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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Satisfaction with Child Support Agency Services and Its Relationship to Child Support Payments

Daniel R. Meyer
Yoona Kim
Maria Cancian
Institute for Research on Poverty
University of Wisconsin–Madison

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Qualitative research has suggested that many noncustodial parents see the child support program as punitive, unfair, or uninterested in their situation (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Waller & Plotnick, 2001). Noncustodial parents who feel the child support program is not “on their side” may not cooperate with the agency. This lack of cooperation could contribute to lower payments, if, for example, noncustodial parents avoid caseworkers who are trying to help noncustodial parents lower their order or avoid a punitive action. A lack of cooperation is likely to affect agency performance as well; even if collections are eventually made, the increased time required by uncooperative parents could lower the ratio of collections to administrative costs, a key agency outcome. Finally, dissatisfaction with the agency could lead not only to less cooperation with the agency, but more directly to paying less support if it reduces motivation to pay support.

Some prior research into attitudes toward the child support program and satisfaction with its services has used qualitative methods to gather in-depth information. However, these methods, while important, provide little information on either the extent of different attitudes, or whether there are statistical relationships between attitudes and later child support payments.

More specifically, there is currently little information on three important questions:

1. How widespread are feelings of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) among a larger sample of noncustodial parents?
2. What factors are associated with levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction?
3. Is satisfaction consequential? That is, do those who report more or less satisfaction pay more or less child support?

In this report we provide answers to these three questions, using data from noncustodial parents in the regular-services (“business-as-usual”) group of the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) program. CSPED was piloted in selected counties in eight states from 2013 to 2016, with noncustodial parents who were having difficulty paying support because of their employment situation. Drawing data from the regular-services group

allows us to examine these questions among noncustodial parents whose experiences would have been most like typical agency customers who were having difficulty paying. We focus particularly on results from the two counties in Wisconsin that were part of CSPED, supplementing this with analyses using data from five other CSPED states (California, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, and South Carolina).¹

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, we highlight selected findings from three areas of previous research that are particularly relevant to this report. We begin with a summary of research on satisfaction with U.S. government programs in general (not limited to child support). We then focus on satisfaction with child support services and the child support agency. We provide an overview of the previous research examining noncustodial parents' experiences of child support services in the United States and its influences on their lives. Because this research is based on small samples, we also review research on satisfaction with child support services in the United Kingdom, where large-scale surveys assessing satisfaction have been conducted.

Satisfaction with General Government Programs in the United States

The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI, 2019) model has been widely used to gauge customer satisfaction with the services and goods of industry and governments (Van Ryzin, Muzzio, Immerwahr, Gulick, & Martinez, 2004). The ACSI annually interviews about 180,000 individuals with regard to four key domains of service provision: timeliness and ease of government processes; the quality of information the government provides; customer service;

¹CSPED included seven states in addition to Wisconsin. We exclude Tennessee here because it does not have information on a key factor potentially related to satisfaction; whether orders were increased, decreased, or stayed the same. We also exclude Texas because the survey that was completed by participants in Texas when they entered the program was much shorter than the standard survey, so provides substantially less information.

and the usefulness of government websites. These four domains are then combined to assess citizen's overall satisfaction (ACSI, 2019). The most recent report on the federal government (ACSE, 2019) provides overall scores and scores by agency. The overall government satisfaction score in 2018 was 69 on a 100-point scale, with the highest scores for customer service (76) and the usefulness of the website (76). Among federal departments, Health and Human Services is average, scoring 69; no scores for particular agencies (like the Office of Child Support Enforcement) are provided.

It is noteworthy that previous research suggests that citizens may judge the performance of government services based not only on their own judgement of the quality of their experiences, but also on an implicit comparison between the service quality they received and their prior expectations (Van Ryzin, 2013). In other words, satisfaction may depend not only on the actual quality of government performance, but also on whether a customer's experience was better or worse than their expectations. Research also suggests that, especially at the federal government level, customer expectations may be influenced by political ideology, party identification, and overall trust in the federal government (Morgeson, 2012). Thus, the factors associated with levels of satisfaction are potentially complex. In addition, some of these factors (such as expectations about the quality of services) may also have implications for cooperation with the system. Together, this suggests there may not be a simple relationship between agency performance, satisfaction, and customer outcomes.

Satisfaction with Child Support Services in the United States

Previous studies based on in-depth interviews with noncustodial fathers consistently suggest that they have not had positive experiences with the child support agency (e.g. Edin &

Nelson, 2013; Pate, 2002; Threlfall & Kohl, 2015; Waller & Plotnick, 2001).² Sources of fathers' dissatisfaction can be grouped into three broad categories, discussed below: treatment that they perceive as punitive (either in the setting of orders or in enforcement activities); the perceived rigidity of the agency; and counterproductive consequences of agency actions on fathers' relationships with custodial mothers and their children (Pate, 2002; Threlfall & Kohl, 2015; Waller & Plotnick, 2001).

Many noncustodial fathers believe that the agency is treating them punitively. Fathers with low incomes and high degrees of financial instability may be ordered to pay an amount of support that is based on imputed income, often presuming that they could work full-time at the minimum wage, even if jobs for a person with their skills may not be available (Waller & Plotnick, 2001). Dissatisfaction may be exacerbated when noncustodial fathers who are not in full compliance with their child support order face enforcement actions that they perceive to be punitive, from having their drivers' license suspended, being arrested, or even being incarcerated. Prior research has emphasized that enforcement actions can make noncustodial fathers feel powerless. While many fathers report that being a good parent is the most important aspect that they consider, their self-assessment of this quality falls when they are threatened by compulsory enforcement actions from the child support system (Waller & Plotnick, 2001; Pate, 2002). Prior research has noted that noncustodial fathers criticize the child support program for treating them as potential criminals, rather than as parents facing challenges (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015; Waller & Plotnick, 2001).

²Because there has been limited research on noncustodial mothers, in this section we focus only on fathers.

Another source of dissatisfaction is that noncustodial fathers perceive the child support system as too rigid to take their circumstances into account, which makes it more difficult for them to comply with the agency even when they are willing to do so. Prior ethnographic research suggests that noncustodial fathers are unhappy that the child support system does not credit any informal support that they made outside of the system (Edin, 1995; Waller & Plotnick, 2001). Moreover, they do not believe that the agency considers how much they struggle when they have obligations for children with more than one partner (Sullivan, 1992). Some noncustodial fathers who have new resident children feel that the inflexibilities of the program mean that their obligations to their new children are not taken into account. A sense of agency inflexibility may also reflect in part that noncustodial fathers do not always understand their rights; for example, noncustodial fathers who do not know that they could seek an order modification when they have substantial changes in income may view the lack of a modification as system inflexibility (Threlfall et al., 2015).

Although the goals of the child support agency are to ensure noncustodial parents' financial contributions to their children and so promote children's well-being, some noncustodial fathers report that the child support agency's actions are counterproductive to their having better relationships. For example, when noncustodial fathers pay formal support on behalf of children whose other parent is receiving TANF, some or all of the support will be withheld to offset government expenditures. This can then lead to conflict between noncustodial fathers who believe they are doing all they can and custodial mothers who are not receiving the full contributions (Waller & Plotnick, 2001). In conflictual relationships, custodial mothers who do not believe the father is doing his part may prohibit or make it difficult for the father to see the child ("gatekeeping"). If the relationship between the father and mother is difficult, a

noncustodial father may be less likely to invest resources in those non-resident children and instead turn to any new coresident children (Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010; Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). As a result, the child support program can contribute to an unintended outcome of noncustodial fathers becoming estranged from their non-resident children.

Satisfaction with Child Support Services in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has undergone several reforms in their child support system, with the most recent reform including replacing the Child Support Agency with the Child Maintenance Service. Before the 2012 reform, child support services in the United Kingdom had several similarities to the current system in the United States where orders were charged and collected by an agency. After the reform, parents were encouraged to come to their own arrangements in the amount to be transferred and how it was to be paid and received (Patel, Griggs, Dunatchik, Jones, Callanan, & Hudson, 2016). If they opt to use the agency, parents can choose “Direct Pay,” meaning that the agency determines the level of the order and the amount is paid directly to the custodial parent or “Collect and Pay,” meaning that, for a fee, the agency collects the amount due from the noncustodial parent and distributes it to the custodial parent.

The U.K. Department for Work and Pensions developed the National Client Baseline Survey (NCBS) in 2000 to provide a baseline to evaluate the eventual reform (Wikeley et al., 2001). The NCBS 2000 measured clients’ level of satisfaction with current services, focusing on comprehensibility, accessibility, and responsiveness. Noncustodial parents reported a lack of understanding about how child support orders were calculated, so scores for comprehensibility were low (Morris, 2007; Wikeley et al., 2001). Accessibility and responsiveness measure service delivery aspects. Noncustodial parents reported some issues with accessibility, particularly difficulty in finding the right person to talk to about their cases (Wikeley et al., 2001). In regard

to responsiveness, noncustodial parents were generally satisfied with the attitudes of agency staff, who they assessed as polite and appropriate when agency contacts were made, but complained about the slowness of the agency's response to their queries (U.K. Child Support Agency [CSA], 2008; Wikeley et al., 2001).

In a more recent assessment, published in 2016 after the reform, 61 percent of noncustodial parents reported overall satisfaction with the new system and with the quality of service (U.K. Department for Work and Pensions [DWP], 2016). For example, in a survey of those who selected the Direct Pay option, some noncustodial parents stated that they appreciated the sense of control that came from being able to make payments directly to the other parent, without the need for an intermediary (Patel et al., 2016). In addition, new clients seem to be more satisfied than those with prior agency involvement (DWP, 2016). However, some noncustodial parents reported dissatisfaction even if they were only using the Direct Pay option if they had a contentious relationship with the custodial parent, financial instability, or had administrative problems obtaining details on the custodial parent's bank account (Patel et al., 2016). In contrasting the results from the United States and the United Kingdom, it is worth noting that the U.K. survey included a broad distribution of noncustodial parents, whereas much of the ethnographic research in the United States summarized above focused on disadvantaged parents.

In summary, at the most general level, most citizens are satisfied with U.S. federal governmental services, with an average score of 69 on a 100 point scale, although an important minority are not satisfied. We are not aware of an overall satisfaction score for child support services in the United States, but in the United Kingdom, 61 percent of noncustodial parents reported satisfaction with the Child Maintenance Service, again suggesting that a majority are satisfied, while a significant minority are not. Qualitative data from the United States on mostly

disadvantaged noncustodial fathers suggests that agency actions that are perceived as punitive, the perceived inflexibility of the child support agency, and potentially negative consequences of agency actions on the noncustodial parent's relationships could all be important factors contributing to dissatisfaction. However, there are no larger-scale studies in the United States of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and we know very little about its correlates or effects, including any potential effect on payment amounts.

DATA AND METHODS

Data and Sample

In this report, our data come from the CSPED follow-up survey, which was administered between December 2014 and December 2016 to noncustodial parents about one year after random assignment. We combine these data with the CSPED baseline survey of (taken at random assignment); each state's administrative data on child support orders, payments, arrears, and enforcement actions; records of earnings and employment as found in the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH); and each state's administrative records of public benefits and criminal justice actions and outcomes. We apply survey weights to represent the full set of eligible noncustodial parents in the regular-services group of CSPED.

Our total analysis sample consists of noncustodial parents who were randomly assigned to receive regular services (business as usual), and who fully completed the follow-up survey in Wisconsin ($n = 303$) and five other CSPED states (California, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, and South Carolina) ($n = 1,252$).³ In a multivariate analysis of factors related to satisfaction, we have a

³The total sample excludes: four ineligible cases (noncustodial parents who were deceased, had a physical impairment preventing from completing the survey, or requested to be removed from the survey); 65 parents who partially completed the follow-up survey; 652 parents from Tennessee and 391 from Texas; and 1615 parents randomly assigned to the group that received extra CSPED services.

somewhat smaller sample because of missing variables (remaining $n = 287$ in Wisconsin and 1,186 in the five states). In the multivariate analysis of child support payments, we exclude an additional 83 parents from the five-state sample who do not have information on variables used in that model.

Measures

Outcomes

The two main outcomes of interest are: the level of satisfaction with child support services at the point of follow-up survey; and payments in the six months after the follow-up survey. In the follow-up survey, our main measure of satisfaction comes from a question in which noncustodial parents were asked if they strongly agreed, agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with this statement: “I am satisfied with the experiences I have had with child support program.” We construct a binary variable of satisfaction by assigning 1 to strongly agree or agree and 0 to the other responses.

As supplementary information, we also examine five additional variables from the follow-up survey that may characterize satisfaction with the program. These variables all have the same structure: parents were asked if they strongly agreed, agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the following statements: (1) “If I have a question about my child support agreement, I know who to contact”; (2) “The child support program has treated me fairly when setting my child support order(s)”; (3) “The child support program has helped me have a better relationship with mother/father of children”; (4) “The child support program has helped me provide financial support to my children”; and (5) “The child support program has helped me have good relationship with my children.”

We also estimate the relationship between satisfaction and child support payment amount in the six months after the follow-up survey. The measure of payments is based on administrative records and includes only current child support (that is, it does not count any payments made toward arrears) owed to all custodial parents; more details on the measurement of child support can be found in Cancian et al. (2019). The six months over which payments are measured begin in the first full month after the follow-up survey completion date.

Explanatory Variables

We include three types of explanatory variables: those related to the child support program, those that previous research suggests may be related to satisfaction, and control variables. The explanatory variables of interest related to the child support program include:

1. *Order modifications.* Binary indicators for an order modification that increased or decreased the amount owed in the past year.
2. *Wage withholding order (not available in all states).* A binary indicator equal to 1 if noncustodial parents had a wage withholding order instituted in the past year.
3. *Enforcement actions variables (not available in all states).* Binary indicators for whether the noncustodial parent had a contempt hearing or warrant in the past year. We also use a set of categorical variables for license suspensions/reinstatements comprising reinstated only; suspended only; both reinstated and suspended and neither reinstated and suspended in the past year.
4. *Duration of experience of child support system.* We use age of the oldest nonresident child (less than 4, 5 to 9, 10 to 14, and 15 to 18) as a proxy for the duration of engagement with the child support system. Nonresident children are those who spent fewer than 16 overnights with the parent out of the 30 nights prior to random assignment.
5. *Owed more than 50 percent of formal earnings:* A binary indicator equal to 1 if the amount of current support owed totals more than 50 percent of their earnings from formal employment in the past year.⁴ In the model that examines child support payment

⁴ Some explanatory variables are measured over the twelve months following random assignment. For ease of exposition, we refer to this as “in the past year” even though this is not the precise time period for any parent not surveyed until after the thirteenth month.

amounts, we also include the total dollar amount owed in the six months following the follow-up survey.

6. *Total arrears owed at entry to CSPED (not available in all states).* The amount of total arrears owed in month before or in the month of random assignment.
7. *Agency.* Indicators for each state used in this study.

Factors not directly tied to the child support agency, but suggested in the previous research as potentially affecting cooperation with and attitudes toward the child support agency include:

1. *Quality of relationship with custodial parents.* A 5-point scale (excellent as 5 and poor as 1), measured at random assignment. For each noncustodial parent, averaged across all custodial parents.
2. *Quality of relationship with children.* A 5-point scale (excellent as 5 and poor as 1), measured at random assignment. For each noncustodial parent, averaged across all biological children.
3. *Informal or in-kind support.* A binary indicator equal to 1 if the noncustodial parent reported providing informal cash or in-kind support to any custodial parent, measured at random assignment.
4. *Multiple custodial parents.* A binary indicator equal to 1 if a noncustodial parent reported that they had had children with more than one partner, measured at random assignment.
5. *Coresident children.* A binary indicator equal to 1 if the noncustodial parent had any coresident children (defined as 16 or more overnights out of the 30 nights prior to random assignment).
6. *Gatekeeping.* A binary indicator equal to 1 if the noncustodial parent reported gatekeeping by any custodial parent(s) or family/friends of custodial parent(s) of children, measured at random assignment.
7. *Custodial parent TANF.* A binary indicator equal to 1 if the state's administrative records show that any custodial parent received TANF in the previous year.

We also control for economic and demographic characteristics of noncustodial parents:

1. *Formal earnings.* A categorical variable for average monthly earnings from formal employment over the past year (none; \$1 to \$400; \$401 to \$800; \$801 to \$1,500; and more than \$1,500).
2. *Sex.* A binary indicator equal to 1 if the noncustodial parent is male.

3. *Age*. A categorical variable for noncustodial parent's age at random assignment (less than 25, 25 to 40, and more than 40).
4. *Race and ethnicity*. A categorical variable for noncustodial parent's race and ethnicity (Hispanic; non-Hispanic white; non-Hispanic black; and non-Hispanic other).
5. *Marital status*. A categorical variable for noncustodial parent's marital status at random assignment (Married; Divorced/separated/widowed; and Never-married).
6. *Education*. A categorical variable for noncustodial parent's educational attainment in years, measured at random assignment (Less than 12 years; 12 years/GED; and more than 12 years).
7. *Marital status at child's birth*. A categorical variable for whether the noncustodial parent had no marital children, all marital children, or both marital and nonmarital children)
8. *Depression*. A binary indicator equal to 1 if noncustodial parent reported major or severe major depression at random assignment, based on responses to the eight-item Patient Health Questionnaire depression scale.
9. *Incarceration*. A binary indicator equal to 1 if noncustodial parent reported they had ever been incarcerated, measured at random assignment.
10. *Number of nonresident minor children*. A categorical variable for number of nonresident minor children noncustodial parent reports (Zero; One; and Two or more); nonresident children are defined as those who stayed with the noncustodial parent less than 16 overnights out of the 30 nights prior to random assignment.

Analytic Approach

We first provide descriptive information on satisfaction with the child support program in Wisconsin and in five other CSPED states. In describing the level of satisfaction, we present our main measure ("I am satisfied with the experiences I have had with child support program") and the five supplementary measures described above. We discuss the level of correspondence between the responses to our main measure and the supplementary measures.

We then turn to multivariate models to measure the level of satisfaction at the time of the follow-up survey, and subsequent payments, with analyses conducted for Wisconsin and for five other CSPED states combined. We first use a logit analysis to explore factors related to satisfaction, considering child support program variables, other variables previously linked to

cooperation and attitudes, and economic and demographic covariates. We then estimate payment amounts in the six months after the follow-up survey, using an OLS regression. In these models we include the variable for satisfaction as well as the variables we included in the satisfaction model. (We also add the dollar amount owed). We estimate two models: in the first, the level of satisfaction is included as a binary variable, and in the second as a categorical variable that differentiates the five potential responses (strongly agree; agree; neither agree nor disagree; disagree; or strongly disagree).

RESULTS

How Widespread are Feelings of Dissatisfaction?

Wisconsin

Figure 1 shows the responses of the noncustodial parents in Wisconsin who were in the regular-services group of CSPED to the six questions about satisfaction with the child support services. The first bar shows responses to our primary measure of satisfaction, the summary statement: “I am satisfied with the experiences I have had with the child support program.” A substantial proportion of noncustodial parents are dissatisfied: about one-quarter of noncustodial parents strongly disagree with the statement, and another 18 percent disagree. On the other hand, the majority of noncustodial parents were satisfied: 12 percent strongly agree that they are satisfied, and the largest group of noncustodial parents (41 percent) reported that they are satisfied. This level of satisfaction, among a sample of noncustodial parents most of whom are behind on their child support, is noteworthy.

The remainder of the figure shows the supplementary measures. The second bar assesses whether noncustodial parents have personal service, that is, whether they agreed with a statement

that they knew who to contact if they had questions about their child support agreement. Only about one in four disagreed (that is, they did not know who to call); most had this knowledge.

The next question asks about whether they were treated fairly when setting their order. Similar to the results for the summary question, the third bar shows a significant minority disagreeing that they were treated fairly, with 58 percent agreeing.

The child support program's official role is in location, order setting, and collection of child support. Nonetheless, the program may be assisting in other areas as well. The final three questions ask about agreement with statements that the child support program helped the noncustodial parent provide financial support to their children and helped with better relationships (both with the other parent and with the children). Not surprisingly because these are not core functions, more noncustodial parents disagree with these statements than agree with them. For the fourth question, whether noncustodial parents agreed that the program helped them provide financial support, 50 percent disagreed, but, perhaps surprisingly, 44 percent agreed. The relationship questions have the highest proportions disagreeing: 65 percent did not agree that the program helped with better relationships with the other parent and nearly as many, 58 percent did not agree that the program helped with better relationships with their children.

Figure 1
Satisfaction with Child Support Program: Wisconsin

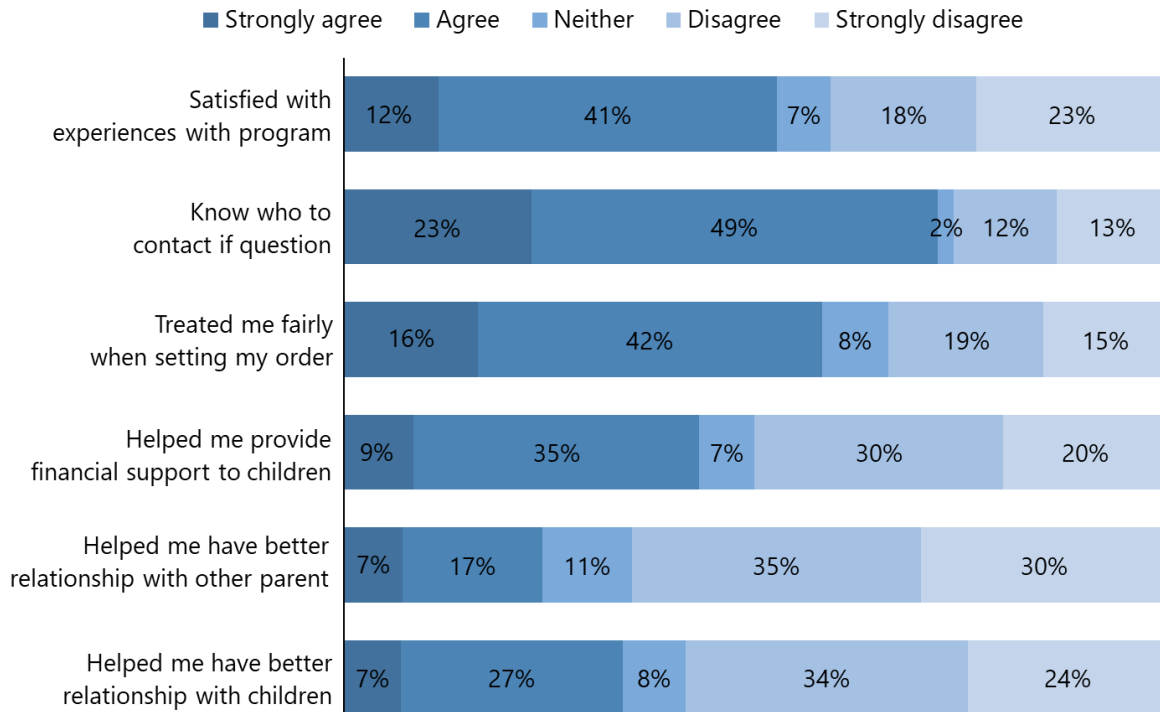
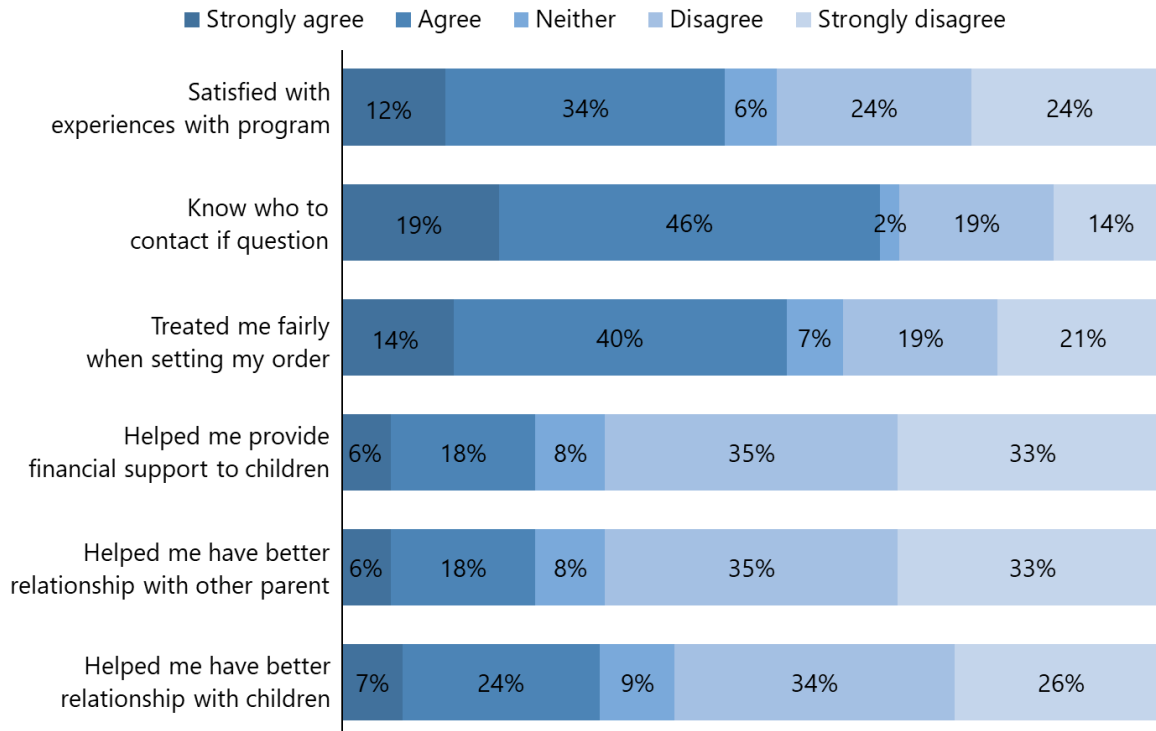


Figure 2
Satisfaction with Child Support Program: Other States



Five States

Figure 2 shows comparable results from California, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, and South Carolina (combined). The patterns are generally similar. More specifically, for our main measure, about half (46 percent) of noncustodial parents agreed that they were satisfied with the experiences they had had with the child support program, and about one-quarter strongly disagreed. The highest levels of agreement were with the statement that the noncustodial parent knew who to contact. The majority of noncustodial parents agreed that the program had treated them fairly in setting their order, but, as in Wisconsin, disagreed that the program had helped them have better relationships. One area where there somewhat larger differences between Wisconsin and the other states was agreement that the program had helped the noncustodial parent provide financial support. In Wisconsin 44 percent agreed with this statement; in the other states, only 24 percent agreed.

How is the main measure of satisfaction related to the other five statements? Results (not shown) are quite similar in Wisconsin and the other five states. The level of correspondence is particularly high between our main measure and the statement about knowing who to call: combining “strongly agreed” and “agreed”, the vast majority of those who agreed that they were satisfied also agreed that they knew who to call (92 percent in Wisconsin, 88 percent in the five states). This suggests that having a person to contact (rather than just a help line) may be related to satisfaction. There is also high correspondence between satisfaction and fair treatment in the setting of orders. In both Wisconsin and the five states, more than 80 percent of those who agreed that they were satisfied also said they agreed that they were treated fairly. The other statements, involving other help that the program might give outside of its core mission, are also positively related to satisfaction, but not as strongly. For example, in Wisconsin 64 percent of the

noncustodial parents who agreed that they were satisfied also agreed that the program had helped them provide financial support for their children (the comparable figure for the other states was 61 percent). In both Wisconsin and the five states, 55 percent of those who agreed that they were satisfied also agreed that the program had helped them have good relationships with their children, and 41–43 percent of those who agreed they were satisfied agreed that the program had helped them have a better relationship with the other parent.

What Factors Are Associated with Levels of Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction?

Wisconsin

The first columns of Table 1 report estimates of the relationship between satisfaction (whether individuals agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with child support services) and our explanatory variables. The first block of variables relates to actions of the child support program. In Wisconsin, those who had had their orders modified downward in the last year were twice as likely to report being satisfied. Somewhat surprisingly, none of the other agency enforcement actions were statistically related to satisfaction, including whether a withholding order was instituted, a hearing was held, a warrant was issued, or licenses were suspended or reinstated. We do not have direct information on how long a noncustodial parent has been part of the child support system, but a proxy variable, the age of the oldest child, is not significantly related to satisfaction, nor is whether the order is burdensome or the amount of arrears.

Table 1: Satisfaction with Child Support Services

	Wisconsin			Five States		
	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.		Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	
Child Support Program Variables						
Order modification in last year (compared to not modified)						
Order increased	0.996	0.635		0.899	0.193	
Order decreased	1.971	0.762	*	1.182	0.189	
Withholding order in last year	1.199	0.941				
Hearing in last year	0.847	0.310				
Warrant in last year	1.214	0.839				
License suspensions/reinstatements (compared to neither)						
Reinstated only	0.593	0.408				
Suspended only	1.087	0.622				
Both reinstated and suspended	0.433	0.728				
Age of oldest nonresident child (compared to 0–4)						
5–9	0.548	0.296		1.116	0.262	
10–14	0.360	0.228		1.009	0.247	
15–18	0.523	0.355		1.158	0.314	
Owed more than 50% of formal earnings	0.358	0.243		0.585	0.124	**
Total arrears owed at entry to CSPED	0.800	0.294				
State (compared to California)						
Colorado				0.959	0.195	
Iowa				1.080	0.250	
Ohio				1.089	0.251	
South Carolina				0.302	0.142	**
Variables Previously Linked to Cooperation/Attitudes						
Quality of relationship with custodial parents (average)	1.088	0.182		1.361	0.103	***
Quality of relationship with children (average)	1.172	0.165		1.015	0.065	
Provided informal or in-kind support	0.749	0.298		0.927	0.145	
Multiple custodial parents	0.714	0.352		0.651	0.127	**
Coresident children	0.625	0.322		0.870	0.160	
Reported gatekeeping	0.786	0.254		0.866	0.126	
Custodial parents receiving TANF benefits (any)	2.883	1.329	**	0.984	0.159	
Economic and Demographic Controls						
Formal Earnings last year (compared to none)						
\$1–\$400/month	0.615	0.440		0.892	0.165	
\$401–\$800/month	0.263	0.202	*	0.666	0.167	
\$801–\$1500/month	0.264	0.217		0.723	0.184	
More than \$1500/month	0.430	0.376		0.542	0.148	**
Male	0.419	0.179	**	0.808	0.171	
Noncustodial parent age (compared to < 25)						
25–40	2.468	1.285	*	0.823	0.234	
40 +	3.954	2.775	*	0.924	0.298	
Noncustodial parent race/ethnicity (compared to Hispanic)						
Non-Hispanic white	0.619	0.287		1.310	0.244	
Non-Hispanic black	0.303	0.162	**	1.202	0.263	
Non-Hispanic other (a)	0.298	0.221		0.870	0.245	

(table continues)

Table 1, continued

	Wisconsin		Five States		
	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	
Noncustodial parent marital status (compared to married)					
Divorced/separated/widowed(a)	1.635	1.238	0.792	0.169	
Never married	1.358	0.962	0.656	0.158	*
Noncustodial parent education (compared to < 12 years)					
12 years/GED	0.971	0.356	0.654	0.107	***
More than 12 years	0.192	0.087	0.418	0.075	***
Marital status at child's birth (compared to no marital children)					
All marital children	0.915	0.631	0.864	0.201	
Both marital and nonmarital	0.410	0.247	0.889	0.193	
Noncustodial parent depression	0.323	0.110	0.791	0.125	***
Noncustodial parent ever incarcerated	0.837	0.296	1.011	0.142	
Number of nonresident minor children (compared to one)					
Zero (all resident or only adult children)	0.369	0.378	2.223	0.876	**
Two or more	1.176	0.518	1.180	0.193	
Intercept	11.207	15.760	2.222	1.204	*
N		287		1,186	
Pseudo R2		0.233		0.06	

*** p < .01; ** p < .05; * p < .10

Notes: (a) These categories also include a small number of don't know/refused.

Model also includes indicator variables for: missing marital status at child's birth; missing direction of order modification; amount owed compared to formal income; and, in Wisconsin only, Brown County (compared to Kenosha).

The next group of variables is drawn from the literature on factors that may be related to the level of satisfaction with the agency, as described above. Only one of these variables is statistically significant and it has an unexpected sign; those whose children were receiving TANF (meaning that the custodial parent and children did not receive the full amount paid) were *more* satisfied. None of the other variables—those representing the quality of the relationship with the custodial parent or with the children, whether the noncustodial parent provided support outside the formal system, whether he or she owed to multiple parties, whether there were coresident children, and whether noncustodial parents reported they did not see their child as much as they wanted to because the other parent created barriers—were statistically related to satisfaction.

We also consider control variables. Those with any earnings are less likely to be satisfied than those without earnings, though the relationship is not always statistically significant. Noncustodial parents who were male; were younger than 25, were non-Hispanic black noncustodial parents, had higher educational achievement, and reported depression were all less likely to agree that they were satisfied.

Five States

The last columns show comparable results in the five states. In terms of agency variables, fewer variables denoting enforcement actions are available. In contrast to the Wisconsin results, those whose orders decreased were no more satisfied than those whose orders did not change. In these states (but not in Wisconsin), those who owed more than 50 percent of their earnings in child support were less likely to be satisfied. The model includes indicator variables for states, which can reflect state child support agency practice but could also reflect labor market

conditions or the sample composition. These coefficients show that those in South Carolina were less likely to be satisfied than those in the other states.

Whereas only one of the variables previously linked to cooperation were statistically significant in Wisconsin, two different ones are in the other states. Those with higher quality relationships with the child's other parent were more likely to be satisfied than others. Those who owe support to multiple parents are less likely to be satisfied.

Finally, we turn to economic and demographic control variables. There are similarities to the Wisconsin results. For example, those with positive earnings are less likely to be satisfied than those with no earnings, and those with higher education are less likely to be satisfied. Some variables are statistically significant in the five-state analysis that were not in Wisconsin; never-married noncustodial parents are less likely to be satisfied than married parents, and those without minor nonresident children are more likely to be satisfied than those with nonresident minor children.

Do Those with Less Satisfaction Pay Less Child Support?

We now turn to whether the level of satisfaction is related to the amount of current child support paid in the six months after the follow-up survey.

Wisconsin

In Wisconsin, the simple bivariate relationship between satisfaction and amount paid is not statistically significant (not shown). Two multivariate analyses (reflecting different operationalizations of satisfaction) are shown in the first columns of Table 2 (the full estimates, which include all the measures shown in Table 1, are reported in Appendix Table 1). The level of satisfaction, whether measured as a dummy variable differentiating those who strongly agree or

agree that they were satisfied from all others, or a series of categorical variables, is not statistically related to payment amount.

Five States

Similar to the Wisconsin results, there is no statistically significant bivariate relationship between satisfaction and payment amount (not shown). The last columns of Table 2 show the coefficients on satisfaction from multivariate analyses with the five other states. Again, there is no statistical relationship between satisfaction and amount paid.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this report we examine the level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with child support services in Wisconsin and in five other states among noncustodial parents who were behind or likely to fall behind in child support payment, were having difficulty with employment, and were receiving regular child support services. Our results are generally consistent with other research on satisfaction with government services and satisfaction with child support services from the United Kingdom. We find that a substantial minority of noncustodial parents are dissatisfied with child support services; 41 percent of noncustodial parents in Wisconsin (and 48 percent in the five states) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were satisfied with services. Our findings suggest that more personalized services and perceptions of fairness in the setting of orders were associated with higher satisfaction. A multivariate analysis of factors related to satisfaction showed relatively few variables where a statistically significant relationship was detected. Somewhat surprisingly, punitive enforcement actions were not related to satisfaction. This research is exploratory, and thus we had no previous empirical studies on which to base our model. The lack of consistent results suggests that more work is needed to understand the

Table 2: Satisfaction and Amount Paid

	Wisconsin				Five States			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Satisfaction with Child Support Services								
Strongly agree/agree satisfied	111.23	80.99			-31.38	50.93		
Compared to neither agree nor disagree								
Strongly agree			-144.60	143.73			57.45	117.62
Agree			83.37	133.49			10.60	105.93
Disagree			-112.95	144.99			103.12	110.23
Strongly disagree			-75.83	144.91			18.26	111.59
N	287		287		1,103		1,103	
R squared	0.6269		0.6326		0.9978		0.9979	

*** p < .01; ** p < .05; * p < .10

Notes: Model includes additional control variables; full model shown in Appendix Table 1

concept of satisfaction with child support services and factors that might be related to it. We also examined whether the level of satisfaction was related to the amount of child support paid. These results show no relationship.

As noted above, factors associated with levels of satisfaction are potentially complex. In addition, some of these factors may also have implications for payment patterns. Thus, there may not be a simple relationship between child support program actions and noncustodial parents' satisfaction with the program, and payments.

The lack of measured relationship between agency actions, satisfaction, and payments may also reflect limitations related to the sample and available measures. Perhaps the measure of satisfaction is too limited. Alternatively, perhaps satisfaction has an impact on payments, but not on noncustodial parents as disadvantaged as those participating in CSPED. Another possibility is suggested by previous research; some work shows that for noncustodial parents in the formal economy, payments are essentially non-discretionary (Bartfeld & Meyer, 2003). That is, a withholding order is established and payments are made whether the parent is satisfied or not, and whether they want to pay or not.⁵

The relationship between child support agency actions, noncustodial parent satisfaction, and payment behaviors is complex. Even if satisfaction with services does not have a detectable relationship with payments, understanding the relationship between agency actions and customer satisfaction is important. Government leaders may feel a responsibility to provide high-quality services to citizens. This report shows that even among a disadvantaged sample of noncustodial

⁵This would imply that the only group for whom satisfaction could affect payments would be those outside the formal economy. However, many of these parents have limited ability to pay, so for them their level of satisfaction would be unlikely to have an impact. This means that the subgroup for whom satisfaction would be likely to change payment behavior would be those who can afford to pay but who are not in the formal economy, perhaps a relatively small group.

parents behind on their child support payments, many are satisfied with the services they receive. However, many parents are not satisfied. Additional research to better understand the factors associated with satisfaction may help policymakers and practitioners more effectively address this problem.

Appendix Table 1: Satisfaction and Amount Paid (full model)

	Wisconsin						Five States					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2		
	Coef.	Std. Err.		Coef.	Std. Err.		Coef.	Std. Err.		Coef.	Std. Err.	
Satisfaction with Child Support Services												
Strongly agree/agree satisfied	111.23	80.99					-31.38	50.93				
Compared to neither agree nor disagree												
Strongly agree				-144.60	143.73						57.45	117.62
Agree				83.37	133.49						10.60	105.93
Disagree				-112.95	144.99						103.12	110.23
Strongly disagree				-75.83	144.91						18.26	111.59
Child Support Program Variables												
Amount owed (in \$1000)	603.97	49.54	***	603.02	48.10	***	518.36	2.59	***	518.36	2.59	***
Order modification in last year (compared to not modified)												
Order increased	-361.88	125.69	***	-342.05	123.56	***	212.18	110.72	*	215.08	110.33	*
Order decreased	-6.63	79.69		-9.13	79.83		8.02	54.60		10.96	54.17	
Withholding order in last year	87.82	172.71		103.54	171.46							
Hearing in last year	8.87	87.57		27.26	86.61							
Warrant in last year	110.71	181.73		92.62	184.01							
License suspensions/reinstatements (compared to neither)												
Reinstated only	25.31	138.88		11.39	136.76							
Suspended only	-161.43	148.39		-135.89	147.43							
Both reinstated and suspended	-2.60	166.58		-24.11	157.74							
Age of oldest nonresident child (compared to 0–4)												
5–9	-47.07	114.69		-24.87	112.47		-36.42	87.32		-39.86	88.23	
10–14	24.39	146.11		57.15	145.81		-86.29	93.04		-92.34	93.39	
15–18	32.15	155.61		53.72	152.95		-74.10	97.18		-81.03	97.50	
Owed more than 50% of formal earnings	-69.68	119.11		-94.85	118.43		-157.14	92.54	*	-162.65	92.04	*
Total arrears owed at entry to CSPED	-225.28	94.83	**	-225.69	98.42	**						
State (compared to California)												
Colorado							55.03	79.73		54.53	79.18	
Iowa							122.34	77.00		125.01	76.95	
Ohio							82.76	75.99		84.64	76.12	
South Carolina							74.03	129.27		76.47	129.58	
Variables Previously Linked to Cooperation/Attitudes												
Quality of relationship with custodial parents (average)	54.35	42.35		64.02	42.38		56.42	31.31	*	57.30	31.21	*
Quality of relationship with children (average)	-58.14	35.39		-58.43	35.24	*	5.89	26.00		5.85	25.94	
Provided informal or in-kind support	37.11	85.06		37.70	87.66		-59.78	66.71		-58.01	66.53	
Multiple custodial parents	-274.45	121.20	**	-271.20	118.62	**	-71.00	77.65		-66.11	77.12	
Coresident children	157.33	125.44		130.96	124.32		24.10	69.83		15.37	70.00	
Reported gatekeeping	-28.23	90.40		-24.27	90.06		-53.38	57.84		-53.79	58.17	
Custodial parents receiving TANF benefits (any)	-339.87	99.70	***	-340.23	98.91	***	-52.50	57.21		-51.85	57.50	

(table continues)

Appendix Table 1, continued

	Wisconsin				Five States				
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	
Economic and Demographic Controls									
Formal Earnings last year (compared to none)									
\$1–\$400/month	-106.93	160.10	-97.51	157.30	-71.51	64.09		-72.17	64.69
\$401–\$800/month	203.68	193.21	184.41	191.39	224.61	97.97	**	220.72	97.36
\$801–\$1,500/month	290.87	212.57	254.68	213.40	348.91	112.10	***	341.30	112.03
More than \$1,500/month	489.22	211.39	**	467.36	210.40	**	668.87	126.64	***
Male	-30.03	96.90		-34.41	98.00			-28.75	71.45
Noncustodial parent age (compared to < 25)									
25–40	34.47	108.43		35.16	105.81			128.62	88.39
40 +	122.56	146.46		123.36	147.03			42.84	105.61
Noncustodial parent race/ethnicity (compared to Hispanic)									
Non-Hispanic white	37.43	113.98		34.88	114.46			-28.96	75.96
Non-Hispanic black	82.57	122.99		95.83	124.37			-104.90	86.33
Non-Hispanic other (a)	-262.43	204.42		-276.15	203.10			1.16	99.33
Noncustodial parent marital status (compared to married)									
Divorced/separated/widowed(a)	-92.96	181.70		-66.95	178.10			-65.01	101.99
Never married	-261.53	189.08		-243.08	185.01			-127.15	95.89
Noncustodial parent education (compared to < 12 years)									
12 years/GED	60.30	83.48		34.19	84.91			33.49	66.28
More than 12 years	-39.53	95.02		-50.23	94.67			108.81	67.47
Marital status at child's birth (compared to no marital children)									
All marital children	65.62	168.08		70.23	169.38			-116.83	93.39
Both marital and nonmarital	81.53	150.71		88.30	150.41			-254.04	97.61
Noncustodial parent depression	-43.97	85.81		-35.95	85.83			-26.36	65.91
Noncustodial parent ever incarcerated	39.04	87.67		33.82	87.48		**	-138.67	55.62
Number of nonresident minor children (compared to one)									
Zero (all resident or only adult children)	-123.97	176.73		-106.74	179.44			-197.43	153.07
Two or more	101.39	106.00		84.52	105.35			24.85	61.57
Intercept	26.00	339.08		72.35	351.81			-128.00	232.25
N	287		287		1,103			1,103	
R squared	0.6269		0.6326		0.9978			0.9979	

*** p < .01; ** p < .05; * p < .10

Notes: (a) These category also includes a small number of don't know/refused

Model also includes indicator variables for: missing marital status at child's birth; missing direction of order modification; amount owed compared to formal income; and, in Wisconsin only, Brown County (compared to Kenosha).

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