

## Executive Summary

Most children in the United States will spend at least some time living apart from one of their parents (Andersson, Thomson, and Duntava, 2017). The poverty gap between one- and two-parent families has contributed to calls to strengthen child support policy as a way to reduce poverty and increase the income of single-parent families. However, many noncustodial parents struggle to meet their child support obligations. Whether noncustodial parents are providing all that can be expected or could provide more is difficult to ascertain without knowing something about their life circumstances. Unfortunately, prior research on noncustodial parents who are behind in paying child support is quite limited, and we know relatively little about their earnings, barriers to employment, or the complexity of their relationships with their former partners or their children.

The purpose of this report is to begin to fill in the blanks by documenting the characteristics of more than 10,000 noncustodial parents who participated in the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration program (CSPED). The federally funded intervention was operated by child support agency grantees within eight states, and served noncustodial parents who were behind on child support payments and experiencing employment difficulties.

### The CSPED Model

In the summer of 2012, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), invited applicants to submit proposals for grant funding through the CSPED program. Through CSPED, as described in the program's Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA; DHHS, 2012), OCSE sought to examine the efficacy of child support-led employment programs for noncustodial parents, and to improve child support payment reliability in order to improve child well-being and avoid public costs. OCSE laid the groundwork for the CSPED design through the FOA, which specified that CSPED programs were to consist of the following core services: (1) case management; (2) enhanced child support services, including review and adjustment of child support orders; (3) employment-oriented services, including job placement and job retention services; and (4) parenting activities using peer support. These services were to be accompanied by a domestic violence plan. OCSE required applicants to develop child support-led program models, with parenting and employment services delivered through partners with expertise in those domains. OCSE described the target population for CSPED programs as noncustodial parents involved with the child support program who were not regularly paying child support, or who were expected to have difficulty paying, due to lack of regular employment.

As described in the FOA (DHHS, 2012), OCSE constructed these required program elements based on findings from previous demonstrations, including the *Parents' Fair Share* demonstration (Miller and Knox, 2001); the *Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative* in New York (Sorensen and Lippold, 2012); and the state of Texas's *Noncustodial Parent (NCP) Choices* program (Schroeder and Doughty, 2009).

## **CSPED and Its Evaluation**

In fall of 2012, OCSE competitively awarded grants to child support agencies in eight states (California, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin) to provide enhanced child support, employment, and parenting services to noncustodial parents who were having difficulty meeting their child support obligations. These state child support agencies served as the fiscal agents for the demonstration. They chose a total of 18 implementation sites, ranging from one county each in Ohio, Iowa, and California to five counties in Colorado. Each implementation site had a local child support agency that managed the daily operation of the demonstration.

Also in 2012, OCSE competitively awarded a cooperative agreement to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families to procure and manage an evaluation of CSPED through an independent third-party evaluator. The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families chose the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, along with its partner Mathematica Policy Research, to conduct the evaluation. The Institute for Research on Poverty also partnered with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center, which worked in conjunction with Mathematica Policy Research to collect data from study participants.

Research products from the evaluation to date include an interim implementation report (Paulsell et al., 2015) and a final implementation report (Noyes, Vogel, and Howard, 2018). Future reports will share findings from the demonstration’s impact evaluation on key outcomes of interest, and the results of a benefit-cost analysis.

## **Eligibility, Recruitment, and Enrollment**

Prior to CSPED enrollment, OCSE provided direction to grantees about whom programs should serve. OCSE required that grantees enroll participants who had established paternity and were being served by their child support programs. OCSE also required grantees to enroll participants who were not regularly paying child support, or who expected to have difficulty making payments, due to a lack of regular employment. OCSE’s guidance provided a common framework from which grantees operationalized their own definitions of key terms provided in the OCSE guidance. Some grantees added to or modified OCSE’s criteria prior to enrollment; some grantees modified their eligibility criteria after enrollment began.

Using these eligibility criteria, grantees set out to find and recruit eligible noncustodial parents. All grantees except South Carolina began enrolling participants in the last quarter of 2013; South Carolina began in June 2014. Study enrollment ended for all grantees on September 30, 2016. Grantees reached potentially eligible participants through a variety of approaches, including direct recruitment as well as referrals from courts, child support staff, and CSPED participants themselves. Grantees refined their recruitment strategies over the first year to boost enrollment numbers. Ultimately, CSPED staff reported that the most effective recruitment strategy was child support staff referrals (Noyes et al., 2018).

These recruitment efforts culminated in CSPED grantees enrolling 10,173 participants, or 85 percent of OCSE’s target. Nine participants had been determined to be ineligible by spring 2018, leaving a sample for this report of 10,164. One-half of the noncustodial parents enrolled by

each grantee were randomly assigned to receive CSPED services (the treatment group); the other half were randomly assigned to a control group that received regular services.

### **Baseline Survey of CSPED Participants**

As part of the rigorous evaluation of CSPED, the Evaluation Team collected information from study participants on their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics through a survey administered when they enrolled in the program. All study participants completed the baseline survey through a telephone call with the UW Survey Center call center.

The baseline survey included sections on informed consent; demographic and socioeconomic characteristics; children and relationships; child support orders and payments; economic stability; parent background and well-being; motivation to participate in the program; and a follow-up contact information section.

### **Characteristics of CSPED Participants at Enrollment**

This report relies on the baseline survey to describe various aspects of the lives of CSPED participants, all of whom were noncustodial parents having difficulty meeting their child support obligations, a group about whom little is known.

**Demographic profile.** Nearly all participants were men, and participants were on average 35 years old. Participants generally had low levels of educational attainment—nearly 70 percent had at most a high school education. Only 14 percent were currently married and about half had never married. Most participants identified as non-Hispanic black or African American (40 percent), non-Hispanic white (33 percent), or Hispanic or Latino (22 percent).

**Child support orders and formal and informal payments.** Virtually all participants reported having a child support order for at least one of their nonresident children. Children are considered *nonresident* if the participant reported staying overnight with the child for 15 or fewer nights of the past 30. When a noncustodial parent owed support to the custodial parent(s) of their nonresident child(ren), the median amount they reported as owed was \$325 in the past 30 days.

Orders represented a high proportion of earnings for noncustodial parents who reported earnings. Among noncustodial parents with an order for any nonresident child, and earnings in the past 30 days, 58 percent owed more than half their earnings in support. Forty-four percent of noncustodial parents owed support even though they reported no earnings in the past 30 days.

At the time of enrollment, many participants reported that they had contributed to the financial support of their nonresident children in the past 30 days. Forty-three percent reported that they paid formal child support; 48 percent reported that they gave money for items such as food, diapers, clothing, or school supplies for children (informal cash support); and 60 percent reported that they directly purchased these types of items (informal noncash support). When payments were made in the past 30 days, the median amount paid was \$225 for formal child support, \$130 for informal cash support, and \$150 for informal noncash support.

For those with nonresident biological children in multiple families, there were differences in likelihood of providing informal cash and noncash support favoring the youngest child (from the

most recent relationship); however, the likelihood of providing formal cash support favored the oldest child. Differences in the amounts provided to youngest and oldest children were not large.

**Employment, other economic characteristics, and well-being.** Participants faced substantial economic disadvantages. Only 56 percent had worked in the 30 days prior to enrollment. Among those who had worked in the past 30 days, their median monthly earnings were \$500, well below the poverty guideline for a single person, which averaged \$981 per month during CSPED's enrollment period. Less than half reported receiving public assistance (35 percent received SNAP) or having health insurance coverage (44 percent).

The most common barriers to employment reported by participants were problems getting to work, having a criminal record, and not having a steady place to live. About two-thirds reported having a criminal record. Nearly 30 percent reported not paying rent where they lived and 2 percent reported living in a shelter, on the streets, or in an abandoned car or building. Nearly one-third lived with their parents or grandparents and 30 percent did not expect to live in the same place the following year.

Finally, in terms of noncustodial parents' emotional well-being, using a standard eight-item depression scale (PHQ-8), more than one-fourth of participants would be categorized as depressed. As another indicator of emotional well-being, one-fourth reported that they never or rarely felt in control of things that were happening to them.

**Parenting.** Most CSPED participants had one (30 percent) or two (28 percent) biological children. Just over 20 percent had four or more biological children. Nearly all participants had at least one nonresident child, and about one-third had a resident child (with nonresident status defined by 15 or fewer overnights in the past 30 days).

Not surprisingly, participants reported having much better relationships and having much more contact with their resident children than their nonresident children. While 84 percent of participants who had resident children reported an excellent relationship with them, only 30 percent reported having an excellent relationship with their nonresident children. Twenty-seven percent of participants had no contact with their youngest and oldest nonresident children in the 30 days prior to enrollment and about 40 percent had no in-person contact with these children. Four in five noncustodial parents did not see their youngest and oldest nonresident children as much as they wanted. The most common reason noncustodial parents expressed for not spending as much time with their children as they wanted was that the custodial parent prevented it (reported by about a third of participants).

**Relationships with the other parents and romantic partners.** At enrollment, nearly 60 percent of CSPED participants were romantically involved with either a parent of one of their biological children (28 percent) or someone else (30 percent); 41 percent reported that they were not in a romantic relationship. Sixty-two percent of noncustodial parents had children with more than one partner.

At enrollment, participants tended to report that they had fair or poor relationships with the custodial parents of their nonresident children. For example, 62 percent of participants reported that they had a fair or poor relationship with the custodial parent of their youngest nonresident

child. They were slightly more positive when it came to assessing whether they were a good parenting team. About half of participants (53 percent) agreed that they and the custodial parent were a good parenting team for their youngest nonresident child.

## Summary

Noncustodial parents who participated in CSPED were selected because they were behind in their child support payments and likely to have employment difficulties. Indeed, we found that participants faced various challenges. What can we conclude from the portrait of CSPED participants that emerges from the baseline survey? First, median orders for formal child support (\$325 per month) would potentially be manageable if nonresident parents had steady employment at a moderate wage. However, actual reported earnings fall far short, and many of the barriers to employment are significant; evaluations of previous employment interventions suggest the difficulty of designing effective interventions to overcome mental health issues, housing instability, and a history of incarceration.

Second, the noncustodial parents participating in CSPED were typically at least somewhat engaged with at least some of their children—though they were infrequently contributing substantially to all of their children. It is important to recognize the diversity in engagement, not only across nonresident parents, but sometimes even across children for a given nonresident parent. Many nonresident parents in CSPED had some resident children—with whom they typically reported strong relationships. On the other hand, most had not made any formal child support contributions in the past month, and 42 percent had no in-person contact with their oldest nonresident child over that period.

This brings us to our third conclusion: noncustodial parents in CSPED were trying to manage complex situations—balancing responsibilities to both resident and nonresident children and navigating co-parenting relationships with multiple other partners, often without stable employment or housing. Developing programs and policies to appropriately respond to these complexities is clearly a challenge—and is one of the primary motivations for the CSPED intervention itself.