



Updated July 2021

Overview of the Child Support Program

An Intergovernmental Partnership Ensuring Financial Support and Parental Involvement

The Child Support Program¹ is a successful federal-state-tribal partnership that seeks to promote economic stability for children whose parents live apart. The program collects \$5.51 for every \$1 in public funds invested.² Over 13 million children and families received parentage and child support establishment and enforcement services from the program in FY 2020.³

The Child Support Program ensures that children in single-parent households receive a reliable source of private financial and medical support. The program increases family self-sufficiency, reduces child poverty, and encourages both parents to be involved and committed to their children. Only the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid reach more children. In FY 2020, state and county child support agencies collected \$37 billion in child support.⁴ While collecting financial support for the child from the parent who owes child support its core mission, the program does much more.

The Child Support Program's **core functions** include:

- Establishing parentage;
- Establishing, modifying, and enforcing child support and medical support orders; and
- Collecting and distributing support.

Child Support staff use a variety of methods and tools to carry out these core functions to support children and their families. Using administrative and judicial processes, child support staff **locate employers and other income payors, and work with them to withhold a portion of income paid to parents owing support.** Over 60% of collections come from withheld wages.⁵

While income withholding is the primary collection tool, Child Support staff utilize many other remedies to pursue support for children including:

- Withholding a portion of unemployment insurance benefits;
- Offsetting federal and state income tax refunds;
- Suspending driver licenses;
- Seizing bank accounts;

¹ Created by Title IV-D of the Social Security Act.

² Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) FY 2020 Preliminary Report, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/policy-guidance/fy-2020-preliminary-annual-report-and-data>.

³ *Ibid*, table P-93.

⁴ *Ibid*, table P-29 (total collections figure includes both IV-D and non-IV-D cases).

⁵ *Ibid*, table P-28.





- Placing liens on real and personal property;
- Denying a US Passport;
- Denying hunting/fishing and other recreational licenses; and
- Denying professional and occupational licenses.

States also collaborate with each other to ensure that parents living in a state different from their children meet their obligations.

Child Support Supplements and Reduces Custodial Families' Need for Public Benefits

- ***In 2015, over three-quarters of custodial parents served by the child support program lived in households that received some form of public assistance.*** In that year, 73% of households served by the child support program received Medicaid; 45% received SNAP; 15% received housing subsidies; 9% received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and 9% received Supplemental Security Income (SSI).⁶
- Child support represents a substantial portion of income for lower income parents. ***Among custodial parents below poverty who received full payments, the mean annual child support received in 2017 (\$5,581) represented 57.1% of their mean personal income.***⁷ Child support helps families avoid the use of public benefit programs, supplements benefits while the family is receiving assistance and supports their transition off assistance.

The Child Support Program Does More than Collect Dollars

- Local child support staff work hard with parents who owe child support to assist them in ***maintaining work, and modifying support orders when necessary***, so that they do not fall hopelessly behind in payments. Child Support staff try to build a culture of compliance, so that parents support their children voluntarily and reliably.
- Child Support Programs ***promote stable, safe, and healthy relationships between parents and children*** by participating in local community's efforts to strengthen families and ***encourage healthy marriage and responsible parenthood***.
- Child Support Programs have developed targeted initiatives to ***work with parents in special circumstances who have barriers to meeting their child support obligations. This includes veterans, incarcerated parents, and the re-entry population.***

Federal, State, Local and Tribal Partnership Works!

- Efficiently administered, in FFY 2020, ***the Child Support Program sent 95% of distributed child support collections directly to families, while retaining only 5% to reimburse the state and federal government for public assistance expended.***⁸

⁶ Office of Child Support Enforcement. (2018). Characteristics of Families Served by the Child Support (IV-D) Program: 2016 U.S. Census Survey Results
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/iv_d_characteristics_2016_census_results.pdf

⁷ U.S. Census, "Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2017," May 2020, p.11.

⁸ Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) FY 2020 Preliminary Report.





- Child support payments lifted 656,000 people from poverty in 2019, including 365,000 children. Without it, child poverty would increase by 4%.⁹

The National Child Support Enforcement Association (NCSEA) Supports Continued Improvements to the Child Support Program

- [NCSEA](#) provides information about child support issues and successes to congressional members and provides input to the federal [Office of Child Support Enforcement \(OCSE\)](#). In the last two years, NCSEA has provided detailed feedback to the administration on proposed rulemaking, and their strategic plan. Annually, NCSEA provides a [Child Support Policy Forum](#) in which child support leaders from across the country share with state, private, tribal, and federal partners the various policy improvements and challenges to implementing and improving the program.
- NCSEA is preparing additional proposals to improve the Child Support Program. They include:
 - Increasing collaboration between the Child Support Program and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act programs (see NCSEA Resolution for [Improving Access to Employment Services for Parents Owing Support](#));
 - Amending existing law to allow 66% federal match dollars to be spent by IV-D child support programs on employment services for parents owing support, including case management, enhanced child support services, employment training, subsidized employment, and transportation costs associated with employment services (see NCSEA Resolution for [Improving Access to Employment Services for Parents Owing Support](#));
 - Improving the administrative tools and authority to adjust support orders based on the parent's ability to pay (see NCSEA Resolution in Support of [New Tools to Improve Child Support Collections](#));
 - Improving enforcement tools to identify assets and encourage parents to support their children (see NCSEA Resolution in Support of [New Tools to Improve Child Support Collections](#));
 - Establishing parenting time orders as an allowable activity for federal financial participation so that unwed parents receiving a support order are also given parenting time privileges (see NCSEA Resolution for Support of [Establishing Parenting Time Orders](#)); and
 - Improving collaboration between the Child Support Program and the Child Welfare Program (see NCSEA Resolution for a [National Review of Child Support and the Child Welfare Referral and Coordination Policies](#)).

⁹ The Supplemental Poverty Measure: 2019, U.S. Census Bureau, Tables A-6, A-7.

