

Employment and Parenting Services for Noncustodial Parents

A Descriptive Study

Asaph Glosser, Hannah Engle, Sophie Shanshory, and Keri West

MARCH 2024

Child support programs across the country serve millions of families with low incomes. They establish paternity and child support orders, and they collect child support payments that can help increase family financial stability and contribute to positive long-term outcomes for children. However, many parents with child support obligations struggle to make regular payments. This can result in less financial support for their children, strained parenting relationships, and a potentially substantial accumulation of debt.

From 2021 to 2022, two child support agencies in Ohio—the Franklin County Child Support Enforcement Agency and the Stark County Child Support Enforcement Agency—operated programs that were intended to increase the availability of supportive services to parents who owe child support, often described as noncustodial parents.¹ The agencies' goals were to improve noncustodial parents' employment outcomes, increase their ability to meet their child support obligations, and improve their relationships with their children. In Franklin County, which includes the city of Columbus, the program was called The Journey. In Stark County, which includes the city of Canton, it was called Right Path. The county child support agencies developed The Journey and Right Path in partnership with a group of local organizations that provided employment assistance, job training, and parenting supports.

The Journey and Right Path build on prior efforts—both in Ohio and across the country—to strengthen the role that child support programs can play in responding to or addressing barriers noncustodial parents have to providing consistent financial and emotional support.² The Journey and Right Path programs provided a package of employment services, parenting services, and individualized case management to parents with recently established child support orders. The two programs were initially designed to provide services soon after a child support order was established, before noncustodial parents accumulated child support debt or had negative experiences with the agency because of punitive actions for nonpayment.³

The emphasis on newly established child support orders follows broader efforts by child support programs across the country to engage with parents proactively, before they fall behind on payments

and accumulate large debts.⁴ With early intervention, The Journey and Right Path aimed to increase parents' earnings and employment rates, engagement with their children, and compliance with child support order obligations. In contrast to standard case management—which largely focuses on sanctions and involves minimal proactive contact with parents outside of child support payment enforcement—the two programs also included more proactive outreach and services related to parents' child support cases. The experiences of these programs, their staff, and the individuals they sought to serve are a valuable addition to the existing literature on the experiences of noncustodial parents with the child support program and efforts by publicly funded programs to better assist these parents in meeting their child support obligations.

This brief is part of the larger Building Evidence in Employment Strategies (BEES) Project, which is being conducted by MDRC in partnership with Abt Associates and MEF Associates. (See Box 1.) It presents findings from a descriptive study of The Journey and Right Path. It begins with a brief overview of the child support program, an overview of The Journey and Right Path, and a description of the research methods used in this study. It then describes the employment and family circumstances of the families served by Franklin and Stark Counties' child support agencies, parents' perspectives on The Journey and Right Path services, and the degree to which those services aligned with parents' needs. The brief concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for practitioners and policymakers seeking to understand the role that child support programs can play in meeting the needs of noncustodial parents.

Box 1. Overview of the BEES Project

MDRC, in partnership with Abt Associates and MEF Associates, conducted an evaluation of The Journey and Right Path as one study in the Building Evidence in Employment Strategies (BEES) Project. The BEES Project is actively coordinating with the Next Generation of Enhanced Employment Strategies (NextGen) Project as part of the Innovative Strategies for Addressing Employment Barriers Portfolio, which is overseen by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families. Through this portfolio, OPRE seeks to build on the lessons learned from—and the gaps in knowledge revealed through—previous or current studies of interventions that connect individuals to the labor force, and identify and rigorously evaluate the “next generation” of employment strategies. OPRE is partnering with the Social Security Administration (SSA) to incorporate a focus on employment-related early interventions for individuals with current or foreseeable disabilities who have limited work histories and are potential applicants for Supplemental Security Income. SSA is providing financial and technical support for the evaluation or service provision of select interventions within the BEES and NextGen Projects (or both).

THE BROADER CHILD SUPPORT PROGRAM CONTEXT

The child support program is a partnership between the federal government and the states, counties, territories, and tribal governments that administer the program. The core functions of the child support program include:

- opening a child support case
- locating parents
- establishing parentage
- establishing and enforcing a child support order through judicial or administrative processes (once parentage is established)
- collecting and distributing payments
- reviewing and modifying support orders
- establishing and enforcing medical support

The child support program is an important source of income for families. Nationally, the program distributed over \$31 billion in child support collections to families in 2020, and it served over 13 million children.⁵ Though their financial circumstances vary dramatically, recent analyses suggest that more than half of the families served by the child support program have incomes below 150 percent of the federal poverty line.⁶ In 2020, 95 percent of all child support that was collected went to families; the government kept 5 percent as reimbursement for public assistance payments.

A sizeable portion of the child support caseload includes families that were required to have a child support case as a condition of receiving some form of public benefits. For example, in 2020, 55 percent of all open child support cases in Ohio involved custodial parents who were current or former public assistance recipients.⁷

In Ohio and nationally, the child support program has a complex set of rules and processes that can often feel daunting and hard to understand for the parents it serves.⁸ Despite the critical role it plays in supporting the financial needs of children, noncustodial and custodial parents often have strong negative feelings toward the program—especially those who feel the application of rules and procedures are unfair or who did not want a case opened in the first place.⁹ These feelings are often most acute in noncustodial parents, especially those with low incomes. Noncustodial parents often have a limited understanding of how the program works, what their child support obligations are, how the program sets and enforces those obligations, and what recourse they may have if they disagree with actions taken by the program.¹⁰

THE JOURNEY AND RIGHT PATH

Recruitment for The Journey and Right Path began in April 2021 and continued through January 2022. The two programs, operated by Franklin and Stark Counties' child support agencies, originally sought to enroll unemployed or underemployed noncustodial parents shortly after their child support orders were established.¹¹ Over the course of the implementation period, the county child support agencies expanded eligibility criteria to also include noncustodial parents with existing child support orders who were unemployed or underemployed.¹²

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, county child support staff members primarily contacted parents by phone. They explained the program services and referred parents who were interested in participating to the two programs' local service partners. Additionally, county child support staff members sent interested parents' contact information to the service providers, who then conducted their own outreach. Staff members from both the county child support agencies and the service partners asked parents questions about their family and employment circumstances, to better understand their needs.

The counties contracted with local providers to deliver employment, parenting, and case management services to parents. Staff members from these partners and the county child support programs met virtually, on a regular basis, to discuss parent participation and needs.

- **Employment services.** These services included creating individual employment plans for parents, helping parents build their resumes and learn interview skills, assisting parents with job searches and placement, and connecting parents to employers. Once a participant obtained a job, the program offered ongoing one-on-one case management to help maintain employment. The employment programs provided services in both group and individual settings.
- **Parenting services.** These services included parenting skills courses, tailored assistance with visitation, and assistance with custody agreements and coparenting strategies. They were also provided in both group and individual settings.
- **Individual case management and child support services.** County child support staff members coordinated with parenting and employment service providers to provide enhanced child support services, which included placing parents in smaller caseloads than what was typical for the programs, contacting parents at least once a month about their cases and their participation in the program, offering individually tailored assistance with child support obligations compliance, and helping parents request modifications to their child support orders.¹³

The two programs continued to provide services to enrolled parents through March 2022. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the county child support agencies and their service partners largely provided remote services.

THE EVALUATION OF THE JOURNEY AND RIGHT PATH

The study of The Journey and Right Path began as a randomized controlled trial comparing the employment rates, earnings, child support payments, and other child support compliance outcomes of program participants with those of nonparticipants. Due to recruitment and engagement challenges that were exacerbated by the rapidly shifting remote landscape throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, in early 2022 the research team shifted to conducting a descriptive study of the two programs. The shift in study design presented an opportunity to document how the program identified and interacted with parent needs.

For the descriptive study, the team conducted in-depth interviews with county child support staff members, their service partners, and parents. (See Box 2.) The interviews focused on the financial and family circumstances of noncustodial parents, the services offered by The Journey and Right Path, and the degree to which those services aligned with parents' needs. Collectively, these conversations can help inform a broader discussion about the role of child support programs in providing employment and parenting services to noncustodial parents, the implementation of employment interventions and parenting services, and the broader importance of coordinating human services programs in service delivery.

PROGRAM EXPERIENCES

This section describes the circumstances of the families served by The Journey and Right Path, drawing on interviews with noncustodial parents and child support and partner program staff members in the two counties. It also discusses whether those circumstances align with prior literature on the families served by the child support program. It then describes parent experiences with the implementation of the programs and lessons for policymakers and practitioners.

Family Circumstances

There is a broad range of family configurations among those served by the child support program, including divorced parents, parents who were never married, and family members or guardians with custody. The relationships between coparents, and the relationships between parents and their children, also vary.¹⁴

The noncustodial parents who were interviewed described a variety of family structures and custody arrangements. Some parents had children who lived with them for portions of the year, some both owed and were owed child support, some had no contact with their children, and some had children who lived with them full time but still had child support orders in place that they had been obligated to pay in the past. There was no single type of family structure, but in interviews, parents regularly described challenging relationships with their coparent, including issues related to custody arrangements. Their concerns aligned with similar challenges identified in prior research.¹⁵

Box 2. Approach to Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth interviews with noncustodial parents, child support workers, and staff members in partner agencies providing The Journey and Right Path services occurred remotely in the spring of 2022.

The research team conducted interviews with 11 child support staff members and program managers, including those who were responsible for recruiting parents into The Journey and Right Path, establishing or enforcing child support orders, helping program participants with their child support orders, and overseeing The Journey and Right Path. The team conducted interviews with seven staff members at partner agencies, including individuals who were responsible for delivering employment and parenting services to program participants. Generally, staff interviews addressed the programs' structure and design, service delivery, staff perspectives on participant needs and challenges, and changes in the programs over the course of implementation.

Interviews were also conducted with eight parents who participated in the programs and three parents who either declined to participate or were not offered the opportunity to do so (due to being randomly assigned to the control group of the original [randomized controlled trial](#)). These conversations addressed parents' backgrounds and personal histories; employment histories; experiences with the child support program; and, if applicable, experiences with The Journey and Right Path.

To determine who to interview, the research team randomly selected parents who were enrolled in The Journey and Right Path from program records. Child support staff members in the two counties provided information that helped the team select parents for interviews who did not participate in The Journey and Right Path.

The research team recorded and transcribed every interview. The team coded interviews using a coding scheme that aligned with topic areas covered in the interview questions, adding themes based on common responses provided by interviewees. To maximize intercoder reliability, the team selected a subset of interviews for each respondent type where multiple team members coded the responses.

Because a relatively small number of parents were interviewed, the interviews are not necessarily representative of the typical noncustodial parents in the two counties. However, the random selection of parents who agreed to participate, along with the inclusion of those that did not, does suggest the sample includes a reasonable distribution of experiences and perspectives.

The parents who were interviewed for this study often had partial, limited, or no visitation with their children. Many parents spoke openly about their frustrations regarding parenting time, stating that the custodial parent sometimes prevented contact or limited their

access to their children.¹⁶ Though this perspective might not be shared by the custodial parents, it does align with findings from prior employment interventions for noncustodial parents, in which program participants pointed to limitations placed by the custodial parent as the most common reason for not spending time with their children.¹⁷ One parent participating in The Journey and Right Path services went through the courts to set up visitation with his child after communication with his coparent broke down. He said, “[My child’s mother and I] don’t have to be on terms, like, to where we’re friends to have a kid together, as long as I take care of my kid.” During this ongoing waiting period, the parent spoke of how infrequently he saw his child.

The parents who were interviewed described a tension between meeting their financial obligations and spending time with their children. Parents talked about the financial burden of providing child support and the necessity of working long hours to do so, which prevented them from spending time with their children. One parent who did not participate in the programs described feeling like the county child support agency does not look at fathers as individuals who are trying to do their best, even though many fathers—including him—are the main providers for their children. As he put it,

So you gotta literally work two, three jobs just to make ends meet—not for yourself, but just to make sure your child get[s] what he needs. Like I wanna put my kids in sports, but I can hardly take time off to do that while I constantly have to work to make sure that everything’s always there.

Employment Circumstances

The Journey and Right Path sought to enroll parents who were unemployed or underemployed. Though the criteria evolved over the course of implementation, the programs enrolled noncustodial parents with a range of incomes, from those with no income to those who made slightly more than the minimum wage for full-time employment.

Most parents who enrolled in The Journey and Right Path worked in low-paying jobs that were either temporary or had sporadic hours. Multiple parents who were interviewed said they struggled to make ends meet, and they reported receiving little or no financial assistance from social programs. One parent described the challenges he faced, stating, “Putting food on the table consistently, making sure . . . I have a bigger space that’s affordable for my kids—it is definitely making it hard.” Another parent, who started a job shortly after enrolling in the program, said, “I’m out here trying to go to school and do this [program], but I still have to work and support myself, pay child support, and everything else. So I had to choose the job over going to school and everything else.” Both program staff members and parents described the tension parents felt between meeting their child support obligations and ensuring that they could meet their own basic needs. As one parent said, “You constantly have to work to make ends meet, on top of paying child support for your kids. . . . And without a roof over my head, my kids can’t come over to my house.”

Many parents did not feel The Journey and Right Path services—and the associated time commitment—would meaningfully improve their financial circumstances. Parents regularly described the financial hardships they experienced. However, most hesitated to participate in The Journey and Right Path. Some parents said that they did not see the benefits

of participation, since the program would not significantly alter (or help them navigate) their complex economic circumstances. Many parents worked for pay in some capacity, but even if their incomes were low or sporadic, they saw limited value in the employment services that The Journey and Right Path offered. They felt that the time commitment required to participate was too great, given what they perceived to be a limited opportunity for substantial increases in their earnings. These issues contributed to low levels of interest and engagement with both the employment and parenting components of the programs.

Program Recruitment and Services

This section describes the implementation of The Journey and Right Path.

The county child support agencies experienced difficulty recruiting parents into The Journey and Right Path. The two programs struggled to meet their recruitment targets and engage potential program participants. Conversations with staff members and participants indicated that this was a result of multiple factors, including mistrust of the child support program, the perception among noncustodial parents that employment services did not meet their needs, and an array of complications caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The county child support staff members responsible for recruitment also discussed how challenging it was to get accurate contact information for noncustodial parents. The statewide application parents use to apply for child support often provides limited information about noncustodial parents, which made it difficult for county child support staff members to contact noncustodial parents and inform them about the program.

Parents and staff members felt that the intake process included redundant steps. Staff members reported that assessing participant needs was an integral part of the program intake process and informed the development of individualized plans for parents. However, both staff members and parents said the intake process for The Journey and Right Path included redundant steps: County child support staff and partner staff both asked similar questions about parents' needs.

There was limited alignment between the programs' employment services and parents' needs. The parents who were interviewed did not feel the employment services offered by The Journey and Right Path were relevant to their specific circumstances. Many of the parents worked and earned low wages, and most did not feel the employment services offered them a pathway to an improved employment situation. One parent said, "They got me hooked up with a career consultant . . . and she was really great. It's just she couldn't do much for me."

The Journey and Right Path staff members reported that few participants attended parenting classes. According to staff members, participants prioritized their work obligations over attending parenting classes. Parents noted that the timing of these classes—they typically were held during normal business hours—and the inflexible schedule contributed to their limited attendance. However, parents who participated in the parenting classes generally had favorable impressions of them. One parent felt the program helped improve his relationships with his children and his coparent; he said, "I'm able to somewhat talk to [my coparent] . . . it helps, you know? It's a slow process, but it definitely helps." These

findings align with prior research that indicates that, though it can be challenging for child support programs to engage noncustodial parents in parenting programs, the parents who do engage generally have positive experiences.¹⁸

Parents wanted more flexibility in selecting a mix of program offerings. Parents who enrolled in The Journey and Right Path were expected to participate in both employment and parenting services, though some expressed interest in only one of the two. Even if they wanted to engage in some of the program services for both employment and parenting, such as supportive services or enhanced child support services, they were deterred by the requirement to participate in all program components. Some parents also saw participation in The Journey and Right Path more as an obligation than a set of services that would benefit them.

Parents often viewed The Journey and Right Path through a broader lens of despondency and struggle. Parents were skeptical that The Journey and Right Path would meet their needs, they described their personal situations as being insurmountable, and they often felt defeated by their circumstances. They worked—some with multiple jobs—but did not feel that they had enough money to make ends meet and had few hours to actually see their children. They spoke of not seeing “the point” because a program like this could not help their situation enough to change their reality. One child support staff member reflected on how difficult it was to recruit parents who had existing child support cases, stating, “They seem to [be] more defeated . . . like, ‘Well, this is my lot in life. So, I’m not going to . . . [do] things you’re asking me.’”

Parents struggled to meet their own basic needs. Some parents emphasized the challenges they faced meeting their own basic needs and how those challenges created barriers to both engaging in The Journey and Right Path services and meeting child support obligations. One father said,

My kids need health insurance and it’s like, [it] . . . consistently has to come out of my pocket. I don’t make enough; I don’t have enough time in the day to make enough money for that. . . . What can I do? And I’m not really receiving the help, and I’ve called and asked for help.

For such parents, the near-term struggles they faced made it harder to find the time and mental bandwidth to participate in The Journey and Right Path. A staff member at one of the partner organizations expressed frustration about not being equipped to deliver services to many participants because of barriers they faced, such as housing instability and mental health needs. In several interviews, staff members indicated that the resources and time commitment required to address these issues far outstripped the resources available through The Journey and Right Path.

Virtual services increased accessibility. Parents, child support staff members, and program staff members all expressed the benefits of virtual services. The ability to participate in the program from the comfort of their own homes helped to allay parents’ concerns about the health and well-being of their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, some parents were able to participate in virtual services while at work or managing other obligations, which eliminated any need to take time off from work and lose out on pay.

Parent Experiences with the Child Support Program

This section describes parents' attitudes toward the child support program and their experiences receiving child support services in Franklin and Stark Counties. Because The Journey and Right Path were operated by county child support agencies, parents' attitudes toward—and experiences with—those agencies had substantial implications for their broader perspectives on The Journey and Right Path.

Parents entered The Journey and Right Path with strong, negative perceptions of their county child support programs. Many parents described having an adversarial relationship with county child support agencies, which they felt often did not make an effort to understand their perspectives. Child support staff were very aware of this dynamic. One staff member said noncustodial parents often feel that child support agencies “just [want their] money” while they may be struggling to get access to their child. Moreover, the interviews emphasized how frequently parents struggled to understand how the county child support programs worked. One parent explained, “Nobody told me how the system works. I didn’t know anything until I started receiving government assistance.” Parents said they were confused about the notifications they received from the agencies, how they ended up with an open case, how much they owed, what actions they were required to take, and what recourse they had to contest a decision. Parents with existing child support cases spoke of past efforts to get information about their cases and described receiving delayed (or no) responses and feeling as though the decisions that the program made were unfair or biased against them. One parent said, “I will not sign up for a program through [the] child support system, and I can barely get a response or know what’s going on with my case.”

There are benefits to giving parents a direct child support program contact. Parents appreciated being able to contact someone directly at the county child support agency. The Journey and Right Path child support staff members said that a big part of their role was to explain the child support process to parents; the parents who participated in The Journey and Right Path had positive interactions with child support staff members who spent time explaining the process to them. The Journey and Right Path child support staff members described how they explained the broader child support process to parents and how they spent more time than they typically would answering parents' questions about their child support orders, including questions about payment options, eligibility for modifications, and the status of different enforcement efforts. Child support staff members said they used their discretion when taking enforcement actions. For example, one parent—whose driver's license had been suspended for nonpayment of child support—had applied for a trucking job. This parent and a child support worker negotiated a payment plan that would allow for the license to be reinstated so the parent could begin working and making subsequent payments. For parents new to the child support program, having a direct program contact could increase their confidence that someone would be available to them to help navigate child support issues that emerged.

Noncustodial parents' competing responsibilities limit their ability to engage with the child support program and the services offered through The Journey and Right Path. Multiple staff members noted that some parents were also involved with the criminal legal or

child welfare systems. Those systems imposed additional requirements on individuals, who had to take specific actions or fulfill financial commitments. Parents and staff members both indicated that these competing demands made it difficult for parents to prioritize engagement with child support programs—even though almost all of the parents who were interviewed emphasized their desire to play a social and financial role in the lives of their children. These observations align with a growing body of research on the intersection between the child support system and parents' other legal and financial obligations.¹⁹

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The experiences of The Journey and Right Path staff members and participants can help practitioners and policymakers understand the difficulties of program implementation and think more broadly about the role that child support programs can effectively play in offering employment and parenting services for noncustodial parents. Programs could take the steps described below—which are informed by parent and staff experiences with The Journey and Right Path—to help parents meet their child support obligations.

Create flexible parent-centered service delivery options that are responsive to the changing needs of parents. Child support agencies that are focused on providing employment and parenting services to noncustodial parents should be intentional in designing services that meet the needs of their targeted population. They could offer services tailored to the circumstances of individual parents (such as those with low-wage or part-time jobs), eliminate “all-or-nothing” participation requirements, and provide comprehensive services to address immediate needs (such as transportation and mental health resources). Program models that are inflexible about when and which services are offered may be ill-suited to adapt to the unique and changing needs of noncustodial parents with low incomes. There are few examples of rigorous studies that demonstrate that employment and parenting programs for noncustodial parents have positive effects; the existing research underscores the benefit of not taking an overly prescriptive approach.

Give parents clear and actionable information about their child support cases. Many noncustodial parents did not understand the child support process and felt excluded from conversations about their cases. The parents interviewed for this study appreciated having better access to child support staff members and the clear information they were given about their cases. Providing services that parents perceive as fair and transparent may help child support agencies overcome the embedded distrust they face within communities. The Procedural Justice–Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) project is a recent example of an effort to increase parents' perceptions of fairness and transparency. A PJAC brief that described parent perspectives underscored how important it was for parents to receive clear information about their cases, feel like their child support order amounts aligned with their ability to pay, and feel like they were being treated fairly and with respect by child support program staff members.²⁰

Incorporate parents' lived experiences and perspectives in program design. The Journey and Right Path built upon previous efforts by child support agencies to provide services that improved noncustodial parents' economic stability and their relationships with their children and coparents. However, the design of these programs was largely driven by the perspectives of program administrators and their staff members. Conversations with parents, and the broader move toward incorporating lived experiences in the design and implementation of human services programs, highlight the limitation of any program based solely on the perspective of those providing the services.²¹

Identify resources for parents seeking assistance with issues related to access and visitation. Child support programs typically do not assist with access and visitation, a common frustration voiced by the parents who were interviewed for this study and noted more broadly in the literature.²² Though there may be limitations on the direct services that child support programs can provide in this area, forging relationships with partners who can help parents address concerns about access and visitation could increase trust in the program and make parents more willing to engage in services that would improve compliance with their child support orders.

Consider lessons from other efforts to engage parents in employment programs. There are several recent examples of employment programs that specifically focused on increasing the employment and earnings of noncustodial parents. Evidence from these efforts can potentially inform future approaches. For example, multiple evaluations of subsidized employment and transitional jobs programs for noncustodial parents demonstrated that it is possible to successfully engage noncustodial parents in employment activities. Though the interventions' long-term effects on employment rates and earnings are mixed, it is clear that the prospect of paid work is a powerful incentive for engaging noncustodial parents.²³ Similarly, recent pilot programs in the Families Forward Demonstration—drawing on positive earlier findings from training programs that targeted specific, high-demand occupations—focused on providing occupational skills training to unemployed or underemployed noncustodial parents. That descriptive study provides useful reminders to map employment services for parents to both the local labor market and the skills and interests of the parents themselves, with the caveat that it may be challenging to identify parents interested in participating who meet the entry requirements for the training programs.²⁴

Reconsider the role child support agencies play in administering employment and parenting programs. Noncustodial parents expressed their substantial distrust of the child support program and skepticism that child support agencies could offer services that would meaningfully alter their current trajectories. This skepticism—born out of a combination of personal experiences and the child support program's broader reputation within the community—was a barrier both to The Journey and Right Path recruitment and to parents' ongoing engagement in its services. Few parents trusted that the programs could help them; those who did engage often saw a disconnect between the services that were offered and the supports they felt would best meet their needs (such as housing or food assistance). Of the parents who were interviewed, this distrust of services offered by the child support agencies came from previous experiences where they struggled to get responses from county child support staff members and because they felt like they had been treated unfairly. Given this distrust, it may be difficult for child support agencies to establish themselves

with noncustodial parents as credible providers of employment services. For noncustodial parent employment programs where participation is mandatory, these issues of trust and engagement may be less relevant.²⁵ For voluntary programs that need to demonstrate their value to parents, these concerns may be more acute.

CONCLUSION

Research is increasingly clear about the need to provide more comprehensive services to low-income noncustodial parents, but the role child support programs should play in providing these services remains an open question.²⁶ Difficulties engaging noncustodial parents in parenting services may also suggest that other lead agencies are better suited to provide these services. Recent evaluations of fatherhood programs operated by community-based organizations have highlighted successful approaches to parent engagement that both child support programs and other service providers could draw upon.²⁷ These evaluations, combined with findings from this descriptive study of The Journey and Right Path, underscore the benefit of strong partnerships between child support agencies and other organizations that serve parents with child support orders. However, evidence on the ability of fatherhood programs to improve employment outcomes for noncustodial parents remains limited.²⁸

The implementation experience of The Journey and Right Path aligns with existing research on the barriers faced by noncustodial parents with low incomes, and the difficulties that child support programs may encounter when attempting to increase services to these individuals. Many noncustodial parents with low incomes are disconnected from broader safety net programs and struggle to meet their basic needs. Though noncustodial parents' relationships with child support agencies are often fraught, these agencies are often one of the few social service programs with which they interact. This creates the potential opportunity for child support agencies to connect these parents to needed services.

Despite this opportunity, the historically adversarial relationship between many parents and child support agencies reduces trust and can make it difficult for these agencies to engage parents. At the same time, child support is a critical component of financial stability for millions of families, and child support agencies could take steps to potentially reduce tensions with noncustodial parents and have an impact on child support collections. Franklin and Stark Counties' child support agencies tried to respond to the needs of this population by focusing on parents who were relatively new to the child support program and attempting to provide a robust array of employment and parenting services. However, the difficulties they had enrolling parents into The Journey and Right Path and providing a mix of services that kept noncustodial parents engaged underscores the broader challenges facing these parents and the child support program. Recent efforts by federal agencies to help child support programs more systematically integrate parent perspectives in their programming may represent an opportunity to better align service offerings with parent needs.²⁹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 There are multiple terms used to describe parents who owe child support. In this brief, the research team uses “noncustodial parent” or “parent” to describe the parent who has been ordered to pay child support. This individual generally does not live with the child, though a wide variety of coparenting and custody relationships exist. The brief refers to the party ordered to receive support as the “custodial parent,” though there are others who may have legal custody of a child even if they are not the child’s parent (such as grandparents or other relatives).
- 2 Past initiatives include, most prominently, the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration Program Grants (CSPED). See, for example, Office of Child Support Enforcement, “National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration Program Grants (CSPED),” website: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/national-child-support-noncustodial-parent-employment-demonstration-program-grants-csped>, 2019.
- 3 To increase the recruitment pool the two counties expanded eligibility criteria to include parents with existing orders who were unemployed or underemployed.
- 4 See, for example, Asaph Glosser and Angela Gaffney, “Personalized Outreach: Testing Early Parent Engagement in Washington’s Child Support Program,” July (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019); Angela Gaffney, Mike Fishman, and Jared Smith, “Explainers and Case Managers: Engaging California Parents During Child Support Order Establishment,” June (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).
- 5 Office of Child Support Enforcement, *FY 2020 Preliminary Data Report* (Washington, DC: Office of Child Support Enforcement, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021).
- 6 See, for example, Elaine Sorensen, Arthur Pashi, and Melody Morales, *Characteristics of Families Served by the Child Support (IV-D) Program: 2016 U.S. Census Survey Results* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2016).
- 7 Office of Child Support Enforcement (2021).
- 8 There are numerous examples in the literature of the complexity of the child support program and the implications this has for the families it serves. Multiple tests conducted as part of OPRE’s behavioral economics portfolio illustrate this complexity and its implications for parents. See, for example, Asaph Glosser, Dan Cullinan, and Emmi Obara, *Simplify, Notify, Modify: Using Behavioral Insights to Increase Incarcerated Parents’ Requests for Child Support Modifications*, OPRE Report 2016-43 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016); Mary Farrell, Caitlin Anzelone, Dan Cullinan, and Jessica Wille, *Taking the First Step: Using Behavioral Economics to Help Incarcerated Parents Apply for Child Support Order Modifications*, OPRE Report 2014-37 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014); Peter Baird, Dan Cullinan, Patrick Landers, and Leigh Reardon, *Nudges for Child Support: Applying Behavioral Insights to Increase Collections*, OPRE Report 2016-01 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).
- 9 See, for example, Louisa Treskon and Jacqueline Groskaufmanis, “Parents’ Reflections on Their Experiences with the Child Support Program in the Procedural Justice–Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration,” August (New York: MDRC, 2022).
- 10 See, for example, Treskon and Groskaufmanis (2022).
- 11 Income eligibility limits for The Journey and Right Path shifted over the course of implementation, largely to increase the recruitment pool. However, the programs typically targeted parents who were below 200 percent of the federal poverty line.
- 12 Given difficulties in meeting enrollment targets, the two county child support agencies, in conjunction with the research team, decided to expand eligibility to include parents with existing

orders in the hope that it would increase enrollment. The counties focused on individuals who earned less than \$537 in the previous month, as well as those who had been unemployed for at least two months.

- 13 The county child support programs established the support order amounts before parents' enrollment in the study. If parents felt the support order did not reflect their actual ability to pay, enhanced child support services represented a potential opportunity for them to revisit these amounts through the order modification process.
- 14 Kathryn Edin, "Child Support in the Age of Complex Families," *Issues in Science and Technology* 34, 2 (2018): 38–45.
- 15 See, for example: Treskon, and Groskaufmanis (2022); Maureen Rosamond Waller and Robert D. Plotnick, *Child Support and Low-Income Families: Perceptions, Practices, and Policy* (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 1999); Robin Dion, Pamela Holcomb, Heather Zaveri, Angela Valdovinos D'Angelo, Elizabeth Clary, Daniel Friend, and Scott Baumgartner, *Parents and Children Together: The Complex Needs of Low-Income Men and How Responsible Fatherhood Programs Address Them*, OPRE Report 2018-18 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018); Jennifer Noyes, Lisa Klein Vogel, and Lanikque Howard, *Final Implementation Findings from the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) Evaluation* (Madison, Wisconsin: Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2018).
- 16 Parenting time, also commonly described in terms of access and visitation, refers to the formal and informal agreements coparents or guardians have regarding how and when the noncustodial parents can see and spend time with their children.
- 17 See, for example, Noyes, Vogel, and Howard (2018).
- 18 Noyes, Vogel, and Howard (2018).
- 19 See, for example, Vicki Turetsky and Maureen R. Waller, "Piling on Debt: The Intersections Between Child Support Arrears and Legal Financial Obligations," *UCLA Criminal Justice Law Review* 4, 1 (2020): 117–141; Veronica L. Horowitz, Kimberly Spencer-Suarez, Ryan Larson, Robert Stewart, Frank Edwards, Emmi Obara, and Christopher Uggen, "Dual Debtors: Child Support and Criminal Legal Financial Obligations," *Social Service Review* 96, 2 (2022): 226–267.
- 20 Treskon and Groskaufmanis (2022).
- 21 See, for example, Lisa Rau, Bethany Boland, and Jeanette Holdbrook, *Gathering and Using Family Input to Improve Child Support and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Services: Approaches from the Human Services Field*, OPRE Report 2022-177 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).
- 22 Lisa Klein Vogel, "Help Me Help You: Identifying and Addressing Barriers to Child Support Compliance," *Children and Youth Services Review* 110 (2020): 104763; Jennifer Noyes, Lisa Klein Vogel, and Lanikque Howard, *Final Implementation Findings from the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) Evaluation* (Madison, Wisconsin: Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2018).
- 23 See, for example, Elaine Sorensen, *What We Learned From Recent Federal Evaluations of Programs Serving Disadvantaged Noncustodial Parents*, OPRE Report 2020-120 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020); Patrick Landers, *Child Support Enforcement–Led Employment Services for Noncustodial Parents: In Brief* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020); Cindy Redcross, Bret Barden, Dan Bloom, Joseph Broadus, Jennifer Thompson, Sonya Williams, Sam Elkin, Randall Juras, Janaé Bonsu, Ada Tso, Barbara Fink, Whitney Engstrom, Johanna Walter, Gary Reynolds, Mary Farrell, Karen Gardiner, Arielle Sherman, Melanie Skemer, Yana Kusayeva, and Sara Muller-Ravett, *The Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration:*

- Implementation and Early Impacts of the Next Generation of Subsidized Employment Programs* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2016).
- 24 Kyla Wasserman, Lily Freedman, Zaina Rodney, and Caroline Schultz, *Connecting Parents to Occupational Training: A Partnership Between Child Support Agencies and Local Service Providers* (New York: MDRC, 2021).
- 25 Maria Cancian, Daniel R. Meyer, and Robert G. Wood, “Do Carrots Work Better than Sticks? Results from the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 41, 2 (2022): 552–578.
- 26 Lawrence M. Berger, Maria Cancian, Angela Guarin, Leslie Hodges, and Daniel R. Meyer, “Barriers to Formal Child Support Payment,” *Social Service Review* 95, 2 (2021): 312–357.
- 27 See, for example, Michelle S. Manno, Patrizia Mancini, and Charlotte O’Herron, *Implementing an Innovative Parenting Program for Fathers: Findings from the B3 Study*, OPRE Report 2019-111 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).
- 28 Erin Kramer Holmes, Braquel R. Egginton, Alan J. Hawkins, Nathan L. Robbins, and Kevin Shafer, “Do Responsible Fatherhood Programs Work? A Comprehensive Meta-Analytic Study,” *Family Relations* 69, 5 (2020): 967–982.
- 29 Elliot Hinkle, Jessica R. Kendall, Madison Sandoval-Lunn, Francesca Stern, and Jeremiah Donier, *A Starter Kit on Engaging People with Lived Experience in Child Support Programs* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2022); Jeanette Holdbrook, Lisa Rau, Bethany Boland, Shaun Stevenson, Mark Ezzo, and Imani Hutchinson, *Elevating Family Input in TANF and Child Support Programs: Resources for Program Staff, Leaders, and Families*, OPRE Report 2023-024 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022), website: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/toolkit/toolkit-elevating-family-input-tanf-and-child-support-programs-resources-program-staff>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the program staff members in Stark and Franklin Counties who participated in virtual interviews for this study. Their commitment to the implementation of The Journey and Right Path and their willingness to share their experiences were critical to making this work possible. We thank the parents who participated in virtual interviews for sharing their experiences, perspectives, and insight with us.

This paper would not have been possible without the work of many individuals at MDRC and Abt Associates. Megan Millenky, Caroline Mage, Annie Utterback, Dan Bloom, John Hutchins, and Karin Martinson reviewed drafts of the brief and provided valuable comments. Jose Morales was an especially valuable partner in this effort. He deftly coordinated the production of the paper, assisted with fact-checking, and provided an equity review. Jillian Verrillo edited the report and Ann Kottner prepared it for publication.

This brief and the project for which it was developed are funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, through contract number HHS-P2332015000591. The project officer is Megan Reid.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following organizations and individuals that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Arnold Ventures, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JPB Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation and Sandler Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our website: www.mdrc.org.

OPRE REPORT 2024-063
MARCH 2024

AUTHORS: Asaph Glosser, Hannah Engle, Sophie Shanshory, and Keri West

SUBMITTED TO: Megan Reid, Project Officer, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

PROJECT DIRECTOR: Megan Millenky, MDRC, 200 Vesey Street, 23rd Floor, New York, NY 10281

CONTRACT NUMBER: HHS-P2332015000591

This report is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Glosser, Asaph, Hannah Engle, Sophie Shanshory, and Keri West. 2024. "Employment and Parenting Services for Noncustodial Parents: A Descriptive Study." OPRE Report 2024-063 Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

DISCLAIMER: The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This report and other reports sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation are available at www.acf.hhs.gov/opre.

Connect with OPRE

