pay, established through legislation rather than rulemaking by the executive branch.

Automatically enrolling families would ensure the CSE program's services are available to more families who need them but may be unaware or unwilling to cooperate. Extending automatic enrollment to include programs such as SNAP or Medicaid would better serve the majority of needy custodial parent families, while still allowing those who object to opt out. Increased availability of workforce development services would help the image of the system evolve into one that is trying to help struggling families, and the services themselves would help boost

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payment of child support. Finally, revising the performance measurement system would eliminate the rewards to states for avoiding serving needy families and make them generally responsible for recruitment of poor custodial parent families. With policy changes

like these, the federal CSE program would be better positioned to serve the modern custodial parent population, help keep families with children out of poverty, and make sure that absent parents meet their responsibilities.

The Limited Reach of the Child Support Enforcement System

Expectations around child support have come a long way in the past 30 years, when David Ellwood wrote a blunt assessment of the existing child support system in his 1988 book, *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family*: “The message is clear: Absent fathers do not necessarily have financial responsibility for their children.”¹ In the years following, the Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program strengthened dramatically, and the result has been positive for millions of children. Absent parents, mostly fathers, were mandated into a system that held them financially accountable for their children, and custodial mothers were given some financial relief. But over the past several years, the reach of the CSE program has quietly decreased. This report explores the reasons why and recommends ways to bring it back to where it should be.

Raising a child can be an expensive proposition, even for intact families. The problem is magnified for children raised by only one of their parents, whether due to divorce, separation, or never-married parents. In a society that holds parents responsible for their children, we must ask whether and how the absent parent should contribute. Of course parents, absent or not, can contribute in numerous ways to raising a child, and most of them are not easily quantifiable. There is little society can do to require people to be good parents, but at minimum one can design policies and programs to make sure that absent parents contribute their share financially.

The CSE program is a 40-plus-year partnership of national, state, and local governments that promotes economic self-sufficiency for single-parent families in hopes of supporting the well-being of children living with only one parent. The CSE program works to

achieve this goal by locating absent parents, establishing paternity, creating financial and medical support obligations that the absent parent must contribute, and enforcing those obligations. The CSE program affects numerous families. In 2014, it collected \$32 billion in child support, the vast majority of which was distributed to about 14 million parents raising 16 million children on their own. Throughout this paper, the parents of children for whom support is collected are referred to as custodial parents, and the absent parents from whom support is sought are called noncustodial parents.

Child support enforcement has historically been popular across the political spectrum. In fact, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was passed by a Republican Congress and signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996. Despite being commonly referred to as welfare reform, the bulk of this bill actually dealt with child support enforcement. As shown below, receipt of child support lifts many families out of poverty and has been associated with reduced behavioral problems, improved academic success, and other positive outcomes for the children. The CSE program is thus broadly appealing for at least two reasons: it benefits numerous families and children, and it does so by mandating personal responsibility, not by giving handouts. At the most basic level, the CSE program sends this simple message: if you play a part in bringing one or more children into the world, you must support them.

With a history of bipartisan support, along with evidence that the CSE program helps many low-income families, why is the reach of the federal CSE program shrinking? This report shows that the percentage of eligible families reached by the system peaked around

2004 and generally declined ever since. This report documents these trends in detail and explores several potential reasons for the decline.

This paper begins by defining child support, using examples of hypothetical families. This is followed by an overview of the federal CSE program and its evolution, including its history of positive effects on families and its administrative efficiency. Next, trends in child support enforcement over the past 20 years are examined, including overall caseloads gleaned from agency data and characteristics of eligible families, whether served by the CSE program or not, as estimated from US Census Bureau data. Additional analysis follows in an effort to better understand what factors are contributing to the trends observed in the data. Finally, taking all this together, policy directions are recommended to help this program better reach the families who could benefit and be lifted out of poverty.

Defining Child Support

Any discussion of child support and the CSE program can quickly become confusing because of jargon. The term “custodial parent” refers to the parent who has primary custody of the child, and “noncustodial parent” refers to the parent who pays support, but one needs familiarity with other terms to understand the CSE program and consider how it may be improved.

To illustrate, consider a hypothetical family: Justin, 22, is the father of two children. The oldest, Skylar, 4, was born to a young woman, Simone, who Justin got together with as a teenager. Simone and her son have now moved back in with her parents while she attends community college. Although he is officially unemployed with roofing work seasonally unavailable, Justin pays Simone \$25 per week in child support through the CSE program whenever he has enough left over from odd jobs, after satisfying his other priorities. At times, he has been unable to make the full payment. Justin’s youngest child, Molly, 7 months, was born to Justin’s current partner, Monica. He, Monica, and Molly share a single bedroom in Monica’s aunt’s house. Although he contributes little to household

finances during lean months, Justin scrimps and saves to bring home the occasional toy, diapers, or formula whenever he can.

In CSE program terms, Justin, Simone, and Skylar constitute a child support case. If they would have had multiple children together, it would still be regarded as a single case. Simone is the custodial parent, and Justin is Skylar’s noncustodial parent, otherwise known as the absent parent. The status of this case is advanced because it has an active child support order, or obligation to pay, albeit set at a low amount of \$25 per week. Orders are also referred to as agreements at points in this paper. Justin pays this amount not to Simone but to his local child support agency, which sends the money to Simone through its state disbursement unit. When he has regular employment, the child support is automatically deducted from his check through wage withholding, as the vast majority of child support payments are today, but the occasional payments he makes from odd jobs are not as regular or efficient.

Simone is no longer receiving cash welfare through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, but when she was a beneficiary of this program several years ago, the agency kept most of the child support payment and forwarded a small amount to her. Justin knows that he owes Simone back child support, also known as arrears, from payments he has missed, but he is only dimly aware that he has been determined to owe thousands of dollars in state-owed arrears as well, amounts assessed to him to cover birthing costs from Medicaid and TANF payments. This latter fact became clear to him when the government intercepted his tax refund check.

Justin does not have a child support case with Monica, but Monica’s and Molly’s financial futures might be better protected if they had some form of agreement. Although he desperately wants to form a family with Monica, the odds are against him. Several years down the road, most men in his situation will no longer be living with the mother or his child. Odds are also good that his earnings will have grown by then, but if they have no child support agreement, his hoped-for family may never see the benefit of his increased earning capacity.

Now consider another family: Frank is 37 years old, the divorced father of three children, ages 10, 11, and 13, who live with his ex-wife, Bianca. He works as a delivery truck driver, and \$165 per week in child support is automatically deducted from his paycheck and forwarded to Bianca. Frank lives with his new girlfriend Jenny, 28, and her six-year-old son Joseph. Jenny is proud to have worked her way through school without relying on public assistance. She knows who Joseph's father is, but for a variety of reasons, she has never pursued financial support.

Frank is what many picture as the typical divorced noncustodial parent. All his children were born during his marriage to Bianca, thus there was no need for paternity establishment because he is the presumptive father. His children are covered under his employer-provided health insurance, as specified in their agreement, and his child support payments are made seamlessly through automatic wage withholding. If he should lose his job, it would be in his interest to receive a modification to his child support order, if only temporarily while he finds comparable employment.

Jenny may not even be aware that her local child support agency would help her establish a case (including paternity testing, if needed) and collect child support from Joseph's father, if only she were to request the assistance. She is not sure if the father still lives in the old neighborhood, but she has enough information that the agency could locate him. She did not think much of his career prospects back then, and she does not know that today, employment services can be made available to some low-income noncustodial parents. She is proud of her independence, but she still has to work long hours to make ends meet, and therefore she has less time to spend with Joseph and Frank.

Of course there are numerous families touched by the CSE program in one way or another, each with their own economic and personal circumstances. These are but a few examples, not meant to be representative, but to illustrate the breadth and complexity of the system.

Program Background

The CSE program was created in 1975 as a joint federal-state program. It was authorized by Title IV-D of the Social Security Act, and thus the term IV-D is often used as a shorthand reference to the program. One of its original purposes was to recover costs associated with recipients' cash welfare receipt under the original Aid to Families with Dependent Children, (AFDC) program,² but it has since evolved much more in the direction of collecting and distributing funds to custodial parents for the support of children. Much of this evolution came through changes made by the 1996 PRWORA welfare reform law, which reformed the AFDC program and in its place created a new block grant program, TANF. Powered in part by many new child support enforcement tools included in the same law, the TANF program's primary objective is to assist families in becoming self-sufficient by mandating participation in employment programs and by placing time limits on cash assistance. The interaction of the CSE program and TANF programs is discussed in detail below.

The CSE program is run by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families. CSE programs are operated by all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, and these local programs receive federal matching funds. Generally speaking, the federal government contributes \$2 for every dollar of administrative costs borne by states and localities. Reflecting the evolution of its mission over time, the OCSE currently regards its primary goal as "ensuring that children have established parentage and can rely on receiving financial support that reflects the parent's ability to pay."³

The CSE programs provide the following major services, typically sequentially, meaning that failure at one step often precludes completion of any following steps. Services are generally provided in this order:

- **Location of Absent Parents.** Provided they receive sufficient identifying information on the absent parent, the CSE program agencies now

have many automated tools for locating them, whether in or out of state.

- **Paternity Establishment.** Paternity establishment is required in nonmarital cases and may involve voluntary acknowledgment, sometimes in the hospital at birth, or genetic testing if necessary.
- **Establishment of Child Support Orders.** The child support order is the legal obligation for the absent parent to provide financial support, typically also including medical support. States are required by the federal government to set an amount that reflects an ability to pay, but they have flexibility in determining what that entails and how it is determined.
- **Establishment and Enforcement of Medical Child Support.** Medical support may consist of a requirement to provide insurance coverage, especially if one party has a good employer-sponsored plan, and may also include payments to cover out-of-pocket medical costs.
- **Review or Modification of Child Support Orders.** The initial amount of support due is based on one or both parents' incomes and other factors but is subject to periodic review or modification to ensure fairness when circumstances change. Noncustodial parents who neglect to have their orders modified in response to their changing employment situations could end up with unaffordable orders.
- **Collection of Child Support Payments.** The CSE program agencies have extensive tools for enforcing collection of child support, detailed below. By far the most important tool is automated wage withholding.
- **Distribution of Child Support Payments.** Collection and distribution of payments is handled by centralized, automated state disbursement units. Not all the money that is collected is forwarded

to families, depending on their welfare status and state policy.

For cases that have advanced to the stage of having an active child support order, also referred to here as an agreement, the CSE program agencies have many effective and largely automated tools available to aid in collection of child support. These include automatic wage withholding; intercept of income tax refunds; intercept of unemployment compensation received under the unemployment insurance system; intercept of lottery winnings; ability to suspend professional, driver's, or sporting licenses; ability to seize assets held in financial institutions or pension funds; intercept of data on insurance settlements; ability to place liens against property; reporting to credit bureaus; and the ability to deny or revoke passports. As these tools have been added to the CSE program toolkit over time, the agencies have generally become more effective at enforcing child support for those families they serve. Critically, however, these efforts benefit only those families who are participants in the formal system.

Families who receive TANF, or cash assistance, are typically required to cooperate with the CSE program as a condition of receiving cash assistance. Recipients of other forms of assistance (e.g., Medicaid or Food Stamps) are sometimes required to cooperate with the CSE program as well, as states have the option of making assistance conditional on such cooperation. CSE program services are nominally provided free of charge to TANF families, although the policy in many states is to keep all or a substantial part of any child support payments made while custodial parents are actively receiving cash assistance. States have the option of passing through a portion of payments made while the custodial parent is on assistance, but only about half of the states have such policies in place.⁴ As a result, in non-pass-through states, there is a common perception that payments made through the formal system are not going to the custodial parent. Even though data show that the vast majority of collections go to the custodial parent and not the state, this perception may serve as a disincentive to noncustodial parents making such formal payments

in these states. The CSE program services are also generally available for a small application fee⁵ to anyone who requests assistance in child support matters. Alternatively, individuals who choose not to be part of the formal CSE program may instead use private attorneys or informal agreements to ensure (or hope for) payment of child support, but the enforcement efforts of the CSE program are generally not available to these parents.

Effectiveness of the CSE Program

The CSE program is generally regarded as an example of a good government program. It has many benefits for families, including well-documented effects on individual children and additional benefits demonstrated at the societal level. And it has been continually improving in administrative efficiency. The cost-effectiveness of the CSE program, in terms of dollars of child support collected and distributed per dollar of administrative expense, has steadily increased over the past two decades, from a low of \$3.59 in 1995 to a high of \$5.31 in 2013 (see Appendix B). Much of this is because technology has made enforcement efforts much easier and less costly. Nevertheless, improving cost-effectiveness is probably the best single indicator of how well the formal CSE program has performed in recent history.

Payment of formal child support has been associated with several positive outcomes for children, including reduced behavioral problems, improved academic success, reduced rates of depression and anxiety, and increased self-esteem.⁶ More recent research shows that absent parents' provision of financial support is directly related to improving children's cognitive development, but that effects on reducing behavioral problems are more indirect by way of reduced parenting stress.⁷ At a societal level, stricter enforcement of child support by states is associated with reduced nonmarital childbearing.⁸ Another report confirms this important finding, while also observing that the decline in childbearing due to child support enforcement was especially strong among less-educated women.⁹ Even more recently,

researchers have shown that a reduction in nonmarital teen childbearing associated with intense child support enforcement is due to increasing school enrollment among this vulnerable population, which leads to a reduced probability of early motherhood.¹⁰

More recent research shows that absent parents' provision of financial support is directly related to improving children's cognitive development.

In 2012, the formal CSE program helped lift roughly 1 million people out of poverty by distributing child support payments to poor custodial families.¹¹ While this is impressive, the cited report did not specify how many more might have escaped poverty if their child support obligations had been met in full. More recent statistics indicate that a total of \$32 billion in child support was collected in fiscal year (FY) 2014. Of this, 95 percent was reportedly distributed to families, while the remaining 5 percent went to recover public-assistance costs. Also as of 2014, 75 percent of collections occurred through automatic wage withholding, highlighting the importance of this collection tool. The program served about 16 million children in 2014. Among typical custodial parents served by the CSE program, most are female (82 percent), over the age of 30 (79 percent), have only one child eligible for child support (57 percent), and are white (68 percent). Black custodial parents account for 25 percent, and Hispanics of any race account for 28 percent.¹²

The CSE program's performance management system measures states and other localities on five

outcomes: paternity establishment, child support order establishment, current child support collected, cases paying toward arrears, and cost-effectiveness of the program overall. This incentive and penalty program is used to reward states financially for good or improved performance. As of 2012,¹³ paternity had been established for 97 percent of cases requiring it,¹⁴ well above the 90 percent target in federal law. The OCSE also boasts of having an established order in 82 percent of cases (meaning custodial parents who have initiated a child support order), and collections made on 63 percent of cases as part of current child support. The share of cases paying toward arrears (that is, missed child support payments that are still owed) stood at 62 percent, and cost-effectiveness stood at \$5.19 in collections per \$1 of program expenditures. The question of whether these performance metrics are up to the task of leading the system to excellence in a modern policy environment are addressed later, but in general these metrics suggest that the program is performing well. In total, the CSE program was reported to have spent \$5.7 billion in FY 2012, including \$3.4 billion in federal funds and \$2.3 billion in state funds.

Because the CSE program has been politically popular, administratively effective, and beneficial to children, one would expect the program to expand over time. But a look at the data, in the sections that follow, suggests the opposite.

Trends in Child Support Enforcement

This section identifies trends in child support enforcement over the past 20 years using data from two sources: administrative data from the OCSE and survey data from the US Census Bureau's Child Support Supplement. The OCSE publishes annual reports to Congress with extensive data on caseloads, collections, performance statistics, and other useful information. This data source allows a detailed look at the CSE program but is necessarily limited to only those families in the formal system. This means that a significant portion of children with an absent parent are not reflected in the OCSE annual reports

to Congress. A broader perspective that includes all children with an absent parent is provided later by analyzing data on all child support-eligible families drawn from the US Census Bureau's Child Support Supplement, a survey conducted in even years between March and April.¹⁵ Aggregate data from this survey gathered from 1994 through 2014 are available in a consistent form that allows examination of trends across the past two decades.

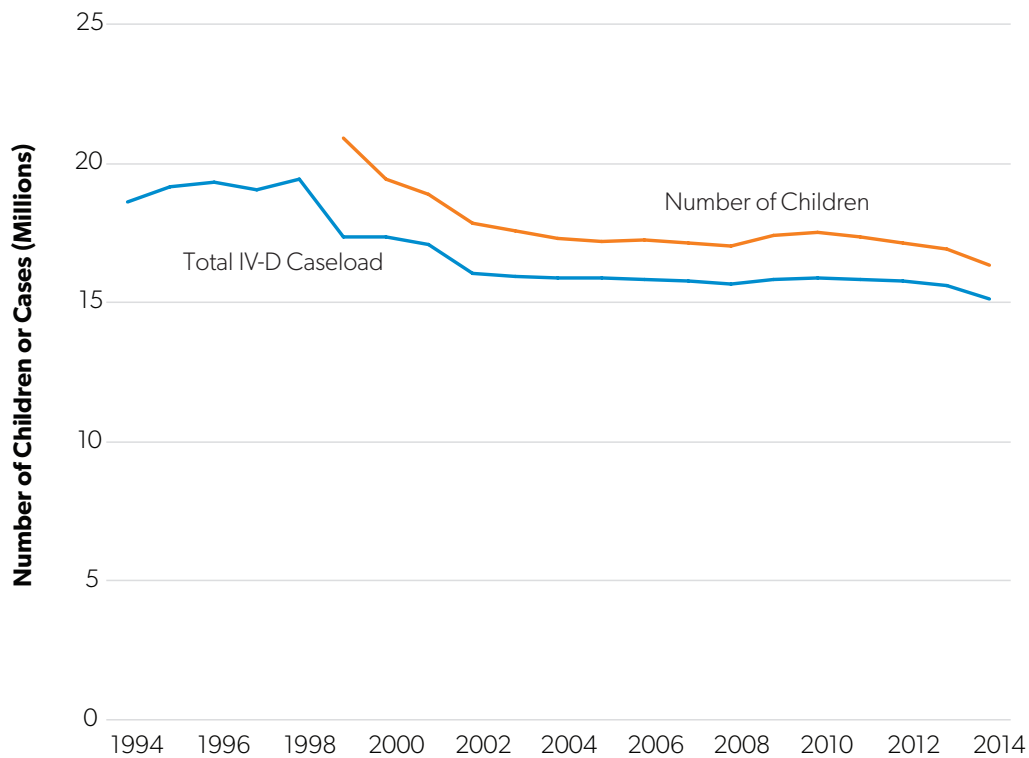
Together, these two data sources allow a powerful look over approximately the past two decades at trends in both who is served by the formal CSE program and which custodial families are left outside the formal system but could potentially benefit from the CSE program's services. To keep this report accessible to a wide audience, complex statistics are avoided, and all numbers cited are from publicly available sources.

Trends in Caseload and Program Performance.

The first trend to be examined in the OCSE data is the total caseload over time. Figure 1 displays both the total caseload and the number of children served over approximately the past 20 years. As described earlier, a case in the CSE program refers to a combination of two parents and one or more children they have together. This distinction is important because although one might be tempted to think of cases as families or households, one custodial parent having multiple cases with different noncustodial parents, and vice versa, is common. (This multipartner fertility was illustrated earlier.)

According to Figure 1, the total formal child support caseload peaked in 1998 at just over 19.4 million cases and has since declined by more than 20 percent to about 15.1 million as of 2014. Since the concept of cases can be confusing, the number of children on the IV-D caseload is also plotted. Although the numbers of children served are not available for the earliest years in the chart, this trend tells essentially the same story: the number of children served by the CSE program has slowly and steadily declined since 1999.

Figure 2 explores two performance indicators that measure what share of cases have progressed to more advanced stages of child support enforcement.

Figure 1. Caseload over Time

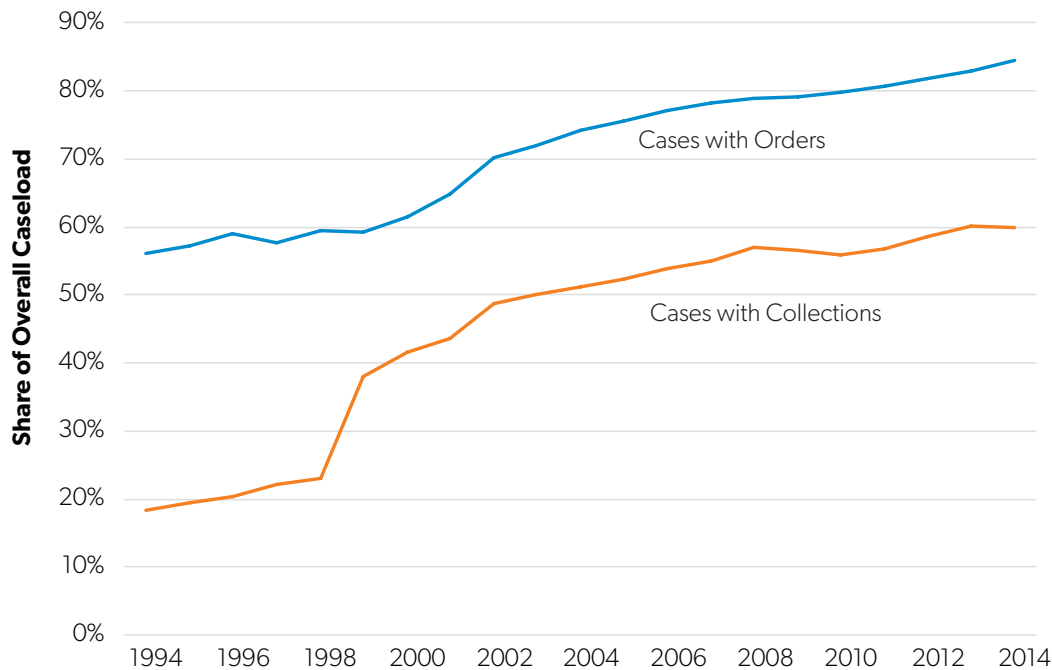
Source: Author's analysis of the OCSE data.

Although the total caseload has declined over the past 15 years or so, as Figure 2 shows, the shares of cases with orders established and with child support collected have continued to rise. This suggests that in the face of declining caseloads, the system has done a better job establishing orders and collecting on orders for the cases it does have, likely due to widespread adoption of effective collection tools such as automated wage withholding. This general upward trend seems to be decelerating, however, suggesting the easy gains may be tapped out, with the more difficult-to-serve cases beginning to predominate among the remaining cases with no child support orders or with no collections. More importantly, the upward trends on these indicators contrast with the declining caseload, raising the question of whether the existing performance metrics are adequate to capture the performance of the system in terms of how well it serves populations in need of child support enforcement.

Figure 3 examines the composition of the CSE program caseload over time, with cases categorized based on whether they currently receive AFDC or TANF, previously received such cash welfare benefits, or have never received benefits. Figure 3 tracks the caseload totals in these three categories of cases, beginning in 1999.¹⁶ Cases headed by individuals who are currently on public assistance or have a history of public assistance have steadily declined since 1999. Even though there was an increase during this time in cases whose members never received assistance, it did not match the drop in current or former assistance cases. The result is a 13 percent drop in total cases since 1999.

The decline in current and former assistance cases is hardly a surprise given the effects of significant changes made to the AFDC and TANF cash welfare programs over this period. Since the PRWORA's enactment and other changes in the intervening

Figure 2. Selected Caseload Performance Indicators over Time

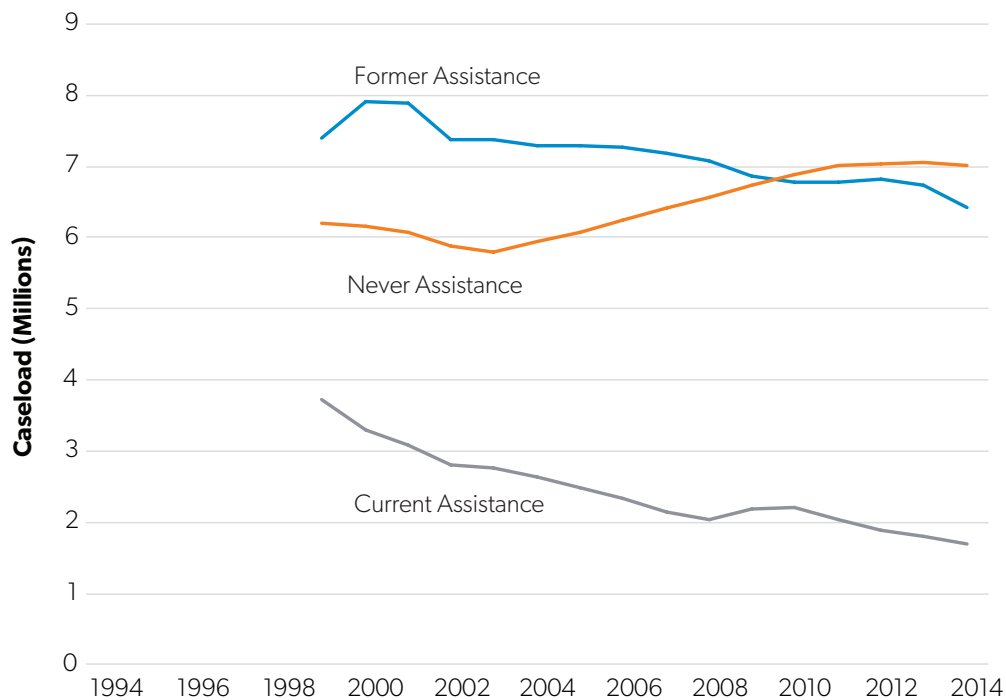


Source: Author's analysis of the OCSE data.

years, the national cash assistance caseloads have declined dramatically, from a peak of 5.1 million families on AFDC in 1994¹⁷ to 1.3 million families as of 2015,¹⁸ a drop of almost 75 percent. And since TANF recipients are required to open a child support case and cooperate with the child support agency or face sanctions, this decline in the TANF caseload necessarily leads to a shrinking of the pipeline of new cases into the formal CSE program. This decline in public-assistance cases was not accompanied by a dramatic nationwide decrease in eligibility for TANF. Explaining the decline in TANF is beyond the scope of this paper, however. For present purposes, the important point is the dramatic TANF caseload decline has drastically shrunk the pipeline that leads eligible families to establish a CSE program case. There are likely many families living in poverty who could benefit from child support collection services whether or not they are automatically introduced to the program through TANF.

In other trends, not charted, collections on child support cases have improved over time, likely due to widespread adoption of better enforcement tools. Total child support collections distributed rose dramatically from the mid-1990s and peaked in 2008 at about \$29.2 billion but has since declined by about \$1 billion. Note that this peak in collections is only evident when looking at inflation-adjusted data; before adjusting to 2014 dollars the largest amount of child support distributed would have occurred in 2014 (see Appendix B). In practical terms, this means that although the total dollars collected and distributed¹⁹ appear to be increasing, the actual value of total child support paid is no longer trending upward.

A similar trend is seen when looking at data on arrears. As mentioned previously, arrears is the term used to describe unpaid child support debt, but it can also include interest and other charges. The total amount of documented child support arrears owed in the country is staggering: about \$115 billion as of

Figure 3. Caseload Composition over Time

Source: Author's analysis of the OCSE data.

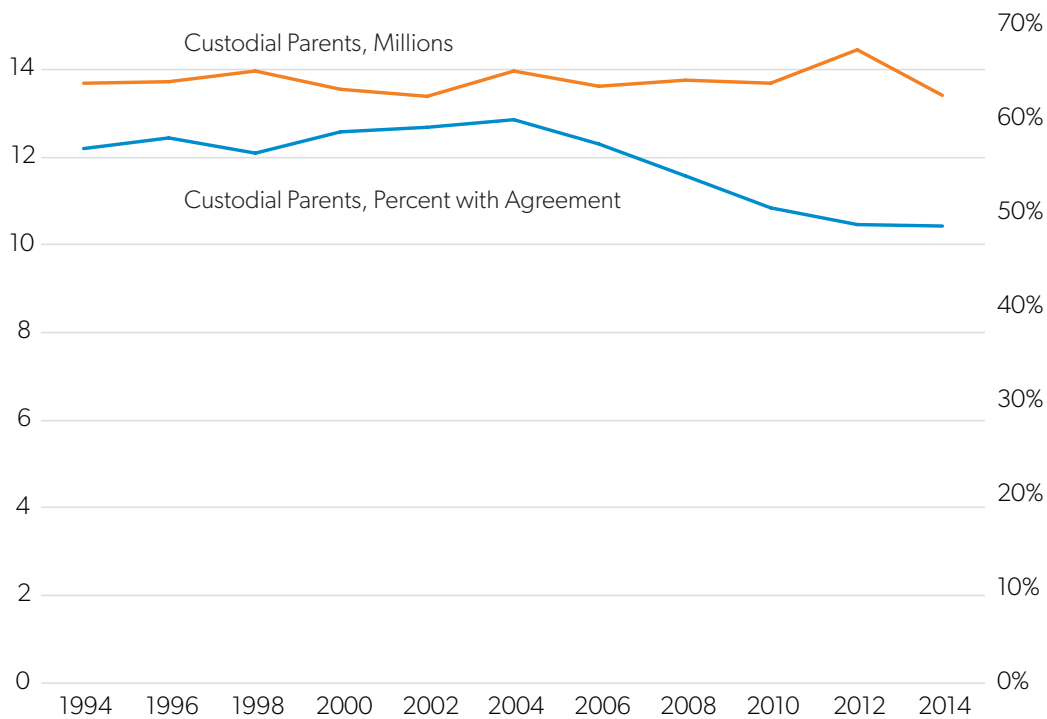
2014.²⁰ While this is certainly a big problem, as noted by many in the policy community, it is no longer growing. When adjusting for inflation, one finds that total arrearages have declined by 11 percent from the \$129 billion peak seen in 2005 (see Appendix B).

Only slight progress has been made in the share of cases that are paying toward arrearages. While these data do not indicate how much of the arrearages balance is owed to families and how much is owed to the government as reimbursement for prior cash assistance receipt, recent research helps to fill this gap.²¹ As of 2014, about only a quarter of arrearages is owed to the state, down from about half in 2002. Regardless of to whom it is owed, a small fraction of noncustodial parents owe most arrearages, and these noncustodial parents are in little position to pay.²² In fact, the 10 percent of noncustodial parents with either no documentable income or income less than \$10,000 per year owe about 70 percent of arrearages. Another study found that higher arrearages balances led

noncustodial parents to pay less often, even toward current support owed.²³ In short, the bulk of child support arrearages seems to be bad debt, not likely to ever be collected without going to great expense. Further, the arrearages balances on some cases will likely impede collection, even of current support, suggesting that accumulating arrearages against those unable to pay is counterproductive.

Population Trends in Child Support-Eligible Families. Program data reviewed thus far showed that the number of formal child support cases has declined, mainly because of declining TANF caseloads, which are no longer providing a steady flow of new cases into the system. Even though the shares of cases with orders and collections have increased, total collections peaked several years ago. TANF clearly has played a role, but could these trends also be explained by a decline in the number of families eligible for child support? To answer that, taking a broader look at the

Figure 4. Custodial Parent Population over Time, Share with Child Support Agreement



Source: Author’s analysis of summary data from tables accompanying Timothy S. Grall, *Current Population Reports*, nos. P60-212, P60-217, P60-225, P60-230, P60-234, P60-237, P60-240, P60-246, P60-255, 2000–15, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/population.html>.

child support–eligible population using data from the US Census Bureau is helpful.

Child support–eligible families are defined for the child support supplement survey as parents over 15 years old living with their own children up to 21 years old whose other parent is not living with the family. This child support–eligible population consists of custodial parents and their families. Note, however, that some in the general population who might be eligible for child support, such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles, would not be included in these data. Note also that although some of these census data are reported separately for female- and male-headed custodial parent families, typically only the combined data are reported here so that conclusions may be drawn regarding the entire custodial parent population.²⁴

The primary question addressed using these data relates to the declining caseload trends seen in the OCSE data. Would a similar trend appear in the

population data? According to Figure 4, the answer is no. The population of child support–eligible households has held steady near 14 million for most of the past two decades.²⁵ Of course these numbers of households are not directly comparable with the OCSE data that reflect cases, and as noted earlier, multiple cases can be included in one household. But one can certainly compare trends, and clearly the declining OCSE caseload and numbers of children served shown in Figure 1 are not matched by a decline in the population of child support–eligible households. Thus, it follows that the CSE program has been serving a declining share of child support–eligible households in recent years.

Also shown in Figure 4, on the right axis, is a major factor that could help illustrate the decline in reach of the CSE program. According to this chart, the percentage of child support–eligible households in the population who have agreements with the nonresident

parent for child support payment peaked at 60 percent in 2004 and has declined steadily ever since to 49 percent as of 2014. If one considers that agreements in the census data roughly correspond to orders in the OCSE data, then a large share of the reduced reach of the CSE program is explained by a dearth of agreements among the child support–eligible population.

A simple calculation with these data suggests that if the share of custodial parents with legal agreements had held steady instead of declining over the past decade, then there would be about 1.6 million additional custodial parent families with agreements in 2014 (see Appendix A). In the absence of a solid argument specifying the optimal number of families that should be served by the formal CSE program, this 1.6 million figure seems a reasonable estimate of the number of families who could have legal child support agreements given the right combination of policies but are left without orders for support under current policies. Similar calculations are used throughout this paper to compare different potential factors in terms of what share of the reduced reach they might represent.

Possible Reasons for Declining Reach

Thus far, the most obvious explanation for the declining reach of the formal CSE program is the reduction in TANF cash assistance caseloads, a program that provides an automatic introduction to the CSE program whether low-income families want it or not. This may not be the entire story, however. Continuing the investigation with US census data facilitates the search for explanations of the declining reach, and in particular as it relates to the reduction in agreements noted above.

Male Custodial Parenthood. The growing proportion of custodial parents who are male could be responsible for the declining reach of the system. A commonly observed pattern is that male custodial parents are less likely to be awarded child support, as compared with female custodial parents, and are less likely to receive child support when due.²⁶ A similar pattern emerges from analysis of census data in the

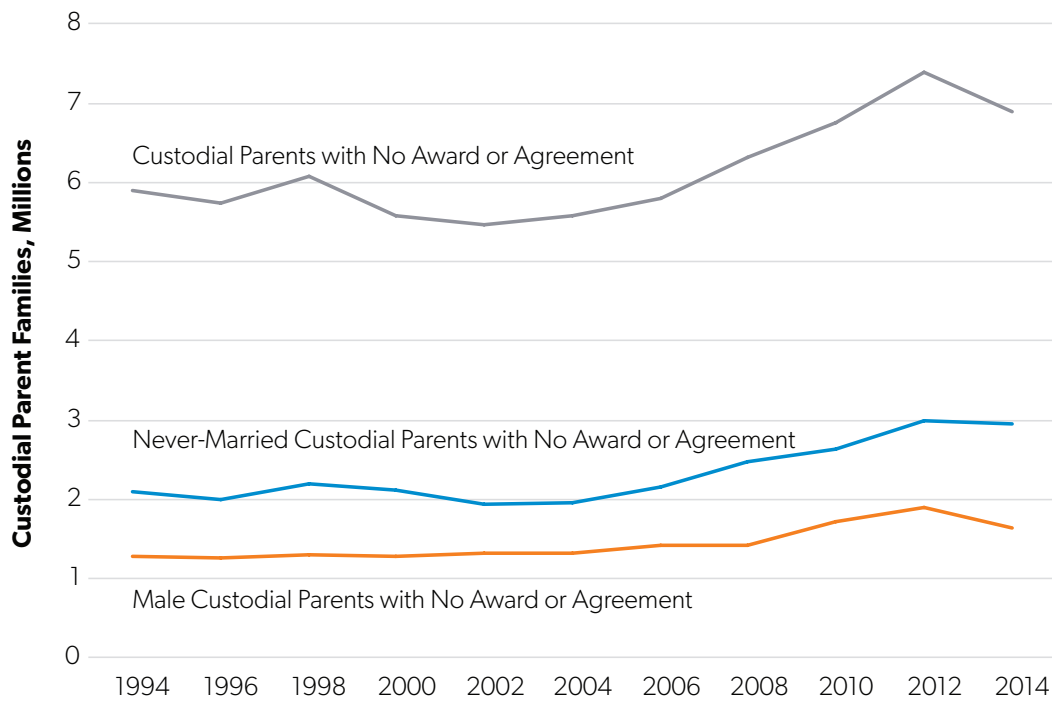
child support supplement. The shift toward male custodial parenthood in the child support–eligible population was a gradual 1.5 percentage point increase over the period of study, from 16 percent male in 1994 to 17.5 percent in 2014 (see Appendix B). Focusing on the past decade, some simple calculations suggest that if there had been no gender shift between 2004 and 2014, there would be about 15,000 additional families with a child support agreement (see Appendix A). Thus, this can potentially account for only a tiny fraction of the reduced reach of the CSE program (see also Figure 5).

Never-Married Parenthood. Another factor likely responsible for some portion of declining child support caseloads is the trend toward never-married parenthood. Although this trend is by no means new, the proportion of custodial parents who were never married has increased steadily over the period of interest, from 26 percent of such households in 1994 to 38 percent in 2014 (see Appendix B). This is a fairly dramatic increase of 1.4 million households headed by custodial parents who were never married.

Population data further indicate that those who were never married are far less likely to have a child support agreement than those of other marital statuses,²⁷ a difference ranging between 10 and 19 percentage points over the past two decades. As shown in Figure 5, however, the growing share of custodial parents who were never married accounts for at best a small share of the recent rise in custodial parents with no agreements. In fact, some simple calculations indicate that if the never-married share of the caseload had held at 26 percent, then that would have left about 171,000 additional custodial parents with child support agreements (see Appendix A). Thus, the shift in marital status, in particular the increasing share of custodial parents who were never married, can at best account for one-tenth of the reduced reach of the CSE program.

Requests for Assistance. Turning now to other factors potentially explaining the declining reach, the next chart illustrates trends in requests for child support assistance made by custodial parents. According

Figure 5. Custodial Parent Families with No Award or Agreement



Source: Author’s analysis of summary data from tables accompanying Timothy S. Grall, *Current Population Reports*, nos. P60-212, P60-217, P60-225, P60-230, P60-234, P60-237, P60-240, P60-246, P60-255, 2000–15, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/population.html>.

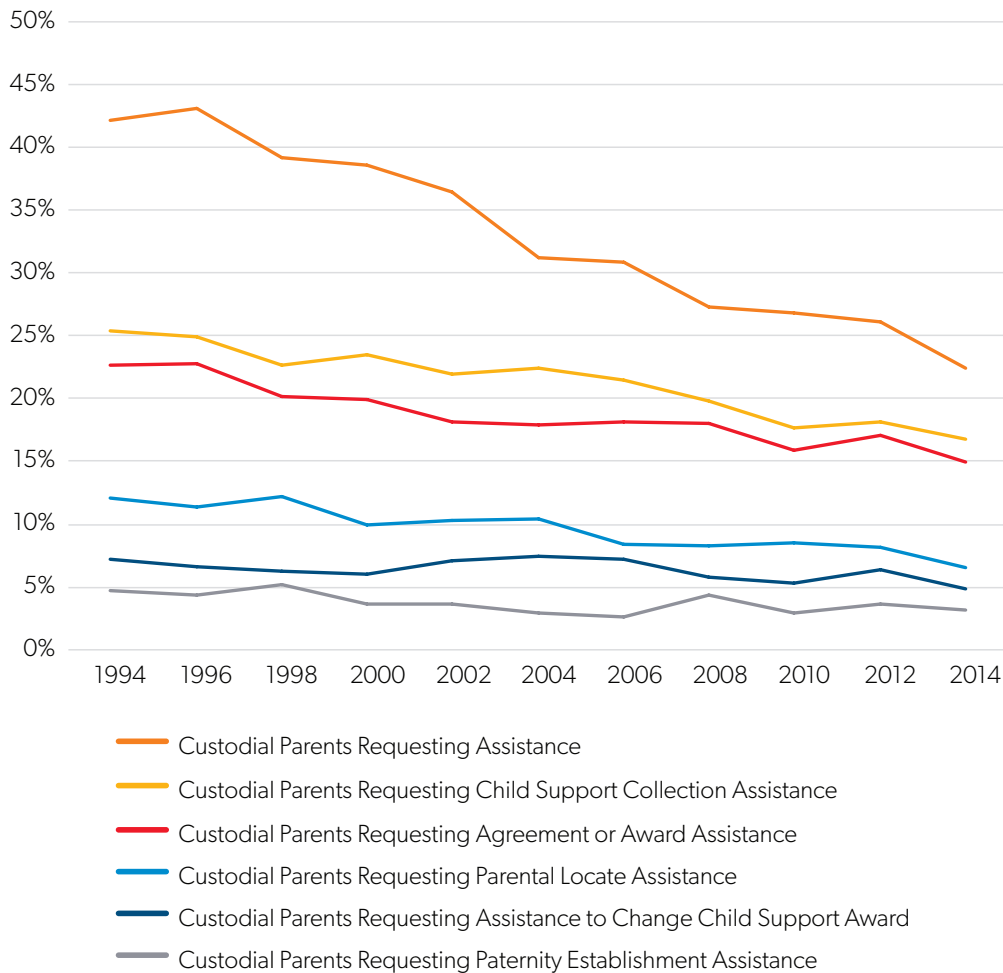
to the uppermost trend line in Figure 6, the share of custodial parents who contacted a CSE program office, state department of social services, or other welfare or TANF office for any kind of child support assistance (outside of any obligation through the TANF program) decreased steadily from 42 percent in 1994 to 22 percent in 2014. This represents a substantial decline of almost 2.8 million custodial parents per year requesting assistance.

Also shown in Figure 6 are trends in requests for child support assistance broken out by the specific topic of the request. For almost every topic, requests for child support assistance declined steadily throughout this period. Interestingly, most of these items are concerned with areas in which the formal child support system has improved its performance. To name just a couple of examples, locating the absent parent has become easier through the use of tools such as the

nationwide Federal Parent Locator Service, and collecting child support has improved dramatically due to widespread adoption of tools such as automatic wage withholding.

The decline in requests over the past decade is less dramatic. Across several categories, declines in the percentage of custodial parents making a request for assistance can account for less than a third of the reduced reach of the child support system (see Appendix A). Thus, custodial parents (outside of the TANF program) are less likely with each passing year to request assistance with child support matters at the same time that TANF initiated requests are also declining, which presents something of a puzzle.

While specific reasons behind declines in CSE program requests are not available, the data suggest that the CSE program may have an image problem, or possibly an awareness problem, among families outside

Figure 6. Requests for Assistance

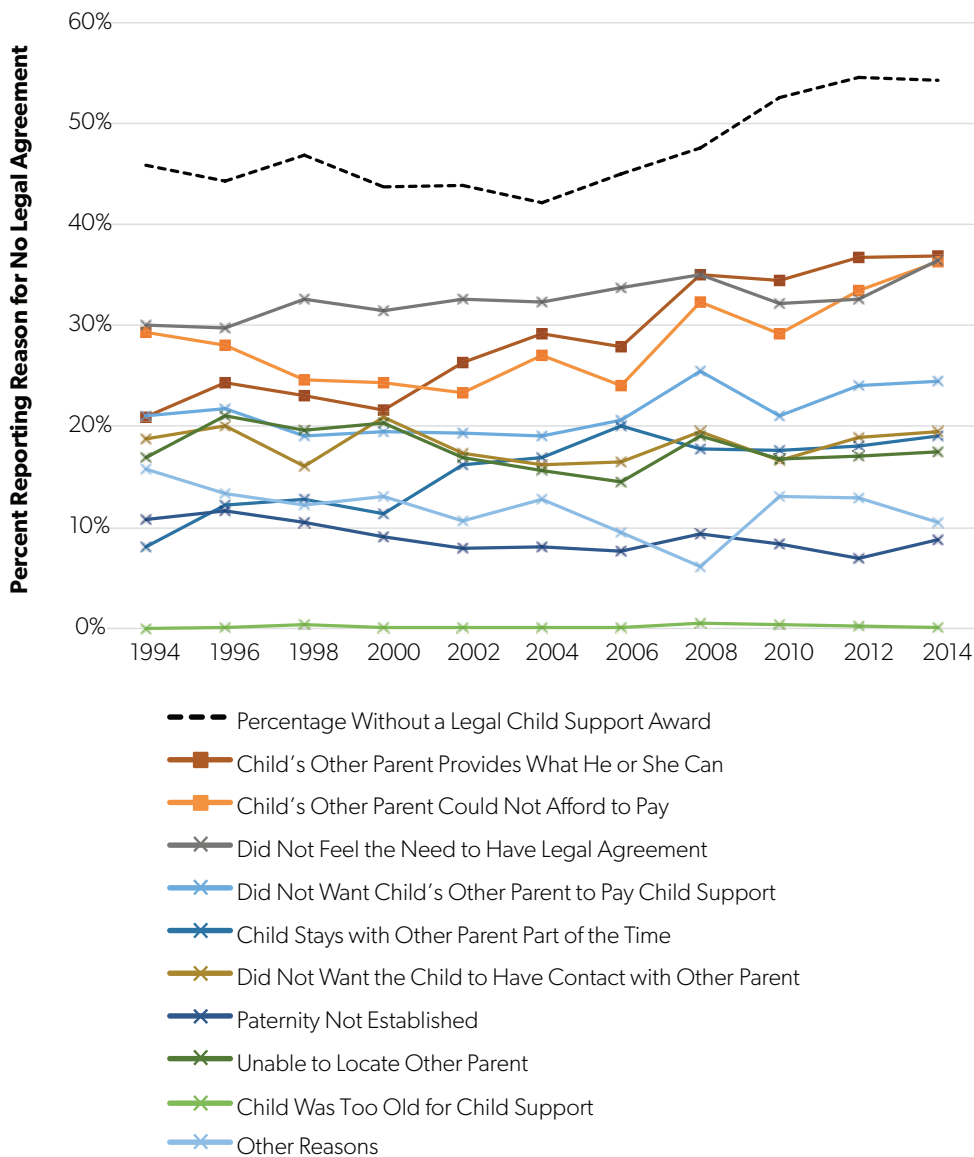
Note: Requests for assistance obtaining health insurance or getting TANF or Medicaid are not shown.

Source: Author's analysis of summary data from tables accompanying Timothy S. Grall, *Current Population Reports*, nos. P60-212, P60-217, P60-225, P60-230, P60-234, P60-237, P60-240, P60-246, P60-255, 2000-15, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/population.html>.

of the TANF program whom the system is geared to serve. In some cases, the custodial parent may be discouraged by the noncustodial parent from requesting an order. An automatic referral from TANF would have taken that discretion away. In some cases, an automatic referral may have even protected a custodial parent from conflict with the noncustodial parent as it related to a child support order. Whatever the reason, these data reveal that the number of people who are both aware they need assistance and willing to request it has fallen.

Weak Economic Prospects of Noncustodial Parents. A specifically targeted question is included on the census survey that directly addresses the issue of why so few custodial parents have child support agreements. This question directly asks respondents who are eligible for CSE program services but have no legal agreement why they do not have an agreement.²⁸ Figure 7 presents common responses to this question over the past two decades. Also included in this chart is a dotted line representing the percentage of custodial parent households with no legal agreement,

Figure 7. Reasons for Having No Child Support Agreement



Source: Author's analysis of summary data from tables accompanying Timothy S. Grall, *Current Population Reports*, nos. P60-212, P60-217, P60-225, P60-230, P60-234, P60-237, P60-240, P60-246, P60-255, 2000–15, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/population.html>.

which serves as a visual reminder that this segment of the population has increased dramatically since about 2004.

Although Figure 7 might at first seem visually crowded, two closely related reasons, indicated on the chart by lines with square markers, increased most dramatically between 2004 and 2014 in how commonly they were cited. A growing share of

eligible custodial parents without a legal agreement indicated that the child's other parent "provides what he or she can" or "could not afford to pay" child support. Seemingly, both reasons reflect a judgment by the custodial parent that the other parent simply does not have enough financial resources to support their children. The extent to which the earnings capacities of noncustodial parents were

actually reduced during this time is unclear, but this fits with the commonly observed pattern of reduced earnings among low-income men during the Great Recession. Nor is it clear to what extent the custodial parents citing such reasons are aware of or have had contact with child support enforcement, but if they had, the odds are pretty good that they were not aware that job-search assistance or other workforce development opportunities can be made available to increase the other parent's earning potential. These custodial parents are likely unaware of federal guidelines that are intended to ensure that child support order amounts reflect an ability to pay by the non-custodial parent, in some cases providing orders as low as \$25 a month.

Declines in the TANF population also could have played a role in shifting the composition of reasons given for not getting an order. TANF requires participation in the CSE program, whether the custodial parent believes the noncustodial parent can afford to pay or not. Legal agreements that previously would have resulted from TANF-initiated cases may now be more likely to fall into one of the categories related to inability to pay.

Now consider what share of the reduced reach of the CSE program might be accounted for by these trends. According to some simple calculations, the number of custodial parents without legal agreements who claimed the other parent could not afford to pay or provides what he or she can increased by between 1.1 and 2.1 million between 2004 and 2014 (see Appendix A). Thus, in contrast to other factors examined here, the trend in custodial parents not getting agreements due to their belief that the noncustodial parent has insufficient finances is large enough in magnitude to be a contributing factor in most if not all the reduced reach of the system. Along with reduced TANF caseloads, this is the closest yet to a single observed factor large enough to explain the declining caseload.

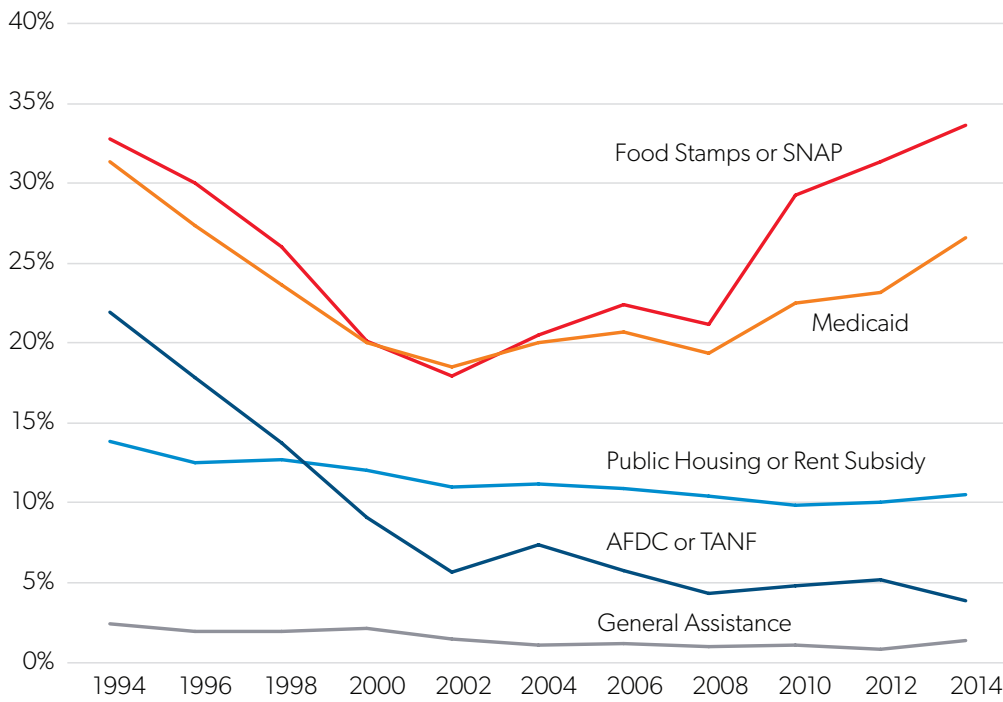
Economic Factors Among Custodial Parent Families. Poverty rates among families headed by custodial parents gradually declined from a high of 33 percent in 1994 to a low of 23 percent in 2002,

then began to increase slowly, with a more dramatic jump starting in 2008 to coincide with the Great Recession (see Appendix B). With the poverty rate among custodial parents standing at 29 percent in 2014, most of the earlier gains have been wiped out. Of course, these patterns are influenced by both the macroeconomy and trends in child support enforcement, and separating the two is difficult. However, the reduced reach of child support has coincided with an increase in financial need and poverty among custodial parent families.

Custodial parents might qualify for many different government benefits, depending on their income, assets, and other eligibility requirements. Figure 8 shows the percent of custodial parent families receiving benefits including SNAP (formerly Food Stamps), Medicaid, housing or rental subsidy, TANF (formerly AFDC), or general assistance. Here is a pattern that is familiar by now, of general improvement, in terms of decreasing reliance on or need for government benefits up until 2002, followed by a near complete reversal of this trend up to the present. The individual programs show three programs holding steady or gradually losing their relevance to this population and two programs on which custodial parents have become increasingly reliant in recent years. Utilization of public housing or general assistance by custodial parent families was essentially unchanged or declined slightly across this period. The TANF program continues its steady decline over this period, and thus the TANF program's potential for generating automatic referrals to child support among populations that may benefit from the CSE program continues to decline as well.

Standing in stark contrast, the SNAP program, which served less than 18 percent of custodial parent families in 2002 near the apparent peak in reach of the CSE program, was accessed by more than one in three custodial parents as of 2014. In fact, SNAP and Medicaid receipt among custodial parent families shows no signs of returning to levels seen in the early 2000s. With 4.5 million custodial parent families receiving SNAP as of 2014, this represents a dramatic 2.1 million family increase over the low of 2.4 million recipient families in 2002. Note that this is

Figure 8. Benefits Received over Time



Source: Author’s analysis of summary data from tables accompanying Timothy S. Grall, *Current Population Reports*, nos. P60-212, P60-217, P60-225, P60-230, P60-234, P60-237, P60-240, P60-246, P60-255, 2000–15, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/population.html>.

bigger than the magnitude of the estimated reduced reach of the CSE program. Part of this SNAP trend is no doubt due to rapid expansion of the SNAP caseload in response to the Great Recession and policy changes that made it easier to access, but part of it also reflects the declining economic circumstances of custodial parent families generally, which has persisted well after the recession was declared to have ended. Regardless of the reason, the SNAP program, and to a lesser extent Medicaid, now fill the primary assistance role in supporting poor custodial parent families. With the passage of TANF, custodial families are expected to work and benefit from the earned income tax credit (EITC) and other work-based programs, while TANF has become increasingly inconsequential for typical custodial parent families.

Summary and Discussion

A clear divergence has emerged between the CSE program caseload, which peaked more than a decade ago and has been declining ever since, and the population of child support-eligible families, which has been essentially unchanged for the past two decades. This yawning gap is evidence of a reduction in reach of the CSE program in terms of serving a smaller share of families with children who could benefit from its services. The bulk of this reduction is due to two factors: the dramatic decline in TANF caseloads, thus shrinking the pipeline of new (mandatory) child support cases, and the real or apparent decline in earnings capacities of low-income, undereducated noncustodial parents who are not required to be part of the formal system. As of 2014, 6.5 million custodial parent families had child support agreements. If trends from

the early 2000s had continued, there would be about 8.1 million custodial parent families with agreements, or 1.6 million more families with agreements than were actually seen over the period from 2004 to 2014.

Other possible explanations for the reduced reach of child support enforcement were limited. For example, although steady declines in most types of requests for child support assistance were seen in the past decade or so, there is little indication why this occurred, and the trends specific to the types of requests that might lead to a child support agreement were found to potentially explain only a small fraction of the families with no agreements. Another factor examined was the steady trend toward increasing male custodial parenthood. Male custodial parents, comprising 17.5 percent of custodial parents as of 2014, are less likely to receive a child support agreement and less likely to receive child support payments when due, but this was estimated to account for about only 1 percent of families who should have agreements but do not. A stronger relationship was observed when looking at the trend in never-married parents. In this case, the increase in never-married status among custodial parents, from 26 percent to 38 percent between 2004 and 2014, was found to potentially account for about one-tenth of the families with no agreement. While these smaller factors might yield suggestions for improving the child support system, the areas most urgently in need of reform are the diminished capacity of TANF to serve as a pipeline to child support enforcement, the low-earnings capacities of noncustodial parents, and the CSE program's ability to serve them.

Evidence of the first factor, the shrinking of the TANF pipeline of new cases, appears throughout this paper. Figure 3 shows that the TANF and former TANF portions of the formal child support caseload have been shrinking for years, with the only growing portion of the caseload being those who never received TANF. It is further shown that the national TANF caseloads have shrunk by almost 75 percent from their peak levels in 1994. Another piece of evidence appears in Figure 8, showing that TANF receipt among child support-eligible families has fallen precipitously, from 22 percent in 1994 to 3.9 percent in

2014. TANF has declined in relevance for many poor families, with the EITC and SNAP taking a much more prominent role. For the reach of the CSE program, the problem is that TANF, not the EITC or SNAP, serves as the primary referral source.

The perception that the noncustodial parent could not afford to pay accounted for at least two-thirds, and likely more, of the reduced reach of the system.

Intertwined with the reduced TANF pipeline of new cases are the twin issues of awareness and willingness to engage with the child support system among custodial parent families who are not part of the TANF program. In the patterns in requests for child support assistance in Figure 6, evidence suggests the number of custodial parents who are both aware they need assistance and willing to request it has fallen. But what of those who are either unaware or unwilling? As noted, in recent decades the enrollment of many of those who most needed child support was handled through the AFDC or TANF requirement for cooperating with the CSE program as a condition for receiving cash assistance. Given the historic decline in TANF rolls, the potential for automatic enrollment of those who need but are unaware or unwilling to pursue child support has nearly vanished.

Are there other programs that could serve as automatic referrals and thus enroll those who can benefit but may be unaware or unwilling to engage with the child support system? The evidence on dramatically increasing receipt of SNAP among custodial

parent households, shown in Figure 8, raises the possibility that the child support system might benefit from automatic referrals from SNAP. Under current law, states can require SNAP recipients to cooperate with child support enforcement, and some states have tried it. Under such a system, sanctions for non-cooperation would partially reduce SNAP benefits for the custodial parent or noncustodial parent not cooperating but would not affect benefits for the children. Of course exemptions from cooperation would be allowed in some cases where warranted. Even with these caveats, one should be careful adding requirements to SNAP eligibility that could cause people to go hungry. But if there is the potential to increase resources into the household through child support, it might be worth implementing on a pilot basis and rigorously evaluating the impacts.

Can we learn from the experience of states who have implemented such policies? As of 2005,²⁹ only four states had active policies imposing a child support cooperation requirement on SNAP recipients.³⁰ A more recent study found that although 10 states had adopted policies sanctioning SNAP recipients not cooperating with child support since 2002, only three states still had this policy in place by 2014.³¹ Fully half of these states tried the policy for only one year before abandoning it. A partial answer to the question of why states might not want to expand their child support caseloads through better in-reach to low-income populations may be suggested below, in a discussion of performance metrics.

Another approach to the unaware or unwilling might involve a nudge. A promising Texas program that was recently evaluated, called the Integrated Child Support System (ICSS), flipped the default among those filing for divorce or otherwise contesting Suits Affecting Parent-Child Relationships. By law, custodial parents in the general non-TANF population are required to file an application to receive CSE program assistance. Operating under a waiver of this requirement, the Texas ICSS program flipped this default and automatically enrolled members of these cases, while giving them the opportunity to opt out. Fans of behavioral economics might recognize this as a nudge. Quite simply, many would benefit from

enrollment in the CSE program even if they were not aware of the program's existence or that they needed the help. The final report on this program reported strong positive impacts on child support payment and evidence strongly indicating reduced child support arrears.³² This longer-term outcome was expected to originate from the early enrollment of custodial parents before they became difficult collection cases. Such a program, if adopted nationwide, would promote far greater use of child support enforcement services by many who would ultimately benefit, while still allowing autonomy in the form of opting out.

Turning to the other major factor behind the declining reach of the child support system, recall that among those surveyed about why they have no legal child support agreement, the perception that the noncustodial parent could not afford to pay accounted for at least two-thirds, and likely more, of the reduced reach of the system. But why should this belief, true or not, leave custodial parents or child support agency officials believing that no agreement is needed? The assumption that noncustodial parents with few economic prospects today will never have enough income to support their children is not true. For many people, being unemployed or underemployed is a temporary condition. In fact, studies show that many low-income fathers will experience dramatic earnings growth within five to seven years of their child's birth.³³ Even if the low-income problem does not resolve itself with time, there are rigorously tested workforce development programs that are proven to help unemployed or underemployed noncustodial parents gain employment and increase their income. It also sends a strong message that can benefit both the mother and the father—that the noncustodial parent is legally obligated to support the child.

Research has been ongoing for nearly two decades into programs that provide workforce development services to low-income noncustodial parents. Perhaps the most rigorously evaluated study so far is the large-scale Parents Fair Share (PFS) demonstration.³⁴ The PFS program combined job training and placement, peer support groups, and other services with the goals of increasing the earnings and child support payments of unemployed, noncustodial parents,

improving their communication and parenting skills, and encouraging them to be more engaged in their children's lives. Results of the evaluation indicate that PFS led to increased employment and earnings, but among only those noncustodial parents deemed less employable, or those with no high school diploma or little recent work history. Interestingly, in a result common to programs like these, the researchers reported difficulties recruiting participants.

In a similar line of research conducted by me and colleagues in Texas, the early work focused almost exclusively on the workforce development component of this intervention.³⁵ This first study examined a noncustodial parent workforce referral program that essentially failed in getting referred, low-income noncustodial parents to actually show up in significant numbers at the workforce development office. With the appropriate lessons learned, the model was revised into a program known as Noncustodial Parent Choices.³⁶ Recruitment under this program was made essentially mandatory when participants, who appeared before a family law judge due to nonpayment of child support, were given the choice of either making a lump sum payment of at least \$500, enrolling in the program, or going to jail. Not surprisingly, just under 90 percent of participants enrolled in the program, and the handoff to a workforce development specialist was essentially seamless when they were colocated in the courtroom complex. The impacts of the Noncustodial Parent Choices program included increased employment and payment of child support and even reduced TANF receipt among associated custodial parents. Subsequent studies showed that including peer learning in the package improved the outcomes and successfully extended the model to serve establishment cases earlier in their histories.³⁷

The OCSE is currently funding a large-scale, random-assignment study to demonstrate the efficacy and cost benefit of providing workforce development for low-income noncustodial parents. This study, referred to as the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration Project (CSPED), included, along with workforce development, a package of enhanced child support services,

case management, and parenting classes in a peer support model. Results will not be in for several years; however, if the results are positive, it could be used to justify broader adoption of workforce development strategies.³⁸ Somewhat concerning, however, is the fact that most of the eight states in which the study sites are located do not have mandatory enrollment, and in a familiar story, many are already reporting recruitment difficulties. It remains to be seen whether, despite this limitation, the programs will have the expected impact on employment and payment of child support.

One of the primary barriers to getting child support agreements among the unmarried is the need to establish paternity.

These recommendations offer ways to address the two major factors behind the reduced reach of the CSE program, but are there others? One of the primary barriers to getting child support agreements among the unmarried is the need to establish paternity. Since 1993, all states have been required to establish in-hospital paternity acknowledgment programs. As of 2005, six out of every seven paternities established occurred in a hospital setting. One study found that establishing paternity, whether in or outside the hospital, was associated with greater formal and informal payment of child support.³⁹ This is good progress, but the substantial fraction of unmarried parents who still do not formally acknowledge paternity represent a missed opportunity.

One report provides a detailed picture of the dynamics of child support among unmarried parents.⁴⁰ Three months after the birth and signing the Acknowledgment of Paternity (AOP), 93 percent of

unmarried mothers do not have cases in the formal child support system. Their relationship with the other parent is fragile, however, and after three years the formal child support status is heavily determined by the relationship status. Of those cohabiting three years after signing the AOP, 96 percent are still not in the formal child support system. However, among those who are not in a relationship after three years, 58 percent now have a formal child support case, suggesting fairly rational behavior among couples that signed the AOP. Critically, however, those non-custodial parents who fail to sign the AOP in hospital tend to have risk factors that are associated with later entrance into the formal child support system.⁴¹ Since these risk factors are also predictive of nonpayment of child support once in the formal CSE program, a well-designed system might enroll nonsigners of the AOP automatically as a preventive measure.

Policy Recommendations

The formal CSE program faces a difficult task in ensuring the well-being of children born into fragile families. A delicate balancing act is required. If the system is too aggressive in recruiting families, it could harm the chances of reconciliation among struggling couples, and thus foreclose the possibility of children growing up with both parents. If the CSE program is not aggressive enough, it may miss opportunities to lay the groundwork for future child support cases, should they be needed.

With this balancing act in mind, seeing that the reach of the CSE program has diminished while the need has remained consistent is unfortunate. Two factors can account for most of this shortfall. One is the lack of automatic enrollment from the TANF program. The second seems to be a lack of awareness, ability, or willingness to engage with child support among those who could benefit but are not receiving TANF services. In the absence of a large federal program to mandate compliance with child support, the belief, real or imagined, that noncustodial parents have insufficient earnings capacity to make

enforcement of child support orders worthwhile is allowed to dictate who is pursued for child support and who is not.

Two policy approaches could help with the recruitment problem: identify one or more substitute programs that compel needy families to cooperate with child support and improve the image of the CSE program so that more families voluntarily make use of its services, including those who believe the noncustodial parent is not currently in a position to pay. The best policy response might include elements of both, while also leaving room for smaller policy fixes that improve the functioning of the CSE program (which may also help with the image problem).

Specific policy recommendations include:

- Automatic enrollment in the CSE program at family law court for those getting divorced (opting out is possible) and for unmarried parents who fail to sign the paternity acknowledgment;
- Automatic enrollment for SNAP recipients, with appropriate exclusions and the ability to opt out if they choose;
- Reforms to eliminate loopholes in the performance management system that currently allow states to avoid serving some of the neediest families (which may also prevent some states from expanding their programs to SNAP or Medicaid);
- Workforce development for low-income non-custodial parents with a proper funding stream to improve their ability to pay, established through legislation rather than rulemaking by the executive branch;
- Work-first services available under this model, along with training designed to improve human capital and earning potential;
- Efforts to improve the CSE program image including revisiting policies around collection of child support arrears owed to the state;

- Redefining the arrears-collection performance measure so that states are rewarded only for collecting arrears owed to custodial parents, not the state; and
- Generous pass-through policies should be applied in all states so that families keep most or all payments made, even when receiving TANF.

The CSE program has always benefited from automatic enrollment, in the form of required participation of AFDC or TANF recipients. But it has never really had to do outreach to serve populations it should be serving. Now that the TANF program has been reduced to a small fraction of its former size, at the same time that poverty levels have gone up by more than 5 percentage points among custodial parent families since 2002, there are underserved populations for whom some form of automatic enrollment may be prudent.

The Texas ICSS program, including its automatic enrollment in the CSE program, coupled with the ability to opt out, offers a model that could feasibly be copied and disseminated widely. Enforcing child support early after the birth of a child helps to avoid the buildup of arrears and helps families stay out of poverty. While such a system, serving as a nudge toward universal child support, would serve most divorcing families well, it would not likely succeed at reaching much of the never-married population.

For this never-married population, which has been growing, the AOP in hospital lays the groundwork for future child support cases, should they be needed. Importantly, those noncustodial parents who fail to sign the AOP in hospital tend to have risk factors that are associated with later entrance into the formal child support system.⁴² These risk factors—which include incarceration, multipartner fertility, domestic violence, or substance abuse—are also strongly predictive of nonpayment of child support once in the formal CSE program. It is important then to treat nonsigning of the AOP as a red flag indicating a potential future difficult-to-collect child support case and to automatically enroll nonmarried custodial parents who have not signed AOP into the formal CSE program.

This was not my idea but it is a great suggestion, and it should work for the same reasons that automatic enrollment in family law courts, as in the Texas ICSS model, works: enforcing cases early helps keep families out of poverty and avoids the buildup of arrears. Automatic enrollment of custodial parents who have not signed AOP at the hospital would round out the universal child support system nicely by reaching more never-married parents.

The same automatic enrollment model could also be applied to SNAP families. In fact, they could be signed up automatically at application but subsequently allowed to opt out of child support enforcement if they choose. Some fraction of them may actually need SNAP in part because of nonpayment of child support and may not be aware how successful the state can be at collecting child support. It also might provide cover to custodial parents who are discouraged by the noncustodial parent from contacting child support enforcement. This approach would have the added benefit of shoring up the universal child support model among older cases, since the universal child support recommendation above focuses on cases earlier in their histories, closer to the divorce or birth.

Another class of potential solutions to the enrollment problem would involve fixes to improve the image of the child support system. Recruiting cases would be far easier if one were to successfully convert the image of the system from one that unfairly goes after those with little income and keeps for the state payments made while the family is receiving cash assistance into one where unemployed noncustodial parents can receive job-search assistance and even training to help them meet their financial responsibilities.

Likely one of the biggest changes that could improve the image of the CSE program would be to stop collecting money to recover current or prior welfare payments. Already only 5 percent of collections reimburse states for public-assistance costs, a figure that has been shrinking over the years, so the loss of funds would be minimal. One could also argue that recovery of welfare costs is a form of double taxation. Taxpayers shoulder the burden of paying for

the safety net system, including the TANF program. If one accepts that noncustodial parents are taxpayers, but then requires them to individually support the child support system directly through cost recovery in the form of state-owed arrears, this is double taxation. Noncustodial parents who are poor may pay little in taxes today, but a well-targeted jobs program could convert them into serious taxpayers going forward. This is a big reason people see the system as unfair,⁴³ and it must be addressed by any serious effort to improve the reach of the system so that it efficiently serves as a poverty-avoidance mechanism for as many families as could benefit. It is past time, for the sake of the CSE program's image, to end the practice of welfare cost recovery.

Debt-forgiveness programs that incentivize behaviors such as making payments or participating in workforce development efforts may be worthwhile to pursue.

Another problem affecting the image of child support is the shadow cast by the substantial outstanding child support debt, or arrears, which totaled more than \$115 billion nationwide in 2012. Carrying bad debts on the books is not good business, and as discussed earlier, a large fraction of existing arrears is regarded as uncollectible.⁴⁴ Debt-forgiveness programs that incentivize behaviors such as making payments or participating in workforce development efforts may be worthwhile to pursue. Although many debt-forgiveness programs suffer from low enrollment, the Families Forward program has many features that an ideal program would and could possibly be improved by an even more generous rate of

debt forgiveness.⁴⁵ States may be reluctant to forgive the arrears they believe are owed to them, but if performance measures that hold states accountable were redefined to focus on the share of cases paying toward arrears owed to custodial parents only, states may be more willing to engage in debt-forgiveness programs.⁴⁶ All arrears-collecting activity should be focused on debts owed to custodial parent families, and states should be incentivized toward that goal.

Another way to improve the image of the CSE program would be to turn it into a place where unemployed and underemployed noncustodial parents can get job-search assistance or training to improve their earnings capacities and thus their ability to meet their obligations. Low-earnings potential among noncustodial parents was the most common and growing reason cited by custodial parents without child support agreements. An effort to make child support enforcement more explicitly about workforce development for noncustodial parents would help directly, by improving their employment and earnings, and indirectly by improving the image of the system.

There is no need to wait on the results of the CSPED study to know providing workforce development to low-income noncustodial parents who are unable to meet their financial responsibilities is a good idea. The only real question is what level and type of services to provide. Many will benefit from low-cost, low-touch, work-first services such as job-search assistance, but others may need support services to help them retain their jobs. Still others have no trouble finding low-skill work but may benefit from assistance in advancing their human capital and thus their earnings potential. There are well-documented sectoral-training programs that lead to long-term sustainable earnings gains (e.g., Capital Idea),⁴⁷ but training can be expensive and not always effective unless well targeted; therefore it must be used judiciously. One challenge in offering training opportunities to noncustodial parents is recognizing the trade-off against current earnings while participating in weeks or months of training. If a noncustodial parent is paying child support, even a small amount, it could place the custodial parent under additional strain if payments are missed during training. Programs that pay

one's current child support obligation during training would alleviate this concern.

Workforce development programs serving non-custodial parents should be rigorously evaluated to determine their efficacy, but what should be the funding source for these services? It has arguably been possible since the inception of the TANF program in 1996 for states to pay for workforce development services using excess TANF funds. But a proposed rule change would extend this authority as an allowable child support enforcement expense.⁴⁸ This would be a positive change, but it is too important to leave to the whims of a future administration (as an administrative rule change would allow) and should instead be authorized in law. Using TANF funds is one possible solution, but the proposed option to fund job services using the same two-to-one federal match that incentivizes states to spend their own money on child support enforcement is also an attractive funding model for jobs services.⁴⁹ The CSE program has been improving its cost-effectiveness for so long, now collecting more than \$5 for every dollar spent, it can afford to invest a little in such longer-term priorities.

In addition to the recommendations listed here, one might also consider the synergy that could result from combining some or all of them. Reducing arrears balances and enrolling noncustodial parents in workforce development are good ideas. However, since such programs often suffer recruitment challenges, it makes sense to use arrears reduction as an incentive to enrollment and participation in workforce development.

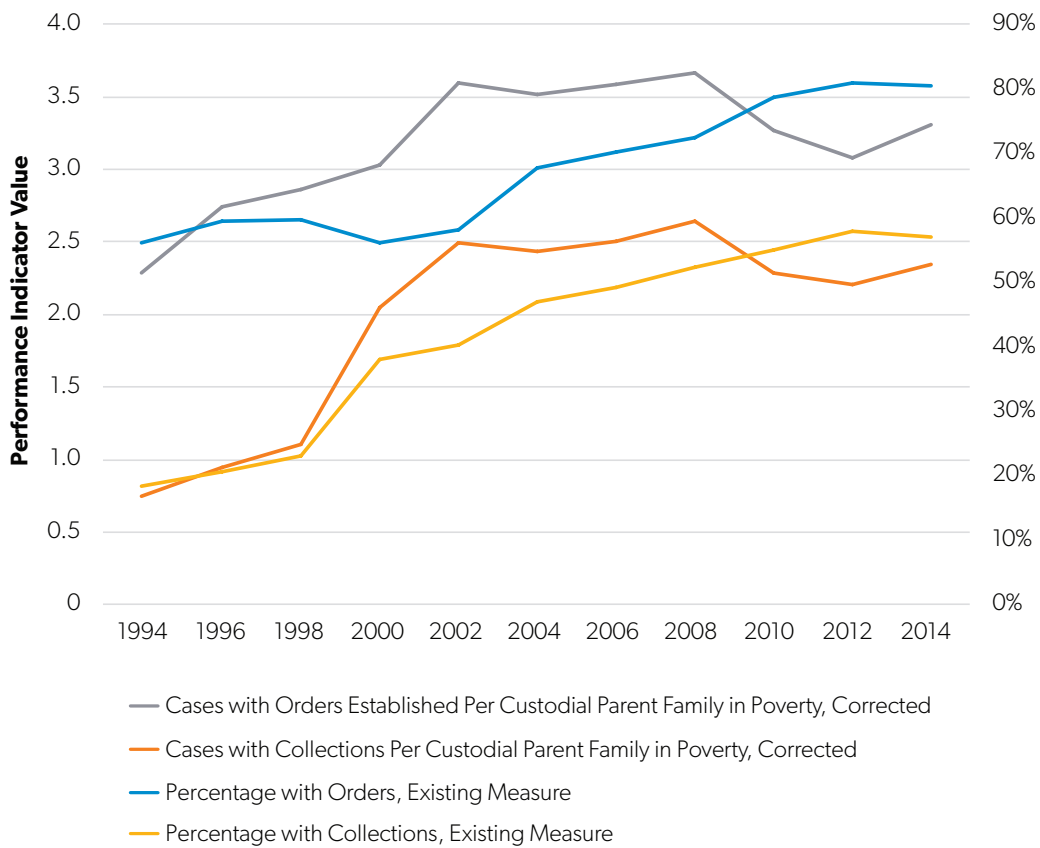
A final major recommendation would be to eliminate loopholes in the performance management system that currently allow states to avoid serving some of the neediest families. An example of this appeared recently in the popular press, in an article in which Ohio was praised for improving its payment statistics. The real source of the improvement, found in the fine print, was due to "elimination of a rule requiring the creation of child support cases when single-parents apply for government-funded medical assistance."⁵⁰ These difficult-to-serve cases were ostensibly weighing the system down, and serving them required an outsized share of resources. The travesty is that

although these families include some of those most in need of child support enforcement, Ohio was rewarded for eliminating the rule requiring its CSE program agency to serve them.

The real problem with several of the performance management measures is that the denominator includes all child support cases with no concern for how financially needy the families are. Figure 2 illustrates recent trends on two existing but faulty performance measures, percentage of cases with orders and percentage of cases with collections. Figure 9 reproduces these faulty measures and compares them with two proposed replacement measures in which the denominator is the number of custodial parent families living in poverty.⁵¹ The contrast of the existing versus proposed performance indicators is immediately apparent. The existing measures show generally improving performance throughout the past 20 years, failing to capture the reduced reach documented here. In contrast, the proposed new measures accurately reflect the stagnant or declining reach of the system over the past 10 years or so, and in particular they highlight the inability of the existing system to recruit and serve poor custodial parent families. As before, these proposed measures reward agencies for serving families, but the reward is potentially magnified for serving families in poverty, since collecting child support for poor families has the potential to both add to the numerator and remove families from the denominator by lifting them out of poverty. More importantly, these proposed measures would not reward states for eliminating the difficult-to-serve cases from their CSE program caseloads.

Beyond these major recommendations, there are other smaller ways to improve the CSE program. There is, for example, a great deal of variation in the CSE programs and policies across states. While allowing states to experiment with the CSE program or other programs is generally a good thing, there comes a time when good practices need to be accepted and widely distributed. But there are too many examples of good policies that have not been adopted by many states. For one, consider the pass-through policy. When a custodial parent is currently receiving TANF and the noncustodial parent

Figure 9. Proposed Versus Existing Performance Indicators



Source: Author’s calculations using publicly available data from multiple sources.

makes a child support payment, in most states the custodial parent receives absolutely none of that payment. Before the passage of PRWORA in 1996, states were required to pass-through at least the first \$50, but for some inexplicable reason, they were given flexibility on this. Subsequently, only 19 states had pass-through policies as of 2012.⁵² In the remaining states and territories, the money is kept by the state, and for many noncustodial parents, there is little incentive to pay child support through the formal system. Pass-through policies typically allow the custodial parents to keep the first \$50 or \$100 or more of a payment and have been shown to be effective in increasing both payment frequency and amount.⁵³

With the federal government funding the CSE program at a rate of \$2 per every dollar of state spending, there is considerable leeway for the feds to require changes in state and local programs. It should be a simple matter to have states establish some kind of pass-through and even to make it more generous. In fact, under most circumstances, custodial parents should be allowed to keep most or all of any child support payments that are made.

These policy recommendations could go a long way to restoring and strengthening the CSE program and its ability to keep families out of poverty. Automatically enrolling families would ensure the CSE program services are available to more families who need them but may be unaware or unwilling

to cooperate. Extending automatic enrollment to include programs such as SNAP or Medicaid would better serve the majority of needy custodial parent families, while still allowing those who object to opt out. Increased availability of workforce development services for low-income noncustodial parents would help to evolve the image of the system into one that is trying to help struggling families, and the services themselves would help boost payment of child support. Finally, along with other fixes, revising the

performance measurement system would eliminate the rewards to states for avoiding serving needy families and make them generally responsible for poor custodial parent families to such an extent that they may need to devise recruitment strategies. With policy changes like these, the federal CSE program would be better positioned to serve the modern custodial parent population by helping to keep families with children out of poverty and making sure that absent parents meet their responsibilities.

Appendix A

Cases with No Agreements or Orders

The percentage of child support-eligible households in the population who have legal agreements with the nonresident parent or orders for payment of child support peaked at 60 percent in 2004 and has declined to 49 percent as of 2014.⁵⁴ A simple calculation can be done with these data to get an estimate of the magnitude of the problem of no child support agreements. Hypothetically speaking, if the share of custodial parents with legal agreements had held steady at 60 percent instead of declining over the past decade, then there would be 8.1 million custodial parents with agreements in 2014, as opposed to the 6.5 million actually observed. The difference, about 1.6 million custodial parent families, will be regarded as an estimate of the magnitude of a problem of reduced reach of the CSE program.

Male Custodial Parenthood

The shift toward male custodial parenthood in the child support-eligible population was a gradual 1.5 percentage point increase over the period of study, from 16 percent male in 1994 to 17.5 percent in 2014. Focusing instead on the more recent period of 2004 to 2014, the shift toward male custodial parenthood was 0.6 percentage points. As of 2014, 51 percent of female-headed custodial parent families had no legal agreement, whereas 70 percent of male custodial parent families had no legal agreement. Hypothetically, if there had been no gender shift between 2004 and 2014, there would be 15,000 additional families with a child support agreement as of 2014.

Never Married

Child support population data show the proportion of custodial parents who were never married increased from 26 percent of such households in 1994 to 38 percent in 2014 (see Appendix B). Families headed by custodial parents who were never married were between 10 and 19 percentage points less likely to have a child support agreement than those of other marital statuses. Hypothetically, if the never-married share of the caseload had held at 26 percent, instead of climbing to 38 percent, there would have been 3.5 million never-married custodial parent households in 2014 as opposed to the 5.1 million that was observed. Assuming the 1.6 million were instead married, widowed, separated, or divorced, that would leave about 171,000 additional custodial parents with child support agreements in 2014 than was actually observed.

Requests for Assistance

Requests for assistance in establishing a child support agreement or getting an award decreased by 486,000 between 2004 and 2014. Requests for assistance in establishing paternity increased by 17,000 over the same period. With a net decrease of about 470,000 across these two categories of request, and without knowing what fraction of requests would have ultimately yielded legal agreements, this suggests that declining requests for assistance can account for less than a third of the reduced reach of the CSE program.

Reasons for Having No Agreement or Order

Among the most common reasons cited by those with no agreement, there are only two that increased by 26 percent or more between 2004 and 2014. The number of custodial parents without legal agreements

who claimed the other parent could not afford to pay increased by about 1.1 million between 2004 and 2014, and the number without agreements claiming the other parent provides what he or she can increased by about 1 million in the same period. Since respondents could select more than one reason, this means that, at a minimum, 1.1 million custodial parents selected one of these reasons, and potentially up to 2.1 million did.

Appendix B

Table 1. Panel A, The OCSE Data⁵⁵

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Cost-Effectiveness Ratio	3.85	3.59	3.94	3.90	4.00	3.94	3.95	3.92
Total Collections Distributed, Inflation Adjusted (Millions)	\$15,735	\$16,819	\$18,136	\$19,712	\$20,838	\$22,595	\$24,546	\$25,341
Total Arrears, Inflation Adjusted (Millions)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Cost-Effectiveness Ratio	4.13	4.32	4.38	4.58	4.58	4.73	4.80	4.78
Total Collections Distributed, Inflation Adjusted (Millions)	\$26,499	\$27,246	\$27,397	\$27,887	\$28,105	\$28,378	\$29,205	\$29,116
Total Arrears, Inflation Adjusted (Millions)	\$121,491	\$127,115	\$128,277	\$129,181	\$122,602	\$121,556	\$116,055	\$118,776
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014			
Cost-Effectiveness Ratio	4.88	5.12	5.19	5.31	5.25			
Total Collections Distributed, Inflation Adjusted (Millions)	\$28,831	\$28,728	\$28,581	\$28,461	\$28,199			
Total Arrears, Inflation Adjusted (Millions)	\$119,707	\$117,183	\$118,123	\$118,034	\$114,790			

Source: Author's analysis of the OCSE data.

Table 2. Panel B, Census Data

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Total Caseload, Custodial Parents (Thousands)	13,690	13,715	13,949	13,529	13,383	13,951	13,605	13,743	13,672	14,440	13,418
Percentage of Male Custodial Parents	16.0%	15.4%	14.9%	15.0%	15.6%	16.9%	16.2%	17.4%	17.8%	18.3%	17.5%
Poverty Rate, Custodial Parent Families	33.3%	30.3%	28.9%	26.1%	23.4%	24.0%	25.0%	24.6%	28.3%	28.9%	28.8%
Never Married	26.7%	26.4%	30.0%	29.9%	29.5%	28.7%	30.4%	31.9%	34.6%	35.0%	38.1%
Other Marital Statuses	73.3%	73.6%	70.0%	70.1%	70.5%	71.3%	69.6%	68.1%	65.4%	65.0%	61.9%
Have Child Support Agreement, Never Married	42.8%	44.9%	47.3%	47.8%	50.9%	50.9%	47.8%	43.5%	44.2%	41.0%	42.2%
Have Child Support Agreement, Other Marital Statuses	62.2%	62.8%	60.4%	63.4%	62.6%	63.7%	61.5%	59.0%	53.9%	53.1%	52.7%

Source: Author's analysis of summary data from tables accompanying Timothy S. Grall, *Current Population Reports*, nos. P60-212, P60-217, P60-225, P60-230, P60-234, P60-237, P60-240, P60-246, P60-255, 2000-15, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/population.html>.

About the Author

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Notes

1. David T. Ellwood, *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 162.
2. Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and later Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, is often referred to as the IV-A program because Title IV-A of the Social Security Act authorizes and governs it.
3. US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Child Support Enforcement, “FY2012 Annual Report to Congress,” 2012, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/resource/fy2012-annual-report-to-congress>.
4. See National Conference of State Legislatures, “Child Support Pass-Through and Disregard Policies for Public Assistance Recipients,” September 21, 2016, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/state-policy-pass-through-disregard-child-support.aspx>.
5. The application fee is not to exceed \$25.
6. Paul R. Amato and Joan G. Gilbreth, “Nonresident Fathers and Children’s Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, no. 3 (August 1999): 557–73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/353560?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
7. Jeong-Kyun Choi and Ho-Soon Pyun, “Nonresident Fathers’ Financial Support, Informal Instrumental Support, Mothers’ Parenting, and Child Development in Single-Mother Families with Low Income,” *Journal of Family Issues* 35, no. 4 (March 2014): 526–46, <http://jfi.sagepub.com/content/35/4/526.abstract>.
8. Irwin Garfinkel et al., “The Roles of Child Support Enforcement and Welfare in Nonmarital Childbearing,” *Journal of Population Economics* 16, no. 1 (February 2003): 55–70, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s001480100108>.
9. Anna Aizer and Sara McLanahan, “The Impact of Child Support Enforcement on Fertility, Parental Investments, and Child Well-Being,” *Journal of Human Resources* 41, no. 1 (2006), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.383.163&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.
10. Lingxin Hao, Nan M. Astone, and Andrew J. Cherlin, “Effects of Child Support and Welfare Policies on Nonmarital Teenage Childbearing and Motherhood,” *Population Research Policy Review* 26, no. 3 (June 2007): 235–57, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11113-007-9029-6>.
11. Elaine Sorensen, “Major Change in Who Is Owed Child Support Arrears,” US Department of Health and Human Services, March 2014, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/changes_in_who_is_owed_arrears.pdf.
12. Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, “Child Support 2014: More Money for Families,” 2012, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/2014_preliminary_report_infographic.pdf.
13. As of this writing, the most recent formal annual report to Congress filed by the OCSE was in 2012.
14. Paternity establishment is required for nearly all births to unmarried women, except for incest, rape, or pending adoption.
15. The child support supplement is part of the Annual Social and Economic Supplement, which is a component of the Current Population Survey.
16. Before 1999 a different categorization scheme was used to classify cases as “TANF/Foster Care,” “Non-TANF,” or “TANF/Foster Care Arrears Only.” A far more confusing version of this chart showing trends using the earlier categorization is available from the author; it also shows a rapidly declining TANF-related portion of the caseload before 1999.
17. Carmen Solomon-Fears, “Fatherhood Initiatives: Connecting Fathers to Their Children,” Congressional Research Service, January 14, 2016, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL31025.pdf>.
18. Administration for Children and Families, “TANF: Average Monthly Number of Families,” June 15, 2016, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ofa/2015_family_tan.pdf.
19. A small fraction of child support that is collected goes undistributed. Because it does not appear to be trending over this time period or driving the trends of interest, it is not discussed here.

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20. Office of Child Support Enforcement, “FY 2014 Preliminary Data Report Announcement,” April 16, 2015, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/resource/fy-2014-preliminary-data-report-announcement>.

21. Sorenson, “Major Change in Who Is Owed Child Support Arrears.”

22. Elaine Sorensen, Liliana Sousa, and Simone G. Schaner, “Assessing Child Support Arrears in Nine Large States and the Nation,” Office of Child Support Enforcement, July 11, 2007, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/assessing-child-support-arrears-nine-large-states-and-nation>.

23. Maria Cancian, Carolyn Heinrich, and Yiyoon Chung, “Does Debt Discourage Employment and Payment of Child Support? Evidence from a Natural Experiment,” Institute for Research on Poverty, July 2009, <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp136609.pdf>.

24. The child support supplement originally included only custodial mothers; fathers were added to the survey beginning in 1991. For many measures in which results are broken out by custodial parent gender, there are too few observations among males to release estimates. The issue of custodial parent gender is returned to later.

25. The high estimate of the number of child support-eligible families in 2012 appears likely to be due to measurement error because it reverted to its prior range for 2014.

26. Carmen Solomon-Fears, “Child Support: An Overview of Census Bureau Data on Recipients,” Congressional Research Service, March 1, 2016, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS22499.pdf>.

27. For simplicity of presentation, we collapse married, divorced, separated, or widowed custodial parents into one category. Timothy Grall does likewise, using the term “ever-married.” On most child support measures examined, never marrieds differ drastically from the remaining ever-married categories collectively, so this seems a reasonable simplification. See Timothy S. Grall, *Current Population Reports*, nos. P60-212, P60-217, P60-225, P60-230, P60-234, P60-237, P60-240, P60-246, P60-255, 2000-15, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/population.html>.

28. Typically less than 1 percent of custodial parents have informal child support agreements; they are also asked the question why they have no legal agreement, along with those who have no agreement of any kind.

29. Paula Roberts, “Child Support Cooperation Requirements and Public Benefits Programs: An Overview of Issues and Recommendations for Change,” Center for Law and Social Policy, November 2005, <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/files/0252.pdf>.

30. Ten states had a comparable disqualification from SNAP when noncooperation was found to occur in relation to TANF, but because these policies do not reach non-TANF households, we focus on those states who potentially sanction all SNAP-recipient households.

31. Rodney W. Hopkins and Robbi N. Poulson, “Food Stamp Child Support Cooperation Study,” Social Research Institute, August 29, 2014, <http://le.utah.gov/interim/2014/pdf/00005534.pdf>.

32. Daniel G. Schroeder and Ashweeta Patnaik, “Texas Integrated Child Support System: Final Evaluation Report,” 2016, http://raymarshallcenter.org/files/2016/10/ICSS_Local-Rule_Final_Sep2016.pdf.

33. Elizabeth Phillips and Irwin Garfinkel, “Income Growth Among Nonresident Fathers: Evidence from Wisconsin,” *Demography* 30, no. 2 (May 1993): 227–41, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2061839?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

34. John M. Martinez and Cynthia Miller, “Working and Earning: The Impact of Parents’ Fair Share on Low-Income Fathers’ Employment,” Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, October 2000, http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_618.pdf.

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36. Daniel Schroeder and Nicholas Doughty, “Texas Noncustodial Parent Choices: Program Impact Analysis,” Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, August 2009, http://raymarshallcenter.org/files/2005/07/NCP_Choices_Final_Sep_03_2009.pdf.

37. Daniel Schroeder and Amna Khan, “Noncustodial Parent Choices Establishment and PEER Pilots: Impact Report,” Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, August 2011, http://raymarshallcenter.org/files/2005/07/NCP_Choices_Estab_Sep2011.pdf.

38. Daniel R. Meyer, Maria Cancian, and Yiyu Chen, "Why Are Child Support Orders Becoming Less Likely After Divorce?," *Social Service Review* 89, no. 2 (June 2015): 301–34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/681604>.
39. Ronald Mincy, Irwin Garfinkel, and Lenna Nepomnyaschy, "In-Hospital Paternity Establishment and Father Involvement in Fragile Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, no. 3 (August 2005): 611–26, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2005.00157.x/abstract>.
40. Cynthia Osborne et al., "A Portrait of Father Involvement and Support in the First Three Years After a Nonmarital Birth," Child and Family Research Partnership, October 2013, http://childandfamilyresearch.org/content/uploads/AOP_1st3_web.pdf.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Kathryn Edin, "Single Mothers and Child Support: The Possibilities and Limits of Child Support Policy," *Children and Youth Services Review* 17, nos. 1–2 (December 1999): 203–30, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740995000092>.
44. Elaine Sorensen, Liliana Sousa, and Simone G. Schaner, "Assessing Child Support Arrears in Nine Large States and the Nation."
45. Carolyn J. Heinrich, Brett C. Burkhardt, and Hilary M. Shager, "Reducing Child Support Debt and Its Consequences: Can Forgiveness Benefit All?," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 30, no. 4 (June 2011): 755–74, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pam.20599/pdf>.
46. The OCSE proposed a smart provision that would allow states to close cases with no current support and all arrearages owed to the state. The purpose is to allow states to focus resources on collecting arrears for families. See Office of Child Support Enforcement, "NPRM: Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization in Child Support Enforcement Programs," *Federal Register* 79, no. 221 (November 2014): 68548–87, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2014-11-17/pdf/2014-26822.pdf>.
47. Tara Smith et al., "The Local Investments in Workforce Development Evaluation: Travis County-Funded 2009/2010 Participants Plus Longer-Term Outcomes for Capital IDEA," Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, December 2012.
48. Office of Child Support Enforcement, "NPRM: Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization in Child Support Enforcement Programs."
49. This is not to suggest we duplicate services; the existing network of one-stop workforce development centers works well with multiple funding streams. It might be worth considering the colocation of the CSE and workforce development services to facilitate the handoff.
50. Cornelius Frolik, "More Payments Ordered for Child Support Cases," *Dayton Daily News*, February 3, 2016, <http://www.mydaytondailynews.com/news/news/local/more-payments-ordered-for-child-support-cases/nqJKP/>.
51. The proposed performance measures plotted here also include a macroeconomic correction for local economic conditions, in the form of dividing the cases-per-poor-family ratio by the employment-population ratio. This automatic correction builds in a recognition of the difficulty of collecting child support when employment levels are low.
52. Carmen Solomon-Fears, "Child Support Enforcement: Program Basics," Congressional Research Service, May 22, 2014, <http://www.ncsea.org/documents/CRS-Report-on-CSE-Program-Basics-5-2014.pdf>.
53. Kye Lippold, Austin Nichols, and Elaine Sorensen, "Evaluation of the \$150 Child Support Pass-Through and Disregard Policy in the District of Columbia," Urban Institute, November 2010, <http://www.urban.org/research/publication/evaluation-150-child-support-pass-through-and-disregard-policy-district>.
54. These figures count both legal and the less common informal agreements, but the declining trend does not appear to be driven by one or the other.
55. Where dollar amounts are cited over time, values have been adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers, so that the real purchasing power of a dollar is held constant across time at its value as of 2014. Such corrections are noted as "2014 dollars."

