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Perceptions of Fairness in Child Support

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over a quarter of U.S. children live apart from a parent (Hemez & Washington, 2021), and children who live in custodial parent (CP) families are nearly three times as likely to experience poverty than children in other families (Grall, 2020). The child support program is an important tool in the fight against childhood poverty (Meyer & Hu, 1999; Cuesta & Meyer, 2018), and consistent payment of child support helps CPs cover regular costs for children, such as housing, transportation, clothing, and food (Ha et al., 2010). The child support program aims to secure consistent financial support for children who live apart from a parent, and to recover costs for children receiving public assistances from parents outside of the home (Cancian et al., 2011).

Though child support is an important source of income for many families, the child support program does not always engage with CPs and noncustodial parents (NCPs) as intended. In 2018, fewer than half of U.S. CPs had a child support order in place. Reasons CPs have given for not pursuing an order include: believing the NCP already provides what they can, feeling an order is unnecessary, or not wanting the NCP to pay (Grall, 2020; Huang & Pouncy, 2005); perceiving that the other parent cannot afford to pay (Grall, 2020; Harris, 2015); seeking to avoid conflict with NCPs or concerns about domestic violence (Harris, 2015; Waller & Plotnick, 2001); and preferences for informal support (Edin & Lein, 1997; Harris, 2015; Waller & Plotnick, 2001). For CPs *with* an order, nonpayment of ordered support by NCPs is a significant problem. In 2018, most (54%) CPs did not receive all the child support owed to them, and nearly one-third received none, with CPs living in poverty disproportionately unlikely to receive all of the support they were owed (Grall, 2020). A range of factors can affect NCPs' compliance with child support obligations, including issues related to ability to pay, willingness to pay, and aspects of the enforcement system itself (Bartfeld & Meyer, 2003). As a result of mismatches

between child support owed and paid, NCPs accrue substantial child support debt as arrears; in 2021, nearly 10 million NCPs owed over \$113 billion in child support arrears (Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2021). NCPs with the most debt are disproportionately likely to have low incomes and orders that comprise a large share of their income (Sorensen et al., 2007).

Traditionally, child support agencies (CSAs) have focused narrowly on setting and enforcing child support orders (Miller & Knox, 2001), and the child support program has experienced decades of significant expansion and strengthening of the tools available for enforcement (McLanahan, 2004; Sorensen & Hill, 2004). In recognition of the limitations of this enforcement-only approach, members of the child support policy and practice communities have called for new approaches to serving families, using more supportive strategies. Some of these efforts have focused on connecting NCPs struggling to work and pay child support to employment services and other supports (Hahn et al., 2018; Turetsky, 2010). Wisconsin is a key leader in this realm—through the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) (Cancian et al., 2022), known locally as Supporting Parents Supporting Kids (SPSK), as well as the court-ordered referral program Children First, and the more recent ELEVATE (Empowering Lives through Education, Vocational Assessment, Training, and Employment) program.

Another area of focus for some CSAs has been incorporating procedural justice ideas into practices and processes. Procedural justice approaches focus on five core principles: treating individuals with respect; giving individuals voice within processes; individuals understanding of processes; neutrality in decision-making; and helpfulness and trustworthiness of system actors (Swaner et al., 2018; Tyler, 2007). The notion of procedural justice focuses on how individuals experience a process (Thibault & Walker, 1975); it posits that when people perceive processes as

fair, they are more likely to comply with process outcomes, even if actual outcomes differ from desired outcomes (Tyler & Lind, 2002; Tyler & Huo, 2002; Berman & Gold, 2012). This concept has been empirically tested in a host of settings (see Thibault & Walker, 1975, and see Tyler & Lind, 2002, for a review). As Tyler and Lind (2002) note, and relevant for child support, processes that are perceived as fair are more likely to be complied with over time. Procedural justice approaches have made their way into child support programs formally through projects such as Procedural Justice Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) and are reflected less formally in the more helping-oriented approaches many Wisconsin CSAs have shifted towards in recent years (Vogel, 2021; Vogel et al., 2022; Vogel and Hossain, 2022).

Previous IRP analyses have examined factors related to perceptions of fair treatment and have estimated the quantitative relationship between NCP perceptions of treatment and child support outcomes (Kim & Meyer, 2021). Kim & Meyer (2021) used data from CSPED's evaluation to determine whether NCPs randomly assigned to receive a package of extra services—including enhanced child support, case management, employment, and parenting services—were more likely to report fair treatment than those assigned to a control group for business-as-usual child support services. Within the Wisconsin-specific sample, the authors found that NCPs randomly assigned to the extra services group were more likely to report fair treatment than those who received regular services, even when controlling for child support order outcomes (including order amount and modifications received). They identified that perceptions of fair treatment were affected by parent understanding of child support processes, including knowing who within child support to contact with questions, and helpfulness of system actors. These patterns were largely consistent with analyses that included other states beyond Wisconsin, though these additional analyses also identified the principles of respect, neutrality,

and voice as important to perceptions of fairness. The authors did not find a relationship between their measure of fair treatment and payments overall, though did find a significant relationship for Black NCPs—a group especially historically marginalized by the child support and criminal justice systems—within the Wisconsin sample.

Despite the growing emphasis on process fairness and the important insights yielded by this prior work, many questions remain about how various stakeholders involved in child support processes perceive the fairness of those processes. This study aims to address this gap, through interviews with actors working within CSAs—including agency leaders and frontline staff—as well as CPs and NCPs served by CSAs, in two Wisconsin sites. The study explores what fairness in child support means to these stakeholders: their overall perceptions of fairness in child support; perceptions of fairness at key junctures within the child support process (including order establishment, modification, and enforcement); and, from the perspective of these stakeholders, how child support systems and actors could work differently to improve experiences and perceptions of fairness and incorporate aspects of procedural justice into practice. This study attends to the following research questions:

1. How did parents become involved with child support? What do they perceive as the role of child support in the lives of families?
2. Broadly, to what extent do stakeholders perceive the child support system as fair or unfair, and to whom?
3. What aspects of child support practices do stakeholders perceive as fair or unfair, at key junctures in child support processes? To what extent do stakeholders believe that justice principles (dignity, voice, neutrality, helpfulness, and understanding of the process) are currently incorporated into child support policies and processes?
4. What efforts are CSAs engaged in (or planning to engage in) to improve fairness and perceptions of fairness, and what information or resources could help support CSAs seeking to incorporate these principles into their practice?
5. How do stakeholders imagine an optimally “fair” system could operate?

II. BACKGROUND AND POLICY CONTEXT

A. Wisconsin's Child Support Program

Wisconsin's child support program is administered locally by Wisconsin's county and tribal CSAs and supervised by the state. States must comply with federal rules and standards to receive federal funds to help cover program costs. County CSAs must follow state and federal guidelines and have the flexibility to implement, interpret policy, and determine practice within these guidelines. Wisconsin's county CSAs, among other key functions, are tasked with establishing paternity; setting orders for support and periodically reviewing orders; monitoring compliance; and enforcing orders when parents do not pay (Gentry, 2017).

Families come to child support through different pathways. Some parents apply for child support services after the dissolution of their relationship. Others are referred from public benefits programs (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2018a.; Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2020). Before child support can be ordered, a child's paternity must be established. Paternity establishment can occur through multiple pathways, including presumption based on marriage, voluntary acknowledgement of paternity, or adjudication of paternity via court process (Gentry, 2017). Once established, courts set orders for financial and medical support using Wisconsin's child support guidelines contained within Chapter 150 of Wisconsin's administrative code¹. Wisconsin's guidelines are presumptive and designed to address a variety of family circumstances and parent financial resources. Once an order is set, court action is required to change it (Gentry, 2017).

Child support is collected and distributed via a centralized state system (Gentry, 2017) and the state retains a portion of child support paid when the CP receives cash payments from

¹https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/code/admin_code/DCF/101_199/150

certain public benefits programs (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2017). Automatic income withholding facilitates automatic collection of child support via NCP paychecks and is a key tool for promoting compliance (Gentry, 2017; Bartfeld & Meyer, 2003); most child support in the United States is paid this way (Tollestrup, 2019).

When NCPs do not pay the support that they owe, CSAs can take a host of enforcement actions to compel payment. Many enforcement actions occur administratively; some occur automatically (such as sending of certain letters and placement on a lien docket), often with the help of state databases and systems, and some are staff-initiated (such as asset seizure and license suspension). Courts also play a role in enforcement when CSAs initiate civil contempt proceedings to compel compliance with a child support order or, in rare circumstances, when CSAs recommend criminal nonsupport charges (Gentry, 2017; Vogel, 2021). Civil contempt can result in incarceration if an NCP is found in contempt, fails to meet purge conditions in the specified timeframe, and the court has ordered jail as a remedial sanction (Cook & Noyes, 2011). Incarceration has been found to disproportionately impact people of low-income and minoritized backgrounds and can exacerbate economic disadvantages (Battle, 2018; Haney, 2018; Middlemass & Josephson, 2021). In recent years, federal and state guidance has encouraged a cautious approach towards use of civil contempt through the Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization in Child Support Enforcement Programs Final Rule (2016), and a 2017 follow-up bulletin from Wisconsin's Bureau of Child Support directing counties to pursue other remedies and evaluate ability to pay prior to initiating contempt (Bureau of Child Support, 2017).

B. Perceptions of Fairness in Child Support

The child support program involves transfers of private funds from one parent to another, on behalf of children, facilitated by public entities. Therefore, when examining perceptions of

fairness in child support, perspectives on what is meant by fairness, to whom, and for whom, are important considerations. A body of previous literature sheds light on the topic of parent perspectives.

Regarding the collection of child support, several studies have identified that NCPs often perceive child support as generally fair as a means to ensure that children receive the resources they need—particularly in situations when parents living apart from their children do not contribute support—but also identify aspects of their own situations or treatment by the program that they experience as unfair (Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022; Vogel, 2020). For some NCPs and CPs, these examples of perceived unfairness begin early in the process. Some research indicates that both CPs and NCPs feel it is unfair for child support to be ordered when parents have worked out arrangements for themselves, especially if they are in a romantic relationship (Waller & Plotnick, 2001). Several qualitative studies identify a preference for informal support among some NCPs and CPs. From the perspective of some NCPs, payments made through bureaucratic channels rather than directly diminish their ability to demonstrate direct support for their children (Edin et al., 2019; Turetsky & Waller, 2020). Some NCPs also feel it is unfair that informal contributions are not considered (Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022; Waller & Plotnick, 2001; Vogel, 2020). From the perspective of some CPs, informal support can be desirable if it exceeds the amount of formal support ordered (Waller & Plotnick, 2001). Some CPs and NCPs perceive withholding child support to offset the cost of public benefits as unfair (Waller & Plotnick, 2001), leading some to attempt to circumvent the system. NCPs sometimes feel child support is particularly unfair when they perceive that the CP is doing well financially or using child support for personal luxury items (Cozzolino & Williams, 2017; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Vogel, 2020; Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022).

Previous research has identified that both NCPs and CPs sometimes experience child support order amounts to be unfair. Lin (2000) found that more than half of fathers broadly perceived the amount of their child support order to be unfair—a larger share than reported by mothers—and that fathers perceived “fair” order amounts to be, on average, 40% lower than amounts reported as fair by mothers. Some NCPs, particularly those struggling financially, experience child support as uncaring about their own situations and leaves them with insufficient resources to meet their own basic needs, unresponsive to life changes, and not understanding about the challenge of meeting obligations across multiple families. Research has also identified NCP concerns about fairness in order determination related to placement and parenting time issues (Smith et al., 2009; Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022; Vogel, 2020), and when NCPs encounter barriers to seeing their children, they sometimes feel their requirement to pay is unfair, not recognizing that these processes are decoupled (Vogel, 2020; Waller & Plotnick, 2001). In contrast, CPs raise concerns about the inadequacy of orders relative to the costs of raising children (Harris, 2015; Noyes, 2011; Smith et al., 2009; Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022) and the ability of NCPs to conceal income or underreport income, resulting in orders that are unfairly low (Harris, 2015; Noyes, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Regarding order enforcement, some NCPs experience the system as harsh, punitive, criminalizing, biased against fathers in favor of mothers, and as an entity focused on enforcement rather than supports and resources (Edin et al., 2019; Vogel, 2020; Waller & Plotnick, 2001; Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022). Further, some NCPs raise concerns that certain enforcement actions, including incarceration and license suspension, can exacerbate barriers to payment, and express lack of understanding about when and why enforcement actions occur or how to remediate them (Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022; Vogel, 2020). Some CPs share frustrations

with the enforcement process and perceive aspects of order enforcement as unfair. Some CPs share NCP concerns that traditional, punitive enforcement strategies can create barriers to NCP employment and feel more should be done to connect NCPs to work (Harris, 2015). Treskon and Groskaufmanis (2022), however, observed that CPs sometimes experienced frustration with NCPs receiving alternatives to contempt-based enforcement through PJAC due to the perception that steps taken to facilitate compliance were inadequate. Some CPs also perceive enforcement as ineffective for yielding payments and CSA staff as unresponsive to their concerns about nonpayment (Waller & Plotnick, 2001). CSA leaders and staff in Wisconsin, for their part, describe taking actions to facilitate supports and connections to employment in lieu of traditional enforcement alone and believing these approaches to be ultimately more effective, though acknowledge that this approach can be frustrating for CPs (Vogel, 2021; Vogel et al., 2022).

In addition to concerns about specific processes, prior research suggests that some parents experience child support processes as generally confusing and convoluted. Some NCPs experience the system as opaque and hard to navigate, resulting in frustration and misunderstandings (Pate, 2002; Waller & Plotnick, 2001) and confusion about why orders were initiated or how amounts were determined (Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022). Harris (2015) also identified that CPs sometimes experience frustration with delays, errors, and poor communication, and sometimes perceive information about how orders were set or why orders change as inadequate.

III. THE CURRENT STUDY

A. Methodological Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach to address the aforementioned research questions: what fairness in child support means to key stakeholders, overall perceptions of fairness and

perceptions of fairness at key junctures, efforts underway to incorporate procedural justice principles into practice, and stakeholder visions for a more fair system. We recruited two Wisconsin counties to participate in the study as research sites and conducted interviews with key stakeholders from both research sites. All recruitment and data collection efforts were approved and overseen by the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Institutional Review Board.

B. Sample, Recruitment and Data Collection

1. Site and Staff Recruitment

Our sample selection and recruitment efforts began with the research team’s identification of counties as potential sites, in consultation with the Bureau of Child Support (BCS). The research team recruited counties with relatively high levels of racial heterogeneity as research sites. Site recruitment occurred in November 2021. As a first step, prior to IRP initiating contact, BCS leadership sent each selected county’s child support director an email informing them of the forthcoming invitation from the IRP research team. An IRP research team member then initiated recruitment by emailing each county’s child support director to explain the study’s purpose and goals, inform them of the voluntary nature of the study, and schedule a time for an initial meeting. In the initial meeting, the research team shared information about the study, answered questions, and discussed options for disseminating study information to CSA-involved families within the county. After securing permission to move forward, the research team scheduled a time to interview agency leaders by video and obtained contact information for frontline staff working across functional areas of focus for this study (including order establishment, modification and enforcement). Frontline staff were invited to participate in separate interviews. County sites also identified court commissioners who hear child support cases and, depending on the agency’s structure, customer service team members, supervisors, or

staff attorneys. Once identified, the research team sent each individual an email inviting them to participate in an interview via video conference. In total, 13 of 15 invited leadership and staff members participated.

2. *Leadership and Staff Data Collection*

All interviews with CSA leadership and staff took place virtually, via the teleconference platform of the study participant's choosing (i.e., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.). Interviews began in November 2021 and ended in February 2022. Interview lengths varied based on participant roles and lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. All interviews were audio recorded (with participants' permission) and professionally transcribed. We used semi-structured interview protocols to guide the director and staff interview process. Interviews consisted of a core set of questions applicable to all respondents, as well as batteries of questions specific to each respondent's role. The guides covered perceptions of the role of parents and child support; broad perceptions of fairness in child support; and perceptions of fairness at key junctures of focus (i.e., establishment, modification, and enforcement) and perceptions of (and perceptions of parent's experiences with) the extent to which procedural justice principles are reflected in child support currently. It closed with perceptions of how child support policy and practice could work differently to improve fairness and perceptions of fairness, future plans related to these issues, and resources or guidance that could support CSA efforts.

3. *Parent Recruitment*

After CSAs agreed to participate in the study, the research team launched efforts to recruit NCPs and CPs. Site recruitment began in December 2021 and continued through March 2022. The study team used an array of public engagement strategies within each county to recruit parents. These engagement strategies relied on dissemination of information about the study to

potentially eligible parents through study flyers. The flyer contained information about the study, as well as web and phone contact options for parents to express interest in participating, and defined eligibility criteria. Parents needed to: (1) have at least one child under age 18; (2) have an order (as an NCP or as a CP) for current support within a participating county; and (3) be at 18 years old. As a first step in sharing information with parents, the research team conducted internet searches within each county site to create a list of community providers of interest, with a focus on agencies serving families. Providers included public and private non-profit human services agencies; local parenting and employment programs; educational institutions; legal aid offices; public libraries; re-entry programs; and community centers. After identifying a community provider, the research team identified and contacted via email the provider's director, administrator, or other key personnel. The email described the study, provided the study's recruitment flyer, and asked that the agency share the study's flyer through their agency's listservs or on social media. The study team also offered to send hard copy flyers for distribution. Study team members placed reminder calls by telephone as needed or as requested. In addition to community-based recruitment, the study team also engaged in snowball sampling, by sharing an electronic copy of the study flyer with parent participants at the end of interviews so they could share the flyer with other potentially eligible parents. Participating CSAs also shared information about the study with CPs and NCPs by posting flyers in public spaces on their website or including flyers in other agency mailings. Interested parents who came across study information then reached out to the study team for more information and screening. Study staff conducted all recruitment and screening of potential parent participants.

4. *Parent Data Collection*

Once identified and screened, the research team arranged a time to interview the parent. On account of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study team offered virtual options—including telephone and Zoom—as the default means of participating in interviews; in-person interview options were available, though no parents requested this option. All parents were offered a \$50 gift card as a token of appreciation for completing the interview. On average, parent interviews lasted 90 to 120 minutes. Parent interviews began in January 2022 and were conducted through April 2022. In total, 26 parents (including 16 CPs and 10 NCPs) completed interviews. Interviews were audio recorded when participants’ provided permission and professionally transcribed.

As with agency stakeholders, we used semi-structured protocols to guide parent interviews. Interview questions mirrored those asked of staff and were tailored to parents’ circumstances based on whether they owed or were due support. Guides led with questions about the parents’ family and child support circumstances, followed by parents’ perspectives on parenting and perceptions of fairness in child support broadly. The guides then asked about parents’ specific experiences related to child support order establishment, modification, and enforcement; their experiences asking for and obtaining help from agencies; and their perceptions of the extent to which procedural justice principles were reflected in their experiences. Self-reported characteristics of parent participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Parent sample characteristics

	Payor (Noncustodial) Parents (n=10) Percent or Mean	Payee (Custodial) Parents (n=16) Percent or Mean
Age	40.4	38.1
Gender		
Male	90%	6%
Female	10%	94%
Race/ethnicity		
Black	30%	13%
White	60%	44%
Another background or multiracial	10%	44%
Employment		
Currently employed	80%	81%
Experienced change to employment due to pandemic	60%	56%
Highest level of education completed		
High school diploma or HSED	20%	13%
Some college	20%	13%
2 year or 4 year college degree	40%	56%
Graduate school	20%	19%
Annual personal income		
Under \$30,000	20%	56%
\$30,000 to \$59,999	50%	25%
\$60,000 or higher	30%	19%
Family and children		
Total children	2.7	2.4
Children age 17 or younger with an order	1.7	1.5
Ever married to other parent on focal order	40%	50%
Shared placement arrangement for children on focal order ^a	50%	38%
Child support		
Years since focal order established	5.5	8
Monthly child support order amount, across orders ^b	\$493	\$421
Focal order ever modified	60%	44%
Focal order ever had enforcement action	50%	31%

Notes: Some distributions do not sum to 100% due to rounding. “Focal order” refers to the parent’s most recently established order (if parent had multiple orders), or the parent’s only order (for parents with one order only).

^aIf a participant self-identified as having shared placement, or described a placement arrangement of at least 25% with each parent, we coded the observation as “shared.”

^bIf a weekly amount was provided, the research team converted this to monthly amount using the formula: (weekly amount * 4.3 weeks) = monthly amount.

C. Analysis

Interviews were professionally transcribed, then read into NVivo Pro software for coding. The study team analyzed study data using a hybrid inductive-deductive (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2006; Braun, Clark & Terry, 2012; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The team developed an initial codebook using structural codes derived from the research questions and interview guides. We then reviewed transcripts for emergent themes and added codes for initial emergent themes to the codebook. We performed an initial round of coding using this scheme and added new codes (as separate codes or subcodes) as needed as analysis continued (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Early transcripts were double-coded, and the research team engaged in memoing and peer debriefing throughout the coding, analysis, and writing process (Franklin & Ballan, 2001; Schrier, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017).

IV. FINDINGS

Findings are presented in this section as follows. In Section A, we describe the pathways that led the parents we spoke with to child support, and parent beliefs and perceptions about the role of child support (addressing Research Question (RQ) 1). In Section B, we explore stakeholder general perceptions of fairness in child support (RQ.2). In Section C, we describe stakeholder perception of fairness specifically related to three key junctures in child support: order establishment, order modification, and enforcement and we highlight perceptions of the extent to which procedural justice principles (dignity, voice, neutrality, helpfulness, and understanding of the process) are incorporated into child support processes currently (RQ.3). In Section D, we describe current CSA efforts, and future CSA plans, related to improving fairness and perceptions of fairness in child support and incorporating procedural justice principles into

practice (RQ.4). We close with Section E, in which we describe stakeholder perceptions of what an optimally “fair” child support system would look like (RQ.5). We incorporate quotes from stakeholders throughout this section, sometimes lightly edited for clarity or brevity.

A. Pathways Into, and Beliefs About, Child Support

1. Pathways into Child Support

Most parents we interviewed first had contact with the child support program through the public benefits system, via a referral resulting from applying for childcare or other assistance.² This composition aligned with CSA directors and staff reports that their caseloads are comprised mostly of benefits referral cases. A minority of parents we spoke with encountered child support via divorce proceedings; divorced parents were more likely than unmarried parents to report having an attorney involved in their child support case, and for non-IV-D cases, very limited interactions with CSAs. Parents and CSA staff described pathways into child support, and initial interactions with parents, as consequential for parent perceptions of having a voice in child support processes, understanding what is happening and why, and perceptions of respectful treatment (i.e., key aspects of procedural justice principles). Parents and staff explained that when communication is lacking early in the order establishment process, this can lead to confusion, misunderstandings, and lack of information among parents, which can leave some parents feeling blindsided, voiceless, and intruded upon during future child support processes.

²Families who receive certain public benefits, including W-2, Wisconsin Shares (childcare assistance), Kinship Care, and the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) caretaker supplement are referred to child support and receive services automatically upon referral (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2018a). Families who apply for health insurance through BadgerCare Plus may also be referred for child support services (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2020) when parents live apart, or when parents live together but paternity has not been established (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2022). Referred parents are required to cooperate with CSAs to avoid benefits sanctions, absent an exemption for good cause. Sanctions can include loss of parental health insurance, cash benefits, or services (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2017).

Parents and staff highlighted that an significant communication gap can occur at the point of referral from a benefits program to the CSA. Most CPs we spoke with who entered child support via public benefits referral reported that the referring program did not inform them that enrolling in benefits would lead to cooperation requirements with child support. Consequently, CPs experienced initial contact from the CSA as surprising and sometimes unwelcome, particularly given the personal nature of the information requested (e.g., sexual histories). Referrals and cooperation requirements differ by program and family situations, and these factors were often opaque to parents. Most CPs we spoke with expressed confusion about which benefits programs result in a referral and when cooperation is required. Described a CP:

I think because I was on Section 8 and getting W-2 that they just automatically sent some court papers out to him. I don't even think I initiated it. I think they did. And then we went to court to try to figure that stuff out.

Several parents reported knowing someone else whose circumstances seemed similar, but who were not required to have an order. Lack of clarity and perceived inconsistency contributed to perceptions among some parents that these decisions were made unfairly. Described a CP:

I know some other people that get food stamps, other people that get state benefits—they don't have to pay... The [caseworker] asked me if I wanted child support. I told her no. And she asked [the NCP], and he said no, but then they was like, 'No we're still going to do it.'

Directors and staff also described challenges with referring programs not informing CPs of the child support implications of applying for benefits, noting that this communication gap can lead to parents inadvertently not complying with required information requests and affect CPs' first impressions of the CSA. Staff noted that recent shifts in enrollment processes from in-person or phone meetings to online applications created additional opportunities for CPs to miss or not receive information about referrals. Described a caseworker:

When the case is first referred, that's when they have the most questions, because they have no idea how child support got involved. Obviously, someone who applied for our services understands, but if their case was referred due to public assistance, there's an automatic referral to child support. I don't know if that information is not being relayed, because a lot of applicants for benefits are doing it online versus in-person now. So, I'm not sure if that information is just getting missed somewhere. And also, we do have an obligation to establish child support if you're open for childcare and for W2, and there's got to be something missing there, too, because everyone seems confused. Once I reach them or send out that form, they're like, 'I had no idea I needed to return that because I wasn't told that I have to cooperate with you. I don't know why you are being involved in my family.' So, I think there is confusion. Once we have contact with that person to answer their questions and explain, sometimes they're not happy; sometimes they are good with it now that they understand. But overall, as soon as it's explained why we're involved, at least people understand why, whether they're happy or not.

In addition to sometimes being caught off guard by referrals to child support, a significant concern for many CPs—including but not limited to survivors of domestic violence—was that their co-parent did not always realize or believe that the CP did not initiate the order, leading to conflict. One CP, who relocated to Wisconsin after leaving a domestic violence situation in another state, discussed her interactions about child support with the referring agency:

I lived in [another state]. They didn't have the child support orders that they do here. So when I filed for everything she said, 'Oh, I'm going to send you some child support papers.' I said, 'I don't want to do child support. I'm okay.' She said, 'Oh, well, it's mandatory.' I said, 'What?' I was kind of taken aback. When I got the paperwork, I filled it all out. But I said, no, that I didn't want it. And they didn't care. They proceeded with forcing me into a courtroom to do it. It was ridiculous. That was my first interaction with child support... I thought you need to be on childcare for them to ask for child support. All I had was FoodShare and Medicare. And again, I lived in [another state] for so many years. I didn't understand any of this. And coerced is really the way to look at it. That's really what they did... they had made the threat to say that basically if I didn't comply, I could be facing, you know, repercussions. And that is scary to hear as a single mom. Like I'm going to go to jail or get charged or whatever, that's insane.

Unlike CPs, who were often contacted by the CSA as a first step in collecting information to begin the establishment process, NCPs described first learning of their child support referral

via court summons. Like CPs, NCPs often described being caught off guard and confused by this initial communication. Described an NCP, “I didn’t know anything about it. Nothing. I just got papers in the mail and that was the end of it.” NCPs in two special circumstances—those serving in the military or incarcerated³—described their first communication about child support as receiving paperwork via mail. These NCPs perceived that their situations made it especially difficult to obtain information and help. Described a parent on active duty:

I got served with paperwork that I had to sign, so I had to dig into it. I had to read up on it and look at the policies and the laws on that order and try to figure out how it was fair, how was \$1,200 fair... It said three kids was 29%. And then it didn’t give me an exact number. It just told me it was 29% of whatever I was making.

An NCP who was incarcerated at the time of establishment shared:

I was incarcerated [at the time the order was established] and it was just paperwork to sign. Then, I started getting bills in the mail from them. They were still charging me child support while I was incarcerated, even though I wasn’t making any income.

A CSA leader provided some context for why NCPs feel caught off guard in this process, noting that CSAs are not required to reach out to NCPs at this stage, and because child support is a legal process, initial communication starts with service of legal paperwork:

Usually our referrals are—we’re required to act on those, right? So, it’s not like we’re just getting it in and acting like we don’t care about the alleged father, and we don’t want to contact anybody. We don’t represent anybody. So I think that’s what—you know, that needs to be understood. We don’t represent any parties. So

³Policies related to incarcerated NCPs have changed over the last decade. Prior to 2017, if an incarcerated NCP informed their CSA of their incarceration, the CSA was required to evaluate whether a review was appropriate; CSAs were exempt from providing reviews under certain circumstances, including instances when an NCP was incarcerated due to crimes against a child or custodial parent, or due to felony non-payment of ordered support. In response to the 2016 Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization in Child Support Enforcement Programs final rule, the federal government directed states to review cases for incarcerated NCPs and evaluate whether a modification is appropriate; the rule also specified that states cannot treat incarceration as voluntary unemployment when evaluating a case for modification. In response, Wisconsin’s state Bureau of Child Support issued bulletin 17-14 in 2017, removing review exemptions and informing CSAs of their responsibility to contact NCPs and CPs proactively upon learning that an NCP has been incarcerated for at least 180 days to inform them of their right to a review (Costanzo, 2018).

just because we had a referral, and maybe it's mom that takes out the benefits. We're not serving just her. We have a requirement to act on it. And our first line of action, obviously, is to get it established. So, we've got to take it to court. And we don't necessarily reach out to the alleged father or potential father because we're not required to. And yes, maybe the first interaction that they have with their agency is when they get served those documents, just like any legal process goes, when you get sued—I hate using that word—and you get served documents, that's the first interaction.

2. *Perceptions of the Role of Child Support*

In interviews, we asked parents and staff to share their perspective on the role the child support program in the lives of families. A common perspective across interview participants was that child support should help ensure that children are cared for financially, with different ideas about what “care for” and “ensuring” mean. Many CPs perceived that child support should be an “equalizer,” to help “maintain kids in the way they were accustomed to living.” A CP said:

So, I thought it was to try to make the incomes between households more equal, and to allow the person receiving child support to take care of their kids, kind of in the way that they were accustomed to before the child support was ordered, or before the people divorced or separated or whatever. So, I thought it was more of a way to make things equal financially.

Another CP shared a similar perspective, emphasizing the balance across households:

I thought that the goal of child support was that the child has their needs met, no matter which house they're at. So, if one parent makes drastically more than the other, that there'd be some like equaling of the scales or equaling of like the household income so that the child can have the things that they need in both houses. Or that it could be like similar living at both houses that you're not going from like a mansion to like an apartment, you know. But it wasn't like—it would never cover like 100% of everything. Like I don't think that I ever thought child support would just be like, ‘No, I have child support, so I can just retire.’

Child support as a means for ensuring financial contributions was a perspective shared by CSA staff. Described a director, “The financial part is the piece that child support is here for. We need both to be financially responsible for this child that they brought into this world.”

NCPs, for their part, often described child support as a financial tool for meeting children’s needs—rather than as an “equalizer.” Stated an NCP:

I’ve gone round and round with lawyers with this, but the perception prior was, you know, that money is used to pay for the kids’ basic needs and necessities for, you know, supporting, you know, whatever it may be, right?

Some of the NCPs we spoke with felt that child support should play a targeted role; that is, child support should be spent on items specifically for the child for whom the order applies, rather than for expenses shared across a household or as a general income stream for a household. Several NCPs described their views about child support in terms of what it shouldn’t be—specifically, not for “luxuries” for the CP, but only for children’s essential needs. One NCP described child support as “Not for getting your nails done or car payments or trips to Mexico.”

Across groups, interview participants often described the role of child support as a means by which to ensure “accountability,” with varying perspectives on who the system should hold accountable. Across interview participant groups, interview participants discussed child support’s role in facilitating accountability when NCPs do not support their children, so that CPs are not held entirely responsible for their child’s needs. As one CP stated, “Obviously, I don’t think child support should cover 100% of the kid’s cost, but a fair split so that the custodial parent is not unduly burdened for raising the children, you know, 100% financially.” From the perspective of some CPs and many CSA staff members, child support can be a necessary measure, because break-ups can be acrimonious, and an NCP’s future payment behavior might change without third party intervention. Described a CP:

I think in a perfect world, wouldn’t need a system, because [parents] would work out between them what the child needs. But we don’t live in a perfect world, and divorce and custody is hard and contentious and can get really nasty really quickly. And so, I kind of see the child support agency as necessary, if not preferred. It’s not ideal but it’s necessary.

NCPs, like CPs, often articulated ideas of accountability and the role of child support in families; however, NCPs generally examined accountability through the lens of *who* should have a child support order. A common perception that emerged in many discussions with NCPs, and some CPs, was that child support is appropriate for NCPs who do not take care of their children. Crucially, most NCPs we spoke with perceived themselves as parents who provide for their children, irrespective of whether they make payments through the formal child support program. NCPs contrasted themselves with non-providing parents for whom they perceived child support to be appropriate—parents who make no effort to be involved in the lives of children, or who could support them financially and choose not to—and therefore perceived child support to be unfairly involved in their lives. NCPs, and many CPs, described parents as playing many roles in families, from teacher to protector to provider and beyond; parents broadly viewed child support as one vehicle for facilitating financial contributions to children, but not the only vehicle, and parent perspectives on child support paid through the formal system relative to contributing financially in other ways also varied. From the perspective of some NCPs, and a minority of CPs, formal child support undercut their abilities to demonstrate care for children by providing them with resources directly, and therefore undermined their role as parents. An NCP said:

I never wanted child support. Basically I feel like child support is really for, you know, those who don't do for their kids, are not in their kid's life. Like, then, okay, you know, the mama might need some type of help. And I'm not saying like help for herself, but like as far as the kids, you know. Kids stay with their mothers, majority of the time. So you know, kids need a roof over their head, they got to have lights, they got to have food. ...I feel like that's when like child support should play in. When the mama can't count on the father to do that at all. But other than that, I feel like there are great fathers out here and then child support still be making them pay off top of what they're already doing outside of child support. I feel like child support is really just for those who's not doing for their kid at all.

Another NCP shared a similar perspective, stating, “I don’t feel like everybody needs to pay child support. If you are an active parent, you are there, you see the needs. If you are an absentee parent, then I feel like you should pay.”

Some NCPs also discussed the role that they believe child support should play in fostering accountability from a different vantage point. From the perspective of these NCPs, the child support system should—but does not currently—hold CPs accountable for contributing financially to children. Some NCPs expressed the perspective that child support should require CPs to spend financial resources directly on children and account for how child support resources are spent. Others felt that child support orders unfairly extracted financial contributions from NCPs, without ensuring that CPs work and contribute equally to children’s financial needs.

In addition to perspectives on child support as a means to ensure financial contributions to children, across interview participant groups, a number of participants also described child support as playing a role in mediating power and conflict between parents. From the perspective of many CPs, the child support program helps ensure that NCPs contribute to children without CPs having to depend on an NCP’s willingness to do so, a perspective that aligned with those of many staff we spoke with. Child support, in their view, helps to equalize the power imbalance between parents by CPs not having to “ask” NCPs for money, and serves as a middleman between parties to facilitate transfers of resources—a view echoed by staff and some NCPs. This was particularly important for CPs who had experienced acrimonious break-ups or who experienced domestic violence. Described a CP:

It would be really difficult to think about having to go to my ex-husband to get child support payments every month. And it would be a very, very bitter pill for him to swallow to have to write a check to me every month.

Another CP elaborated:

But I mainly think it's there for when [an NCP] can't take it upon themselves to give that other parent money or make sure that the kids have what they need. You know, they think, 'Oh, well, they live with their mom; she'll take care of it.' You know, 'She's not going to let my kids starve. If she's eating, then she'll make sure the kid eats,' you know? So I think it had to be put there because, you know, [CPs] were doing it on their own and then they come to [NCP] like, 'Oh, well I need money for this.' And then [the NCP is] like, 'oh, well, you know, you don't need money for that. Look, you have your hair done. You did this or you did that.' And it's like, 'No, I need that. I'm using my own money to take care of the kid.' So you're essentially just paying me back, just to help, you know? So the other parent doesn't have to do everything financially on their own.

In contrast, while some NCPs also raised the role child support plays in mediating power and control, from the perspective of some NCPs, child support acting as a "middleman" reduced CPs' need for direct involvement with NCPs, and consequently, compromised their involvement in parental decision-making. From some NCPs' vantage points, child support acting as an intermediary between parents also meant that children might not realize that NCPs are contributing financially, and requiring contributions through the formal system limited the resources they had left to provide for children directly. Described an NCP:

If they taking all your income, and then you entrusting to the mother, now you've taken half of the manhood and the fatherhood. So things I'm trying to provide for, I'm not really—there's a middleman there. But that takes away your manhood, and your ability as father. Because now the mother is sitting in the house looking like she's playing both roles, knowing sometimes the kid might not even know that the father might be paying most of the bills in the house. But the child has no idea. So if he doesn't see his father in a regular period of time or whatever, he thinks, well, 'My father done this, my father is that.' But the father's still paying his child support. Because what's happening is, he's paying, but what he's doing is paying the system. The government is in there playing like they the father. So once they are like the father, the father has no real connection to make any decisions. Because sometime when you take care and you provide, it's not just about a dollar. And sometimes its how that dollar gets spent.

We also asked interview participants to reflect on their perceptions of whether the child support program is beneficial for children and families. Across staff and parent groups, many

interview participants described perceiving child support as playing a beneficial role generally or in theory, though interview participants had different perspectives on the reality of the system's benefits. Whereas staff generally perceived child support as playing a beneficial role for many families, parent perspectives were often shaped by their own experiences. Some parents, generally CPs who receive at least some of the support that they owe, described experiencing child support as playing a beneficial role in their own circumstances, by facilitating regular contributions for children from parents living outside of the home, and by collecting payments on their behalf. This was particularly true when things were going "well" (e.g., when NCPs paid ordered support consistently). Described a CP, "For sure, it's helped me. I mean, it distributed cost between the two parents. Because that was a big financial burden for me to pay all that." From the perspective of an NCP, child support plays a beneficial role by facilitating financial contributions to children, but the benefits of the program are narrow rather than more broadly beneficial for child and family well-being. He stated:

I think child support, intentions were good. On the face it's, you know, child support is very needed. And it's supposed to be about the child. But to me now it's more about money... I mean it helps the child, but it doesn't get the child the emotional and other stuff that child needs to really develop. So, it's really, you know, a collection agency.

Parents who perceived child support to not be working well in their circumstances often did not perceive child support as beneficial. CPs often described the system as not beneficial when they did not receive the support they were owed, and particularly when they were required to have an order that they did not want. Described a CP, whose coparent was substantially behind on support, "I literally think they don't care. That is the simplest way I could put it. They just do not care. Me being broke for almost, however long, you know, they just don't care." NCPs often described the system as not beneficial when they perceived processes or outcomes as detrimental

to their economic well-being or harmful to their relationships with co-parents or children, or when they perceived child support to reduce financial accountability for CPs.

B. General Perceptions of Fairness in Child Support

We asked interview participants to reflect on their overall perceptions of whether the child support program treats parents and children fairly. Responses to this question varied substantially, within and across participant groups, and reflected how participants conceptualized or defined fairness based on which vantage point they took. Staff responses generally looked across families as a whole, whereas parents' general perceptions often depended on their family's circumstances and experiences. Many CPs and NCPs described that *conceptually*, having an agency in place to make sure parents contribute financially to their children, is fair. Described an NCP, "There needs to be someone, some agency. It is good thing to have because in certain cases there is a need to make sure these things are being done." NCPs who endorsed this view generally focused on fairness to children; CPs often raised the issue of fairness to CPs in addition to fairness to children. When reflecting on the *reality* of the fairness of the system, CPs often reported feeling that individual actors try to be—and generally are—fair, though also identified ways in which processes and outcomes can be unfair. NCPs often reported feeling the reality of child support is unfair, drawing on their own experiences. Broadly, interview participants described fairness in terms of *treatment* (i.e., whether people who work in the system treated them fairly); *process* (i.e., whether steps taken to set and enforce orders, or rules about how orders are set or enforced, are fair); and *outcomes* (i.e., regardless of perceptions of treatment by individuals or fairness in processes, whether the system yields fair outcomes).

Parent perspectives on fairness in treatment often focused on processes and outcomes, rather than individual people they encountered through the child support program. CPs often

reported that, most of the time, child support staff treated parents fairly, often stating that staff have a job to do that involves moving families through processes, even when they disagreed with those processes or their outcomes. When CPs characterized child support as unfair, they often attributed this to unfair rules or processes, or systemic failures to hold NCPs accountable, rather than biases or unfair treatment on the part of particular people. Described a CP:

I mean, in an aspect of treating them fairly as being, no matter your race, your age, they give you your time of day in front of a judge, that's fair. Everybody can get a chance. Whether young, old, Black, White, Chinese, whatever. So in that aspect, yeah. They give everyone a court hearing and that's fair. But that's about as fair as I see, I guess.... fathers definitely aren't held accountable so I don't feel like they're treated fairly as a mother-father situation.

NCPs, while sometimes reporting feeling more negatively about interactions with particular people involved in the system, generally shared CP perceptions that policies and processes are the main sources of unfairness within the system, rather than unfair treatment on the part of individuals who work within the system. A number of NCPs we spoke with perceived that NCPs have fewer resources available to help them through the child support program and social services more broadly than CPs and attributed this perceived unfairness to systemic biases against NCPs (specifically fathers) in favor of CPs (specifically mothers). Described an NCP:

Just because I'm a male and I'm a noncustodial parent, because I don't have a kid, now I can't get any kind of resources to give me any support. Why can't I get some W-2 for a minute so I can get on my feet? You know. I mean, I might be able to get a little rent assistance here or there. But, you know, why is it so hard for a non-custodial single parent, especially a male, to get some? ...The non-custodial parent has nobody there, he has no advocacy, nobody's advocating for the non-custodial parent. They might have some programs to try to say, well you know this help you get a job. Help you do this. But ain't nobody going into that.

The perception that child support is on the "side" of the CP is a sentiment that some CPs also shared. Most CPs felt this was generally appropriate, as children reside with CPs and the CSA's job is to obtain resources for children. However, CPs often noted that this dynamic can yield

outcomes that are unfair—or feel unfair—to fathers. Described a CP, “I believe child support favors the mom, most of the time. I mean, rightfully so many times, but there’s also case by case scenarios where the dad is right and the mom is wrong.” Another CP elaborated:

I think [child support is] a lot of times on the side of the mom, because they have to collect the money from the dad. So, a lot of times, moms know that the courts usually tend to side with them. But as far as the dad, sometimes I think they might feel like they’re getting treated unfairly because the order is so big that, you know, now they can barely pay rent or they’re like, ‘I have to pay so much out of my paycheck that I don’t even have money now.’

CSA staff, like most CPs and many NCPs, reported feeling that most of the time, individual actors treated parents fairly. Described a caseworker:

Even within our department, we all do everything a little different. I can only speak for myself. I try to give the benefit of the doubt. I don’t want to be like, ‘One chance, you’re done.’ We give multiple chances whether it’s information, paperwork, court cases. [We tell] them ‘For the most part, I will work with you. I just need to know what’s going on. If you don’t communicate or I don’t know, that’s when there’s an issue.’ So I think we are fair.

Other staff noted that while they perceived child support to be generally fair, they were aware that many NCPs and CPs do not share this perception, with some NCPs feeling that child support takes the “side” of the CP, and some CPs feeling that child support does not do enough to enforce orders and treats NCPs leniently. Described a caseworker:

I think so, but I don’t think the parents have that perception. That’s what I have noticed. You know, most of my noncustodial fathers feel that Wisconsin is a mother state, and that it’s always giving the benefits to the mother. So that’s something that we have to overcome, that perception. And in the case sometimes of the mothers, they don’t think that we are doing enough to enforce. So it’s—I think that the perceptions that people have are different from what we do or we try to do. And of course, we try to be fair with everyone and give the same service to everyone. And I guess in the case of my role, I try to give everybody the same service, the same assistance, the same interest, you know, show the same to every case. But it’s difficult to sometimes convey that to participants.

C. Perceptions of Fairness Within Key Child Support Domains

In addition to broad perceptions of fairness, interview participants shared their perspectives on fairness in child support at three key case junctures: (1) order establishment, (2) order modification, and (3) order enforcement. Interview participants' perspectives on fairness varied across and within these domains. Key themes emerged related to perspectives on whether and when child support orders are appropriate and the extent to which order amounts are fair across families; challenges in understanding and navigating the modification process; and, whether, when, and how enforcement actions help to yield resources for children.

1. Order Establishment

a. Determining whether an order is needed

When reflecting on fairness in the order establishment phase, many interview participants across stakeholder groups raised the issue of how having an order established feels to parents who did not seek one out. This could happen in one of two ways—when one parent wanted and sought an order without the other parent's knowledge or participation, or, as mentioned earlier, when a parent is referred from public benefits. They described that sometimes, upon learning of the potential for an order to be established, the parent or parents who did not seek the order are receptive to having one. In other cases, however, one or both parents might not want an order. In instances when parents have an order established involuntarily, stakeholders noted that all subsequent steps (i.e., amount determination, collecting and distributing funds, and enforcement) can feel unfair to parents. This observation was reflected by many staff who work within the system, in addition to parents themselves. Described a caseworker:

I think there's questions. Like, 'Well, I'm only open for medical. Why are you involved?' 'I'm open for childcare assistance. Why do I have to have a child support order if him and I get along and we talk and he provides money to me, but I'm still eligible for child care? Why are you involved?' 'Why is there an

obligation to establish an order and get involved in his life? He is not working, so you can't send an income withholding. So, it's going to make him fall further behind if he can't pay what was court ordered, even though he is, you know, contributing to that family.' I think there are certain circumstances that people don't think is fair because of certain things that are going on in that family dynamic. I don't think anyone wants an order established against them ever.

Another staff member shared that some parents express feeling like being required to cooperate with an order due to receipt of public benefits is a punishment for having children:

Most of the time [parents] don't want an agency to be involved. So, I will say no, that's not something that they consider fair. I think that it's in general, especially from people that I've referred from other agencies. I have people that have told me, 'You are punishing us—our right to reproduce.' You know, how do you respond to that? I think that sometimes that's very challenging, and it's difficult for them to understand, you know, the connection of receiving benefits and cooperating. It it's sometimes difficult for me to explain in a nice way that, you know, parenthood brings responsibilities.

Staff perspectives on whether requirements to have an order *are* fair (versus perceptions of how parents see requirements) varied. Some perceived that establishing orders in response to benefits referrals, or when one parent doesn't want an order but the other does, helps promote fairness to children and to taxpayers, and promotes responsibility among both NCPs and CPs. Further, some staff viewed the paternity establishment as aiding in establishing a bond between NCPs and children, beyond purposes of identifying NCPs for collections. Described a staff member:

We are talking about the children and about willingness to cooperate, then yes, fair is fair. We need to establish who is the father, and we need to be sure that the child will receive the support from the parents. So, in that sense, sure, it is fair.

Some parents who did not want a child support order, but were required to cooperate due to public benefits receipt, shared that they felt voiceless and disrespected during the order establishment process, because their wishes to not have a child support order were not followed or they were not given the opportunity to ask questions. Described a CP:

Well, I felt disrespected when, you know, they asked me, 'Do you want child support?,' and I said, 'no'. It was like basically. I was getting asked like, you

know, on my decision, but then they turned around and, you know, went with their decision. So, I felt like I was disrespected right there... When we said no, I felt like they didn't let me ask more questions as to why.

b. Order amount determination

Another key aspect of perceptions of fairness in the order establishment phase was the amount of child support a parent was ordered to pay or to receive. Staff and directors often reported perceiving the guidelines and processes for determining child support order amounts as fair in most circumstances. A staff member characterized order amounts as generally fair, because the guidelines are responsive to various family circumstances, stating:

I think what makes it fair is our ability to customize and to make things—to make our orders right sized for the situation that people are in. Similarly, if they have two or three prior child support orders, the law takes that into account. And so we're not taking 70% of everything for each kid because at some point you have zero. So there are some built-in safeguards to make sure that things are fair. And there are some allowances and some discretion that are allowed. So I think from my perspective, I mean, I feel like at the end of every hearing, I feel like, you know what, maybe that didn't go how I wanted to make it, didn't go how I wanted, but yeah, that was probably fair. So most of the time, I feel that things are fair.

A court commissioner highlighted that a key component of an order amount being perceived as fair by parents is explaining how the order amount was determined, and what parents can do if they disagree with a decision. They stated:

I do think it's fair. At least here, it's done in a very deliberate basis...if you can tell people why you got to the end result and why you did, and then end it with it if you disagree with how I got there, you have a right to request for a new hearing with circuit judges.

A caseworker echoed that a key source of perceptions of unfairness at this stage among parents is often not understanding how the order amount came to be. Described the worker:

I don't think they realize or know the breakdown of how that goes, and where that's coming from. They just see an amount and will be like, 'no.' Depending on the person, either you're getting the money and think it's not enough, or they're giving it and they think it's too much.

Some parents echoed the sentiment that order amounts and order determination processes are generally fair. Described a CP:

I think it's fair in that it's uniform across. Like it's supposed to be uniform across cases that it's—this is the formula that you use to figure it out, and it's the same formula for every family, for every case, for every situation. So I feel in that case that it is fair.

Similarly, an NCP described feeling the amount he pays is fair, citing that his order amount is based on his earnings, and noting that he pays more than the formal amount in informal support.

Yeah, yeah. I ain't crying about it. I mean based on what I make, I don't have a problem with what I'm paying. You know, I pay more than that anyway. Because like I say, I pay the insurance, I pay everything else on him. And she don't have to ask for that... But for me as a father, you know, I know that's my responsibility. I'm going to make sure something happen if he need to go to the doctor, dentist, vision I keep that. If I'm working, so the benefits on that. And if he still needs he can come stay with me or whatever he wants something or whatever I still paying if something come up, you know, stuff like that, you know. So, I mean I still take care of my—I mean, you know, so I don't have no problems about the money.

Some parents, and particularly NCPs, did not feel that the process for determining order amounts was fair. A common theme that emerged contributing to this perception was the income basis of order amounts. From the perspective of some NCPs, this basis results in orders being unfair because it does not account for NCPs' other expenses. Described an NCP:

Everything is just a default calculation of a percentage. I think that's ridiculous. That needs to change. As soon as one kid, it's, what, 17% of their income. Well, how are they supposed to pay their bills, too? It doesn't seem like a lot of money, 17%. But it adds up pretty quickly, because it's not just child support. They tack on a lot of other stuff, too, that apparently nobody sees or knows about. And then you have to pay a fee for them to take your money every year, at least once, if not twice, of \$65. I think that's ridiculous, too. It's extortion.

Agency and court staff also expressed awareness that some NCPs perceive the guidelines use of gross versus net income as unfair. Perspectives on whether this basis is actually unfair varied among these staff; as an attorney pointed out, using gross income can leave an NCP with little money after child support is taken out. Stated an attorney:

A lot of people think that we're using net income or take-home pay. So, they'll say, 'Well, 17% of my take home pay, I did the math before I got here. And it's way less than what you're saying.' I say, 'Oh, you know, we're using gross income before taxes.' 'Well, how is that fair? I never even see that money.' I'm like, 'I get it. I get it. I understand that misconception but that's what the law says we have to follow.' And they're like, 'Well, how can I pay 17% of my gross if I never see that? That's totally unfair.' And, you know, in many cases, I agree. I mean, if I had to pay child support on my gross income, I would be—I'll be broke, you know. So, I get it.

On the other hand, pointed out a court commissioner, net income accounts for choices made by the NCP—some of which reflect essential expenses and others reflecting discretionary expenses:

You know, we have this thing called the child support guidelines and we try to emphasize that this is set by statute, and this is how it works, and this is the number that the guideline would say. Is there some reason you think we should deviate? And, 'Well, it's just not fair. I can't afford that. That's just too much.' 'OK. Those are the reasons that are laid out as exceptions to where you deviate. You know, we're just crunching the numbers here'. So, I think some would have the perception that it isn't fair because we don't do like an analysis of all their other expenses, what their debts are, you know, unless they're child-related. Can't help it. You've got a \$500 a month truck payment. That was a decision you made. And now, you get these children to support. 'But I can't afford it'. Well, mom needs—this child support statute says she's entitled to it and here's what the guideline would yield.

CPs also cited instances in which the income basis for orders can yield unfair amounts, but in contrast to NCPs, shared experiences in which their co-parent misrepresented their income to the court, resulting in an unfairly low order amount. These CPs reported perceiving the guidelines for determining order amounts as fair, but noted that when misrepresentation of income goes undetected, the process can yield an unfair amount. Described a CP:

I mean, they just use a formula. It's all a formula, but it's based on accurate reporting of income, right? So if someone is misrepresenting their income, I guess that's not on the court, that's on the individual. So, yeah, given the information that they have, yeah, they just use a formula. I mean, there's no—again, they don't—there's not discretion, I don't think, in determining child support payments. It's all just a formula.

Suggested a CP, “I think they should dig a little deeper into it...interview the noncustodial parent instead of just using whatever the court submits to them.” Several CPs also noted the delicate power dynamics they navigated with NCPs related to misreporting of income; raising these suspicions risked angering the NCP, a particular concern for high-conflict relationships or relationships with domestic violence. In other instances, CPs expressing feeling manipulated into accepting a lower amount or not acknowledging hidden income. Described a CP:

I was just trying to go along with what he felt was fair... Like if he would've been like, 'You know what, I think \$100 a week is fair and I'm going to pay that.' I would've been like, 'Okay, that's fine.' I was going to go along with whatever number that he said that he agreed with, because he told me that he would go above and beyond, you know, like 'The state shouldn't have to tell me, you know, how to pay money for my kid. I should do that. And I will do that. So, when we go in here to the court, let's just tell—you know, give the lowest amount that we can and I'll make sure that I pay the difference; you won't be getting screwed over.' Now he said that, but he didn't really follow along with that agreement. You know what I'm saying? Like we made the agreement, but he never followed along with it. So I never thought it was fair. I really wish that we could have come up with a fair number, which maybe even \$50 a week. I probably would've said was fair. But at that point I was just willing to go along with whatever that he said.

Beyond the income basis for determining order amounts, interview participants across parent and staff groups described situations in which parents were particularly likely to perceive child support order determination processes, or resultant order amounts, as unfair. These included:

Shared placement with large orders. From the perspective NCPs broadly, as well as some staff and CPs, it feels unfair to NCPs when placement is shared⁴ and the NCP owes a large amount in support. Described an obligor whose children spent most of the time with him:

Well, I felt like I shouldn't pay nothing. You know, that's what I thought.... It's like, 'Okay, what are we here for? I'm doing it all. I can do it all. But I have to pay you to—so I have to pay you for me to do everything?' My head could not wrap around it.

An obligor with equal shared placement described the challenge of making ends meet:

They want me to pay approximately \$180, because they say that I make a decent amount of money at \$25 an hour. After \$25 an hour, I do insurance. I do the insurance, the 401(k). I'm not bringing home a substantial amount of money. I'm bringing home maybe \$550. Then you want to take child support from it, but you do it off the gross. But now I'm bringing \$400 home. Now I barely have enough money to pay my bills. And then I also have this child 50% of the time that I have to provide for. It makes it very difficult.

An obligor, who experienced lengthy legal processes to obtain shared placement, perceived child support as on the side of CPs (specifically mothers) rather than as neutral actors, describing:

Oh, boy. So, I was a brand-new parent at a young age. You know, young for me anyway, mentally and physically. I mean, we had [our child] at—I think I was 23, 22, fresh out of the military. And I had no money. I had no set life, really. And it was expensive. I mean, I had to pay all the fees to do the court process, which I didn't even want to do anyway. I had to hire an attorney because I found out the first time representing myself thinking like, 'Okay, I'm an active parent. I want to be active.' But they didn't give me 50-50 placement. It went pretty much all to [the CP] initially. And it didn't feel right. I actually had to hire an attorney, spend more money that I didn't have, to get that court order. And I still ended up paying state max for child support. And I have him half the time. So, all that was extremely eye-opening. There're fees associated every year to have child support come out of my paychecks. If you ever get behind, they collect interest on it. It just seems like a racket. It seems like they bend over backwards for the mother.

⁴Wisconsin's child support guidelines are explicated as Chapter 150 in the Wisconsin administrative code: https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/code/admin_code/DCF/101_199/150. Shared placement cases are cases in which both parents have court-ordered placement of at least 25% per year. When placement is shared, the monthly income of both parents and share of time with each parent are factored into the order amount; therefore, child support can be ordered when parents have equal time with children but unequal income. We note that order amounts are based on court-ordered placement, which can sometimes differ from actual placement arrangements.

An enforcement worker's perspective on equally shared placement cases echoed this view:

I mean I guess it depends. I don't understand sometimes like when it's like 50/50 [placement] and like somebody's paying all this money, extra money. Versus like a parent having the child full time then I can understand the percentages a little bit better.

When financial situations are very unequal across households. NCPs in particular expressed that when the other parent goes on to re-partner, and that household has considerably more financial resources and fewer financial obligations, having an order can feel unfair to NCPs. Described an NCP:

No, I don't think it's fair at all. Like I said, I think a lot of other factors need to be taken into consideration, like what the other parent's household income is. And we are, like my current husband also pays child support for his children from his first marriage. So that's three children that he pays for child support. And then, we have a child of our own. So now, though our household income is considerably lower than their household income, where they are only supporting one child, and we are supporting five children. And yet, him and I are still paying child support.

Orders for families with low-incomes and situations in which the NCP has limited or no ability to pay. A key theme that emerged from interview participants across groups was that when both parents have low incomes, the resultant order-amount outcome is likely to be or to feel unfair to all or some family members, because there is simply not enough money across households for parents to meet their own basic needs or the needs of their children. As a result, poverty is sometimes "shifted" by child support, as a CSA director described, without addressing the underlying causes of poverty. As CSA staff noted, many families served by child support have limited financial resources and enter child support via public benefits referral, making this issue salient for many families served by the CSA.

CPs, along with CSA staff, often described that order amounts are inadequate for raising a child when NCPs have low incomes, and especially when CPs are also struggling financially.

A CP acknowledged the balancing act that CSAs and courts must play in these situations, stating:

I think they are [fair] because I know the court takes it into consideration how much money that you make and your bills and stuff. And if you're really trying to pay and they see that and you're trying to get an order lowered or something, you know, so you can take care of your own life. You know, I would hope they take that into consideration and stuff. My order is so low that sometimes I don't think it's fair, because it takes more money than that, but I'm not getting anything. It would just be nice to get that small amount every week. I think they try to be fair to both parties. That they try to take into consideration the income and the actions of the non-custodial parent also. So yeah, I would say I think they're fair.

One CP described feeling treated fairly by the CSA, but also noted that the amount her coparent was ordered to pay was not enough to help meet her children's needs. She described feeling empathy for the NCP's position, but also struggling to meet her child's needs; she both felt treated fairly by child support, but also felt a "fair" outcome was not possible. She stated:

In my experience, we have had good experiences with being treated fairly within the system. Our workers have always been kind. They have listened. They have been helpful. I don't necessarily feel that the—And this sounds awful to even say. But the amount is not sufficient to do much more than, you know, pay for gymnastics lessons, you know what I mean?

NCPs, particularly those with low incomes, often expressed feeling that the amount they were ordered to pay was unfair given their economic circumstances. Described an NCP, "If I was financially doing well, I really wouldn't mind paying child support, or whatever has been asked of me, but then, given my situation, I just feel it's not." Another NCP elaborated on this feeling:

No, because for what I pay, I still can't afford to live on my own. Even if I make 30 or more dollars an hour, I still can't afford to live on my own. I'd have to have two jobs and no life to be able to have apartment nowadays, and food and gas and whatnot, and it's still a struggle. I'd never be able to have my own place, not until I'm done with child support.

Stated a third NCP, “Even when I was unemployed, over the pandemic, guess what was coming out every week? Child support. And when I had no income. So there’s never been a reprieve. There’s never been help or assistance.”

CSA staff, for their part, shared the perspective that when families are struggling financially, achieving outcomes that feel fair—or are fair—to either or both parties can be extremely difficult to achieve, and that to achieve outcomes that feel fair, parents need resources to help improve their overall financial situations. They empathized with the position of both NCPs and CPs, and acknowledged the reality of hardships faced by both sets of parents, as illustrated by the quotes below. Described one director, taking the perspective of NCPs:

If you have an NCP that’s already poor, and you want to take the child out of poverty, but now you’re shifting the poverty over from the child to the NCP, you know, you’re not really making anybody better. You’re just shifting that poverty over. So there’s a lot of discussion about that. You know, are we really taking kids out of poverty? We might be. But it’s so small depending on how much an NCP makes, right? So 17% of somebody who makes minimum wage is nothing. Nothing. And that puts them into even deeper poverty, the NCP, into deeper poverty than what they would be. If you take 17% of \$7.25, you’ve got nothing, you know?... If we’re talking about taking people out of poverty, we’re not really. We’re just shifting poverty from one to the other. And without us changing the way in which we work and the amount of money that people can earn, it’s definitely going to hurt families. Right?

Described a caseworker, taking the vantage point of CPs owed support by low-earning NCPs:

It’s fair in terms of working with whatever income, if any, that he has. But, I don’t see it to be fair for the custodial parent. And I guess that’s no fault of anyone’s. But I feel that \$187 a month is not enough to help support a child.

A caseworker raised concerns about imputing income, when parents are not working or lack a consistent wage history putting parents in a position in which they cannot meet expectations:

I don’t believe that you should establish an order on someone who can’t pay, that doesn’t have the financial means.... As long as you’re not disabled or, like, completely unable to work, if you have the ability to work, we do impute the ability to work part-time at that wage. And so, we do imputed orders, whether it’s

\$65 a month or \$50 a week. Sometimes, I think that can set people up for failure because they don't have the means.

A caseworker shared that unattainable expectations can be unfair both for NCPs as well as CPs:

Sometimes, I see large payments due when the noncustodial parent doesn't have a good work history or a good educational background. And I wonder how their court order came to be ...if an NCP is a low-skilled worker or has, you know, not a good educational background, they are not going to be able to pay a larger court order. So it's sort of unfair to both parties because the custodial parent has the expectation of getting that amount each month.

Across groups, interview participants noted that incarceration, medical issues, or serious impediments to employment can create significant barriers to NCPs' abilities to work and meet their obligations, as well as their own basic needs. A CP voiced concerns about unfair expectations for NCPs who are incarcerated or recently returning from incarceration:

I would say it's not fair...when they set the amount, he was locked up so he wasn't—I felt like when, you know, when you're locked up, it's hard to pay a set amount, especially when you've got to pay for other kids. So, I felt like, I wasn't going to get that amount by him being locked up. So, they end up dropping it, reducing it when he was locked up. But he—when he got out, most jobs don't always hire you because of your background. So, I felt like, you know, by him trying to at least do something, I felt like they should have [given] him a fair amount. And I would say about like \$50.

An NCP who was ill with long-term effects of COVID-19 at the time of the interview described the pressure he experienced to keep up with child support payments even when sick, and described this as not in his own best interest or the best interest of his children:

I feel like it is like it is affecting more than the father, it's affecting the kid, because right now, I've been working at my job, like the last six years, when my lung collapsed. I've got work where I'm picking up refrigerators, recliners, sofas. Like I can't do it no more without getting winded. They let me go because I couldn't do the work no more. You know what I mean? It is like a job I've been working at like forever before I found out, like I had [COVID] and my lung collapsed. I been having this breathing problem but, I know I have to keep on working for child support. Because they don't like—I know they don't understand it...But like then like you got to work. You got to work these hours.

2. *Order Modification*

Participant perspectives on order reviews and modifications depended substantially on their experiences with the process.⁵ Parents fell into two groups—those who were aware that their case had been reviewed for a modification, and those who reported never being aware of a review occurring on their case. In general, interview participants who were familiar with the order review and modification process described it is fair and neutral, and parents who had experience with the order modification process generally described being treated fairly by agency and court staff during this process. However, most parents we spoke with reported never pursuing a modification and not understanding who was eligible, not being aware of if or when a review had occurred on their case, or how to obtain a modification if they wanted one. Participants from all groups raised concerns about the accessibility of review and modification processes, and interview participants described ways that they perceived review and modification processes could result in unfair outcomes, even when perceiving processes themselves as generally fair.

From the perspective of CSA staff, the relative straightforwardness of order review and modification processes compared to establishment processes contributed to perceptions of fairness. Generally, staff and directors often described order review and modification as a largely administrative process in which information brought to the CSA is updated with the agency and

⁵Change requests can occur via stipulated agreement (i.e., when parents mutually agree) or by either parent filing a motion with the court, pro se or with the help of an attorney. Parents can also request a review of their case by the local CSA; if the case meets review criteria and the CSA determines modification may be appropriate, CSAs can work with parents to stipulate to an agreement for court approval or initiate a court hearing for determination. Reviews occur when a parent receives cash benefits for, or a parent requests a review of, an order that has not been reviewed within the last three years or a court orders a review. CSAs can also consider cases for review, even if another review has occurred within the last three years, in response to an NCP's incarceration; because a parent or their attorney requests a review from the court; or when a substantial change of circumstances occurs (including a change to court-ordered placement for a child; a child aging out of a case; income changes for the paying parent that would result in an order change of over \$50; or a change in public benefits receipt for a payee (Gentry, 2017; Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2018b).

the courts—in contrast to order establishment, in which a number of decisions must be made to determine the facts of a case. Described a staff member:

I see it as being very fair because the information that we're basing the review on is not really circumstantial. It's all right there. We're basing it off of what the current order is, what the current situation is... We're not making a whole lot of decisions about the case. A lot of the decisions are already made.

Some staff speculated that parents might perceive staff as relatively neutral in the modification process—especially when the parent initiated the request—and perceived that parent satisfaction with outcomes of requests contribute to parent perceptions of fairness. Described a caseworker:

I think they see us more as a neutral actor in modification than they do in order establishment. I think, ultimately, their perception of us is dependent on whether they're the requesting party or the non-requesting party, and whether, if they are the requesting party, if we are moving in a direction in which they want us to. Yeah, I think it can—their perception can be very different based on the end results in the modification review.

CSA staff also noted that in addition to parents not obtaining the outcome they sought, if parents have difficulty understanding the outcome, disagree with the rules related to timeframes for requesting a modification, or if the process takes a long time, the modification process can feel unfair to parents. Explained a director:

If they come to us, obviously, before the 33 months, and we have made a decision that it's probably not appropriate yet for a modification, they'll probably perceive it as not fair, because they want something right away...I think for the most part, people don't know what the process is. They just know what happens in court, and that's not our decision to make. So, I think they will think it's unfair because the decision that might be not in their favor in court.

Staff, while characterizing the process as generally fair, also cited several aspects of the process that they perceived parents might experience as unfair. One director noted that it can be difficult to achieve fairness with the limited information available regarding family circumstances, and the challenge of balancing obtaining complete information with intrusiveness. They described:

I think it's as fair as possible. Part of the problem is that we're making assumptions about people's lives without really knowing anything about them—how they share responsibilities, how they do their finances. So, we try to follow the law, without conducting a big, intrusive study of what they do. Best case is that both parties are satisfied. They're not always, but we try to at least help them to understand and give them the opportunity to request something. If they want to deviate based on their circumstances, we try to accommodate that. I think in that context, it's more fair than it used to be when we were kind of saying, 'Here's the guideline amount. You're going to take it, and you're going to like it, and that's it.'

Another director, who generally characterized the modification process itself as fair, notes processes for accessing modifications can be unfair, because large caseloads prohibit their CSA from initiating a review on all cases in which a substantial change of circumstances occurs. The director lamented that, because of staff constraints, the agency often encourages parents to file a motion pro se, which can present barriers for parents who experience difficulties understanding legal processes or who lack the financial resources to obtain legal representation to assist them:

I think that we should review every case in a substantial change in circumstance case. And we don't. We refer them to do their own motions. And that's why I don't feel that our process is fair. But our process is necessary. And that is because we have such a large caseload, so we have to have a pro se workaround for that. So, it's not necessarily our fault... That part for me as a director is very hard for me because, you know, when you read the rules, it's really our job to help them do what they need to do to navigate the system. But because of sheer volume, we have to turn to, 'Sorry, you're going to have to file a motion on your own in this situation.'... But as far as the rest of the process, totally fair, because we have rules to follow.

Among parents who had experience with modifications, perceptions of fairness generally aligned with those of staff and directors. Parents often reported the process as fair, particularly when they felt they had a voice in the process and that staff considered their circumstances, when they perceived the basis of the order amount to be on real and accurate information about

income, and they obtained the outcome they wanted. From the perspective of one NCP, he felt that child support was on his “side” (rather than the CP’s) in this process:

They came up, with what I thought, was a fair amount and it was probably maybe just a couple of hundred dollars a month. They said, ‘This is what you got to pay. You pay this.’ So, it was probably a couple of hundred dollars a month because I think I was only bringing home, I might have been bringing home maybe \$1400 a month on disability... They did a review because they didn’t know how long I was going to be disabled, and again they were fair, but, of course, they were on my side they were helping me. The mother wasn’t too happy about those processes, but I thought they were fair that time.

Some CPs who reported the modification process as fair cited the court as providing a degree of checks and balances. Said a CP, “Yeah, it was fair. Most of the time, him and I agreed. And when he tried to lower it, it didn’t work. And that was fair because he wouldn’t provide the information.” However, similar to the establishment phase, some parents who had experienced the modification process cautioned that while they perceive the process itself as fair, outcomes can be unfair if a party misrepresents income without detection. Described a CP:

I mean aside from the fact that, you know, I don’t believe that he had accurately reported his income. I mean, I didn’t feel anything was unfair because it’s just a... it’s a standard formula they use.... I felt the court was fair based on information he provided.

However, many parents echoed concerns raised by directors about the potential for unfairness related to modification process due to access barriers. Most parents we spoke with described not knowing if a review on their case had ever occurred. Some of the parents we interviewed described believing they might be eligible for a review, but not pursuing one because they did not understand whether they qualified for one, or how to obtain one. Parent views often aligned with director concerns that the agency does not have bandwidth to review all cases with changes in circumstances, which contributed greatly to parents’ perceptions of unfairness in the modification process. Two important related themes emerged among parents: 1)

orders are not reviewed or modified as income and placement changes automatically, 2) the process of requesting a modification is often burdensome and confusing for parents.

First, some CPs and NCPs felt treated unfairly when orders were not reviewed or changed automatically as income changes or placement changes. Parents often expected that CSAs and courts would know of these changes and believed that such changes should automatically lead to a review. A CP, whose court-ordered placement schedule did not reflect the changes her family experience, described that the process of requesting a review deterred her from asking for one:

The other part of it is the readjusting every two years if the placement changes... [he] is supposed to have the kids these number of days, but I have them all of the days. The child support order is based on a joint placement schedule. So, it's more expensive to have the kids, because I bought the food seven days a week, etc, etc. But going back and having it adjusted through the courts is such a process that it doesn't always seem like it's worth it.

An NCP described that when earnings change, because orders are issued in dollar amounts rather than as percentages, without frequent reviews, orders can become outsized to income. He stated:

I think [they] should have kept it at the percentage. I think Wisconsin went back to a flat rate, so now that flat rate is kind of steep because if a father or noncustodial parent changes job, and he's not making the same money, now he's still caught it that rate. And that rate is accruing interest. So, I think they should just really keep it to a percentage of what he makes, instead of giving out flat rates...So, if you lose your job, and say I'm paying what I'm paying now, whatever \$500, \$600, and I lose my job, and then I got to do another job. But this job is not paying as much. I probably would be back paying maybe, maybe I'll be paying \$200 something a month, if it was a percentage.

Another NCP expressed dissatisfaction with his order not being automatically modified downward upon his incarceration:

I never disagreed with the number, I just disagreed with the fact that they wouldn't, like, stop it when people are incarcerated. Like, because for two years when I was incarcerated, it ran \$600 a month. Adds up fast when you're not making a dollar. And they still intercept your money that comes in, your gift

money or money to go on your books, it still gets—it gets taken in from that, which I didn't feel was fair either because that's not an income. It's a gift.

CPs also perceived orders not changing automatically in response to income changes as unfair, though from a slightly different vantage point; CPs expressed that it felt unfair for the burden of reporting an NCP's income increase to fall to CPs (rather than the court or agency obtaining and acting on this information automatically). Further, CPs are not always aware of a NCP's income change, and therefore are not aware that a review could be an option. Described a CP:

At the time when we first did the order, 9, almost 10 years ago, I thought it was fair because he wasn't working. I guess I'd probably assumed once he gets a job, they'll relook into it or they'll readjust it, or they'll come back, you know, revisit the case or whatever, after how many months of employment. That doesn't happen. I just kind of assumed, and that's really up to me to go and request for that. So, I would say I think it's partially fair.

Moreover, some CPs expressed worry about creating further strain in the relationships with the NCP by reporting income changes to the CSA and requesting a review. Described a CP:

I don't want him to be in a bad spot, believe it or not. I would never want to put him in a bad spot. But at the same time, I don't think what's happening is fair... I just don't want to deal with possibly now creating a tension or a turmoil with our co-parenting relationship, you know, and then having a big problem on our hands.

Additionally, many CPs and NCPs described the process of requesting a modification as burdensome and confusing, particularly when they lacked an attorney to help navigate the process. An NCP described that from his perspective, an attorney should be provided for parents due to child support processes court orders, as to ensure that parents have a voice in processes:

Well, I mean, first of all, if you in a court, shouldn't I have some representation? If this thing is a court order, shouldn't I have a lawyer that you talking to you instead of just the child support authority and her staff or whatever talking to the judge?

3. *Order Enforcement*

Participants' perspectives on order enforcement varied substantially, in part reflecting their various positions in, and experiences with, the process. From the perspective of CSA staff—whose agencies had undergone concerted shifts in recent years away from traditional, punitive measures and towards strategies involving more outreach and engagement enforcement—processes had become more fair and more reflective of the procedural justice principles of voice, helpfulness, respect, and facilitating understanding over time. While perceiving order enforcement as generally fair, some also described circumstances under which enforcement can be unfair to parents, particularly citing judicial enforcement against NCP who lack ability to pay.

When asked to consider fairness in order enforcement processes, staff cited agencies adapting strategies of stronger outreach and engagement before pursuing judicial enforcement, providing NCPs with opportunities to comply before incarceration would be considered, as well as several resources such as job programs to help NCPs avoid enforcement actions. A caseworker who works in enforcement discussed the steps they now take to provide NCP facing enforcement with resources and to understand the context of an NCPs' nonpayment:

We do have a process now on how we enforce it. In general, we all send them a letter, saying like, 'Hey you're, not paying.' We call and discuss the issue with them, what's going on. We try to talk about different programs that are out there to get employed. You know if they have medical issues we ask for medical documentation so that we can document that and base it on that. So, we try to be fair. I do think we try to be as fair as possible. I like picking up the phone and I like talking to the person before I do anything.

A staff member discussed how new enforcement procedures, resulting from state directives to engage in multiple contacts and alternate remedies before pursuing contempt, discussed the shift towards contempt as a last resort and as a means to open a communication channel with NCPs

who otherwise do not respond. From their perspective, these outreach efforts are often helpful in understanding the context surrounding nonpayment and avoiding the need for contempt:

It's changed a little bit recently with the standards in Wisconsin for bringing contempt hearings. Now, we're required to make at least two efforts to contact a person and say, 'Hey, what's happening? These payments fall off, it might be appropriate for contempt. But can you tell me what's going on?' And a lot of times those phone calls result in, 'Yeah, you know what, the guy who own my business where I was working died, and there's no business there anymore. But I start a new job in three weeks, when construction season is up and running again.' So, it saves us from bringing a contempt action in those cases where we have at least two efforts to contact people... Just because we have scheduled a contempt hearing doesn't mean that we're asking for contempt. At the end of the day, we have to talk to people and figure out what's happening. If we hear that what's happening is not voluntary on their part, there's no way we're asking for contempt.

While CSA staff generally viewed enforcement processes as fair, there were several ways in which they perceived enforcement—and contempt in particular—could be unfair to parents. First, a director emphasized that contempt court processes and paperwork can be confusing and intimidating for parents. They perceived that legal representation can help rectify power imbalances to make processes more fair, though in their director's experience, parents do not always pursue counsel, even when eligible. They stated:

We make it very clear that they have the opportunity to get a public defender, you know, to protect their rights, and I think it's important, because we're always dealing with people pro se. They don't really understand the process. Once they get before the judge, it's intimidating, you know? We say, 'Hey, sign this stipulation or the judge is going to find you in contempt; you're going to jail.' And, you know, 'Do you want an attorney?' 'No, you know, that's okay. I don't need one.' But still, they're in a very, you know, sort of unequal situation. They're, kind of taking what we give them to avoid going to jail that day, but yet again, they've had the opportunity for weeks to get an attorney. We tell them where to go, the phone number, everything, and the majority still don't take advantage of that.... I guess, we haven't really figured that out, how to make sure that they're protecting themselves.

Additionally, some staff noted that for parents who are having difficulty obtaining work, jail-based sanctions can be unfair to parents and further impede their job search. Stated a caseworker:

Throwing somebody into jail for 30 days because they're not paying, you know, I guess it's okay for those people that are like, 'I'm not paying, I'll sit in jail I don't care.' In that case then I don't think it's wrong. I do think, you know other people who are struggling and just want to work and just can't, I think that kind of sucks. Because being in jail you can't get a job. But that's why I don't use that as a punitive thing.

Finally, some CSA staff described that while they perceived the shift towards supports and resources within their CSAs as helpful, some NCPs experience mistrust of the child support agency, limiting NCPs' willingness to engage in services and therefore resulting in use of more traditional means of enforcement. Described a director:

Since I've been in child support, there's been, a switch from, just straight enforcement, contempt, jail, to [employment programs], making sure that we give employment opportunities, parenting programs and, you know, work with the NCPs before we resort to that. And I think that that's been a good development. But we still have trouble kind of engaging parents, you know? Especially NCPs, there's still a lot of distrust there. ...It's still hard to get people to take advantage of the things that we're offering, and then we end up in the same place we've always been, which is in contempt court.

When considering fairness within child support enforcement, CP perceptions were complex, varied, and often nuanced and mindful of the costs and circumstances of other stakeholders. Most CPs perceived CSAs taking actions to compel support when NCPs do not pay as generally fair, though some expressed concerns with specific enforcement tools. When CPs did not receive ordered support—and perceived that the NCP could pay but chose to avoid the system—CPs felt frustrated and perceived the CSA as unhelpful and unfair to CPs and children.

A CP expressed:

Like they're not really doing too much with what they supposed to be doing. So, I feel like the stuff that they say that a non-custodial parents should be doing, they're not really putting that into place with them because they still get away. And the only time that they really pay child support is when they get locked up. But other than that, they roam the Earth free, free and...the child support is not really being up on them how they should be up on them.

One CP, whose co-parent owed a substantial amount in arrears, shared similar frustrations:

I wish they could do better because my baby daddy owes me quite a bit in child support and is still not paying me. So, I wish they could do more to get the other parent to pay... I mean, I wish they could have done more to get him to pay because he's still not paying.

Another CP, who reported that her co-parent owes a substantial amount in arrears and has had a bench warrant for years, when considering fairness in enforcement processes stated:

They don't suspend his license. He owes at least \$80,000 right now. So I mean, there's—I feel like they should go after him, arrest him, he has a warrant out. They never actually enforce the things and go after them, I feel like. So absolutely definitely not fair.

Whereas CPs often characterized the administrative steps taken to compel support as fair, they also pointed to incarceration-based sanctions as unfair and unproductive, especially for NCPs with little to no ability to pay. A CP explained:

I think the liens are fair. I remember—I don't even know how many years ago. It came down to like, should he go to jail? And I didn't feel like that would help us or him or anybody because he's not going to be making any money in there. So I believe I had some influence in him not going to jail because I just didn't see that as helping.

Another CP echoed the notion that some administrative actions felt fair as an enforcement step, but expressed concern about asset seizure or incarceration for NCPs who cannot pay:

The letters are okay. The letters are kind like a bill reminder. You're getting those and you know what you need to do. But I don't know if I would agree with someone's stuff being taken or them going to jail over something like this. If they truly can't pay it, they can't pay it.

Finally, some CPs, when considering enforcement actions, also noted that jail-based sanctions for economically insecure parents can effectively punish parents for experiencing poverty:

It's so hard because, on the one hand, I can see how if you put someone in jail for nonpayment, they can't pay any more, can they, because they're in jail. You

know, taking their wages sounds great in practice. But then what if they can't pay their rent? And now they can't—it's such a complicated thing. My biggest answer is, I don't know. I hope there are smarter people making these decisions because I honestly have no idea...So much [of this] stuff is just penalizing poverty.

NCPs, for their part, often described experiences with enforcement on their own cases that they perceived as unfair, though nonetheless sometimes characterized enforcement tools as fair in principle. NCPs, particularly those who were struggling financially, felt enforcement actions taken by the child support agency were unnecessarily harsh and punitive. Though CSA staff noted the recent shifts underway within agencies to connect NCPs to employment supports and resources, the NCPs we spoke with appeared generally unaware of these resources, and perceived CSA approaches to largely rely on enforcement through punitive measures rather than supports. From the perspective of NCPs, actions such as license suspension and incarceration were counterproductive, as they negatively impacted their abilities to work. Stated an NCP:

If they're going to threaten someone with jail time, because they can't pay, how are you supposed to pay child support if you're in jail? It just doesn't make sense. It's like beating a dead horse. Or, you know, there's we're going to take away your privilege to drive vehicle. Okay, how am I supposed to get to work if I can't drive a vehicle legally because you took away my driver's license? Does that make sense? That's like, you know, dangling a carrot in front of a horse and then pulling it away from him right when he gets there.

This perspective was echoed by another NCP, who described the challenges of trying to get ahead and plan financially while also experiencing tax intercepts to offset arrears balances:

I knew I was behind. I knew I had to pay. But then there's also no opportunity to—I mean, they take it all. So if I was getting back \$2,000 or \$3,000 in taxes, it all went to [arrears]. And so any money that I'd be expecting with taxes, that's all gone. So any relief that I could have had from getting money back from my taxes is gone. So there's really no way of budgeting.

Other NCPs described challenges reaching the CSA to report unemployment and challenges providing evidence of inability to work during the enforcement process. An NCP experiencing long COVID at the time of his interview described:

No...I was like, ‘I called you guys four or five months ago saying I’m not going to be making payments because’—and they wanted proof. And on my healthcare on my app on my phone, my chart, I can’t screenshot certain things. And they won’t let me—And you’re not allowed to personally email child support. Email is the easiest way, I think, to stay in touch with certain people and certain things. And that was my biggest struggle just last week was trying to get them the right paperwork, so I don’t go to jail for child support.

From the perspective of NCPs, these enforcement strategies had long-term consequences.

NCPs described that the cumulative effect of imposing these actions when they could not pay positioned them to fall behind and never catch up. Stated an NCP:

With my previous relationship, I was there. I was there until the situation started to become violent. So, I stepped away. I racked up maybe \$100,000 in child support. If I couldn’t pay—if I couldn’t afford to pay child support, why are you guys continuously letting it run up? You know what I mean? Which only destroys me because now I can’t do anything in life. They put it on your credit report. Now you can’t go get a home. You can’t go out and buy a car. You know what I mean? And these right here are basic necessities that you need in order to survive. So that part, I don’t understand.

Another NCP described enforcement actions as unfair, and noted their potential to exacerbate already-existing family issues and thrust families into the realm of the criminal justice system:

No, no, no, no, it ain’t fair. I already told you about the license [suspension] they’re doing, they’re locking them up, you know, running around here, locking people [up]. Hey come on man. People know it ain’t fair. They’re bring the criminal justice system into the family.

D. Agency Efforts to Incorporate Procedural Justice Principles into Practice

We asked CSA staff to reflect on their CSAs’ approaches to child support services in recent years and the extent to which their agencies had engaged in efforts related to changing parents’ perceptions of fairness within child support, including such as steps taken related to the key principles of procedural justice: voice in processes, respectful treatment, neutrality in decision-making, helpfulness and trustworthiness, and parent understanding of processes. We

also talked with CSA leadership about CSA plans for the future related to parent perceptions of fairness. Staff described various ways in procedural justice principles were, from their perspectives, underway within CSA practice currently. Staff from both counties described steps their CSAs they have taken recent to incorporate procedural justice principles into child support processes, including changes at the outset of the order establishment processes; engaging in efforts to connect NCPs to resources and supports; expanding communication avenues between parents and staff; engaging in community outreach and consciously leading cultural shifts within agencies towards a support-oriented culture. Staff also described areas for potential focus in the future, plans for expanding efforts, and resources or guidance that could help support agencies seeking to incorporate procedural justice principles into practice.

1. Efforts at the Outset of a Case

Staff and directors were aware that a family's experiences at the time of entry into child support shaped their future experiences with the program and described efforts underway within agencies to improve communication, parent understanding, and parent voice in processes at the outset of a case. In one county, staff described providing parents with a "new order packet" at the time of order establishment that provides information and underscores information shared in court hearings. Staff described that court hearings are generally very brief and move quickly, so having information in multiple formats can help clarify and remind parents of rights and expectations. Another staff member described building on these new order packets with directions pointing families to other resources, such as state and court websites:

In our agency, every time that there is a new case, they get a folder, you know, with what to expect. There are so many pieces. There is a folder for the CP and for the NCP that it has all these things explained. I just think that it's sometimes a little bit overwhelming for them, and you know, it's like paperwork that people throw away. [The Wisconsin Department of Children and Family website has] videos that explain how child support works. You have lots of resources to look

for information. I just think that sometimes it's hard for a person that is in that situation in the moment to think, 'Okay, I need to educate myself about this.' You know, and I see my role as that, it's like, 'Okay, let's—let me just educate you a little bit about how this works.'...I feel like when parents are educated, then everything works more smoothly, you know. And the resources are there. It's just sometimes difficult for them to find them, or at the very beginning to give themselves a time to say, 'Okay, I'm going to sit down and read this information.'

Staff from both counties described running reports on newly established orders, and performing outreach to the family to answer questions, provide clarification, and identify potential payment barriers. One county's staff described taking this step routinely for all newly established orders. Described a caseworker:

We run a report for all the newly-established orders, and we do currently have one person working [on] outreach from the agency... 'Do you have questions? Do you understand what happened at court? Is there something that I can help you with? I see you haven't made a payment—do you have coupons? Do you need more coupons? Are you working? Are you job searching?' Just trying to find that information.

Staff described that some of their efforts in this domain had been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused office closures and limited opportunities for in-person contact, and shared plans to resume efforts in the future. One director described that the pandemic had interrupted the CSA's in-person outreach efforts at the time of paternity hearings—a process the director planned to re-start when in-person hearings resumed. They stated:

You know, before paternity hearings, we've always tried—when we were in person, I think we'll go back to that—to have them meet with a worker beforehand, so they can read their rights and get their information. What I'd like to do, once we go back to those hearings, is to have them meet with a worker afterwards, if they have questions about what's going on, or even in some situations, get them set up with like [an employment program... We talked about that, but just it's been difficult to really implement, and I don't think we'll really fully implement that until we go back to in-person hearings.

The director also lamented that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, CSA staff had been able to meet with parents at the CSA about on stipulated agreements, but the pandemic disrupted these opportunities. From the perspective of the director, these meetings helped parents to have a greater voice in the process. The director planned to resume them when the agency re-opened:

Now one thing we've tried like, with modifications and support establishment, before COVID, we had a lot more opportunity for people to come in the office and do stipulations. We haven't been able to do that as much, well, really not at all, and so everything's going to court. We're trying to get back to that, where if people can agree on, you know, support or whatever, in the context of a modification or establishment, they can come in the office, work with a caseworker and, and do that, so hopefully, that will give people a little more input.

Across both counties, CSA staff described that the state could help support CSA efforts to improve outreach and communication by creating simplified templates and forms, using plain language, that CSAs can use to share information with parents.

2. *Providing More Options for Struggling NCPs*

Staff and directors from both CSAs also reported making efforts to incorporate procedural justice principles into the realm of enforcement, noting steps their agencies have taken in recent years to transition away from using harsh measures when NCPs have trouble working and paying towards more outreach and support, with a goal of improving outcomes for all family members. Staff in both counties described implementing changes to the steps leading up to contempt, to include more outreach, in multiple modalities, to help CSA staff understand the circumstances surrounding nonpayment before pursuing contempt. These changes—which relate to the procedural justice principles of helpfulness, improving parent understanding, neutrality, and voice—were driven by CSA goals to avoid making contempt referrals unnecessarily, creating hardship and leading to negative views of the CSA from families, as well by as state guidance to reduce pursuit of contempt. Described a caseworker:

It used to be that we would just make the request to find someone in contempt, it would go to court, they'd be found in contempt, and the next thing you know there's bench warrants. We have changed our process to more outreach. We are reaching out at least twice, like corresponding to someone and phone calls. The person that's responsible for paying, we're reaching out multiple times trying to find out what's going on in their life. 'Did you just become sick or hurt and injured and you're not able to pay?' Well, then, we give them the steps they need to take to file motions to change or review or modify. But again, that outreach is being done before just instantly going to court... to make sure we did our due diligence, talking to people, trying to find out life circumstances first.

Across both counties, staff discussed connecting NCPs to employment programs and other supports to help improve their ability to pay. A director expressed that these connections have the potential to strengthen the whole family:

I think one of the things that, you know, we want to do more of are the collaborations with places where we can turn paying parents to resources within the community like [employment programs], to be able to give them the benefits and the skills they need, to be able to maintain jobs and then have that full circle benefit to come back to the child. Because when you're paying, you've got a better relationship with the mother or the father, whoever the payee is. In turn, hopefully, that would improve the relationship between the parents.

A caseworker discussed plans that had been put on hold due to the pandemic to incorporate onsite meetings with NCPs following enforcement court, to answer questions and connect NCPs to employment resources that could help position them to meet their obligations. This caseworker emphasized the benefits of intercepting NCPs at court to provide information and clarifications, because reaching NCPs after court via telephone can be challenging:

I just don't think [calling people over the phone] is worth it. Because like calling people, nobody even likes to be on the phone anymore. Everybody texts, and messages, and you know most people don't pick up if it's a number that they don't know, I don't. So, you know it's harder to do that like once they're out of the courtroom.

Across both counties, CSA staff noted that the state could help support these efforts by continuing to expand programs and resources for NCPs having difficulty paying child support.

3. *Expanded Communication Avenues*

Directors and staff shared their agencies' experiences attempting to broaden parent access to CSA resources and staff in recent years, by making it easier for parents to communicate directly with staff. These efforts are related to the procedural justice principles of helpfulness and facilitating family voice in processes. One director shared that their CSA provides call center staff for answering phone-based queries, and recently set up processes so parents can directly email staff. The director described efforts to improve response time to parent queries:

We emphasize customer service. I mean, we have a call center. We have people who answer the phone all day every day. That's all they do, and they can't even get to every call, obviously. You know, we try to make sure that if they are put on hold and they have to leave a message, that calls are returned in 24 hours. We respond to emails within one business day... We try to make sure that parties can at least talk to somebody. They might not like what they hear, but at least that they can get through to somebody and talk to somebody.

One of the counties had recently implemented a new phone tree system, to help parents connect with their assigned caseworker directly. Directors and staff broadly viewed this step as important and beneficial for parents. Described a caseworker:

We do take all of our own direct calls now. So, if there are questions, we are providing direct customer service. If we have questions on forms, then we do reach out all the time to try to figure out more information or obtain more information. We get a lot of calls on, you know, 'I didn't cooperate, I didn't send in my forms, what can I do, and why are you involved?' It's that direct customer service trying to explain why we need the information, what they can do to lift their sanction. We do have people that want to file good cause, and that's for domestic violence or for any, you know, other reasons... our biggest thing is the direct customer service. They have the ability to reach us.

Efforts in providing greater opportunities for parents to speak directly with staff are not without their challenges, and directors described these efforts as works in progress. Adapting to new technology, such as phone trees and email, requires adjustments for parents as well as staff. Further, direct communication between parents and staff—without reductions in caseload

sizes—results in a substantial increase in the number of queries caseworkers, already stretched thin with large caseloads, must respond to. Described a caseworker:

[With a] caseload of 3000, you can't thoroughly work your case while answering 40 phone calls a day. It's just not feasible. So, you end up getting people that call and leave voicemails, and it's three days before you get a call back, which to me is not direct customer service. That's leaving a voicemail. And if it were me, I'd feel anxious wondering, 'Did someone get that? Is someone ever going to call me back? What do I do? Should I just call back? Should I wait?' So, we are trying to push for some changes.... Our mission is direct customer service, and this is not it, so we need to make changes.

Staff shared examples of ways that they aim to mitigate caseworker bandwidth limitations due to caseload sizes, including letting parents know about options other than their caseworker for accessing services, information, and court processes. Described a director:

A lot of times we're understaffed, trying to make sure that people understand, you know, child support, online services, and e-filing, and some of those things where they can sort of help themselves a little bit more too.

Both counties also discussed plans for exploring opportunities to connect parents to information about child support virtually through YouTube-based tutorial videos, which they perceived as a relatively familiar and comfortable medium for parents. From their perspectives, YouTube videos could increase parent understanding of procedures and free up caseworker time for handling more complex matters directly with parents. Interview participants expressed a desire for the state to play a role in developing these resources, noting that state ownership would reduce the need for each county to spend time creating such tools themselves and facilitate consistency in information available to parents across counties.

Staff and directors also discussed how virtual court options, still happening within one county at the time of data collection, had the potential to help improve access to child support processes for some parents. Though interview participants cautioned that virtual options do not work well for parents who experience technology barriers or discomfort; they also noted that for

many parents, virtual court options can make it easier to attend hearings without having to take time off of work or find child care and overcome the discomfort some parents feel attending court hearings in person. A court commissioner described these formats can be particularly helpful for survivors of domestic violence:

I think the benefit has been that we get more participation, which leads to better orders because we have more complete information from people. I think it's also much more humanizing where people haven't had to be like waiting in the hall with a whole crowd of other people to come in and talk about their intimate family relations and stuff. And it's also from my perspective, then very beneficial for victims of domestic violence, who don't have to be in the same room with their abuser.

An attorney described that from their perspective, Zoom court leads to improved show rates and therefore fewer default orders, indicating improved parent participation in court processes:

We used to have a lot more defaults than we do now. But now, with the remote hearings, you know, let's say they're working. We scheduled a contempt and now they're working. Are they actually going to take off work to go to court? Heck, no. You know, we want that person to stay at work. So, they can take a 15-minute phone call and not lose their job, you know. They're much more likely to show up now than they would have been if they had to take a bus to the courthouse and miss a day at work for it. You know what I mean? So, it's much greater participation now than we've ever had before.

4. *Engaging in Community Outreach*

Across both counties, staff discussed the importance of engaging in community outreach initiatives for child support-involved families and other agencies that help child support-involved families, to build trust with parents and demonstrate a desire to help. Both counties described recent initiatives in this domain, as well as a desire to do more of this work in the future. Staff and directors in one county described that their child support agency recently started an annual outreach event, aimed at community partners, to help clarify misperceptions about child support and answer questions, thereby helping get information about child support to families who might be hesitant to interact with child support directly. Described the director:

I think agencies need to be visible in the county that they represent. For example, our department, once a year, we do an FAQ with different professionals who may work with people who have child support cases, economic support, Child Protective Services, schools, probation and parole. And we try to deconstruct those myths about the child support program with them so that they can share it with their clientele.

In the other county, staff shared positive experiences with their CSA's past efforts to engage with parents through a community outreach event. This event occurred in a public setting, in collaboration with a respected community partner, so parents could ask questions and get help without the fear or intimidation associated with a traditional office or court setting.

Related to community outreach efforts, one county described a desire to obtain parent input on child support processes and experiences. To that end, this county is considering implementing a parent satisfaction survey on an ongoing basis. The director said:

It more and more makes me feel like we should gather more information. We need to gather more information on our own and maybe put a survey in the new order packet with that stamped self-addressed envelope so they can at least feel like they can respond to whatever they were part of as it relates to just a continuous survey.

5. *Conscious Pursuit of Agency-Wide Cultural Shifts*

In both counties, directors and staff discussed engaging in agency-wide change efforts to encourage a helping, support-oriented culture, rather than the enforcement-only culture of the past. These efforts broadly align with the procedural justice principles of treating individuals with respect, giving individuals voice, helping parents to understand processes, and facilitating trust and helpfulness of system actors. Described a director:

It used to be that we were just a collections agency. We will collect and we would enforce. I don't know how many years it's been, but at least in my years, I feel like that mindset has changed a lot on the federal level and the state level. And I think we're now more here to assist families. I think people have felt that if you can help families, then you're going to get that flow of money coming in a little bit more consistently than if you were just an enforcer.

Directors discussed being explicit with staff about this shift in mission and providing them with training—on topics such as implicit bias and customer service—to set expectations and prepare them to work in new ways. In addition to formal trainings, directors discussed the importance of working with staff individually to address stereotypes and biases staff might hold. These trainings and conversations, from their perspective, are important for shifting agency culture:

People have a lot of ‘war stories.’ You know? ‘This one person called me, and they were horrible’ and, you know, this, this, and that. Sometimes that is true, and sometimes you do have to help people share that stuff. But I think we’ve tried to maybe change workers’ perceptions of parties. That they’re not just either scofflaws trying to avoid child support or welfare queens or whatever kind of stereotypes you want to come up with... We try to kind of change that perception a little bit. And that’s, you know, going through some of those customer service trainings and having [parenting educators] come in and things like that.

Directors also discussed the hiring process as an important aspect for making sure agencies hire individuals with a customer-focused mindset.

[We] started even a couple of years ago making interview questions that will pick out the best candidates for us when it comes to teamwork and customer service and positivity. Right? Because you—I don’t care if you know how to navigate KIDS [the state child support system]. If you come into an interview arrogant and really mean and rotten, there’s no way you’re going to start working for us. Right? So those are things, too, to think of that we do now.

Directors from both CSAs described plans to expand training efforts in the near future, into domains such as handling difficult conversations, trauma-informed service delivery, and secondary trauma, in addition to customer service training. One county also described plans to support staff in providing enhanced customer service through new technology, including an enhanced and interactive website, dashboards, and interactive mapping to identify areas of potential community outreach. Undergirding these efforts, directors described that a key priority for their agencies in the years ahead will be continuing to foster a cultural shift towards a more

helping-oriented culture. They described this as a long-term effort requiring investments in the change process across every level. Described a director:

I think my biggest goal right now is to somehow change the mindset of the people that work here. And in order for us to be successful as an entire agency, that's what needs to happen. [Directors] can want to do all these things that we want. But if we don't have our staff backing us up and doing the work with us, we're not going to be going anywhere. Right? So that is number one for me is trying to change that. Like I said, we have a lot of people that have a more older mindset of, you know, collections and numbers and just getting that. ... That mindset has to change first. And that's the biggest challenge of everything.

Across both counties, leadership expressed a desire for the state to support local efforts by providing training on incorporating procedural justice principles into practice. One director highlighted that CSA leaders, in addition to staff, would benefit from resources and training in this realm, to help them set the tone within agencies and effectively support staff, and suggested the annual Director's Dialogue as a potential forum for such conversations:

I think some of those like training and education opportunities might help a little bit. Just because, I mean, somebody like me, for example, who's kind of responsible for setting the tone, you know, we might not always have a good idea as to like when you say, you know, procedural justice. What does that really—yeah, I can kind of get a general sense of what that means. But you know, are there ideas or things that we could be implementing that could kind of kickstart that a little bit for us?... So I think more opportunities for conversations like that would be—you know, would be helpful, even if they could do something, a Director's Dialogue maybe or whatever. I think that would be really, really helpful.

Beyond efforts to shift culture within child support agencies, interview participants highlighted efforts underway within courts that, from their perspectives, helped to incorporate procedural justice principles into court processes and shift the culture of child support more broadly. For example, a court commissioner described the value of elective trainings currently available for court officials that provide education on implicit biases and strategies for incorporating procedural justice principles into court. Within their own court, the official

described taking steps such as asking parties about pronunciation of names (including the names of children on the case) and taking care to do so correctly, explaining Zoom processes clearly, and providing opportunities to ask questions.

E. Visions of a More Fair System

We asked interview participants to describe, from their perspectives, what a more fair child support system would look like. Though responses varied, within and across stakeholder groups, participant perspectives also converged in several key domains described as follows.

1. A Shared Vision for a More Family-Centered, Approachable, Holistic Model

Across interview participant groups, most participants envisioned a system that serves the whole family; connects families to supports and resources that can help support their well-being; and that families feel safe and comfortable interacting with. Across groups, many interview participants articulated a vision that involved more connections between CSAs and other service providers that can help support family economic well-being, and improved connectivity across these systems. In some conceptions, CSAs and other service providers are co-located in the same physical space, to reduce parent barriers to accessing other services. Described a CP:

It would be more holistic, like understand that when people are looking for services via child support or whatever, that they are probably not looking for just one service. If I need help with childcare, I have to go to the childcare office and child support office. And I have to make those two separate phone calls and they are not connected offices, they just sometimes bump into each other. So I think that would be the first thing, is that there would have to be a way to make these services that overlap and more connected. There has to be a way to make a system that encompasses all of those things where I can file one piece of paper and it goes to all of them, rather than filing five pieces of paper.

Another CP's vision also included a CSA embedded with other providers, and with caseworkers available to connect parents across systems and point them towards relevant information:

It'd be that family friendly, you know, environment I think it'd be great to have. The same large building with all the systems, right? So, like child support, food stamps, and whatever. Like it's all kind of encapsulated in one area, to have a direct person that both parents can contact if they have questions, concerns. 'Hey, I need help with this. What do I do?'

Directors and staff, for their part, envisioned a system that not only helped connect parents to a broader array of services and supports, but also was also welcoming, more accessible to parents in hours of operation and service format, and had more resources for mediation and meetings in less formal and potentially intimidating environments. One director's vision also included the CSA reaching out into the community to connect parents to services, stating:

[My vision] is definitely an open place for not just parents, but for families to maybe even have a daycare in it, to be able to make them feel comfortable and to actually have a commissioner come to us so they don't have to go into a formal courtroom. That's how some counties do it. I mean, when I first started in [county], I had the commissioner just used a conference room. So it was really less invasive... I mean, the court room can be intimidating. I mean—but I mean, when I close my eyes, and I'm the boss of the world, I'm going to have my doors open Monday through Sunday, have a rotation, make sure that the computers can be up on Sundays. I would have people scattered around [This] County for them to go to them instead of them come to us. I would do—you know, if everybody was happy and not violent, I would do—I would come to you with a swab so I could do the genetic test right there from your car or from your home.

NCPs, for their part, discussed a vision in which CSAs felt open to and supportive of them, in addition to children and CPs. For some, this meant more assessments and conversations with NCPs, to help understand their situations and connect them to resources. Described an NCP:

What program do you need? What help do you need? How can we help this problem out? ...How can we guide you to be better parents for the child?... Here is the childcare. There's your food stamps. There you go. Feed him. But you're not looking at the bigger picture. So there has to be a guide, steps, how can we work together? How can we help them work together? How can we help this person out?

Another NCP's vision included more holistic assessments of family functioning and needs, as well as efforts to connect NCPs specifically to economic supports and resources:

My biggest thing would be to make sure when they're doing evaluations and assessment so that they do a full assessment, not just chasing the money... Quit looking at that dollar bill all the time. You know, see what's going on with the father and see if you can help. If you're really trying to help the kid help both the parents. See if the parents can do something. I mean if one of the partners are hurting, they need this or so don't just give all the services to one side. Give some services to the other side. Because I know they're going to always do something for the mother... If there is a kid out there that is getting services, trust me, there is a noncustodial parent out there that need services as well and not just more counseling and job service. Give them real resources.

While serving in a helping role was a key goal articulated by CSA staff, directors and staff also acknowledged the tension between being a helping agency and being an agency tasked with ensuring parent cooperation and compliance. Directors envisioned that a more fair system might include a reduced emphasis on performance measures⁶, noting that these measures drive a focus on establishing and collecting support, even when not consistent with a family's desires or best interests. Described a director:

I think my dream would be we take away performance measures. I think sometimes we get tied up in that. And it makes it difficult to just work with families... But the performance measures, for sure, take away from the staff's ability to really do meaningful work because people are so focused on the state level on what that is. And maybe we don't at [This] County's level. But I think we would have better policies in place that we didn't have to think about, you know, fighting for funding.

Another director added:

You know, how do we—it's federal funding. So how do we get away from that so that we're not subject to audit, so we're not—you know, I mean, and I know there has to be accountability. But still, it's just so strict that I think, like, it takes away from the state's ability to really provide good service to families and to serve them, I mean, to serve the purpose of their mission and their values.

⁶The federal government set five performance measures for states through the 1998 Child Support Performance and Incentive Act, related to paternity establishment, order establishment, collections on current support, arrears collections, and cost-effectiveness. Federal incentive funds are allocated to states based on performance formulas and states are penalized for not meeting performance requirements; penalties include loss of incentive funds (Sorensen, 2016).

2. *Among Parents, a Desire for a More Personalized Approach*

Broadly, parents called for a system with more attention to families' unique needs and circumstances, and more personalized attention and follow-up based on family situations.

An NCP described:

I think it would go case by case basis, not just on certain things that's written in the court of law that you would consider the whole picture instead of just going by a book, I guess. That we are human beings, treat them like human beings, not just like, 'Hey, I'm doing 10 cases today,' and start looking at it as a case, you're just looking at it on a personal level, and that's what child support would look like for me. Would be more fair—it would be more looking at the whole picture instead of just going by the book.

One CP's vision also involved more holistic consideration of individual and family needs.

I would imagine that you'd reach out to both of the parents and see where they're at physically, mentally, economically, and see what you can do to either help that family become a family again. And then go from there because that is child support.

An NCP's vision for a more fair system placed children at the center, and called for consideration of the unique circumstances, needs, and resources of families. This NCP's vision included a holistic consideration of child well-being, beyond formal support alone:

Not making it all about money. Make it truly about the well-being of a child, okay? It's not—the well-being of a child is not directly correlated with how much money is being paid in child support. And it's such a—I don't know—just a horrible way of thinking about it. And I don't know if they hang their hat at night thinking okay, well, we got these people to pay child support. These kids are going to be set for life, because they're from broken homes. And it's not just who's paying what and to whom that helps that situation at all. So stop making it so much about money and actually what is best for the child. And if we have two engaged, active parents that see their child really the same amount of time, how can we justify and reason that we make one person in that situation pay the other person when they have them the exact same amount of time? And that's always been my gripe is how—like, what rationalization do you have—not you in general but the courts—that you can look at this and feel like you've done right by this family, by me, by my son? And just, how do you feel like you've done right by my son because you make me as a struggling single father pay \$460 a month? It just—it seems so backwards. And I realized it would take more time and more energy and likely more resources to do that. But if you're going to insert yourself

into people's lives and dictating what happens and how it happens, well, then you need to make sure you're getting it right.

From the perspective of some NCPs and CPs, obtaining personalized service from CSA staff felt difficult, because it was not clear to them whether they had a dedicated case manager and how to reach that person. This perception of being bounced around an agency from one staff member to another contributed to some parents' perceptions that CSAs see them as cases, rather than individuals, and also made it difficult to know how to ask questions or get information about what was happening on their case. Described a CP:

Just to be a little bit more user friendly and helpful in answering questions about child support, or how to get a modification or, you know, if you even qualify for one, I guess. When I did send the form in the one time, I never got a response. And it would have been nice just to get something saying 'yes' or 'no'. Or 'we received this,' even, because, you know, I wouldn't call there very often because even when I had questions, I didn't get any help initially. So, maybe they've solved that by assigning a case worker to everyone. And that would be great. That would make it a lot easier, I think, a lot more user friendly.

From the perspective of some CPs, more caseworker bandwidth to personalize enforcement actions, or to keep track of changes on cases and initiate reviews where appropriate, were often included in visions of a more fair system. Described a CP:

I feel like they can improve their enforcement portion of it, not just putting it on paper and then filing it away somewhere. I feel like that they need to either hire more of the people that actually go out to enforce it, the police officers or whatever they use to actually pick up people on warrants. Or to go out and go to these people's places of employment. I feel like they can improve in that area.

Several CPs also described an ideal system in which cases received enough personalized attention as to monitor changes in family circumstances, without relying on CPs to share NCP income information, to ensure that order amounts reflect income realities. Described a CP:

I think either as a judge or as child support people, whoever does the portion of actually tracking down the information of the fathers, whether it's their employment information or whatever, I think that I would have even more people doing that or find another way to actually get that information without being in

court and asking the other parent, the one that's supposed to be receiving, and asking them, you know, 'Do you know that information.' I feel like it should be the court system or the child support, you know, part of their job to actually get that information and not ask the other parent, because the other parent doesn't always have communication with that absent parent. They don't know that information. There has to be a better way to get that information.

Parents who had experienced domestic violence shared perspectives on ways in which the child support system could work more effectively for survivors, which differed depending on their unique situations and needs. Survivors shared examples of the ways in which perpetrators of domestic violence leveraged the system to perpetuate ongoing contact with survivors, harass them, or attempt to control or monitor them. For some survivors, this led them to avoid pursuing actions with the potential to benefit the survivor and children—such as pursuit of a modification in response to becoming aware that a perpetrator's income had increased—to avoid distress, conflict, or interaction with the perpetrator. As one CP described:

So, one of my understandings is, if I wanted to fight to change the order to, you know, more adequately reflect his income changes that I would have to take him to court. But I do not want to take my abuser to court, because every time that happens, it's like more abuse, basically, like he uses that. He uses the court systems to stalk me, almost. And like the last time he tried to take me to court, the last time he took me to court for custody stuff, he and his lawyer requested four years of bank statements from me, and like phone records, and like all these things. Because he already has a history of stalking, I'm avoiding that—if I do take him to court to change the order, then he and his attorney can request whatever they want from me as part of that process.

Among CPs who wanted an order in place, suggestions for an ideal system included the CSA facilitating collections from NCPs while minimizing opportunities for contact between survivors and perpetrators, as well as ensuring protections of survivors' personal and identifying information. Among CPs who had experienced domestic violence and did *not* want an order, ideal visions for the child support system often included more supports for navigating good cause exemptions from cooperation requirements. Across these groups, survivors called for proactive

efforts among staff to identify domestic violence concerns through systematic screening procedures and more personalized communication at the outset of a case; increased coordination between CSAs and courts when domestic violence is identified so that all system actors have complete information ahead of meetings or hearings involving both parties; and supports and protections for survivors when domestic violence is identified, including protection of survivor information and enacting steps to address safety concerns in physical and virtual settings. Survivors also called for resources to support survivors and help address the power dynamics related to domestic violence and financial abuse in particular, including connections to low-cost legal representation, court advocacy services, and other community-based resources.

3. *A Shared Vision of Child Support Services for a Narrower Set of Families, With Differing Views of Where to Target Efforts*

Across groups, interview participants described that a more fair system might serve a narrower set of families than currently served by child support. Directors and some staff described that an optimally fair system would be more targeted in its application; it would take more steps to assess family needs before opening cases, freeing up staff bandwidth to focus on cases that want and need the CSA's assistance. A director described:

I think there are a lot of people who really want to have child support services, really need child support services. But it seems like we're getting, you know, every single person who—just because you get a medical card, for example and, a lot of people don't have health insurance through their work. And so, tons of people get kind of funneled into this system, where it's intrusive. But then again, there are people who really need, you know, child support, need the services that we provide. So, I think it would be, you know, maybe more—a little bit more modest as far as the people involved in the system. But if we had the resources to really, you know, help them a little bit more—you know, more part time if we needed, you know, able to work with them a little bit more. So, we could help the people who need and want help, rather than spending a lot of time and resources on people who really don't want us involved.

Some parents, similarly, articulated a narrower vision for an optimal child support program. For some CPs, this meant establishing and enforcing orders when CPs want services, rather than due to referrals from public benefits irrespective of a parent's wishes. For some NCPs, as well as some CPs, this meant a more nuanced evaluation of whether the NCP is providing for children, broadly defined. Stated a CP:

I feel like they can be improved by taking it easy on the parents that, you know, are in their kid's life, and prefer to give the other parent like whatever they got to do on their behalf as far as like, you know, what the kid wants or needs or anything like that. I feel like they should take it easy more on that type of parent.

4. *A Shared Vision for More Open, Frequent Communication, and a Shared Recognition That More Staff Resources Are Required*

Many stakeholders described that their ideal system would involve more proactive outreach early, and more proactive outreach when NCPs fall behind, so that CSAs can work with parents in a more supportive role to understand their circumstances. Described a caseworker:

I think it would honestly be more respectful if there was more outreach so everyone understood and wasn't always feeling like they were in limbo. I think that being confused and not knowing and maybe not knowing who to ask could make you feel like something is wrong or that they don't care about you or they're just here to get another court case number and get us into court. I think out of respect for people, we could do more outreach. The process in general is the same across the board for [This County]. So, I think in that sense, everyone's being treated fairly, and I would hope that all my people that are answering phone calls and trying to answer questions are treating everyone with dignity and respect, whether it be in-person or over the phone. But again, I think if people weren't confused, I think that, in general just out of respect, could be better.

Staff, directors, and parents alike imagined this would include CSAs having more manageable caseloads to provide more intensive case management and proactive outreach to parents. Parents observed large caseloads as being a constraint for communication across agencies and parents, and perceived this as different from other agencies. Described a CP:

To me, that system would look a lot like other agencies that we have here in the state, the Job Center, BadgerCare, FoodShare. Those type agencies that have the

staffing, that have—anybody that's receiving benefits has a case. Anyone that has a case has a case number. Anyone that has a case number has a worker. Anyone that has a worker, worker has a phone number. Any phone number would be manned by the agency and the worker. If you couldn't contact the person directly, that person will call you back. I think a lot of the systems that we have are working and functioning. This might be one of the last ones that needs work because you see with [another program], it's totally systematic, and yet it's not impersonal.... So I'm not really sure what happened with the child support agency where it's any different.

Some parents also called for staffing increases to reduce caseload sizes in order to allow for comprehensive case management in addition to improved communication. Described a CP:

And this may be just more systemic, but we do not staff these agencies as well as they need to be staffed in terms of quantity... it's too many for one human. I don't know if that's a solvable thing in the foreseeable future. It's just we need to be staffing them better, we need to be paying them better, because if you invest in these services, right, these services do better. So that's what I would say is just, like, let's bring it into the 21st century. I think, really, it is just a matter of investing in these services in a more meaningful way than we do. I think anything with—anything dealing with families and children tends to kind of fall by the wayside and does not get the investment that it needs. And these agencies need to be invested in because I can't expect them to make me a priority when they have 50 other cases that they're dealing with, who also would like to be made a priority. So—And I feel like that's a much bigger issue than just my case, you know.

Visions for improved communication included several specific components, in addition to these broader visions. These were:

More centralized information about how CSA processes work, across a broader array of modalities, to facilitate greater transparency. Directors and staff noted that the way people access information is changing, and suggested mechanisms for using technology in ways that meet these realities. Parents also discussed how the child support program could use technology to operate more efficiently. Stated a CP:

It could be more efficient. There could be—And I know this is possible because, again, we live in the future, there could be a system that automatically emails you when your paperwork has been received. Like, it doesn't need to be an actual person behind the desk emailing you. But, you know, there is code you can put

into a system that when a piece of paper is filed and received that an automatic email goes out saying, hey, we've got it. You know, your stipulation was received. So, that kind of thing, where it doesn't have to be a person behind a desk but automatic updates as things are happening.

Another CP emphasized the importance of providing information in multiple formats to work for parents with varying needs:

I just think having multiple ways of communicating information would be helpful. Like, this is something that I do in my own work that seems to be helpful is that when we provide information, we provide it auditory, we'll tell someone about it visually where we'll provide a flyer. And if possible, we'll also try to do like a video of some kind where we're able to just give, especially if it's important information. Not everyone learns that way. Like a flyer, most—a lot of people do not adequately learn changes or new things from a piece of paper. That I think like child support, because the formula is uniform and because the process is similar enough, I think that it can be really easily like a three-minute-long YouTube video that's like linked that you could just click on and watch to see like what to expect for child support court in Wisconsin and just kind of say some of the questions that people normally have... I think that would be really helpful for families trying to navigate a system that—like I never wanted to be in child support, I didn't plan on my marriage failing when I got married or had a child, or I probably would have done either of those things. Like my life was already in enough chaos without having to navigate all this myself or spend all of my lifesavings on a lawyer.

Making paper and electronic documents easier for parents to understand. Parents and staff also highlighted a significant need to make CSA and court materials (e.g., letters, paperwork, and other documents) easier to read and understand. Explained one CP, “The recent [letter] I got, it just used a lot of terms. And then it would refer to that term as an acronym for the rest of the letter. But I never understood what the basic thing was.” Additionally, parents who encounter language barriers spoke of the difficulties they face in understanding both the child support agency documentation as well as other processes at important junctures. A CP's suggestion for greater accessibility aligned with some staff comments about use of technology in providing self-guided tools to aid parents' understanding of child support agency processes:

I consider myself, you know, a reasonably intelligent person, and trying to navigate those court forms was just really overwhelming. I can imagine for a lot of other parents, it's similar, if not worse. You know, the divorcees that are attorneys are in a good spot, but the rest of us, they might as well be in another language sometimes.

CSA staff and directors echoed these perspectives, with a director describing:

I don't know if you've ever seen the stipulation that Wisconsin courts has. It's really long and difficult to understand, and so that's a huge impediment. People will fill it out. I'd say at least half the time, they fill it out incorrectly, and it gets rejected, and they get frustrated, and they say forget it, and so that's a huge frustration. I wish we could have simpler stip forms.

Improved communication for families who apply for public benefits – across CSAs and referring agencies, and from CSAs and referring agencies to parents. As noted previously, many interview participants across groups emphasized that when parents come into the system involuntarily, feel pulled into a legal matter by surprise, or when they have not had the opportunity to ask questions about what is happening and why, involvement in the child support processes that follow often feel unfair. To address this problem and improve perceptions of fairness, interview participants emphasized that a more fair system would include more personalized, parent-friendly communication at the outset of a case to both CPs and NCPs. A caseworker described expanding outreach to NCPs:

I think what could happen is, again, more outreach. Like, before proceeding with that paternity case against dad who may not know he was even named and all of a sudden he's getting this administrative order that you have to appear for genetic testing and he doesn't understand why, any more outreach before even getting to that would be helpful. Reaching out and, 'You have been named as a possible father of this child. Do you know this person? Do you not know this person? Are you willing to sign the birth certificate? Do you want genetic testing?' And explaining that process, I think we'll get more cooperation from possible fathers. And then, also reaching out maybe even just in a cover letter, you know, if you don't end up doing it in-person, re-emphasizing, you know, if there is a reason to file a good cause, and these are the reasons, you know, some reasons why, please file a good cause. We don't want any family in jeopardy. I don't want to have to proceed and have a scared mom who's intimidated. I think just having that information readily available and, like I said, just us reaching out even to dad

saying, 'This is why we're involved all of a sudden.' I think that would be helpful steps that we could take.

A more fair system, according to interview participants, would also involve clearer and more proactive outreach to referred CPs to help clarify how they were referred to the child support program, explain next steps, and answer questions, as well as enhanced communication across CSAs and referring agencies. Stated a staff member:

Maybe improving our interfaces and like the information that goes out to parties. And I think I brought this up with like Economic Support, when they apply for benefits, no matter what the situation, if it's clearly communicated to them why child support will be involved and why that referral was made, that would help. So, kind of all agencies working together to clarify processes and why referrals are made and why different agencies might get involved in your life. So, I think an improvement across everybody would be helpful.

More support and resources before and after court processes specifically. Across stakeholders, interview participants often described that a more fair system would include more communication from the child support agency before and after court, to help parents understand what will happen in court, and to follow-up afterwards on questions about what happened in court and next steps. They described that court can be intimidating, confusing, and overwhelming, and parents often leave with an incomplete understanding of what occurred, why, and what happens next. Described a director:

I have seen another child support office come out and, not do the pretrial with the parents, but to sit down and do the explanation of the process with the parents. Right? We don't really necessarily do that. It might come up in conversation with the attorneys. But we don't have anything formal that says our attorneys must do this, this, this, this and this to make them feel more at ease and hold them accountable. So I think that that is something that we can do to improve. And checking in with them afterwards, you know, instead of just sending them some paperwork that says 'This is how the rest of the process is going to work,' to maybe have that one on one conversation with them.

A CP underscored how support could help ensure parents understand what transpired in court:

Just having better access to information would be more helpful and a breakdown of what is happening in less legal terms too because I know that that was my big issue is I really didn't understand any of the terms that were being used. I didn't know what they were discussing. And that's because I didn't know any of those words.

5. *A Shared Vision for Helping Parents Reach Agreements and Access Legal Supports*

Across stakeholder groups, interview participants described a shared vision for making it easier for parents to obtain child support agreements that work for their families. One area of emphasis was expanding resources to help facilitate parent-driven agreements, as a way to improve fairness and perceptions of fairness within child support processes. A common theme that emerged across stakeholder groups, when envisioning a more fair system, was requests for resources for mediation. Described an NCP:

Just being in a courtroom is a little nerve-wracking, right? I mean more of a mediation approach where maybe you're sitting down in a nice little office with a judge or somebody that are approved to handle those circumstances or situations. And hopefully, that judge or approved arbitrator, mediator, whatever, is able to remove themselves from all their preconceived thoughts... I think that would help all the children involved in these situations as well. But being in a courtroom, too, is just nerve-wracking in its own right. And, like, you're almost starting out. Like, you feel like you've done something wrong and that you've broken the law or something in some way. You're standing at attention for the judge. And there's armed police officers in there. And it's like, Jesus. Like, I just want to see my son.

From a CP's perspective, mediation approaches benefit children in addition to parents:

I think that, you know, the mediation is good. I know there is the family court mediation, which we've had to utilize... I think it's a good thing to have in place. And when it's done properly, it can really benefit the child.

Child support agency staff described that a more fair system would include more resources to sufficiently staff agencies for greater capacity to facilitate stipulated agreements among parents.

Described a director:

You know, [the parents] have to do the stipulation, and it would be great for us to have more opportunities to help people but right now, especially, we can't. We just don't have enough workers to go around.

Additionally, across participant groups, visions of a more fair system often included more connections to low-cost legal representation for child support-involved parents. CSA staff and directors noted that court processes and paperwork are confusing, complex, and overwhelming for many parents. From their perspectives, legal representation can help parents navigate processes, understand rights and responsibilities, advocate for their perspective, and mitigate power imbalances. They noted that when parents understand expectations resulting from child support court processes, they are more likely to comply, positioning the whole family for better outcomes. In addition to benefits for legal representation in matters concerning child support orders, CSA staff also noted that custody and placement is a concern for many NCPs, and that legal resources could help provide clarity about NCP rights and responsibilities. CSA staff noted that these are confusing issues for parents because placement affects child support order amounts, and therefore parents perceive that the child support agency has some level of input or control over placement issues, rather than the domain of the courts and outside of the child support program's purview. When the CSA doesn't help with this area when they have questions, parents don't understand that this is an issue about roles, not about willingness to help.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined perceptions of fairness in child support by putting the views of various key stakeholders—parents who pay support, parents who owe support, and CSA system actors—into dialogue. It aimed to understand perceptions of fairness within child support systems broadly, as well as at key junctures within child support processes, to help inform potential solutions to improve experiences and perceptions of fairness in child support policies and practices. Findings on perceptions of fairness broadly align with those identified in previous research with parents (Cozzolino & Williams, 2017; Edin et al., 2019; Edin & Nelson, 2013;

Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022; Turetsky & Waller, 2020; Vogel, 2020; Waller & Plotnick, 2001), and supports findings from previous quantitative analyses (Kim & Meyer, 2021) indicating that the extent to which parents understand child support processes and perceive child support as helpful affect their perceptions of the system’s fairness. This study extends prior scholarship by incorporating practitioner perspectives; exploring perceptions of fairness at key junctures within child support processes; and delving into these questions at the same time as cultural shifts are underway within some child support agencies. By combining these perspectives, this study highlights that “fairness” is a deceptively simple term—one that depends substantially on the answer to the question, “Fair to whom?” Findings from this study suggest that when multiple parties are involved in a process—in child support, CPs, NCPs, children, and taxpayers—what is “fair” often depends on the experiences of that actor with the system, and the extent to which process outcomes align with that actor’s goals. Results from this study underscore areas of considerable difference—within and across interview participant groups—but also areas of convergence, particularly around ways in which the system could be more fair. These areas of commonality represent important baselines for future efforts.

Findings from this study align with the notion that how parents perceive being treated by the various actors involved in child support services—whether or not they feel they are treated respectfully; that decisions are made neutrally; that they receive the help they need and that this information facilitates their understanding of processes; and that they are heard by those with power—affects whether they perceive processes as fair (Kim & Meyer, 2021; Swaner et al., 2018; Tyler, 2007). Findings also emphasize that perceptions of treatment by individuals involved in child support are only one component contributing to perceptions of fairness; perceptions of fairness of *policies* (such as cooperation requirements for parents who receive

public benefits), *processes* (such as those related to order review and modification), and *practices* (such as those related to communication and outreach) —separate from actions taken by individual actors—play a large role in parents’ perceptions of fairness in child support. Therefore, while efforts to prepare individuals to work in ways that promote fair treatment are important, shifting parent experiences and perceptions of fairness will likely also need to consider policies, processes and practices parents experience as unfair. In particular, findings indicate that what happens early in the child support process—how parents enter the system, the extent to which they understand what is happening, and whether they have a say—can substantially shape their perceptions of subsequent actions.

This study also found that experiences with the system are also affected by parents’ circumstances; parents who are divorced and have financial resources, for example, described very different experiences and perspectives in some regards than unmarried and economically disadvantaged parents. Interview participants underscored that the notion of what a “fair” amount of support is for families living in poverty is particularly challenging—a tension highlighted by a substantial body of prior research (Harris, 2015; Noyes, 2011; Smith et al., 2009; Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022; Vogel, 2020). As we learned from interview participants, including agency staff, the amount of child support ordered when parents have very low incomes is often inadequate for helping contribute to the costs of raising a child. And yet, low-income parents who are struggling to meet their child support obligations often also struggle to meet their own basic needs.

This study’s interview participants often understood and acknowledged these complexities and tensions. Across parents and staff groups, many interview participants reported that children should not be negatively impacted by the dissolution of their parents’ relationships,

should receive the financial support from parents that they need reliably and over time, and need adults to advocate for their best interests. Consistent with previous research, many NCPs we spoke with expressed the need for child support agencies to set and enforce orders—even when they did not think agency actions were fair in their own circumstances (Treskon & Groskaufmanis, 2022; Vogel, 2020). Many CPs experience hardship when they do not receive the child support owed to them, and frustration when they perceive NCPs to “game” the system (such as by underreporting income) or when they perceive CSAs to not be responsive when NCPs do not pay. And yet, many also expressed understanding and compassion for NCPs in difficult or complicated situations and a desire to avoid enforcement actions with the potential to make a bad situation worse. CSA staff, and directors in particular, were often mindful of the ways that families can experience child support as frustrating. Staff and directors identified ways in which policies and practices can play out unfairly in some situations and voiced a desire to create opportunities for CSAs to provide information and support for families. The CSAs included in this study were engaged in various efforts to improve fairness and perceptions of fairness within child support processes. And yet, CSA leaders and staff acknowledge their role in child support’s cost recovery mandate and work within a policy framework in which performance-based funding and various policy requirements provide parameters around the extent of change they can enact without changes to statute, federal rules, or state policy.

A. Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. First, data collection was limited to only two counties, and in Wisconsin’s state-supervised, county-administered system, processes and approaches to service delivery vary. Further, our sample was not random; the CSAs and parents willing to participate in this research might have different experiences and perspectives from

other CSAs and parents. While the information we obtained yields important insights, the perspectives of parents we spoke with are not generalizable to a broader population of parents, within or outside of these counties; family and individual experiences with child support are unique, and perspectives on those experiences vary. Also, our study required parents to have at least one active support order to participate; therefore, the perspective of parents who share placement and do not have orders, or who have the option of whether to have an order or not and choose not to pursue one, are not reflected and likely differ from parents with orders. Similarly, the perspectives of staff and directors we spoke with are not broadly generalizable. Additionally, though we offered an in-person interview option, no parents pursued it, and parent comfort with virtual options appeared to differ. It is possible that our virtual-first format for interviews discouraged participation among parents not comfortable with virtual tools. Finally, interviews occurred at a specific point of time —early 2022 —in which public health circumstances affected agency operations. Those conditions, and related economic circumstances, likely affected parent experiences in ways unmeasured in this report.

B. Potential Implications

Despite these limitations, we feel that this analysis provides insights related to policy, practice, and possible areas of future research.

1. Exploring Opportunities for Community Engagement

Findings from this research underscored that parent experiences early in the child support process shapes their perspectives on fairness throughout the duration of their child support case. As highlighted by CSA leaders and staff, building relationships with community providers who serve parents —and connecting to parents through these trusted intermediaries —can help build trust, foster engagement, and spread the message that CSA practices are shifting. CSAs could

explore opportunities to build relationships with trusted local partners, to explain the roles and services CSAs can offer, create direct pathways for connecting with the CSA for help, and to tangibly and publicly demonstrate the CSA's desire to work with families in new ways. The state could support these efforts by helping to identify and broker connections between CSAs and community partners, funding outreach initiatives, and providing forums for county CSAs to exchange information about promising strategies for engagement and outreach. Researchers could help facilitate these efforts by studying CSA efforts to engage in these collaborations, identifying promising practices, and highlighting key learnings from other human service agency collaborations with community partners beyond the realm of child support.

2. *Examining Policies and Processes Related to Public Benefits Referrals*

Findings from this study demonstrate that how agencies and parents connect at the outset of a new child support case affects their subsequent experiences. State and local CSAs could explore opportunities to work with public benefits programs that refer families to child support on ways to clarify referral processes and cooperation requirements for parents and facilitate smooth transitions between referral partners and CSAs. Findings also suggest that personalized outreach from CSAs to both CPs and NCPs following a referral to explain options, processes, and next steps, as well as answer questions and allow parents to have opportunities to share their perspectives, could help parents understand and feel heard at the outset of a case.

Additionally, policymakers could consider exploring whether all cases referred to child support from public benefits are necessary, and whether requirements for when a child support case must be open could be narrowed or simplified. In particular, study participants raised referrals that result from receipt of medical insurance alone as examples of cases that could be re-considered for referrals. Findings from this study suggest current referral practices capture

some parents who do not want or need an order, contributing to negative perceptions among some parents who perceive CSA involvement as unnecessary. Findings also suggest that a narrower scope could potentially help create more efficient caseloads by increasing staff bandwidth for providing more intensive services to families who want or need CSA intervention.

3. Building on Cultural Shifts That Connect Parents to Supports and Resources

Findings suggest that parents and staff broadly see the value in an approach that helps connect parents who are struggling financially to supports and resources. Such an approach has the potential to help parents more effectively meet their own basic needs in addition to the needs of children and, consistent with the procedural justice principle of helpfulness, allows child support agencies to demonstrate a desire to help families. Agency efforts to serve in this more supportive, connector-based role could be supported in several ways. First, given that this new approach represents a concerted shift from the traditional enforcement-focused approach of child support, child support agency leaders could seek out opportunities to train staff on topics such as customer service delivery, bias reduction, and child support's role within the broader social service landscape. The state could help support leaders' efforts by providing training resources, which could also help facilitate consistency in training access and preparation across CSAs. Additionally, the state could support local efforts through expanded funding for services addressing barriers for NCPs who struggle to work and pay. Supports for these services could help provide more CSAs with places to connect NCPs for assistance. These could include NCP-focused programs, such as Children First and ELEVATE, as well as a broader array of services to address underlying barriers to work and paying. Policymakers could also consider opportunities to expand funding for programs that require children to reside in the home to

parents living apart from children, to help NCPs improve their economic well-being and combat the perception that public systems do not support fathers.

Findings from this study also underscore the potential value of connecting parents to low-cost legal services that can help navigate child support processes. An important theme that emerged from this work was that parents who had legal representation experienced child support in very different ways from those who did not. Child support directors and staff made clear that they are not able to provide legal advice to parents, and yet, were also aware many parents could benefit from greater understanding of what their legal options are in child support processes. Findings highlight that when parents had legal representation, lawyers often helped parents to understand processes and their options, advocate for their positions, complete required paperwork, and participate more effectively in court proceedings. However, the cost of legal representation is prohibitively expensive for many parents and finding low-cost legal resources locally can be challenging for parents. The state could consider opportunities to identify and connect parents to affordable legal services and resources available in counties, such as developing and maintaining a list of legal resources available that is searchable by geographic area. Such resources could be particularly important for parents who enter these processes as especially vulnerable—those with low levels of literacy or formal education, limited economic resources, and survivors of domestic violence.

4. Simplified Information and Processes in a Broader Array of Formats

Findings from this study highlight that many families experience child support processes, and the paperwork that accompanies them, as complex and opaque, and that parents' lack of clarity about how decisions are made, what their options are, and how to obtain information and help affect their perceptions of fairness. Findings also highlight that parents have different needs

and preferences related to accessing information. CSAs, courts, and state agencies, therefore, could consider—at every juncture in the child support process—opportunities to make information and processes more accessible. As highlighted by these findings, parents and CSAs both have a desire for YouTube videos and web-based information to address relatively straightforward questions. The state could help support these efforts by creating and sharing videos, and by creating templates for simplified paperwork and forms, written using parent-friendly, jargon-free language, for CSAs to use with parents. These efforts could make processes (such as filing pro se motions) more transparent and accessible to parents. Findings also indicate that parents seek—and CSAs want to provide—more proactive outreach and personalized service delivery on the part of CSA caseworkers, though caseworkers experience substantial time constraints due to large caseload sizes. Expanded technology-based resources have the potential to head off relatively straightforward questions, expanding caseworker bandwidth to engage in proactive outreach to parents across case junctures, and to focus time and attention on complex cases requiring personal attention and direct assistance.

Findings from this study also highlight that making court hearings available in a broader array of formats, and providing information and support before and after hearings, can help improve parent understanding of court processes and CSA expectations. Providing multiple options for participating in court hearings, including virtual options for parents with barriers to in-person attendance and in-person options for parents who struggle with web-based tools, could help facilitate increased parent engagement. Providing information and support ahead of hearings, such as about what will happen in court, and following up with parents afterwards to answer questions or reiterate next steps, could provide further opportunities for parent

engagement. Agencies and researchers could potentially partner together to test the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving accessibility.

5. *Expanded Resources for Mediation and Case Monitoring*

The adversarial nature of child support processes have the potential to create or exacerbate conflict between parents. Findings from this study suggest that, for some families, mediation could help increase parent voice in processes related to child support orders, while supporting parents in reaching agreements that work for their families. Improving access to mediated agreements could potentially reduce burden on courts by pre-emptively addressing a subset of cases prior to a court hearing, allowing courts more time for contested or more complex cases. CSAs could identify opportunities to connect parents to mediation or other resources to help support those who are interested in arriving at their own agreements, but require support to do so in a fair and equitable manner. The state could help facilitate these efforts by funding or facilitating access to mediation. Researchers could help support these efforts by gathering information from parents about their needs and experiences related to mediated agreements.

Findings also suggest that CSAs are constrained in their abilities to proactively evaluate cases for potential review and modification, and many parents experience confusion about when a review is possible or how to initiate one. CSAs could explore opportunities to help parents understand the steps and rules related to review and modification. These could include efforts such as making information more accessible through web-based resources, created locally or by the state, CSAs ensuring parents receive information when their case is eligible for a review or when a hearing occurs, and the creation of simplified forms for parents to make *pro se* requests.

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