

IRP focus

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Designing more effective child support policies

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In recent decades, changes in family structure have led to a substantial increase in single-parent households in the United States. As a result of high divorce rates and a growing proportion of births to unmarried parents, almost a third of children did not live with both parents in 2016.¹ The child support system is designed to address one of the potential negative consequences of children living apart from one of their parents by ensuring that noncustodial parents contribute financially to their upbringing. In 2015, 37 percent of children with a parent living outside the household lived in poverty. Changes in the social safety net, which no longer includes an entitlement to cash assistance for low-income single parents, have increased the importance of reliable child support. For those low-income families who receive child support, it is often an important part of their household income.²

However, for many families the child support system does not work well. Only 43 percent of custodial parents had a formal child support order in 2015, and of these, only 44 percent received the full amount due. Many noncustodial parents,

including a disproportionate share of those whose children live in poverty, have limited earnings and ability to pay child support, and child support orders often constitute a high proportion of their income.³ In addition, since people tend to have children with other people of similar socioeconomic backgrounds, the noncustodial parents who are most challenged to pay child support often owe that support to the custodial parents and children who are most in need.

The child support system was initially designed to ensure child support payments through enforcement actions. When child support goes unpaid, a variety of enforcement actions may be triggered, including the suspension of driver's licenses, asset seizure, and incarceration. There is growing concern that these enforcement strategies may in fact add barriers to employment and child support payment, and thus be counterproductive to the child support program's goals.

In 2012, in an effort to develop and test a new approach that would not only enforce, but also enable, noncustodial parents' payment of child support, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), began the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED). The target population for this demonstration was 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. The primary goal of CSPED was to improve the reliable payment of child support in order to improve child well-being and avoid public costs. Child support agencies in eight states (California, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin) were selected to participate in the demonstration, which was conducted over a total of 18 sites.

OCSE specified that the lead agency for each CSPED program had to be a child support agency. The advantages of this structure were that child support agencies already had access to the target population of noncustodial parents, had information about the full family context, and were well-situated to reverse some of the punitive enforcement actions that had marked prior child support program operations. This strategy, however, came with the major challenge that the child support program had a negative reputation among many noncustodial parents, who might be unwilling to cooperate with a program that they did not believe was truly interested in helping them.

OCSE also required that a comprehensive set of core services had to be provided, including case management, enhanced child support services, employment services, and parenting activities. Child support agencies were to partner with other agencies to deliver parenting and employment services. Details of the core CSPED services are provided in the text box.

CSPED Services

CSPED services were provided from October 2013 through September 2017. Participating agencies provided services in four core areas: case management, enhanced child support, employment, and parenting.

Case management. Each CSPED participant was assigned a case manager to assist them in obtaining the services they needed and ensure that they followed through with the program. Case managers were expected to assess participants' needs, develop personalized service plans, provide individualized assistance to participants throughout their time with the program, and monitor participant progress. Case managers were also expected to work with the program's partners to assure that participants received the right mix of services and adhered to the program.

Enhanced child support services. CSPED was designed to offer a package of enhanced child support services to promote reliable payment of child support. These could include expedited review of child support orders, order modification if appropriate, and temporary suspension of discretionary enforcement tools while participants were actively engaged in the program.

Employment. Employment services were intended to help noncustodial parents obtain and keep stable employment. The services participants received were to be based on their needs and the design of their programs. OCSE expected all programs to provide job search assistance, job retention services for both the noncustodial parent and the employer, and rapid re-employment services immediately following job loss. OCSE also encouraged programs to provide work supports, such as transportation assistance, education-related services, and training opportunities.

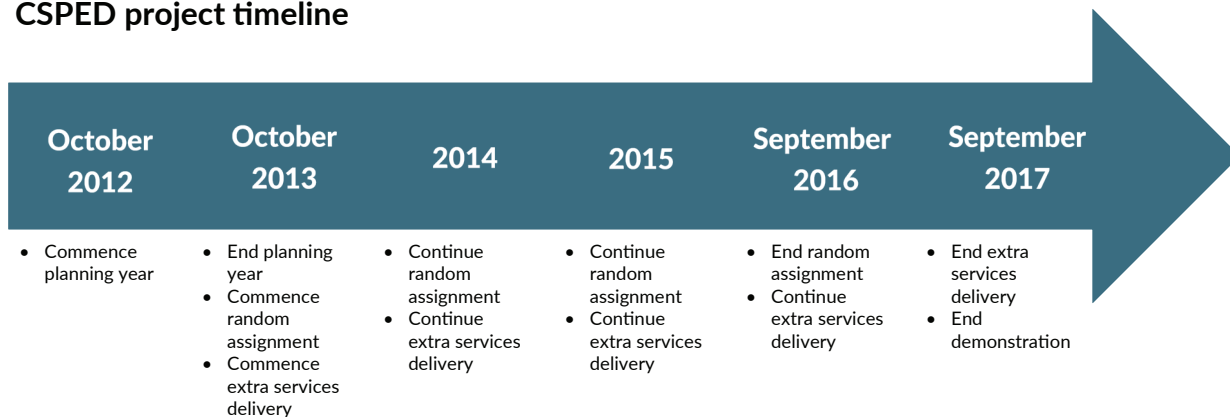
Parenting. Parenting services were intended to promote positive child support outcomes by addressing the importance of being a responsible parent. They consisted primarily of parenting classes with peer support. A specific curriculum was not required, but classes had to include the following topics: personal development, responsible fatherhood, parenting skills, relationship skills, and domestic violence. The parenting component of programs was expected to include 16 hours of instruction.

CSPED also provided screening and assessments for domestic violence, as well as referrals for services and information related to domestic violence in group-based classes. Some states also provided services related to financial education, parenting time or mediation, and assistance with expungement of criminal records.



CSPED programs were evaluated using a rigorous, random assignment design that allowed researchers to identify program effects. Half of the demonstration’s 10,161 enrollees were randomly assigned to receive CSPED services, and half were assigned to a control group that did not receive the extra services. The CSPED evaluation included three primary study components: an implementation analysis, an impact analysis, and a benefit-cost analysis. The evaluation also included a report describing the baseline characteristics of CSPED participants across grantees. To support the evaluation, in addition to collecting administrative data, evaluators conducted baseline surveys, 12-month follow-up surveys, and focus groups with CSPED participants. They also interviewed and conducted surveys with CSPED staff and gathered data on the services received by CSPED participants.

CSPED project timeline



The first article in this issue summarizes the implementation analysis, and the second article highlights key findings of the impact and benefit-cost analyses. The CSPED evaluation effort also provided an opportunity to learn more about an understudied population of interest to researchers and policymakers. The third article describes a study that used CSPED data to determine how many fathers who are behind in their child support obligation have multiple family responsibilities, and whether fathers with multiple responsibilities provide different amounts of financial support, have different amounts of contact, or report different relationships with children from their most recent relationship compared to older relationships. ■

¹M. Cancian, D. R. Meyer, and E. Han, 2011. “Child Support: Responsible Fatherhood and the Quid Pro Quo,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 635, No. 1 (2011): 140–162; U.S. Census Bureau, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2016,” *Current Population Survey, 2016 Annual Social and Economic Supplement*, Table C.1., 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2016/demo/families/cps-2016.html>. Accessed October 23, 2017.

²T. Grall, “Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2015,” *Current Population Reports*, P60-262, Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018.

³D. R. Meyer, Y. Ha, and M. C. Hu, “Do High Child Support Orders Discourage Child Support Payments?” *Social Service Review* 82, No. 1 (2008): 93–118; M. Takayesu, “How Do Child Support Order Amounts Affect Payments and Compliance?” Report prepared by the Research Unit of the Orange County, California, Department of Child Support Services, 2011.

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families was chosen to procure and manage an evaluation of CSPED through an independent third-party evaluator. The Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, along with its partner Mathematica Policy Research, was chosen to conduct the evaluation.

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