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State Initiatives to Support Low-Income Noncustodial Parents:

Results from a Survey of State Child Support Directors

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Introduction

Child support is a critical source of income for children whose parents live apart. For the families in poverty who receive it, child support makes up an average of 41 percent of family income.[1] For families in deep poverty, it makes up 65 percent.[1] Even after accounting for the noncustodial parents (NCPs)[a] whom paying child support pushes into poverty, child support lifts more than one million people out of poverty in a given year.[1]

Yet there is growing recognition that the child support program is not reaching many of the low-income families it is meant to serve. The share of custodial parents with a legal child support agreement fell from 55 percent in 2003 to 37 percent in 2022,[2] and much of the nearly $113 billion in unpaid child support[3] is owed by NCPs with little or no reported income,[4] making it unlikely to reach their children. Most NCPs can pay support,[1] and some who do not pay could. But policies built for parents who choose not to pay can also catch parents who cannot;[5] for those parents, orders set beyond what they can pay and enforcement actions that undermine their employment further impede their ability to support their children. As the writers of a Center for Child Support Policy Blog note, "parents do not come to the child support system with the same resources or the same ability to navigate it."[5]

In late 2025 and early 2026, the Center for Policy Research (CPR) surveyed state child support directors to learn about their adoption of programs and policies designed to address the circumstances and needs of low-income NCPs and, in turn, support more consistent, reliable payments from them. CPR sent the Qualtrics survey to child support directors in all 50 states and the District of Columbia using multiple email outreaches and an in-person meeting at the 2026 National Child Support Engagement Association (NCSEA) Policy Forum. The final sample included responses from child support directors in 32 states[b] (n = 32).

This report summarizes responses from state child support directors. Given the 63% response rate — representing 72% of the child support caseload — the patterns we present are suggestive.[c] Where appropriate, this report supplements those responses with state and federal research, child support guidelines, and other state-level policy sources. Although all responding states are included in the statistical counts, the examples we provide are limited to states that agreed to be mentioned by name.

a This report uses "noncustodial parent" (NCP) to refer to the parent ordered to pay child support, consistent with common usage in the field. We recognize that in equal custody arrangements, the paying parent may not be the NCP, and that some states prefer terms such as "paying parent" or "payer."

b The 32 participating states were Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin.

c These 32 participating states collectively represent approximately 72% of the total 2025 child support caseload (excluding Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands). Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Services. (2026).

1. Voluntary Acknowledgement of Paternity

Paternity establishment is the legal determination of a child's father. Without established paternity, a child support order cannot be set, and children born to unmarried parents may lack access to financial support, health insurance, and inheritance rights. Beyond the financial dimension, paternity establishment can provide social, psychological, and emotional benefits associated with a legally recognized relationship with both parents.[6]

Paternity establishment is a legal necessity only for unmarried parents. In contrast, when a child is born to a married couple, the mother's husband is legally presumed to be the father, and no additional action is required. Roughly 40% of all births in the United States now occur outside of marriage,[7] and nonmarital childbearing is consistently more common among parents with lower income and educational attainment than parents with higher income and educational attainment.[8] Establishing paternity voluntarily and early can help avoid contested paternity proceedings or default orders based on imputed income later in the process, an issue addressed further in Section 2.

Federal law[9] has required birthing hospitals to offer unmarried parents the opportunity to voluntarily establish paternity since the 1990s. This law reflects a longstanding recognition that reaching parents at the hospital, before administrative or logistical barriers can accumulate, is central to effective paternity establishment. Child support agencies play a central role in establishing paternity, particularly through hospital-based programs that reach families at the time of birth.

Three-quarters of responding states (24 of 32 states, including Delaware, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, Vermont, and Washington) report having designated child support staff responsible for coordinating with hospitals or birth registrars.

Responsibilities described by directors cluster into a few recurring functions: training and educating hospital or birth registrar staff on the voluntary acknowledgment process; direct outreach to new parents at the point of birth to explain paternity establishment and assist with completing forms; coordination with the state's vital records or health department office; ongoing monitoring or auditing of hospital compliance and establishment rates; and, in a few states, dedicated liaison or regional staffing models (e.g., assigning specific staff to specific hospitals or geographic regions). A handful of states also described using contracted vendors rather than in-house staff for some or all of this work.

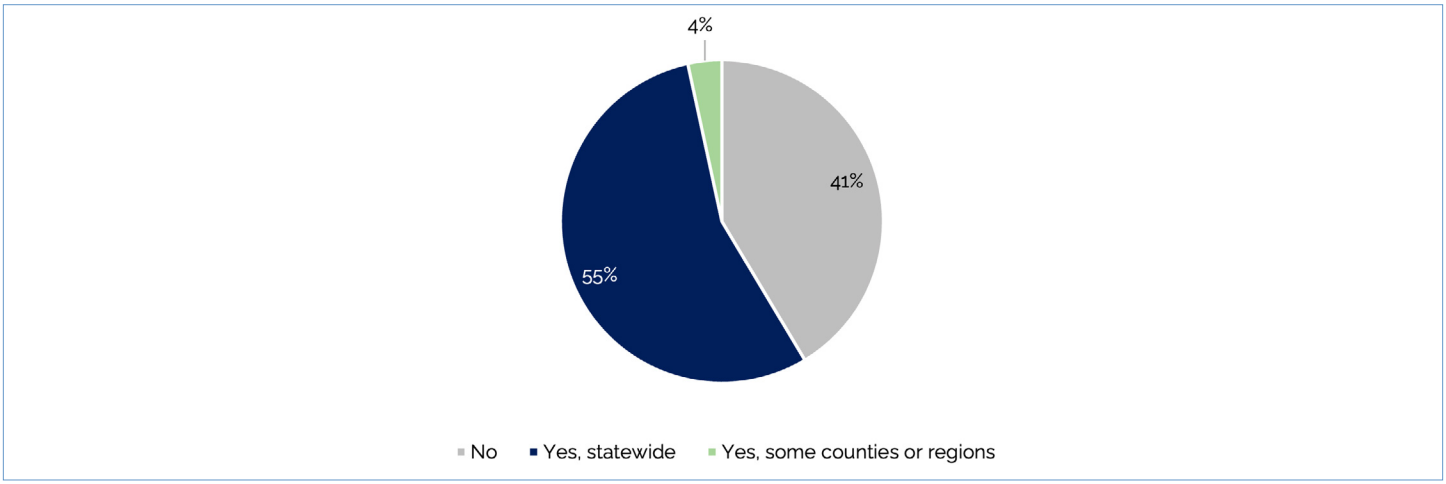
For example, Delaware deploys a Child Support Specialist directly into maternity wards to help new parents complete a Voluntary Acknowledgment of Paternity, paired with a separate administrator who manages hospital contracts and billing. Illinois uses parentage establishment liaisons who coordinate with hospital staff, birthing centers, and community-based organizations. Minnesota's Paternity Program Administrator runs a structured hospital-training pipeline in partnership with the state's Office of Vital Records, including a recurring "Birth Registration 101" course. Washington's Parentage and Paternity Coordinators partner with hospitals, and the state is continuing to build up community outreach. South Carolina operates this work through its Parenting Opportunity Program. New Jersey contracts with an outside vendor to handle outreach, training, and processing

of acknowledgments, with central office staff overseeing the vendor's work. Oregon and Vermont described more limited staffing models, focused on serving as a designated point of contact or providing forms and support to hospitals as needed.

Over three-quarters (77%) of responding states (23 of 30 states, including Delaware, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, and South Carolina) also require notarization of AOPs, which states use to strengthen the legal standing of the acknowledgment and reduce the risk of later challenges to established paternity; the remaining seven states do not require notarization.

Just over half (55%) of responding directors (16 of 29 states, including Delaware, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, and Washington) indicated that their state offers stand-alone paternity services statewide, which allow interested parents to establish paternity without necessarily requesting child support enforcement — for example, when coparents are in a romantic relationship and do not wish to open a formal child support case with the state (Figure 1). One additional state offers these services only in some regions or counties, bringing the share of states offering stand-alone paternity services in at least some jurisdictions to approximately 59% (17 of 29). Twelve states (41%) do not offer stand-alone services.

Figure 1. States that Offer Stand-Alone Paternity Services (*n* = 29)



Bottom Line: Establishing paternity is the first step toward a child support order for unmarried parents, who are disproportionately low-income, and doing it voluntarily and early helps avoid contested proceedings and default orders based on imputed income later. Most responding states invest in this step: three-quarters have designated staff who coordinate with hospitals or birth registrars. Fewer states separate paternity from child support enforcement; just over half (55%) offer stand-alone paternity services statewide. States can support low-income parents by placing staff where parents already are at the time of birth, extending outreach beyond hospitals, and offering stand-alone paternity services so that parents who are together can establish legal fatherhood without opening a child support case.

2. Order Establishment for Low-Income NCPs

Low-income NCPs often have child support orders that are too high relative to their actual earnings and consequently generate uncollectible debt.[4] The 2016 Child Support Enforcement Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization Rule[10] addresses this by emphasizing the use of evidence of the parent's *actual* income or earning capacity in setting orders and requiring that state guideline formulas account for the subsistence needs of the NCP.

Income Imputation

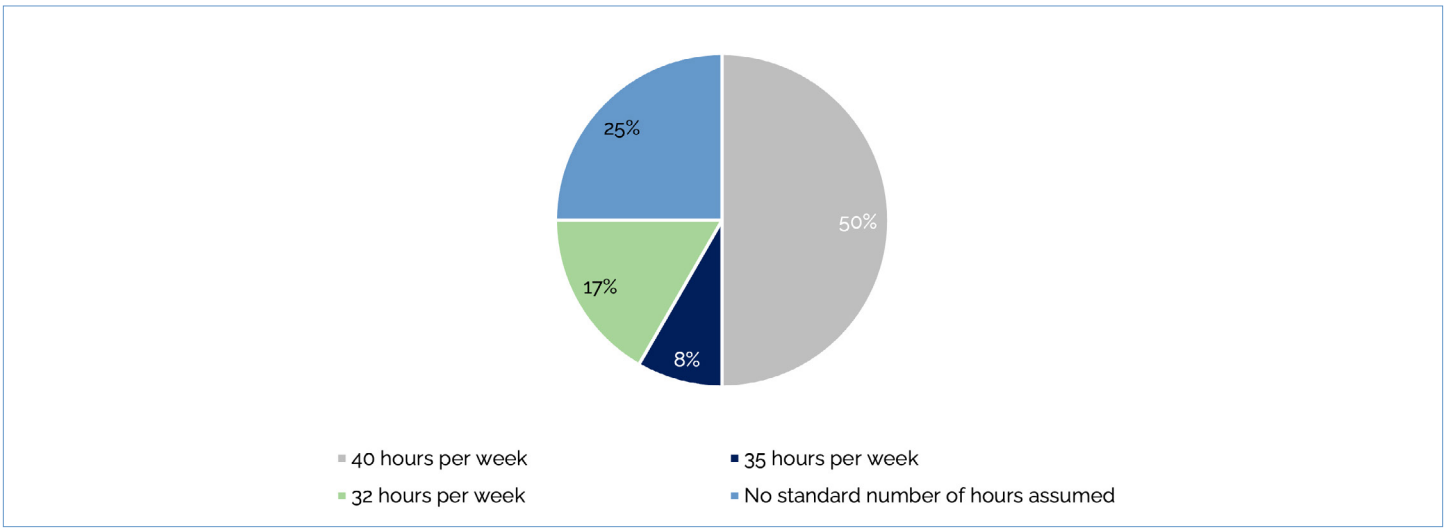
Income imputation allows a court or agency to set a child support order based on income other than a parent's actual income. Among other things, income imputation can include monetizing an asset that is currently not producing an income (e.g., an apartment that the parent owns but took off the rental market), assigning earnings potential to a parent who is voluntarily unemployed or underemployed, or estimating income when actual or historical income information is limited or inconsistent. Imputation remains an important tool when an NCP conceals income or refuses to provide proof of earnings, since it prevents parents from delaying or avoiding a child support order by withholding information.

The concern for low-income NCPs is imputation that exceeds what they can realistically earn. Federal rules require that any imputation consider the specific circumstances of the parent, such as their work history, education, health, and the local job market (45 C.F.R. § 302.56(c)(1)(iii)). When imputation is appropriate because there is no reliable evidence of income or earning capacity, some states use a standardized amount as a starting point. Among the 24 directors who answered this item, 13 (54%), including Delaware, Minnesota, North Dakota, Oregon, South Carolina, and Washington, reported that their state relies on the state minimum wage in these circumstances. The remaining 11 (46%) do not.

Among the 13 states that rely on the state minimum wage to impute income, states vary in the number of weekly hours assumed when calculating that imputed amount (Figure 2). Excluding one state with missing data on this item, half of the remaining 12 states (6 states, 50%) impute income based on a standard 40-hour full-time work week, including North Dakota and South Carolina. A smaller number use a reduced-hours standard: two states impute based on 32 hours per week, and one state (Delaware) uses 35 hours per week. The remaining three states (Washington and two additional states) reported no set hours standard for this calculation.

The choice of hours matters because full-time work is not guaranteed in low-wage jobs: in 2024, about half (51%) of hourly workers paid at or below the federal minimum wage usually worked fewer than 35 hours per week.[11] For an NCP who cannot piece together 40 hours of work, whether from one job or several, an order based on a 40-hour assumption results in an income that the parent does not have.

Figure 2. Hours Assumed for Income Imputation (*n* = 12)



Low-Income Protections in Order Establishment

Once a parent's income has been determined, whether actual or imputed, state guidelines must also protect the parent's ability to meet their own basic needs. States use one of two tests to meet the same federal requirement that state guideline formulas account for the subsistence needs of the NCP: a self-support reserve (SSR) or "another low-income adjustment." A key difference is that an SSR can apply at higher incomes than an adjustment tied to a low-income threshold. In practice, though, both approaches serve the same purpose: to protect the NCP's ability to meet their own basic needs.

An SSR is a specific dollar amount, generally tied to the federal poverty guideline (FPG), that represents the income an NCP (i.e., paying parent) needs to cover their own basic living expenses. States using an SSR calculate the support order based on the difference between the parent's income and that reserve amount, so the adjustment scales down naturally as income falls closer to (or below) the reserve. For example, if a state sets an SSR of $1,000 per month and the NCP's income is $1,100 per month, the order generally should not exceed[d] $100 per month. In effect, the SSR test does not require an income threshold.

Most often, "other" adjustments apply to incomes below a state-determined income threshold. If income falls below that threshold, the state uses a low-income adjustment formula, a separate low-income table, or court discretion to determine the order amount.

The survey asked states to characterize their approach to protecting low-income NCPs as either an SSR or another form of low-income adjustment. Of the states that responded to this item, 72% (21 of 29) categorized their approach as an SSR, and 28% (8 of 29) described another form of low-income adjustment (Table 1). Table 1 also summarizes how states have designed these protections.

d A state's "presumptive minimum order" may set a higher floor.

Table 1. State Approaches to Low-Income Protections in Order Establishment

	Count (%)	States
Method (*n* = 29)		
SSR	21 (72%)	Delaware, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Carolina, Vermont, Washington + 11 other states
Other low-income adjustment	8 (28%)	Illinois, Texas + 6 other states
Level of protection (vs. 2026 FPG, $1,330/month) (n = 27)		
At or above	18 (67%)	Delaware, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, Oregon, Vermont, Washington + 11 other states
Below	9 (33%)	Illinois, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Carolina, Texas + 4 other states
Minimum order (n = 28)		
Has rebuttable minimum order	18 (64%)	Delaware, Illinois, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington + 10 other states
No minimum order	10 (36%)	North Dakota, South Carolina, Texas, Vermont + 6 other states

Note: Counts include all responding states; named states are those that agreed to be identified. Where survey responses were unclear or incomplete, or anticipated a guideline change within the year, we confirmed the information against the state's current child support guidelines.

Within either approach, states make several further policy choices. For SSR states, the central decision is the size of the reserve. For states using another adjustment, they decide the income threshold for applying the adjustment, the adjustment method (a low-income formula, a separate table, or court discretion), and the adjustment's parameters. Illinois, for example, sets a flat order of $40 per child per month for parents at or below 75% of the FPG.[e] States using either approach may also set a minimum order.

Regardless of method, many states set their SSR or other low-income threshold at or above the FPG for one person, which is $1,330 per month in 2026. Among the states in our survey, after comparing survey responses with individual state guidelines where necessary, two-thirds (18 of 27) set their protection at or above the 2026 FPG (Table 1).

How states keep these amounts current matters as much as where they set them. The federal government updates the FPG every January to reflect changes in prices,[12] and many states adjust their minimum wage annually as well. State guidelines, by contrast, must be reviewed only once every four years (45 C.F.R. § 302.56(e)), and a review does not guarantee that low-income protections will be raised. An SSR or threshold tied to the current FPG or inflation-indexed state minimum wage rises automatically each year. A fixed dollar amount stays flat until the state revises its guidelines, losing its value in the meantime: the FPG for one person rose 24% between 2021 and 2026, from $1,073 to $1,330 per month.[13,14] Future research should assess how states keep their SSRs and thresholds current and how much low-income protections erode between guideline reviews in states that use fixed amounts.

e Illinois enacted legislation in 2026 raising this threshold to 100% of the FPG, effective January 1, 2027, while keeping the $40 per child amount and $120 maximum. Public Act 104-733 (S.B. 3524), amending 750 ILCS 5/505.

Minimum Orders

Nearly two-thirds of states (18 of 28, 64%) set a rebuttable minimum order, the smallest obligation presumptively set for a very low-income parent. Minimum orders were more common among SSR states (15 of 20, 75%) than among states using another adjustment (3 of 8, 38%). Amounts ranged from $10 to $160 per month for one child, with most between $50 and $100. Several states scale the minimum by the number of children: Delaware sets $160 for one child and $240 for two or more, Minnesota ranges from $50 for one child to $100 for six or more, Washington sets $50 per child, and Illinois sets $40 per child up to a maximum of $120. These amounts matter because, in SSR states that set one, the minimum order is generally what a parent with income at or below the reserve owes. Because these orders are rebuttable, courts can set a lower amount when the presumptive minimum would be unjust or inappropriate.

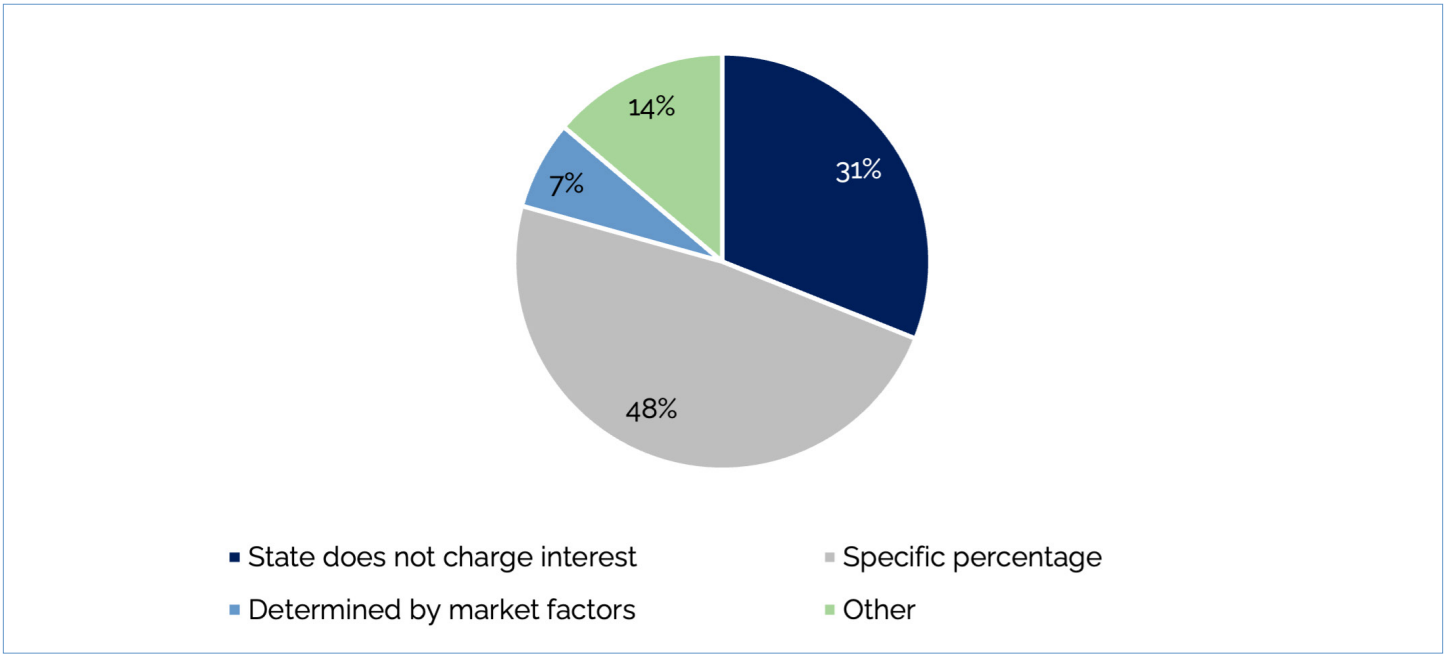
Bottom Line: Setting a fair order for a low-income NCP starts with an accurate picture of their income. When reliable income information is missing, about half of responding states impute income at the state minimum wage, and half of those assume a full 40-hour week, even though about half of minimum-wage workers usually work fewer than 35 hours. Once income is determined, federal rules require every state to protect an NCP's ability to meet their own basic needs. Two-thirds of states set that protection at or above the 2026 poverty guideline, and one-third set it below. Because the poverty guideline rises every year while state guidelines are reviewed only every four years, protections set as fixed dollar amounts can lose value between reviews. States can strengthen protections for low-income NCPs by basing imputed income on realistic hours and local evidence of earning capacity, setting their self-support reserve or threshold at or above the poverty guideline, and tying it to the current poverty guideline or state minimum wage so it rises automatically each year.

3. Interest Charged on Unpaid Child Support

States have the authority to charge interest on unpaid child support at a rate set by state statute, and many use it as an incentive for timely payment and/or a penalty for nonpayment. Interest compensates custodial families for the lost value of support paid late, and families who go without support may take on debt of their own to meet children's needs. For low-income NCPs, though, interest on arrears they cannot pay compounds debt[15] that is unlikely ever to be collected,[4] which does not help families either. Research links this debt to a range of negative outcomes, including reduced father involvement,[16] lower future support payments,[17] and worse outcomes for children.[18] Because interest is discretionary rather than federally required, states vary widely in whether and how they apply it.

Among the 29 directors that answered whether their state charges interest on unpaid child support, 9 states (31%, including Montana, South Carolina, and Vermont) do not (Figure 3). The remaining 20 states (69%) charge interest in some form: 14 states (70% of those charging interest) set a specific percentage, 2 states (10%) determine the rate based on market factors, and 4 states (20%) described another method.

Figure 3. State Mechanism for Charging Interest on Arrears (*n* = 29)



Among the 14 states that charge a specific percentage, rates range from 4% to 12%, with most falling between 6% and 10%. Eight of these states reported that, despite having a specific rate on the books, it is not routinely applied. These patterns track those found in a 2022 report (with data as of 2019) of interest charged on child support debt in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, which found that although 34 states (67%) authorized interest charges on child support arrears, 17 states (33%) did not.[19]

Among the 34 states that authorize interest, 6 states (18%) set the rate annually based on market factors such as the Federal Reserve's average discount rate or the bond equivalent yield published by the Secretary of

the Treasury, and 8 states (24%) use another method. The remaining 20 states (59%) set a flat percentage rate, though four of these states — Colorado, Iowa, Kentucky, and Maine — have interest rates on the books that are not routinely collected or are left to local discretion.

Bottom Line: Interest has been identified as the most important factor driving the growth of child support arrears in several states, and it compounds the debt of low-income parents. Our survey suggests interest is often not charged in practice: 9 of 29 responding states (31%) do not charge interest, and 8 of the 14 states with a fixed rate on the books report that they do not routinely apply it. Together, at least 17 of 29 states (59%) either do not charge interest or reported that they do not routinely charge it. States can reduce uncollectible debt among low-income NCPs by eliminating or suspending interest on arrears owed by NCPs with limited ability to pay, aligning statutes with actual practice, and making accrued interest eligible for debt compromise, which only 4 states currently allow.

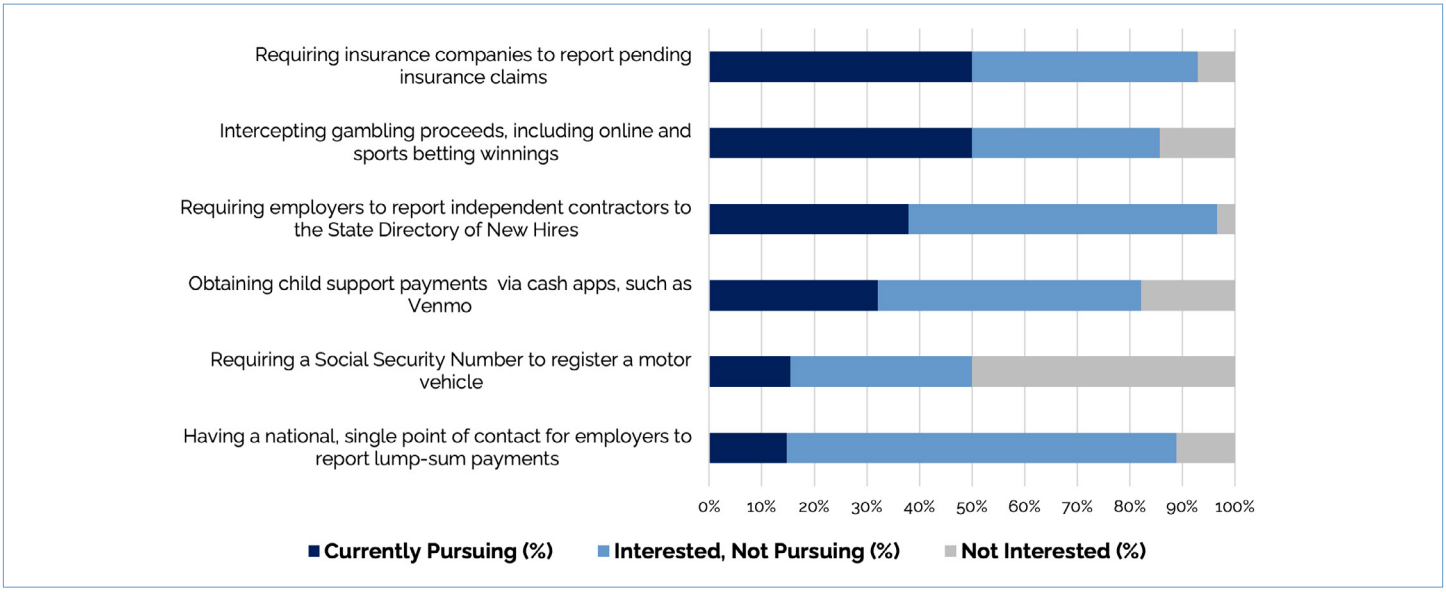
4. Enforcement Actions

When child support payments go unpaid and child support debt accrues, state child support programs have an extensive enforcement toolkit at their disposal. Some tools are federally mandated (i.e., states must have procedures in place and use them), including income withholding and tax refund intercept. Income withholding depends on employers reporting new hires to the State Directory of New Hires, which federal law requires for employees; whether employers must also report independent contractors is left to each state. Others are federally mandated but applied at state discretion (i.e., states must have procedures available but decide when to use them). These include driver's, professional, and recreational license suspension; intercepting lump-sum payments, such as insurance settlements and gambling or lottery winnings; and credit bureau reporting, which states may decline in individual cases only under guidelines available within the state.[20] Others are entirely a state option (i.e., not federally required at all), such as holding nonpaying NCPs in civil contempt of court and suspending motor vehicle registrations.

Interest in and Use of Discretionary Enforcement Actions

Directors were asked whether their states currently pursue, or are interested in pursuing, six state-discretionary strategies to strengthen enforcement (Figure 4). Overall, states are largely interested in increasing enforcement activity: Among the six policies CPR asked about, five policies were either currently used or noted of interest by over 80% of the states. Reporting pending insurance claims and intercepting gambling proceeds were the two strategies furthest along in practice, each already pursued by half of responding states. Requiring employers to report independent contractors to the State Directory of New Hires was closely behind, with 38% currently pursuing and 59% interested in pursuing. Only 3% of directors were not interested. Obtaining child support payments via cash apps, such as Venmo, is already being pursued by nearly one-third of states, and about half are interested in it.

Figure 4. Interest in Various Enforcement Actions



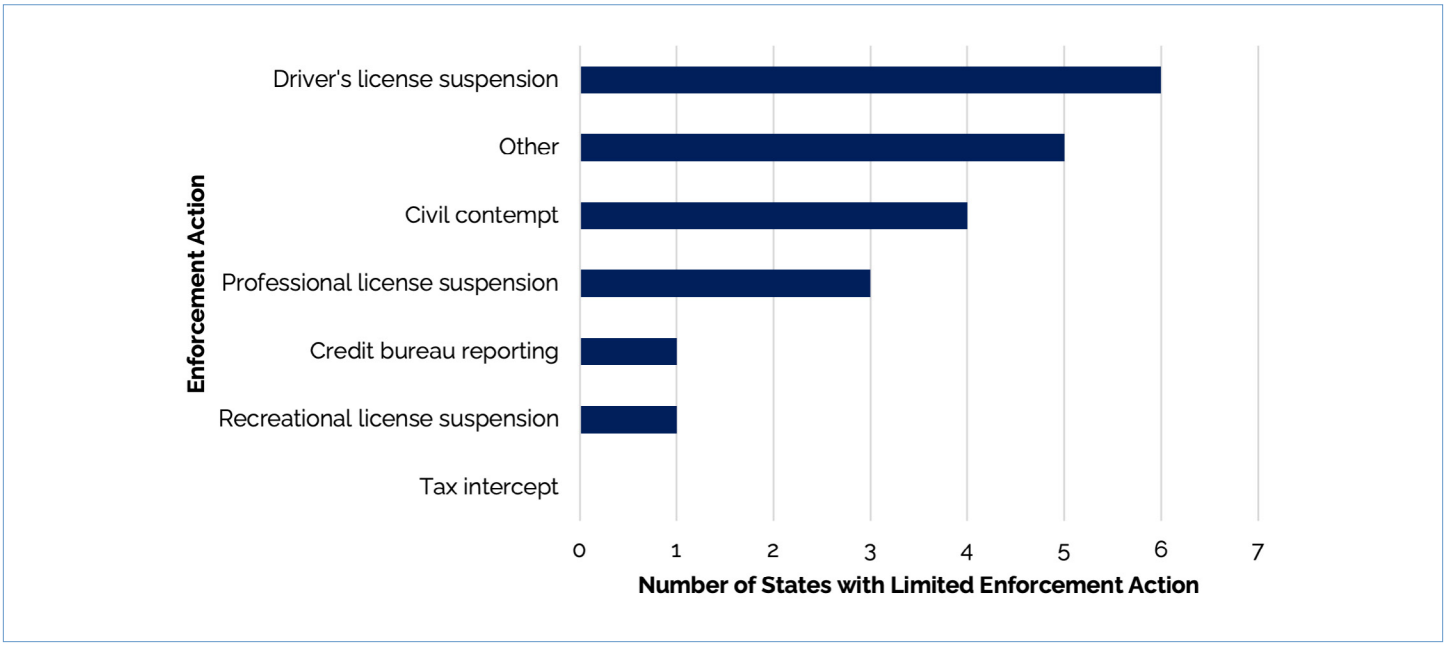
Two strategies with similarly low current adoption (each pursued by only about 15% of states) diverge sharply once interest is taken into account. A national, single point of contact for employers to report lump-sum payments has the widest gap between current practice and interest of any strategy asked about: just 15% of states are currently pursuing it, but 74% are interested, suggesting strong latent demand that has yet to translate into action. Requiring a Social Security number to register a motor vehicle, on the other hand, tells a different story: although 15% of states are currently pursuing it, half of all states say they are not interested in doing so at all. This is the only strategy where outright disinterest, rather than an implementation gap, appears to be the primary barrier.

Limited Enforcement for Low-Income NCPs

The use of enforcement actions varies by state and county and has come under considerable scrutiny in recent years.[21] Intended to motivate parents who have the means to pay to do so, it can be effective in changing payment behavior. But for parents without the means to pay, enforcement actions like license suspension and incarceration can reduce their ability to get and keep work, undermining the stable employment that would increase the likelihood of future payment.[22, 23]

Ten of 31 respondents (32%) reported limiting or waiving some enforcement actions for low-income NCPs, while 21 (68%) do not. Among the 10 states that do, nine shared examples (Figure 5). Driver's license suspension is by far the most commonly limited or waived action (6 of 9 states, 67%), followed by "other" actions (5 states, 56%), civil contempt (4 states, 44%), and professional license suspension (3, 33%). Credit bureau reporting and recreational license suspension were each limited or waived by only 1 of the 9 states. No state reported limiting or waiving tax intercept specifically.

Figure 5. Limited Enforcement Actions for Low-Income NCPs (*n* = 9)



Among these 9 states, most limit or waive more than one enforcement action: 4 of 9 states (44%) reported limiting exactly one action, 3 states (33%) reported two, and 2 states (22%, Illinois and Washington) reported five. For states that limit or waive more than one action, 60% (3 of 5 states) use different income thresholds depending on which enforcement action is considered, while 40% (2 of 5 states) use the same income threshold.

Applying these limits raises a central implementation challenge: distinguishing parents who cannot pay from parents who will not. To learn how states manage this in practice, CPR conducted follow-up interviews with directors or other leaders in the six states that reported a statewide driver's license suspension exemption policy: California, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, Washington, and Wisconsin.[22] Some states rely on categorical eligibility; Illinois and Washington, for example, exempt NCPs who receive TANF, SNAP, or other means-tested benefits. Others contact NCPs or their employers directly before suspending a license. The companion brief details these approaches and the lessons states learned along the way.

Bottom Line: Most states want to expand enforcement: more than 80% are pursuing or interested in five of the six discretionary tools we asked about, and half already intercept gambling proceeds or receive reports of pending insurance claims. Accommodations for low-income NCPs are far less common. Only 10 of 31 states (32%) limit or waive any enforcement action, most often driver's license suspension. For NCPs without the means to pay, tools like license suspension can make it harder to find and keep the work that would allow them to pay. The central implementation challenge is distinguishing parents who won't pay from parents who can't. Some states use eligibility for TANF, SNAP, or other means-tested programs (Illinois and Washington), while others contact NCPs or employers directly before suspending a license.

5. NCP Employment Programs

Estimates show that approximately 35 percent of NCPs have income at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level,[24] while the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) estimates that at least 13% of NCPs are unemployed for an extensive period of time.[25] Decades of evaluation research on employment programs for NCPs with barriers to payment have generally found improvements in NCPs' employment rates, earnings, child support payment rates, and payment regularity.[26] These gains matter for collections: more than 70% of child support is collected through wage withholding by employers,[26] so helping NCPs into formal employment is an important route to reliable payment. The most rigorous test to date, the randomized Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED), found modest but positive effects: participants' employment rose by three percent, first-year earnings rose by four percent, and the likelihood of paying through income withholding rose by eight percent. Participants also reported greater satisfaction with the child support program.[26]

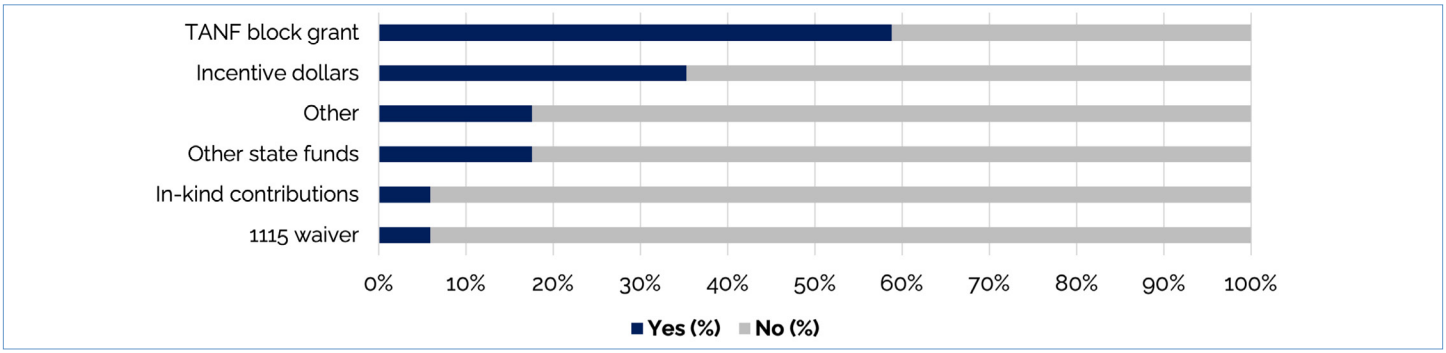
In December 2024, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) finalized a rule allowing state and tribal child support agencies to use federal financial participation (FFP) for employment and training services for NCPs who are unemployed, underemployed, or at risk of not being able to comply with their support order.[26] In June 2026, OCSE proposed to rescind this rule.[27] Some in the field have argued that rescinding the rule would narrow the program's tools for parents whose nonpayment stems from unstable employment.[5]

Nineteen of the 31 responding states (61%) reported having NCP employment programs specifically for clients in the child support program. This aligns with OCSE's 2021 finding that roughly six in ten states offer some form of NCP-focused employment programming.[28] Among these states, survey responses indicated that just over half (10 states, 53%) operate their program statewide. In comparison, the remainder operate in most jurisdictions (3 states, 16%), a few settings (4 states, 21%), or another configuration (2 states, 11%).

Funding Sources

Of the 19 directors who reported having NCP employment programs, 17 reported the programs' funding source(s) (Figure 6). Most reported that funding draws most heavily on TANF block grant dollars (used by 10 of 17 reporting states, 59%), followed by incentive dollars (6, 35%). Smaller numbers of states rely on other state funds (3, 18%), in-kind contributions (1, 6%), or 1115 waivers (1, 6%). Three states (18%) described another funding source not captured by these categories.

Figure 6. NCP Employment Program Funding Sources (*n* = 17)



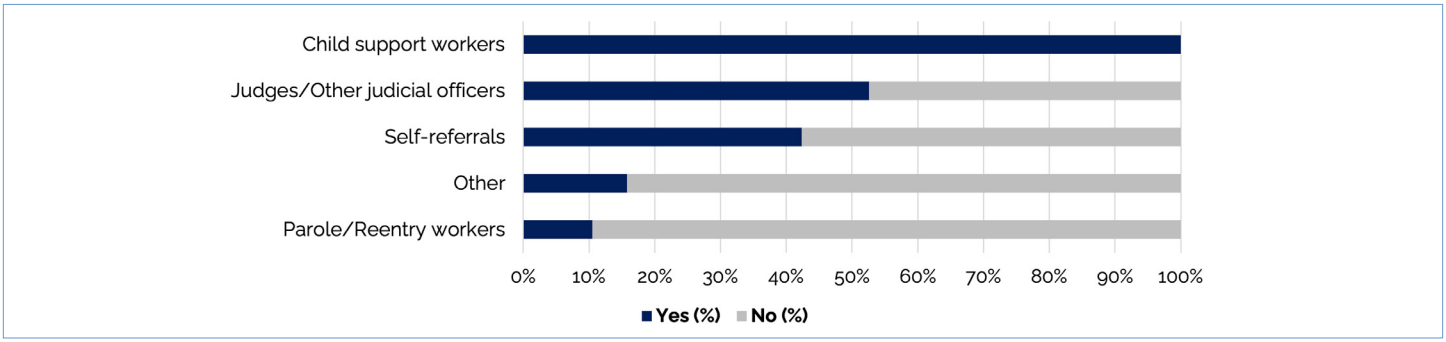
Among the 17 states with NCP employment programs and valid data on funding sources, most (13 of 17, 76%) rely on just one funding source, while a smaller number combine multiple sources. One state (6%) uses two funding sources, and 3 states (18%, including Texas and South Carolina) use three. So, while some programs draw on a mix of funding streams, most rely on a single funding source rather than blending several.

This reliance on a single source leaves programs exposed. When it issued the 2024 rule, OCSE noted that only a few state programs had been able to secure ongoing, consistent funding, that many programs operating in 2014 had since closed or scaled back because of reduced funding, and that fewer states operated NCP employment programs in 2024 than a decade earlier.[26] State budgets are also tightening: 13 states reported projected budget gaps for fiscal year 2027.[29] Although a 2024 CPR analysis found that approximately 40 states held unobligated TANF balances that could be directed toward father-supportive activities, including employment services, spending on these activities remains limited.[30] Some states facing budget pressures have instead redirected TANF funding to fill budget shortfalls.[31, 32]

Referrals

The number and variety of referral pathways a state has built reflect the range of opportunities to connect an eligible NCP to services. As Figure 7 shows, referral into these programs is universal through child support, as child support workers serve as a referral source in all 19 states. Judges and other judicial officers are the second most common referral source (10 states, 53%), followed by self-referrals (8 states, 42%). Parole or reentry workers (2 states, 11%) and "other" referral pathways (3 states, 16%) are used by a smaller number of states.

Figure 7. NCP Employment Program Referral Sources (*n* = 19)



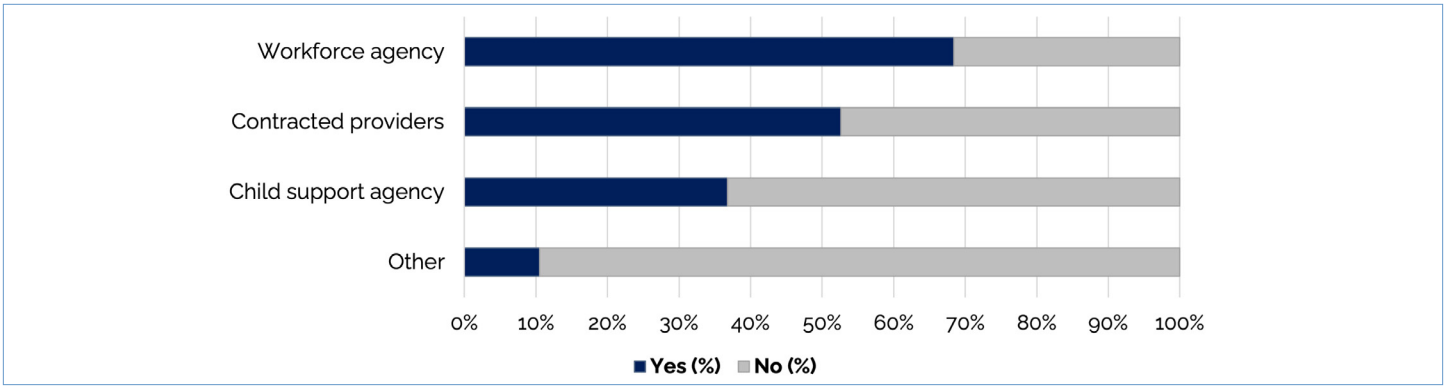
Over half of the 19 reporting states (10 states, 53%) reported that participation is a mix of mandatory and voluntary, depending on the case or service(s) offered. Voluntary participation alone was the next most common approach (7 states, 37%), while fully mandatory participation was rare, reported by only 2 states (Texas and one additional state, 11%). This suggests most states favor some flexibility in how NCPs enter these programs, rather than compelling participation outright.

Texas's NCP Choices program, which requires all participating NCPs to be court-ordered into services, offers a useful illustration of how a fully mandatory model can perform. An evaluation[33] of the program's four original sites, comparing 1,071 NCPs ordered into the program with a matched comparison group, found that participants paid their child support 50% more often and 53% more consistently, for a 44% increase in total collections. They were also employed at 18% higher rates, and the custodial parents in these cases were 17% less likely to receive TANF in the first year after the program. These effects persisted for 2 to 3 years after the program.

Service Delivery

Directors indicated the organizations that delivered their NCP employment programs (Figure 8). Services are most often delivered through workforce agencies (13 states, 68%), contracted providers such as Goodwill (10 states, 53%), or the child support agency itself (7 states, 37%).

Figure 8. NCP Employment Program Service Delivery Organizations (*n* = 19)

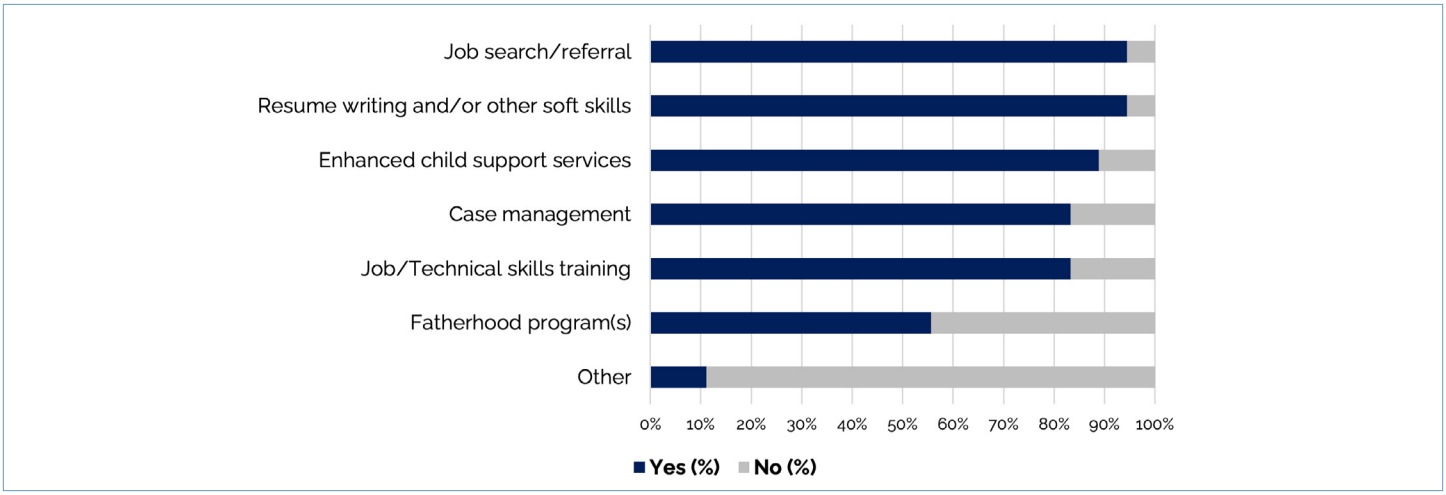


Coordinating across multiple partner organizations is common in child support-led employment programs because the range of services they typically offer — job training, case management, and enhanced child support services — often requires more than one organization to deliver effectively.[34] A majority of child support programs (53%) coordinate service delivery across more than one organization: 7 of 19 states (37%) reported using two delivery organizations, and 3 of 19 (16%) reported three. The remaining programs (9 states, 47%) reported a single delivery organization.

Eighteen of the 19 states with NCP employment programs provided examples of the services offered (Figure 9). The services are broad and often layered: job search and referral (17 of 18 states, 94%); resume and soft-skills training (17 states, 94%); and job and technical skills training (15 states, 83%) are included in nearly all programs. Because these programs are designed specifically for the child support program, most also include enhanced

child support services, such as order modification or waiving enforcement actions (16 states, 89%), and case management (15 states, 83%). Just over half of programs (10 states, 56%) include a fatherhood programming component. Only two states (11%) listed that they had another component that was not described by one of the previous options. Overall, the large majority of states (16 states, 89%) provide at least five of the seven possible service types, suggesting that NCP employment programs, where they exist, tend to be fairly comprehensive rather than narrowly focused on a single service.

Figure 9. NCP Employment Program Services Offered (*n* = 18)



Beyond the NCP employment programs described here, our survey found that workforce programs and fatherhood programs are common partners in the broader landscape of agency collaboration. Among the 24 states reporting any collaboration between child support and other agencies, workforce programs were a partner in 42% of states (10 of 24), and fatherhood programs — the most common partner after prisons and jails — were a partner in 63% of states (15 of 24). These partnerships may function as referral sources into NCP-specific programming, as delivery partners once NCPs are enrolled, or both.

Bottom Line: Approximately six in ten responding states (61%) operate NCP employment programs, and most are comprehensive, pairing job services with enhanced child support services such as order modification. Evaluations have linked these programs to gains in employment, earnings, and child support payments, including through wage withholding by employers (which accounts for more than 70% of collections), and to greater NCP satisfaction with the child support program. But program funding is fragile: 76% of states rely on a single funding source, most often TANF. The proposed rescission of the 2024 rule allowing federal child support matching funds for employment services would remove an important route to stable funding at a time when many states are projecting budget gaps. States can make programs more resilient by braiding multiple funding streams and building on existing partnerships with workforce and fatherhood programs.

6. Child Support Debt Compromise

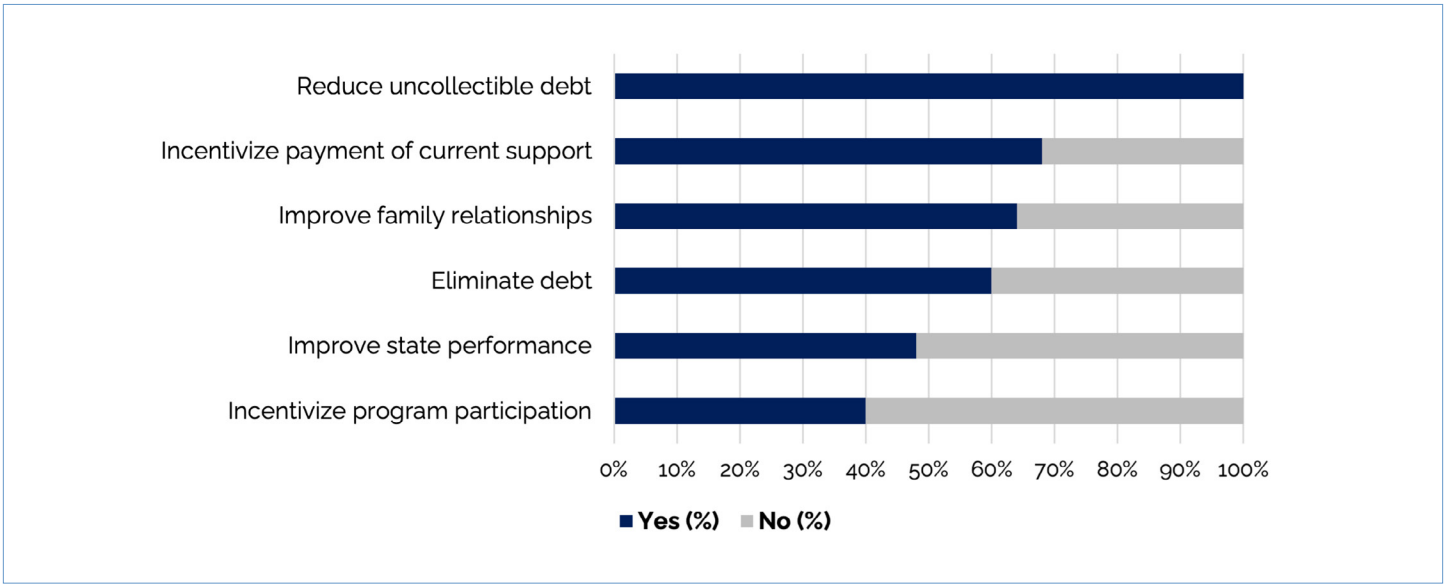
As previously noted, uncollected child support arrears amounted to nearly $113 billion nationally.[3] Research has found that most arrears are owed by NCPs with reported incomes under $10,000,[4] many of whom are incarcerated and/or lack year-round employment.[35] To account for the fact that uncollectible child support debt frequently accumulates during periods of incarceration, unemployment, and/or the imputation of income when orders are established without data on NCP earnings, states may enact policies that reduce, forgive, or settle child support arrears under specific conditions, rather than requiring an NCP to pay the full balance owed. Directors were asked about their states' policies on compromising, or reducing, child support debt. Among the 30 responding states, 25 states (83%) reported at least one type of debt eligible for compromise, while 5 states (17%) reported none.

Goals of Debt Compromise Programs

A 2012 evaluation suggests that NCP debt compromise programs benefit both NCPs and state child support programs.[36] After enrollment, participants' payments on current monthly child support obligations improved, state-owed debt decreased, and a high proportion of participants complied with the terms of their payment agreements.

Directors were asked about the goals of their debt compromise programs or policies, and these goals echo the benefits identified by prior research.[36] Every state with debt compromise programs (25 of 25 states, 100%) cited reducing uncollectible debt as a goal (Figure 10). Beyond that, states most often aim to incentivize payment of current support (17 states, 68%) and improve family relationships (16 states, 64%), followed by eliminating debt accumulated during incarceration, disability, or periods with no ability to earn (15, 60%) and improving state performance (12 states, 48%). Incentivizing participation in other programs was the least common stated goal (10, 40%).

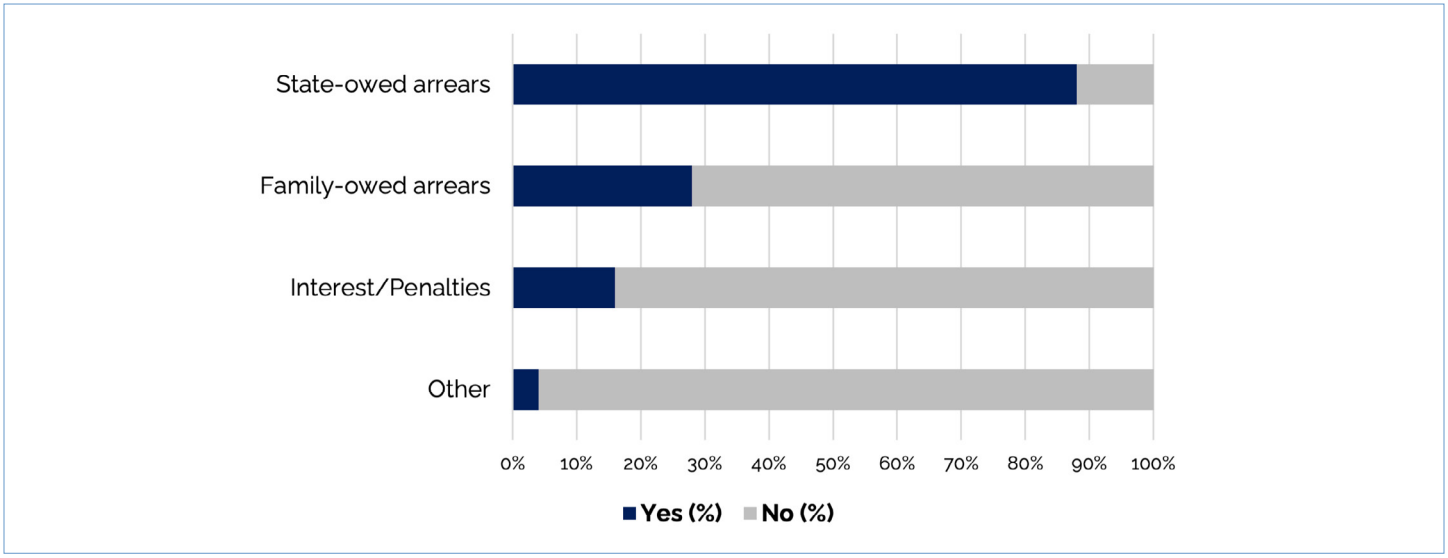
Figure 10. Goals of Debt Compromise (*n* = 25)



Types of Debt Compromised

The types of debt forgiven by these 25 states are presented in Figure 11. Among the 25 states with debt compromise policies, state-owed arrears (which is debt owed to the government rather than to the family, typically from TANF cost recovery) is by far the most common type eligible for compromise (22 states, including Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, Texas, Vermont, Washington; 88%).

Figure 11. Types of Debt Eligible for Compromise (*n* = 25)

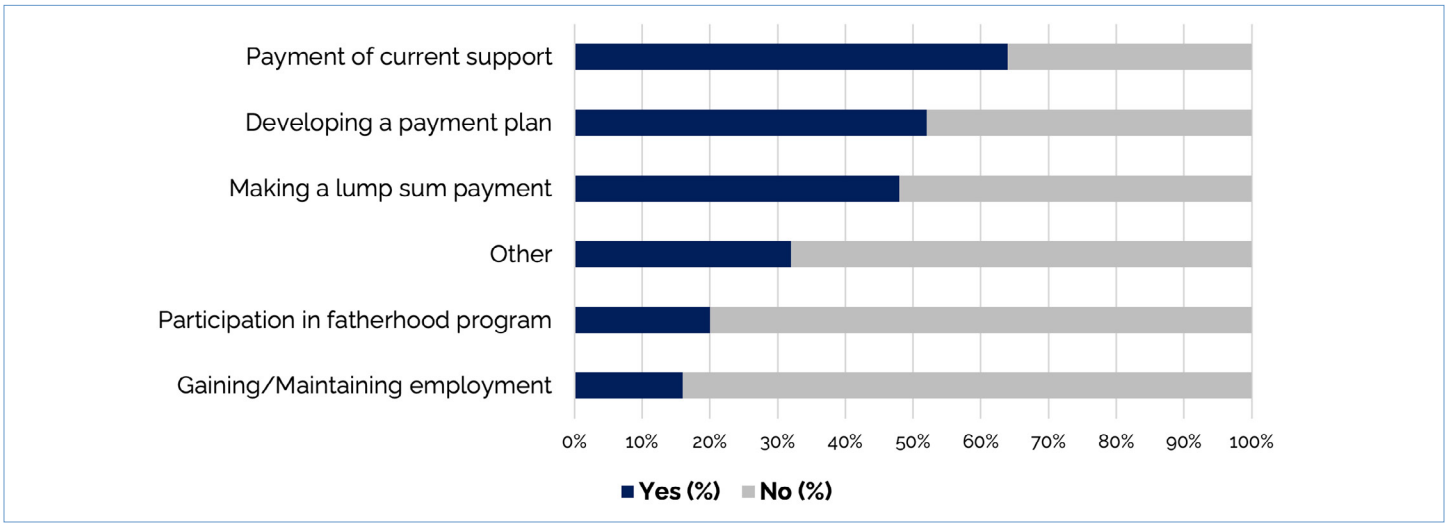


On the other hand, even though roughly 81% of certified child support arrears nationally were owed to families,[37] family-owed arrears are eligible for compromise in far fewer states (7 states, including Minnesota and Vermont; 28%). This is partly by design. Because family-owed arrears belong to the custodial parents, custodial parents in these states may choose to waive or compromise what they are owed. Offering this option requires safeguards so that no parent feels pressured, particularly where there is a history of domestic violence. Interest or penalties are eligible in fewer still (4 states, including Minnesota and North Dakota; 16%).

Requirements to Achieve Debt Compromise

Finally, states were asked what NCPs must do to actually achieve debt compromise (Figure 12). The most common requirement is payment of current support for a certain period of time (16 states, 64%), followed by developing a payment plan (13 states, 52%) and making a lump sum payment (12 states, 48%). Fewer states require participation in a fatherhood program (5 states, 20%) or require gaining or maintaining employment (4 states, 16%).

Figure 12. What NCPs Must Do to Achieve Debt Compromise (*n* = 25)



Beyond the requirements covered in this survey, a 2022 state-by-state compilation by CPR found that several states, including Michigan, Minnesota, and Washington, specifically cite disability, unemployment, or incarceration as grounds for reducing state-owed arrears.[38] In other words, debt compromise in these states isn't only about what an NCP does going forward (e.g., completing a payment plan, maintaining employment, participating in a program), but also recognizes circumstances that made the debt difficult to avoid in the first place.

Programs also differ in how forgiveness is earned. Texas's Arrears Payment Incentive Program matches NCPs' payments dollar-for-dollar, crediting every dollar paid toward state-owed arrears and interest during each month of enrollment. Illinois's Clean Slate program took a time-based approach: low-income NCPs who could show they had been unable to pay because of unemployment, incarceration, or serious illness could have assigned arrears forgiven after six months of regular current support payments.[38]

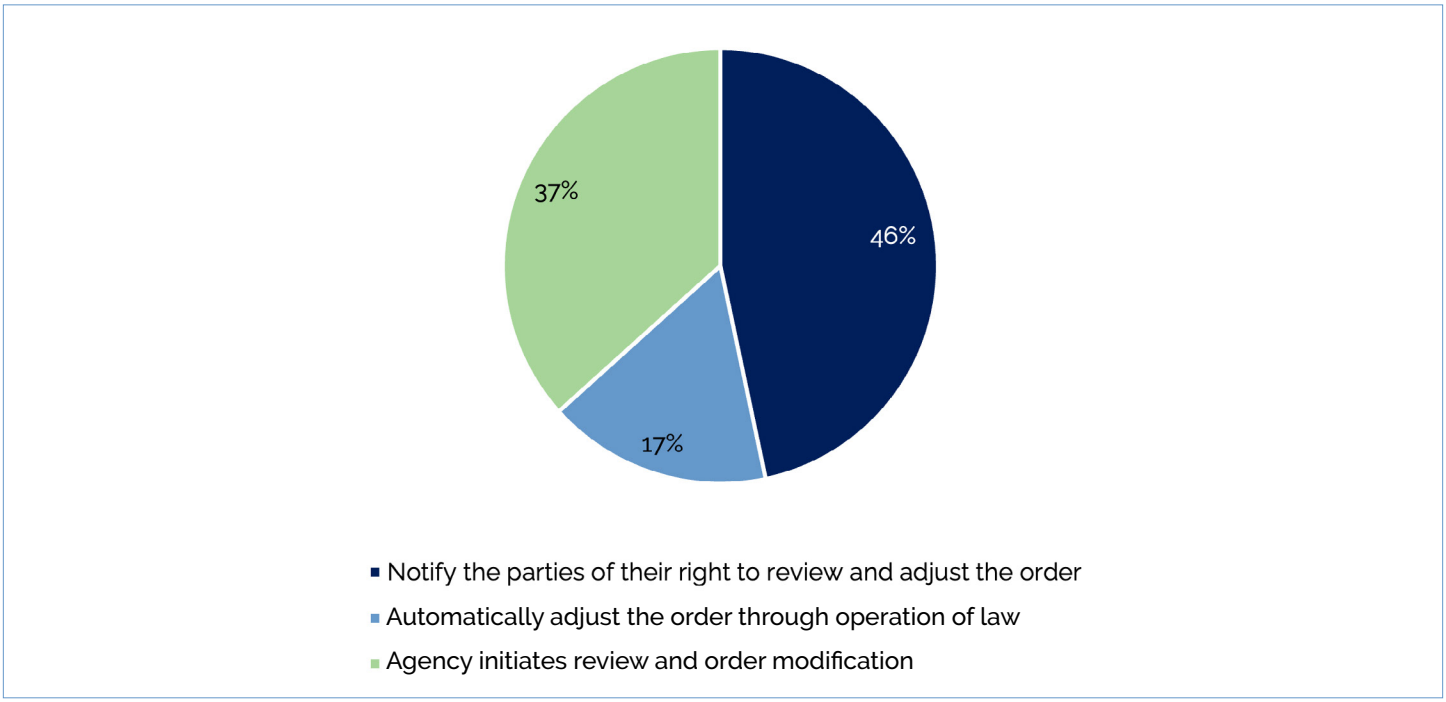
Bottom Line: Much of the nearly $113 billion in unpaid child support is owed by NCPs with little-to-no reported income, and it often builds up during incarceration or unemployment, or after orders are set on imputed income. Most responding states (25 of 30) offer some form of debt compromise, and every one of them aims to reduce uncollectible debt. But compromise is concentrated on state-owed arrears (88% of these states), even though roughly 81% of arrears nationally are owed to families; only 7 states compromise family-owed debt, and only 4 compromise interest. The most common requirement for debt relief is continued payment of current support. States can expand relief by recognizing incarceration, disability, and unemployment as grounds for reduction; offering graduated forgiveness tied to consistent payment; and making it easier for custodial parents who choose to forgive arrears they are owed to do so, with safeguards to ensure the choice is voluntary.

7. Order Modifications for Incarcerated NCPs

It is estimated that nearly one million incarcerated fathers owe child support and leave prison with average levels of child support debt ranging from $20,000 to $36,000, depending on the state and data used.[39] These burdens fall unevenly: in 2023, Black adults were imprisoned at five times the rate of White adults, and Hispanic adults at more than twice that rate.[40] After release, parents with a history of incarceration earn lower wages, carry higher child support debts, and pay a smaller share of their orders than parents who were never incarcerated,[15] and fathers with child support debt have less contact with their children.[16] The 2016 federal rule addressed some of the practices that generate this debt. It requires states to base orders on evidence of the parent's actual earnings and income, limit income imputation to the circumstances federal rules allow, and consider the parent's subsistence needs. It also prohibits states from treating incarceration as voluntary unemployment or excluding incarceration as a basis for modifying child support orders (45 C.F.R. § 302.56(c)(3)).

Federal law also requires child support programs to review and, where appropriate, adjust orders for NCPs who will be incarcerated for more than 180 days (45 C.F.R. § 303.8(b)(2)). Some states make this process automatic, using system-level data matching to identify incarceration and adjust the order without requiring any action from the NCP. Only 17% of responding states (5 of 30) reported that orders are automatically adjusted through the operation of law (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Who Initiates the Adjustment of Child Support Orders for Incarcerated NCPs (*n* = 30)



In the remaining 83 percent, someone must initiate the process: 37% (11 of 30) rely on the agency to initiate review and modification, while 46% (14 of 30) simply notify the parties of their right to request a review and adjustment, leaving the incarcerated NCP responsible for taking action from inside a jail or prison.

Of the 29 states reporting who reviews the adjustment of the NCPs' child support orders during incarceration, those relying on automatic adjustment or agency-initiated review draw almost exclusively on data matches at prison entry (80% and 91%, respectively), while NCP-initiated applications play a larger role under the "notify parties" approach (Table 2).

Table 2. Incarceration Order-Modification Methods, by Initiator and Reviewer

How programs fulfill the incarceration order-modification requirement	Data match at prison entry	NCP-filed application	Other method	Total
Notify parties of right to review/ adjust	8 (62%)	3 (23%)	2 (15%)	13 (100%)
Automatic adjustment by operation of law	4 (80%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	5 (100%)
Agency initiates review and modification	10 (91%)	0 (0%)	1 (9%)	11 (100%)
Total	**22 (76%)**	**3 (10%)**	**4 (14%)**	**29 (100%)**

When asked what an incarcerated NCP's order is typically set to, 16 of 29 responding states (55%) reported that the order effectively stops accruing during incarceration — either set to $0 (11 states, 38%) or explicitly non-charging (5 states, 17%). The distinction matters for what happens after release: a $0 order and a non-charging designation may carry different implications for whether and how arrears begin accumulating again once the NCP is released. However, our survey did not directly probe this distinction. The remaining states set the order to the state's minimum order amount (7 states, 24%) or another amount (6 states, 21%).

Among states reporting a specific dollar figure, amounts ranged widely (from $10 to $100 per month), with some states basing the amount on the NCP's actual income or ability to earn, and others applying a flat minimum regardless of circumstances. Washington's abatement process notably includes a graduated reinstatement structure once the NCP is released, rather than reinstating the full prior order immediately.

Two groups of NCPs fall largely outside these protections. First, the federal review requirement applies only to NCPs who will be incarcerated for more than 180 days (45 C.F.R. § 303.8(b)(2), (b)(7)(ii)). Most jail stays are far shorter: people admitted to local jails between July 2023 and June 2024 spent an average of 31 days in custody, and men an average of 35 days.[41] A few weeks in jail can cost an NCP a job, but it rarely triggers a review of the order. Second, the 2016 rule changed how orders are set and modified going forward, but it did not address debt that had already accumulated. Because the Bradley Amendment prohibits retroactive modification of child support (42 U.S.C. § 666(a)(9)(C)), arrears that built up during earlier periods of incarceration generally can be reduced only through debt compromise (Section 6).[20]

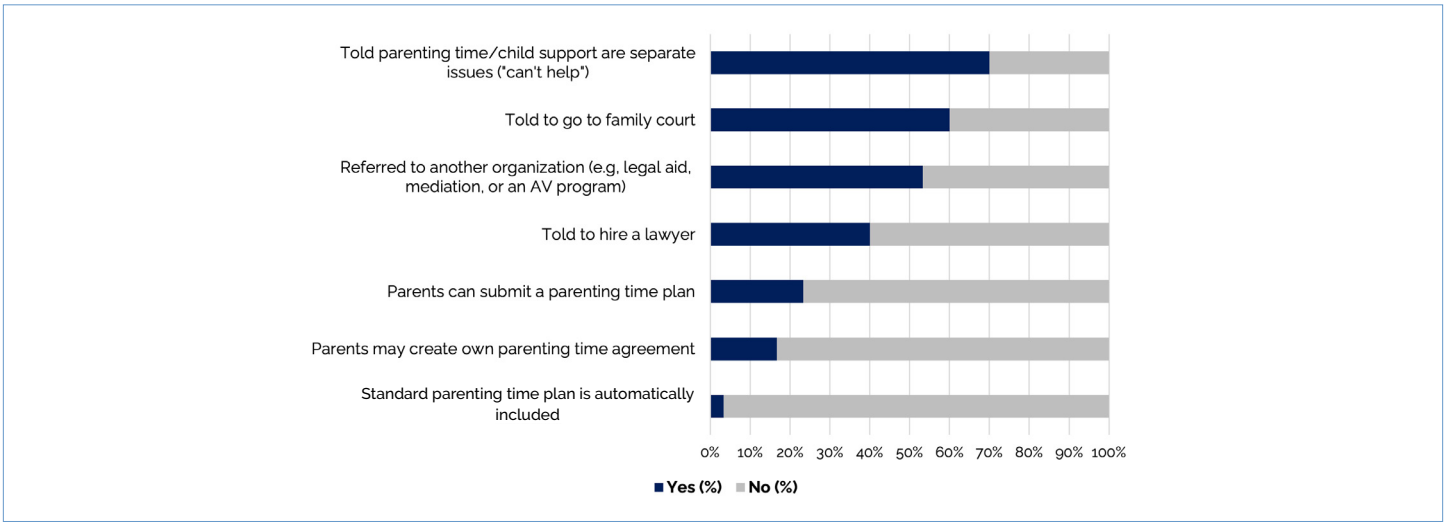
Bottom Line: Incarcerated fathers leave prison owing an average of $20,000 to $36,000 in child support. The 2016 Modernization Rule barred states from treating incarceration as voluntary unemployment, but fewer than one in five responding states adjust orders automatically, and nearly half simply notify parties of their right to request a review, leaving NCPs to act from inside a prison or jail. Notably, most of these notice-only states (8 of 13) already learn of incarceration through a data match, the same tool that states using automatic or agency-initiated adjustment rely on. Once orders are modified, just over half of states (55%) stop them from accruing during incarceration; the rest continue charging a minimum or other amount, which can still add up over a long sentence. NCPs held in jail, where stays average about a month, fall below the federal rule's 180-day review threshold, and debt that accumulated before the rule cannot be modified retroactively. Because Black and Hispanic adults are imprisoned at five and more than two times the rate of white adults, respectively, these gaps can compound existing disparities in debt and in post-release employment, payment, and family outcomes. States can use the data matches they already have to initiate modifications automatically, extend reviews to jail stays, set orders to $0 or non-charging during incarceration, and phase orders back in gradually after release.

8. Parenting Time

Decades of research show that child support and parenting time are closely connected, and that facilitation and mediation services can help most parents reach an agreement, can be adapted to protect survivors of domestic violence, and are associated with increased payment, more contact, and less interparental conflict.[42,43] However, child support and parenting time have historically been treated as legally separate issues, and parenting time is not a service the child support program is authorized to provide — child support personnel may spend only a minimal amount of time coordinating parenting time with plans parents have already agreed to.[44,45] The separation falls hardest on unmarried parents. Divorced parents typically receive a single, comprehensive decree addressing custody, parenting time, property division, and child support all at once; unmarried parents, by contrast, generally receive only a child support order and must file a separate legal petition in a different court to establish parenting time. Many do not: Between 2007 and 2015, the proportion of families with no formal or informal visitation agreement grew from 43% to 55%.[46] Unmarried parents also miss out on parenting time adjustments. Forty-one states and the District of Columbia reduce an NCP's child support order based on how much time the child spends with that parent,[47] but these adjustments generally require a written parenting time agreement, which most unmarried parents do not have.

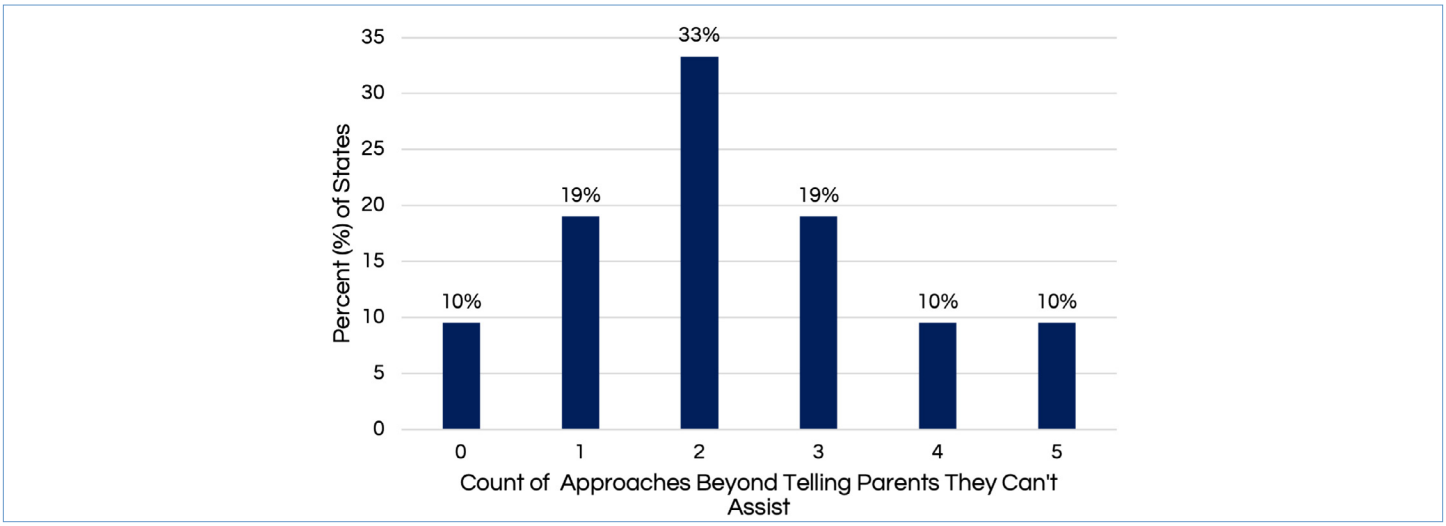
The only regular source of federal funding to help unmarried parents navigate parenting time is the Access and Visitation (AV) Program, a modest, formula-based grant of $10 million nationally per year, available to all states and administered by OCSE but operated separately from the child support program itself, with individual state awards as small as $100,000.[48] In FY 2024, nearly 60,000 parents and guardians participated in AV programs and received parent education, mediation, parenting plan development, and supervised visitation services.[48] Funding constraints may help explain why seven in ten directors (21 of 30 states, 70%) reported that parents are told child support and parenting time are separate legal issues that the child support agency cannot assist with (Figure 14). Even where AV-funded services exist, they operate outside the child support process: 53 percent of responding states refer parents to outside resources like AV programs rather than addressing parenting time within the child support system directly.

Figure 14. How Parenting Time for Never-Married Parents Is Handled (*n* = 30)



Importantly, most state child support agencies are not simply telling parents they cannot assist and leaving them unsupported. Among the 21 states that tell parents child support can't help, all except two states (90%) also select at least one other form of support (Figure 15). In other words, only 2 of the 21 states report telling parents, "We can't help," with no further guidance.

Figure 15. Parenting Time Supports Beyond Telling Parents that Child Support and Parenting Time are Separate Legal Issues (*n* = 21)



Note: The 21 respondents include those who reported that, in their state, parents are told that parenting time and child support are separate legal issues and that the agency "can't assist" (Figure 14).

Going back to Figure 14, most caseworkers refer parents elsewhere for help. Directors reported that clients are directed to family court to file a petition (18 states, 60%), referred to another organization such as legal aid, mediation, or an Access and Visitation program (16 states, 53%), and/or advised to hire a lawyer (12 states, 40%).

Beyond simply pointing parents elsewhere, many states also support parenting time more directly through the child support process itself. Nearly a quarter of states (7 states, including Minnesota, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington; 23%) allow parents to complete or submit a parenting time plan as part of the child support process. Five states (including Minnesota and Oregon; 17%) reported that parents may create and sign their own parenting agreement, which can be added to the child support order. In one state (Texas), the child support order includes a standard parenting time plan unless parents submit their own or indicate safety concerns.

Among the states in our survey, Minnesota and Oregon stand out for offering the broadest range of support: rather than relying on a single approach, both combine multiple options for helping unmarried parents establish parenting time within and alongside the child support process. For example, the Oregon Judicial Department posts fill-in-the-blank parenting plan templates with variations for children of different ages and parents who live different distances from one another. Oregon also posts online safety screening questions to help parents choose an appropriate plan, from standard plans for parents with no safety concerns to safety-focused plans that require supervised parenting time or no parenting time at all.[49]

Bottom Line: Unmarried parents, who are disproportionately low-income, typically receive a child support order with no parenting time arrangement and must go to a separate court to get one. Many do not, and without a written agreement they cannot use the parenting time adjustments to support orders that 41 states and the District of Columbia offer. Most child support agencies (70%) tell parents that parenting time is a separate issue they cannot help with, though nearly all of these states also refer parents elsewhere. A smaller group goes further: about one-quarter let parents submit a parenting plan through the child support process, and Texas includes a standard plan in the order unless parents submit their own. Federal support is limited: the Access and Visitation program is funded at only $10 million a year nationally, and the 2016 rule permits only minimal staff time on parenting time. States can do more within these limits, such as offering parenting plan templates and safety screening as Oregon does, but meaningful progress likely requires making parenting time activities eligible for federal matching funds or substantially increasing AV funding.

Future Research

In the final section of the CPR survey, directors were asked to indicate areas for future research — or topics that would be most useful for the child support field to know more about. In identifying future research priorities, directors pointed to areas where practice is evolving rapidly, but evidence remains limited. Popular responses included collaborations with other agencies (36%), child support pass-through and disregard policies (32%), enforcement actions (32%), NCP employment programs (28%), and parenting time (28%).

CPR has already provided greater detail on state practices in one of these areas: enforcement actions. To learn how states are managing driver's license suspension exemptions in practice, CPR interviewed directors or other leaders in the six states — California, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, Washington, and Wisconsin — that reported having a statewide exemption policy. Their policy choices, implementation challenges, and lessons learned are detailed in a companion brief.[22] CPR intends to produce similar topic-specific briefs, based on interviews with child support staff, for the other areas directors identified as high priorities for future research.

Acknowledgments

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