

Dual Debtors: Child Support and Criminal Financial Legal Obligations

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Exploring Complex Legal-Financial Obligations

- Prior research has examined the effects of owing child support *or* criminal justice debt, not both

Three objectives:

1. Develop the first descriptive overview of the dual debtor population in Minnesota
2. Identify patterns relating to and resulting from interaction, compliance, and enforcement within and between systems
3. Estimate models that predict how debt accrual, payment patterns, and enforcement events in one system affect behavior in another system



Data and Methods

Quantitative

- Individual-level longitudinal data from Minnesota State Court Administrator's Office (SCAO) and Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS)
- Minn-Link, University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, housing and merging data
- Comparison groups: DHS-SCAO (dual debtors), DHS only, SCAO only
- Descriptive analyses; event history analysis; fixed effects models

Qualitative

- 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews
- Inter-coder reliability, coding in NVivo



Findings

- Quantitative analyses in progress
- Thematic findings from interviews:
 - Relative salience of child support over criminal justice debt
 - Comparative assessments of fairness
 - Debt experienced as criminogenic
 - Selective system avoidance
 - Difficulty navigating bureaucratic systems



Policy Implications

- Multiple state-initiated debts likely to result in some degree of non-compliance
- Some current enforcement practices incentivize “going underground” (i.e. exiting or avoiding formal employment)
- Need to account for complex legal financial obligations in determining ability to pay, sanctions for non-payment
 - Fluctuations in income and employment
- Facilitating child support order modification for incarcerated parents may counter accumulation of uncollectible arrears





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