



## Reinvigorating Child Support Enforcement as an Anti-Poverty Program

Ever since I attended my first NCSEA Policy Forum in 1996, I have loved the Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program because it reduces poverty by promoting personal responsibility. Everyone who works in the program knows that child support collections are a major source of income for custodial parents and their children, especially those who are poor. And it sends a strong message to prospective parents: “If you play a part in bringing children into this world, you must support them financially.” Relative to the funds it distributes to struggling families, the program costs taxpayers very little. The CSE program helps ensure that what should happen does happen: both parents provide for their children.

My experiences as child support director for New York State, as social services commissioner for Mayor Bloomberg in New York City, and now as a scholar on issues concerning low-income Americans, have all reinforced my belief that CSE is a great anti-poverty program. Research backs me up. Receipt of child support is associated with improved outcomes for children across a variety of measures, and child support received was estimated by the federal Department of Health and Human Services to have lifted [nearly 1 million](#) people out of poverty in 2012. In 2008, child poverty would have been [4.4 percent higher](#) without child support. Over the last 20 years, income from child support averaged more than a quarter of poor custodial parents' total money incomes. If all support due were paid, incomes in this group would rise a further 27 percent. In 2013, child support income received by poor custodial parents who were due payments comprised [49.2 percent](#) of their total average incomes.

This is why I am concerned that too little attention is being devoted to CSE's substantially diminished reach. A forthcoming analysis of this issue by Dr. Daniel Schroeder of the University of Texas at Austin, to be published through the American Enterprise Institute, will provide greater detail, but I draw on some of his work here.

The national CSE caseload peaked 15 years ago and has been declining since, despite overall population growth and a growing share of children being born to never-married mothers. The formal child support caseload peaked at roughly 19.4 million cases in 1998, and it has declined by about 20 percent to 15.1 million cases in 2014. The share of struggling families eligible for CSE services that are receiving financial support through the program is also shrinking. Of the CSE-eligible population, the share with agreements (including ordered support obligations) has declined especially quickly in the last decade. From 2004 to 2014, the share of CSE-eligible custodial parents who had established agreements declined by 11 percentage points, from 60 percent to 49 percent. This is a dramatic decline, and it hurts poor families.

Many factors underlie this decline, and it is difficult to know with certainty the extent to which each factor has contributed. But child support professionals know that one factor has played the largest role: the shrinking Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) pipeline into CSE.

Establishing a CSE case is a requirement for individuals seeking a TANF cash benefit. Given that encouraging personal responsibility is a core objective of both CSE and TANF, this makes sense. It sends a strong message that custodial parents shouldn't receive financial support from the government if they haven't first asked the absent parent to contribute. While some custodial parents may express reluctance to seek formal child support, I found that most were glad they did once they received collections. And, by making cooperation mandatory, we eliminated the real possibility of custodial parents being manipulated by absent parents.

Since 1996, TANF caseloads have more than halved, and far fewer people are seeking benefits. This is not necessarily a bad thing: work rates, and incomes, are higher and child poverty rates remain lower today than they were before welfare reform, in part due to changes in the TANF program.

But the decline in TANF rolls has resulted in fewer custodial parents being required to establish a CSE case as a condition of receiving assistance from the government. Much research on government programs has found that when people are not required to take a certain action, and are not subject to sanctions when they do not take that action, they tend not to do it. The CSE caseload is likely a casualty of this tendency.

Given the critical role that CSE plays in reducing poverty among vulnerable children and families, child support leaders and legislators must work to reverse this decline in participation in the CSE program. The program is not as effective as it once was in helping poor single parents, and it must be reinvigorated.

A simple strategy to address this decline would be to require cooperation with child support in other public benefit programs. The most obvious candidate would be the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which reaches more families than most other public benefits that are aimed at helping low-income families. As of December 2015, SNAP provided benefits to 46 million people in 22 million households. This simple change, which would of course allow for exemptions in cases relating to domestic violence, would almost certainly increase the share of low-income custodial parents receiving child support, and reduce child poverty. The changes could also help to reduce rates of single parenthood over the long-term.

While this change would benefit many struggling custodial parents and their children, it would also subject more non-custodial parents, primarily low-income men, to child support obligations. Much public attention has highlighted the issue of large arrearages among this group, as well as some cases where unreasonably large orders were established in the first instance. But the child support program has made substantial progress in addressing those concerns, and many promising ideas exist that could improve them further. The fact that low-income men generally are struggling, and the fact that the CSE program has not always taken the most sensible approach to arrears

and orders, should not stop us from asking both biological parents to take financial responsibility for their children.

There are promising examples of effective work programs for those who owe child support but don't have jobs or are having a hard time making payments. The NCP-Choices program in Texas, for example, has shown positive impacts on earnings, work rates, and child support paid by non-custodial parents. Relative to their peers in a [rigorously evaluated pilot](#), non-custodial parents ordered into the program paid child support 47 percent more often, and paid \$57 more per month (51 percent increase in total collections); were employed at 21 percent higher rates; and participated in workforce development programming at 82 percent higher rates than the comparison group. These types of evidence-backed programs should be expanded.

With some help (and sometimes without it), many non-custodial parents can work and contribute. The current system too often allows poor custodial parents to forego much-needed support for themselves and their families. This does the parents—both the custodial parent, and the often-struggling non-custodial parent—no good. A more effective approach would enforce responsibility among a broader group of families who need it most, while more effectively equipping non-custodial parents to deliver on their obligations. CSE does critical work. We can't allow it to languish any longer.

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