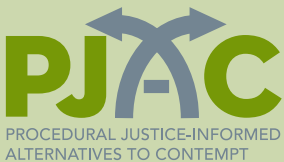


# Procedural Justice in Child Support Enforcement

Lessons from an Implementation Study of the  
Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives  
to Contempt Demonstration



Louisa Treskon  
Douglas Phillips  
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This report was prepared as part of the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration and evaluation, funded by the Office of Child Support Enforcement, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. MDRC and its subcontractors—MEF Associates and the Center for Court Innovation—are under contract with the Georgia Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Services to evaluate the PJAC demonstration project.

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.

# OVERVIEW

**T**he Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration project integrated principles of procedural justice into enforcement practices in six child support agencies across the United States. Procedural justice is perceptions of fairness in processes that resolve disputes and result in decisions. Research has shown that if people perceive a process to be fair, they will be more likely to comply with the outcome of that process, whether or not the outcome was favorable to them.

Child support agencies aim to secure payments from noncustodial parents to support the well-being of their children. The target population for the PJAC demonstration project was noncustodial parents who were at the point of being referred to the legal system for civil contempt of court because they had not met their child support obligations, yet had been determined to have the ability to pay. Eligible parents had at least several months of nonpayment or severe underpayment when they were enrolled in PJAC, often owed a significant amount of child support debt, and had long histories with the child support program. The target population represents a group of parents who are especially difficult to obtain payment from.

The PJAC demonstration project aimed to address parents' reasons for nonpayment, improve the consistency of their payments, and promote their positive engagement with the child support program and custodial parents. Between 2018 and 2020, over 11,000 noncustodial parents who met these criteria across the six study sites were randomly assigned either to a group offered PJAC services or to a group who instead moved into the business-as-usual contempt process. This report draws from several data sources, including interviews with parents, child support staff members, and staff members from the Office of Child Support Enforcement; a PJAC-specific management information system; administrative databases; courtroom observations; and a staff survey.

Part of a series of publications from the PJAC demonstration, this report presents the first systematic analysis of the implementation of the PJAC model. The data show that principles of procedural justice can be integrated into existing child support processes. Staff members implementing the PJAC model described various strategies to incorporate procedural justice principles into their interactions with parents and overwhelmingly felt that the PJAC model was beneficial to parents. Staff members integrated principles of procedural justice into their interactions with parents and also put them into action through informational materials, enhanced child support services, and referrals to outside support services. Child support agencies also experienced challenges in implementing the PJAC model, for example in locating noncustodial parents and engaging them in services. Staff members could not reach 33 percent of the noncustodial parents randomly assigned to PJAC services within 12 months of enrollment. This finding accords with program designers' understanding that noncustodial parents who are at the point of being referred to the legal system for civil contempt of court are a particularly hard group to engage in services.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report and the research upon which it is based were funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE). The Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) evaluation grant was overseen by the Georgia Department of Human Services. Review of study design and analysis was conducted by ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). We are grateful to many individuals within these offices for their comments on previous drafts, including Michael Hayes, Tanya Johnson, and Kimberly Curtis with OCSE, and Megan Reid, Nicole Constance, and Pooja Curtin with OPRE.

We are grateful to the many MDRC, MEF Associates, and Center for Court Innovation staff members who made this report possible. Danielle Cummings, Adelaide Currin, Asaph Glosser, Brit Henderson, Elise Jensen, Yana Kusayeva, Caroline Mage, Zaina Rodney, Bright Sarfo, Riley Webster, and Olivia Williams conducted site visits and numerous interviews and courtroom observations, along with the authors. Peter Baird, Rebecca Behrmann, Adelaide Currin, Asaph Glosser, Dina Israel, Yana Kusayeva, Caroline Mage, Zaina Rodney, Bright Sarfo, and Riley Webster acted as site liaisons. Staff members from Decision Information Resources, Inc. conducted interviews with parents. Danielle Cummings and Brit Henderson oversaw and guided our data team. Olivia Williams and Sally Dai analyzed data from the PJAC management information system. Olivia Williams, Jennifer Hausler, and Michelle Dixon analyzed participant baseline data. Nicholas Commins processed the staff survey data and Jennifer Hausler analyzed the data. Mathew MacFarlane helped to program and field the staff survey. And finally, Sara Ellis analyzed the parent interview data.

This report benefited greatly from review by Asaph Glosser, Jennifer Hausler, Brit Henderson, John Hutchins, Joshua Malbin, Daniel Meyer, and Cynthia Miller.

From the Center for Court Innovation, Kate Wurmfeld contributed a great deal to previous work that fed into this report, and Rachel Swaner helped to develop questions for the staff survey.

The authors sincerely appreciate the dedicated case managers, supervisors, attorneys, and other staff members at the child support agencies participating in the PJAC demonstration: the Arizona Division of Child Support Services, Maricopa County; the California Department of Child Support Services, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties; the Ohio Office of Child Support, Franklin and Stark Counties; the Michigan Office of Child Support, Muskegon County; and the Virginia Division of Child Support Enforcement, Newport News and Richmond District Offices.


We are also grateful to additional OCSE staff members who contributed to the development, launch, and oversight of the PJAC demonstration: Sharon Henderson, Barbara Lacina, and Elaine Sorenson.

We thank Joshua Malbin, who reviewed and edited the report, and Ann Kottner, who designed it, formatted it, and prepared it for publication.

Last, we thank the many parents who participated in interviews and shared their experiences. Their voices are invaluable to this study and we are deeply grateful for their contributions.

*The Authors*





**T**he primary goal of child support programs is to improve children’s well-being by ensuring they receive financial support from both parents. Child support programs help families obtain this support by locating parents, setting financial obligations, and enforcing those obligations. Child support programs have a broad reach: In 2017, they served 15 million children—or roughly one in five children in the United States—and collected over \$32 billion for parents and children.<sup>1</sup> The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) helps states, territories, and tribes develop, manage, and operate their local child support programs.<sup>2</sup>

When a child does not live with both parents, the parent with whom the child does not live, known as the “noncustodial parent,” may be responsible for a share of the costs associated with raising the child. Some families receive child support from noncustodial parents regularly, most commonly paid through wage withholding.<sup>3</sup> For other families, payments may be sporadic, partial, or not received at all. Nationally, among all custodial parents owed child support payments in 2017, 24 percent received only part of the amount owed them during that year and 30 percent received no payments at all.<sup>4</sup>

Parents who do not make their child support payments can be subject to enforcement measures, including legal proceedings for civil contempt of court that require them to attend court hearings. Parents may face arrest or jail if they fail to appear in court or fail to meet the obligations of their child support orders.<sup>5</sup> The civil contempt process can take many months or even

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<sup>1</sup> Office of Child Support Enforcement (2018).

<sup>2</sup> OCSE is within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>3</sup> Office of Child Support Enforcement (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Grall (2020). Note that this 2017 statistic is based on all families owed child support, not just those receiving services from the child support program.

<sup>5</sup> Treskon and Skemer (2021).

years to resolve. OCSE developed the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration project to adapt and apply principles of procedural justice to child support compliance efforts as an alternative to the standard contempt process. Six child support agencies across the country participated (see Figure 1). These six child support agencies applied to OCSE through a competitive process to receive funding to operate PJAC.<sup>6</sup>

**FIGURE 1.** Child Support Agencies Participating in the PJAC Demonstration



Procedural justice, sometimes referred to as “procedural fairness,” is the idea that “how individuals regard the justice system is tied more to the perceived fairness of the process and how they were treated rather than to the perceived fairness of the *outcome*.”<sup>7</sup> This approach has produced notable increases in compliance and general adherence to the law in criminal justice and judicial settings.<sup>8</sup> The goal of the PJAC demonstration was to test whether procedural justice could improve the regularity and completeness of child support payments among parents about to be referred to civil contempt for nonpayment of child support. If successful, the PJAC model could reduce poverty and increase financial stability for children. At the same time it could reduce the use of a coercive approach that can take years to resolve and reduce noncustodial parents’ interactions with the legal system, including arrests for child support warrants or jail time.

MDRC, in collaboration with research partners at MEF Associates and the Center for Court Innovation, is leading a random assignment study of the model’s effectiveness. Management of the evaluation grant funding from OCSE is provided by the Georgia Division of Child Support Services. The purpose of this report—the first in a series to present overall findings from the evaluation—is to describe the implementation of PJAC services using qualitative and quantitative data. Before presenting those results, the next sections describe the characteristics of the parents who were enrolled in the study, introduce the PJAC model, and summarize the research questions and data sources that are the focus of this report.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the PJAC demonstration, see Mage, Baird, and Miller (2019).

<sup>7</sup> Gold (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Berman and Gold (2012).

# About Noncustodial Parents in the PJAC Study

The target population for the PJAC demonstration was noncustodial parents who were at the point of being referred to civil contempt of court because they had not met the terms of their child support obligations, yet had been determined by their child support agencies to have the ability to meet them (in other words, were able to pay, but unwilling to do so).<sup>9</sup> Between 2018 and 2020, over 11,000 noncustodial parents who met these criteria were randomly assigned either to a group offered PJAC services or to a group who instead moved into the business-as-usual contempt process.

Before child support agencies file for contempt against a noncustodial parent, that parent's case will have had at least several months of nonpayment or severe underpayment, and the agency will have already tried other outreach and enforcement measures. In other words, parents eligible for the PJAC study had been subjected to enforcement actions for months or years before random assignment, and yet still had not met the terms of their child support obligations. As such, these noncustodial parents represent a group who are expected to be especially difficult to reach and obtain payment from.

[Characteristics of noncustodial parents](#) enrolled in the PJAC study are presented in Figure 2, with additional detail available in Appendix Table A.1.<sup>10</sup> Since the noncustodial parents enrolled in the PJAC study had generally been out of payment compliance for a long time, they owed large amounts of child support debt (\$26,000, on average). They often had long histories with the child support program (as evidenced by the average age of parents' oldest cases, at 10 years). They also often had very sporadic contact with the child support program. Comprehensive data are not available, but early case studies at three of the agencies participating in PJAC revealed that parents had not been in touch with those agencies for about two years at the time of enrollment in the study.<sup>11</sup>

The average noncustodial parent in the sample was 38 years old at enrollment. Most had more than one child support case, and 8 percent were custodial parents on other child support cases. More than a third had a previous filing for contempt of court for not meeting child support obligations. These characteristics reveal a population with years of experience with child support programs and multiple barriers to payment (significant debt, multiple financial obligations, etc.). Previous research has shown that fathers with low incomes and fathers of color owe most child support debt.<sup>12</sup> While income information is not available for parents in the PJAC study, their gender and racial/ethnic backgrounds align with those in past studies of interventions to help parents make reliable child support payments.<sup>13</sup> Ninety percent of parents enrolled in PJAC were men, and 62 percent were either Black or Hispanic.

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<sup>9</sup> Each state must set its own policy for how to determine ability to pay, an assessment that is not always straightforward. At the agencies participating in PJAC, enforcement workers and legal staff members assessed ability to pay by checking whether a parent was receiving public benefits or was incarcerated. In either case, it would be unlikely that the parent would be able to pay. They also checked state and national databases to assess the parent's formal employment history and may have looked at the parent's social media accounts for evidence of employment not captured in these databases—that is, self-employment, contract employment, and off-the-books employment. For more information, see Treskon and Skemer (2021).

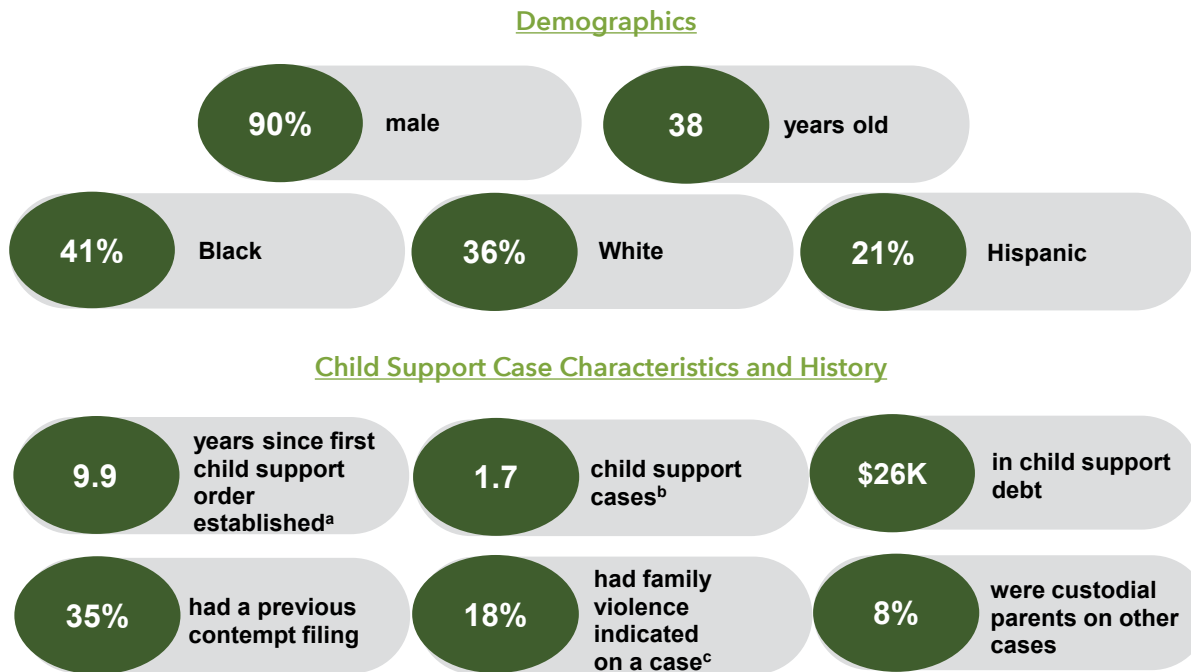
<sup>10</sup> Cummings (2020).

<sup>11</sup> Cummings (2020).

<sup>12</sup> Sorensen, Koball, Pomper, and Zibman (2009); Brito, Pate, and Wong (2020).

<sup>13</sup> Wasserman, Freedman, Rodney, and Schultz (2021); Cancian, Meyer, and Wood (2019).

**FIGURE 2.** Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents at PJAC Enrollment



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on child support administrative records.

NOTES: This figure includes the full study sample: parents enrolled from February 1, 2018 through September 30, 2020.

<sup>a</sup>This measure is calculated among cases open at the time of study enrollment only.

<sup>b</sup>This measure includes cases in which the sample member was the noncustodial parent only (as opposed to cases in which the sample member was the custodial parent or child).

<sup>c</sup>This measure indicates family violence for either the noncustodial parent or the custodial parent on a noncustodial parent's cases, with the exception of one location (Arizona), where the data only include instances where the noncustodial parent was indicated as the victim of family violence.

The demographics of noncustodial parents in PJAC have important implications for thinking about their previous experiences with the child support program, law enforcement, and employment. Men of color, the majority of noncustodial parents in PJAC, face higher incarceration rates and more discrimination in the labor market. These issues reinforce one another, which leads many to experience long periods of unemployment and underemployment.<sup>14</sup> This general reality aligns with PJAC case managers' descriptions of inconsistent, low-wage employment and challenges to obtaining employment as major reasons PJAC noncustodial parents do not make child support payments.<sup>15</sup> Given their employment histories, noncustodial parents in PJAC may have order amounts that are unrealistic to pay in full consistently. Men of color may be particularly likely to face this situation; for example, minimum orders may not adequately reflect the systemic disadvantage they face in the labor market.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Brito, Pate, and Wong (2020).

<sup>15</sup> Cummings (2020).

<sup>16</sup> A future PJAC demonstration report, slated for release in 2023, will offer a more comprehensive discussion of equity issues in the child support program.



# The PJAC Service Model

Child support case managers typically have infrequent contact with parents on cases where non-custodial parents pay their monthly obligations. But when noncustodial parents are not meeting their obligations, child support programs usually employ several methods to obtain payment, such as suspending licenses, intercepting tax refunds, seizing bank accounts, or placing liens on assets.<sup>17</sup> If these tools are unsuccessful, case managers can refer nonpaying parents to the legal system for civil contempt or (rarely) for criminal nonsupport. Civil contempt proceedings require noncustodial parents to attend court hearings and may lead to arrest or jail if they fail to appear in court or fail to meet the obligations of their child support orders.

Civil contempt is a coercive process that may feel impersonal and difficult to understand to parents. The PJAC model offers an alternative. PJAC diverts a noncustodial parent from the contempt process to a trained PJAC case manager who works jointly with both parents. This relationship between the case manager and parents is infused with principles of procedural justice (see Box 1) and is the common thread that runs through all aspects of service delivery.

Figure 3 illustrates the five main components of the PJAC model, also described below and in greater detail in later sections of this report.<sup>18</sup> When these efforts are unsuccessful in achieving compliance, PJAC case managers may take further enforcement actions, including contempt, while working with the noncustodial parent to resolve barriers to payment.

- **Case review:** A case manager reviews a noncustodial parent's case history to inform the case manager's approach to the rest of the components.
- **Outreach and engagement:** The case manager makes initial contact with custodial and noncustodial parents to introduce the program and learn about their perspectives on their case, followed by continued contact.

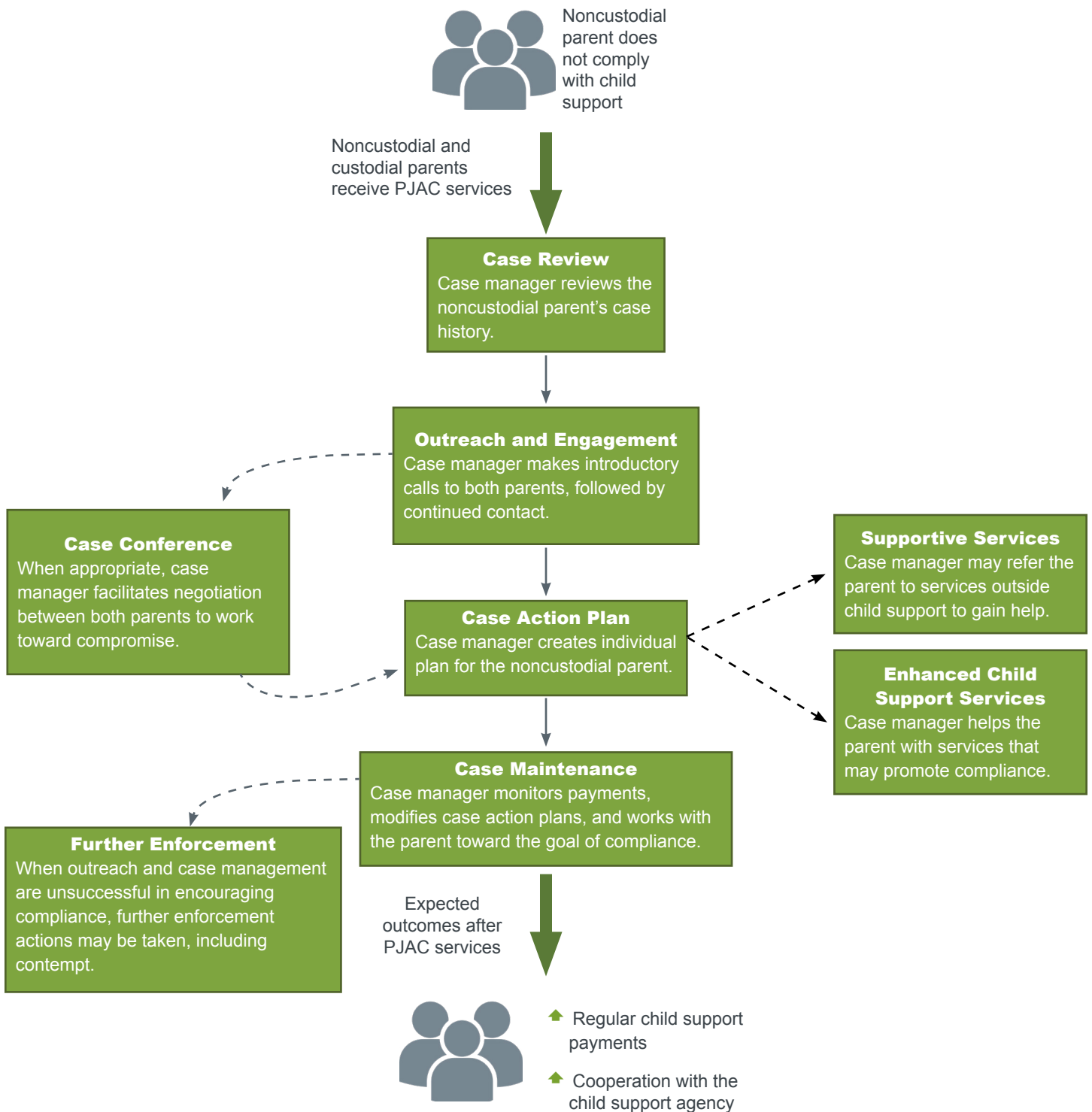
## BOX 1 The Five Key Elements of Procedural Justice as Applied to the Child Support Context

- **Respect:** Parents should believe they were treated with dignity and respect and their concerns were taken seriously.
- **Understanding:** Parents should understand the child support process and have their questions answered.
- **Voice:** Parents should have a chance to be heard by sharing their perspectives and expressing their concerns.
- **Neutrality:** Parents should perceive the decision-making process to be impartial.
- **Helpfulness:** Parents should feel that the child support agency was helpful and interested in addressing their situations.

<sup>17</sup> A lien is a claim upon property to prevent that property from being transferred or sold until a debt is satisfied.

<sup>18</sup> The PJAC model also includes enhanced child support services, supportive services, and further enforcement, but these are not considered main components as they are provided to parents as needed and not all parents are expected to receive them.

**FIGURE 3.** The PJAC Model



- **Case conference:** The case manager facilitates a back-and-forth exchange between parents to identify reasons for nonpayment, come to a preliminary agreement about addressing these reasons for nonpayment, and develop a plan to achieve payment compliance.
- **Case action plan:** The case manager and the noncustodial parent create a plan for the noncustodial parent to become compliant with the child support order. The case manager can connect the parent to enhanced child support services or other supportive services outside the child support agency.
- **Case management:** The case manager monitors payments, meets with the noncustodial parent, and modifies the case action plan as necessary to help the noncustodial parent attain or sustain compliance.

## The PJAC Implementation Study: Research Questions and Data Sources

Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data sources (listed in Box 2), this report addresses the following research questions:

- How were PJAC services staffed? What roles did staff members play, and what training and implementation support did they receive?
- What did the implementation of PJAC’s components look like? What were the structure and content of services, and how often were they delivered? How did this structure, content, and frequency compare with the services that were planned?
- How did PJAC implementation change over time, and how did implementation vary across the participating agencies?
- What best practices and barriers to implementation were identified?

Principles of procedural justice had not been implemented in child support agencies systematically before the PJAC demonstration. Accordingly, this study also explored whether those principles could be successfully implemented in a child support setting, and how case managers would adapt to the PJAC approach. Throughout, this report gives examples of how the six participating agencies—hereafter called “sites”—adapted the PJAC model to their local contexts, and discusses the various ways they implemented it. Finally, by providing a thorough assessment of PJAC’s implementation, this report provides context for future reports that will describe PJAC’s effects on the services and enforcement actions (including referrals to contempt) received by the group offered PJAC services, and on payment compliance.

## BOX 2

### PJAC Implementation Study Data Sources

- **Staff and partner interviews:** 196 interviews with PJAC and business-as-usual staff members and referral service partners, conducted in the spring of 2019 and the summer of 2020 (some staff members interviewed twice, once in each round)\*
- **Parent interviews:** interviews with 121 PJAC and business-as-usual custodial and noncustodial parents, conducted in the fall of 2020†
- **Staff survey:** a survey of 59 PJAC and business-as-usual case managers, conducted in the spring and summer of 2020
- **OCSE interviews:** interviews with 3 OCSE staff members, conducted in the winter of 2019-2020
- **PJAC management information system:** PJAC case-management data documenting the rates and details of parent contacts, case conferences, case action plans, enhanced child support services, and referrals to supportive services
- **Child support administrative records:** administrative data for PJAC and business-as-usual cases extracted for participants, including years since case establishment, previous contempt filings, amount of child support debt, payment history, and any history of domestic violence
- **Court observations:** in-person observations of PJAC and business-as-usual contempt hearings conducted in the spring of 2019
- **Site-specific PJAC service-delivery plans:** initial service-delivery plans outlining minimum expectations for service delivery for each PJAC program component

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NOTES: A management information system is a computer-based system used to capture information about program participants and the activities they engage in with the program's staff. Administrative records are data collected while administering a program or public service.

\* Interviews with child support staff members, partners, parents, and OCSE staff members were all semistructured. In a semistructured interview, the interviewer asks the interviewee open-ended questions from a list of formal questions that align with the research questions. As a result the interviewees were not always asked the same questions.

† Parent interviews were conducted for descriptive purposes and are not intended to be representative of the larger PJAC study sample.

## PJAC Staffing

The six PJAC sites all staffed the same core functions: site manager, case managers, and random assignment staff members, though they varied slightly in terms of the numbers of people in each role. Additionally, a couple of sites developed additional “specialty” roles that focused on specific tasks in the PJAC service model.<sup>19</sup> All of these roles are summarized below:

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<sup>19</sup> Some specialty staff members only worked on the PJAC project part time and performed other duties at the child support agencies outside of their PJAC-specific work.

## Core PJAC Roles

- **PJAC site manager:** ensured that the project was planned, implemented, and evaluated successfully; provided supervision and support to PJAC case managers and oversaw all aspects of the project. Sites had either one or two site managers.
- **Case manager:** implemented PJAC case management services with PJAC parents. Sites had from three to four case managers during the first half of service delivery, and then from five to six case managers in the latter half of service delivery, after additional grant funding became available.
- **Random assignment staff member:** screened cases for PJAC eligibility and randomly assigned parents to either the group offered PJAC services or the business-as-usual group using a web-based enrollment tool provided by MDRC. Most sites had between one and three staff members conducting random assignment, though a couple of sites engaged more enforcement staff members in the effort.

## Specialty PJAC Roles

- **PJAC attorney:** Some sites had attorneys who handled all PJAC contempt hearings, while others did not.
- **Locating staff member:** Some sites had staff members who specialized in locating parents who were otherwise difficult to reach by searching non-child support databases or social media. Others had PJAC case managers do all the work to locate parents.

OCSE left hiring decisions regarding PJAC case managers to sites' discretion; site managers were typically responsible for making these hires. In interviews, site managers described traits they sought in PJAC case managers, including previous experience with child support processes, adaptability, an interest in social work, and a desire to help people.<sup>20</sup> At all PJAC sites, most PJAC case managers hired already worked in child support and were already familiar with business-as-usual case management processes. Case managers' motivations for applying for PJAC included wanting to try a new approach to case management and being unhappy with traditional enforcement. Overall, PJAC case managers had less experience with child support casework than their business-as-usual counterparts, with a median of 5 years of experience relative to business-as-usual case managers' 11 years of experience.

According to a staff survey, PJAC case managers had a median caseload of 255 cases while business-as-usual case managers reported a median caseload of 1,155. PJAC was designed to give its case managers smaller caseloads than business-as-usual case managers had, because PJAC case management was expected to be more time-intensive and the parents in PJAC were expected to have more difficult cases. PJAC cases were all nonpaying by the time PJAC case managers started working them,

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<sup>20</sup> Groskaufmanis (2021).

while business-as-usual case managers' larger caseloads usually included a mix of paying and non-paying cases, and paying cases generally require very little attention. Notably, all PJAC sites hired additional PJAC case managers over the course of the demonstration as caseloads grew and workloads became unsustainable (see the *Case Management* section below for further discussion of caseload size).

During the early months of implementation, several PJAC sites saw some turnover among PJAC case managers. PJAC site managers explained that some PJAC case managers recognized the PJAC approach was not a good fit for them. Some asked to return to traditional child support enforcement; others left for reasons unrelated to PJAC (because they moved, left the child support program for other jobs, etc.).

## Training and Ongoing Support

The procedural justice–informed approach to case management required specialized training and a different skill set than that used in business-as-usual enforcement. Before sites launched PJAC services, OCSE and external subject-matter experts provided [training](#) to all PJAC site and case managers, focusing on four main content areas: procedural justice concepts and applications, responses to domestic violence, dispute resolution, and trauma-informed practices.<sup>21</sup> Sites also conducted their own complementary training to reinforce the standard training content or increase case managers' capabilities in additional areas such as customer service, financial management, and countering implicit bias (that is, unconscious attitudes toward groups of people). Because of the specialized training provided to PJAC case managers, they were far more likely than business-as-usual case managers to report on the staff survey that they had received training in domestic violence responses (95 percent versus 58 percent), trauma-informed care (76 percent versus 31 percent), dispute resolution (92 percent versus 46 percent), and mediation (89 percent versus 31 percent).

Staff members at some PJAC sites reported challenges with ensuring that case managers hired later in the demonstration—after the initial PJAC training was completed—received the same level of instruction as case managers who joined in the beginning. These later PJAC hires were often trained individually by PJAC site managers and shadowed existing PJAC case managers to gain the knowledge and skills they needed to implement PJAC case management practices, instead of receiving initial training from OCSE and external subject-matter experts.

The PJAC demonstration included several other forms of ongoing training and technical assistance support:

- Monthly case-analysis calls with OCSE and PJAC staff members to discuss current cases and identify areas for improvement
- Monthly learning-community webinars that allowed staff members from all PJAC sites to share knowledge and practices

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<sup>21</sup> Trauma-informed approaches train staff members to recognize the symptoms of trauma and to understand its effects on behavior. For more detailed information about PJAC training, see Rodney (2019).

- Annual all-site conferences with refresher training sessions and opportunities for site staff members to share experiences, challenges, and solutions<sup>22</sup>

When surveyed about this ongoing support, PJAC case managers reported that all three forms were helpful, but the annual conference was the most helpful.

## Case Reviews

The first step for a PJAC case manager upon being assigned a new noncustodial parent was to conduct an in-depth review of all the parent's cases, including the parent's payment history and previous enforcement actions, along with other data such as employment and criminal justice records. PJAC case managers could also review parents' social media activity, which could help them locate parents and determine whether they were working. Case reviews also included a thorough screening for domestic violence (see Box 3). In interviews, OCSE staff members described case review as the foundation of the PJAC model. One goal of the case review was to understand the previous interactions parents had with the child support program, to identify where a lack of procedural justice in the past—for example, making decisions without consulting the noncustodial parent (lack of *voice*) or not adjusting orders when financial circumstances changed (lack of *respect, helpfulness*)—may have led to an unwillingness to pay. As is described later in this report, the case review informed subsequent work with parents.

The case review focused on the noncustodial parent and all associated custodial parents, so that the case manager could understand the full scope of the noncustodial parent's involvement with the child support program and better address the parent's underlying reasons for not paying. The case manager examined past conflicts or areas where one or both parents may have perceived the previous process to be biased or unfair.

In business-as-usual case management, case review generally has a narrower scope and is more focused on ensuring an enforcement action (such as suspending a driver's license or sending a case to contempt) is appropriate, given the specifics of the case. It is less likely that a case manager will use a case review to try to understand and address reasons for nonpayment (though some child support agencies' case managers may be more likely than others to do so).

A case review involved looking for information about several topics related to a case. It also involved looking through several databases and information systems. PJAC case managers described collecting a great deal of information about a case's history, including the date of last contact with parents and records of previous contempt hearings, instances of domestic violence, or errors on cases. Case managers said that identifying previous errors was a valuable tool for engaging parents because they could acknowledge past mistakes and, in some cases, fix them even before they made contact with parents. For example, one PJAC case manager described conducting a case review that revealed a noncustodial parent's child had been adopted years ago, ending the parent's legal responsibility to pay

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<sup>22</sup> Rodney (2019).



### BOX 3

#### Domestic Violence and the PJAC Demonstration

The PJAC model places a high priority on parent safety. It required all PJAC sites to implement domestic violence plans that included domestic violence screenings and safeguards for services that involved both parents, such as case conferences or dispute-resolution services. Additionally, PJAC sites established partnerships with domestic violence service providers. According to child support records, 18 percent of non-custodial parents in PJAC had a reported history of domestic violence on at least one child support case at the time of study enrollment. PJAC case managers identified these past domestic violence concerns during case reviews.

When engaging parents whose cases had documented histories of domestic violence, PJAC case managers would reach out first to the parent indicated as the victim (who could be either the custodial or noncustodial parent). For all other cases, case managers always attempted to reach the custodial parent first (as custodial parents were more often the alleged victims of domestic violence) to conduct additional screening for instances of domestic violence not documented in child support records, and to determine whether that parent had any other safety concerns, before attempting to reach the noncustodial parent. Case managers conducted additional screening for domestic violence with noncustodial parents as well, recognizing that previous program and staff biases about domestic violence in the broader business-as-usual enforcement approach may have led to noncustodial parents' domestic violence concerns being overlooked or discounted. For cases with known domestic violence or other safety concerns, PJAC case managers would typically avoid bringing the two parents together, unless they had confirmation that both parents felt safe meeting.

child support. Finding that information allowed the case manager to remove \$13,000 in child support debt immediately. Case managers also described the case review process as important for identifying which enhanced child support services might be most helpful for each case, allowing them to tailor services to individual needs (as described in greater detail in the *Enhanced Child Support Services* section below).

Virtually all parents assigned to PJAC services (99 percent) had case reviews completed within a year of enrollment. PJAC sites had similar completion rates for the case review. Case reviews typically happened within a month (on average, 27 days passed from enrollment to a completed case review). This average time varied among sites from 9 days to 56 days.

PJAC staff members explained that a case review could take less than an hour for a noncustodial parent with a single case, or several hours for one with multiple cases, since each case required an independent review. While PJAC case managers found case reviews informative, they said the time it took to complete them took away from their time engaging with parents and tackling other case-management responsibilities.

PJAC staff members also said case reviews helped them find up-to-date contact information for parents. For many PJAC cases, the child support program had not been in contact with parents for several years, so the phone numbers and addresses on file were often out of date. They described accessing



many databases looking for updated contact information, including those maintained by departments of corrections and police, motor vehicle departments, the Social Security Administration, the agencies that manage Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and financial institutions. They also sought other information that might speak to a parent's ability to pay, such as information on a parent's unemployment, inability to work, or homelessness. Depending on the case, a case manager might access more than 10 different databases and information systems, which could be time-consuming.

Overall, PJAC case managers described case reviews as the basis for future work with parents. While case reviews took time, they also provided a great deal of information that could help case managers engage parents while ensuring their safety, and that could guide the later delivery of PJAC services. PJAC case managers reported using what they learned through the review to inform their approaches to case conferences and enhanced child support services. Identifying previous mistakes on cases offered opportunities to correct those errors and demonstrate their *helpfulness*.

## Outreach and Engagement

Case managers conducted initial outreach to parents following the case reviews. They tailored their approaches to parents based on what they learned during the case reviews. In these first opportunities to speak directly with parents, they often had the chance to acknowledge previous mistakes and offer solutions. [Outreach and engagement activities](#) informed by procedural justice principles allowed parents to voice their perspectives and experiences. In contrast, business-as-usual efforts to reach out and engage parents usually involve automated communications telling parents of missed payments or pending enforcement actions.<sup>23</sup> During the initial contact, case managers aimed to explain the PJAC program and answer questions parents had (to help with parents' *understanding*), to obtain updated information about the case from the perspective of each parent (allowing parents to have a *voice*), to conduct additional screening for domestic violence, and, when appropriate, to schedule a case conference (discussed below).<sup>24</sup> This initial outreach was the first opportunity for case managers to demonstrate the procedural justice principles of *respect* and *neutrality* and to begin building an improved relationship between parents and the child support program. See Box 4 for an example of how this initial contact affected one parent.

The focus of these first interactions was to describe the PJAC project and attempt to engage the parents in services, a challenging task as many of these parents had had limited or largely negative interactions with the child support program in the past.<sup>25</sup> The PJAC model specifies that a case manager should make contact with a custodial parent first to determine whether there are any safety concerns or other issues between the parents that may be helpful to know (for example, issues related to par-

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<sup>23</sup> Kusayeva (2020).

<sup>24</sup> Kusayeva (2020).

<sup>25</sup> Kusayeva (2020).

## BOX 4

### Case Study 1: Kyle\*

When the mother of—and custodial parent to—Kyle’s children requested public assistance, she was told that she needed to open a case with child support in order to receive benefits. She and Kyle had a good relationship: making parenting decisions for their two children together and shuttling the kids back and forth on weekends. When the order was opened, it formalized the financial support that Kyle said he was already often supplying to his children.

Not long after his child support case was opened, however, Kyle applied for disability, and eventually was on government assistance himself. His child support obligation persisted and even increased, although Kyle did not understand why or how to stop it. Unable to work, Kyle could not make payments—which led to the suspension of his driver’s license, a large amount of debt, and a warrant for his arrest.

Kyle first connected with Emily, his PJAC case manager, after he was brought to jail on that warrant. After talking to Kyle and learning more about his situation, Emily was able to make corrections to his case: stopping the monthly obligation that he could no longer pay due to his disability, halting the accumulation of child support debt, and reinstating his driver’s license. “I was very glad that I had met her,” Kyle said, “because I had no clue what I was going to do to try and get this done.”

Emily was also a resource to Kyle beyond child support matters. For instance, when Kyle lost his Social Security card—Emily helped him navigate the process to replace it. As Kyle said:

[One thing] I would suggest to case workers at [the child support agency]: When they get somebody who is starting to get behind [on their payments], they should find out why and offer up this program. Right now, people are being laid off and losing their jobs due to COVID-19. I’m sure they’re getting a boatload of people that are behind on child support. If they offered to help people [who are behind on payments] with this program, then ... the county jail wouldn’t be as full as it is with people sitting there in child support situations.

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NOTE: \*Names changed to protect anonymity.

enting time), before making contact with the noncustodial parent (see Box 3).<sup>26</sup> Issues of this kind can affect a parent’s willingness to pay. In interviews, OCSE staff members offered additional context for this model guideline, noting that a noncustodial parent who was able to pay but reluctant to do so—a parent in PJAC’s intended target population—might be unwilling to pay because of a conflict or poor relationship with the other parent. Getting the perspective of the custodial parent first could inform the case manager’s approach to making contact with the noncustodial parent.

Besides using principles of procedural justice both to give parents a *voice* and to help them *understand* the process, the PJAC model also emphasizes using a range of contact methods, including less

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<sup>26</sup> In some instances, a case manager would make contact with a noncustodial parent first, for example if the case manager could not reach the custodial parent after several attempts, or if the noncustodial parent was the victim of domestic violence.

traditional modes such as text messages and social media. Case managers reached out in multiple ways to demonstrate *helpfulness*, by communicating with parents in the ways that work best for them. According to the staff survey, both PJAC and business-as-usual case managers were most likely to call parents on the telephone. Still, PJAC case managers were much more likely to report that they used text messages and social media regularly (either weekly or daily) to reach noncustodial parents than their business-as-usual peers (92 percent versus 23 percent and 40 percent versus 14 percent, respectively).

## Reaching PJAC Parents

Noncustodial parents were more challenging to reach than custodial parents. PJAC case managers successfully made contact with 67 percent of noncustodial parents within one year of enrollment, and it took an average of three attempts to reach them the first time. Meanwhile they made contact with 77 percent of custodial parents within a year, and it took them only two attempts to do it. PJAC case managers were able to reach both the noncustodial parent and at least one of the custodial parents associated with the noncustodial parent's cases for 56 percent of noncustodial parents. Site averages ranged from 42 percent in Michigan to 64 percent in Stark County, Ohio.

The lack of recent contact with PJAC participants contributed to the challenges case managers faced when trying to reach parents. As mentioned above, an early analysis of case-review data at three PJAC sites revealed that, on average, at the time of enrollment in the study, noncustodial parents had not been in contact with the child support agencies for 24 months. For custodial parents, the average was 19 months.<sup>27</sup> The case-review data also showed that in Michigan, where case managers had the lowest success rate in reaching noncustodial parents, those parents had also gone the longest since their last contact with the child support agency—nearly three years. That long lapse in contact probably contributed to the low rate of successful contacts in PJAC. It is worth noting that even the last successful contact may have been only an assumption of contact. For example, a letter sent to a parent and not returned was assumed to have been received by the parent, whether or not there was any confirmation that the parent actually received it. For more information about how PJAC staff members attempted to locate parents whose contact information had become outdated, see Box 5, which describes enhanced investigation efforts.

In interviews, a few PJAC parents described being excited about the program when their case managers first explained it to them: It seemed like a program that would help them bring their cases into compliance without focusing on enforcement actions that they often perceived as punitive. A few parents also said that they were initially skeptical because the program sounded too good to be true based on their previous experiences with child support. Not all interviewed parents recalled whether they had been reached and informed about PJAC services. The prerequisite for being asked for an interview was having had at least one contact with a PJAC case manager. But having a contact recorded did not necessarily mean that a parent engaged with the case worker or PJAC services. Thus, the parents interviewed had different amounts of experience with and knowledge of PJAC.

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<sup>27</sup> Cummings (2020).

## BOX 5 Enhanced Investigation

Enhanced investigation is a component of the PJAC model that focuses on additional strategies and resources PJAC case managers could use to locate parents. Some enhanced investigation options available to PJAC staff members included paid access to additional databases to search for contact information, resources for an investigator to locate parents, and social media searches.

Enhanced investigation was mainly used to obtain updated contact information for parents whose information was no longer current, making it impossible to reach them. From a procedural justice perspective, adding enhanced investigation resources provides greater opportunities to engage parents and prevent further enforcement actions. These additional efforts can also help make noncustodial parents aware that their cases are heading toward contempt, since parents with inaccurate contact information may well have missed letters and other messages informing them they are no longer compliant.

In summary, it was challenging to engage parents in PJAC services, and it often took multiple attempts to reach them successfully. Parents had often been out of touch with the child support program for some time, and many had had negative experiences in the past that led them to avoid contact with child support. PJAC case managers used additional investigatory tools to locate and reach noncustodial parents. PJAC case managers used principles of procedural justice in their initial interactions with parents, specifically by providing opportunities for parents to have a *voice*, by being *respectful* in their communications with parents, and by demonstrating *helpfulness*. Some parents interviewed said they left that introductory conversation feeling skeptical, but had positive feelings about the program once they began participating.

## Case Conferences

PJAC case conferences brought both parents on a case together to discuss reasons for nonpayment, identify potential solutions, and develop case action plans (described in the next section). Case conferences offered a way for PJAC case managers to put procedural justice concepts into operation: Parents got to tell their side and have their *voices* heard. Parents experienced *neutrality* from child support by seeing their case managers consider both sides. PJAC case managers had the opportunity to improve parents' *understanding* of their cases and child support processes by answering questions and explaining the decision-making process. And PJAC case managers were *helpful* by connecting parents with support to move forward. A [previous brief](#) from this study describes how PJAC case managers determined whether a case conference was appropriate for a case, and how they prepared for and facilitated case conferences.<sup>28</sup> In business-as-usual child support enforcement, parents are seldom brought together outside of contempt hearings in court. On the staff survey, three-quarters of business-as-usual case managers reported that they never met with both parents jointly.

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<sup>28</sup> Webster (2020).

In its planning for PJAC, OCSE envisioned that case conferences would take place when PJAC case managers successfully reached and engaged noncustodial and custodial parents. When a noncustodial parent had multiple cases, a separate case conference was to be held for each case. PJAC case managers had three ways to complete case conferences. The preferred option, when appropriate, was an in-person meeting with both parents. PJAC case managers also had the option to do case conferences with one or both parents on the phone. Shuttle case conferences were a third option, where a case manager interacted with each parent separately, going back and forth between parents to complete a negotiation.

## Participation in Case Conferences

Before scheduling a conference, a PJAC case manager had to review a case and make contact with both parents. As shown in Figure 4, nearly all noncustodial parents had a case reviewed, and for 56 percent of them, the case manager made contact with both parents. Overall, 27 percent of noncustodial parents had a case conference within 12 months after enrolling in PJAC. PJAC sites ranged in their use of case conferences, from 12 percent of noncustodial parents in Michigan to 46 percent in Arizona (as shown in Appendix Figure A.1).

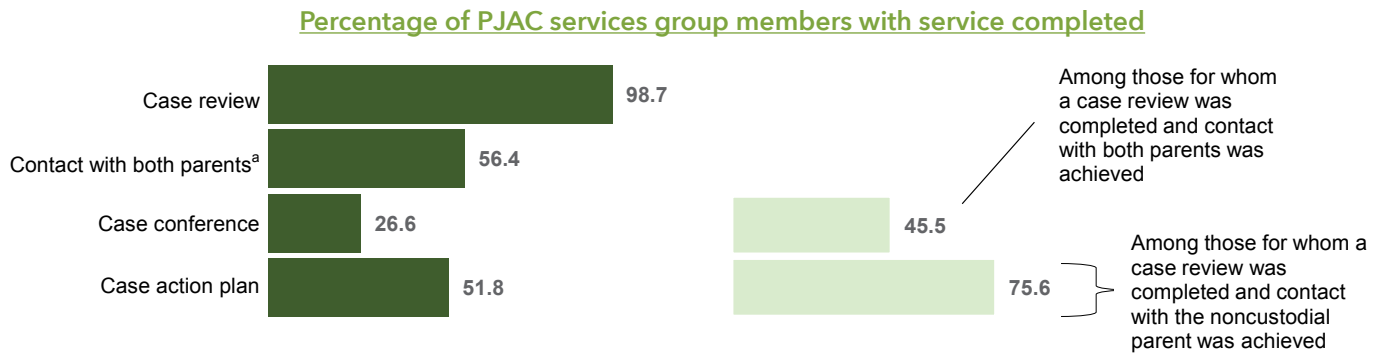
Among noncustodial parents who had completed case reviews and whose case managers reached both parents, 46 percent had a case conference (as shown on the right side of Figure 4). Across sites, this measure ranged from 23 percent in Franklin County to 78 percent in Arizona (as shown in Appendix Figure A.1). On average, case conferences took place about three months after noncustodial parents enrolled in PJAC.

Interviews with PJAC case managers provided insight into the challenges of completing case conferences. Even after they made contact with parents initially, case managers were not always able to sustain that contact and move forward to case conferences. PJAC case managers said that parents often did not want to meet with each other in person or over the phone, or did not want to engage with child support at all. Additionally, it was not appropriate for all parents to take part in case conferences. For example, PJAC case managers said they might avoid case conferences for cases with a history of domestic violence. Case managers also weighed the distance parents might need to travel to the child support office and their availability due to their work or parenting schedules.

When PJAC case managers did not rule out case conferences due to domestic violence or other reasons, it was up to the parents whether case conferences would be held and, if so, what form they would take. PJAC case managers could address travel or scheduling concerns by offering virtual meetings or, in some cases, by traveling to meet parents in neutral, more convenient locations outside the child support office.

Shuttle case conferences could make it easier for parents to attend in person, since they did not have to be there at the same time. They were also a strategy PJAC case managers used to hold negotiations between parents who did not want to meet together, so they could still provide both parents the

**FIGURE 4. PJAC Services Provided Through Case Action Plan**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on PJAC management information system data.

NOTES: This figure includes parents enrolled into the study from February 1, 2018 through May 31, 2020. All measures are based on the year following study enrollment.

<sup>a</sup>This measure includes all noncustodial parents for whom case managers were able to reach at least one custodial parent.

opportunity to have a voice in how their case was handled. For these reasons, most noncustodial parents who participated in a case conference experienced a shuttle case conference (78 percent).<sup>29</sup> PJAC case managers did say that while they had benefits, shuttle conferences could also be challenging, since the case managers had to be the go-between for the parents, and risked misrepresenting one parent’s views or preferences to the other.

## Parent Perspectives

Parents interviewed often said that they did not want to meet with the other parent, and most had not participated in an in-person case conference with the other parent. A few parents reported that they participated in shuttle-type conferences. A small number reported participating in in-person meetings and described some benefits of these meetings. One parent described how it helped with *understanding*. “Yeah, it was helpful, but the way I thought it was going to go, it didn’t go. It was helpful, though. Because I got a lot of information on the rights as parents, and how we could build good stuff together. But it didn’t work [it didn’t result in an agreement between parents].” Another parent talked about how the case conference was used to discuss child support debt forgiveness and how it also contributed to *understanding* and giving the parent *voice*. “I mean [the PJAC case manager] explained to me what it was about, and if I wanted to change my mind, if I wanted to go through with it or whatever, if I had second thoughts.”

## Case Conference Engagement Strategies

A handful of PJAC case managers conducted case conferences for more than half of the noncustodial parents on their caseloads. These case managers described a few strategies that helped them to hold case conferences successfully. One PJAC case manager described emphasizing shuttle case

<sup>29</sup> Noncustodial parents may have had more than one case conference, so some of that 78 percent could have experienced another type of case conference as well.



conferences—which could be completed more easily—for straightforward cases and pushing in-person case conferences for more complex situations, such as those involving disputes over parenting time. Another PJAC case manager talked about educating reluctant custodial parents about the potential benefits of case conferences by asking them to describe what they would like to ask the noncustodial parents, and then explaining that a case conference could be a way to get an answer.

PJAC case managers completed case conferences for about a quarter of noncustodial parents overall, and nearly half of those where they made contact with both parents. There were large differences in the use of case conferences at the site level. Site-specific approaches to case conferences may have led to some of these differences. Some sites emphasized shuttle case conferences because they could lead to agreements more quickly. Others pushed for in-person case conferences either because parents had to sign paperwork, or because they felt they were more effective for parents requiring significant mediation. The PJAC sites with the highest shares of case conferences among parents who were reached also used shuttle case conferences the most often, indicating that this method may have been the easiest one to use.

These findings align with the difficult reality described by PJAC case managers: When a case manager was able to locate and engage both parents on a case, those parents often did not want to meet together. This reaction is not surprising, since most cases in PJAC had long histories of nonpayment, which can breed hostility between parents. Compared with case conferences where parents met in the same room or with one parent on the phone, shuttle case conferences gave each parent less chance to be heard by the other parent and offered fewer opportunities for direct negotiation. However, they still allowed parents to voice their preferences about addressing the issues on a case and let them work toward a resolution. Since shuttle case conferences were already the most prevalent form, the COVID-19 pandemic did not have large effects on the way case conferences were delivered (see sidebar).

### COVID-19 Adaptations

COVID-19 and social distancing [mostly ended in-person case conferences](#), resulting in a slight uptick in conferences where both parents were on the phone after February 2020. Though a few PJAC case managers thought in-person case conferences were more effective than shuttle conferences, many case conferences were not held in person even before the pandemic, so COVID-19 did not have a huge effect on this component of the PJAC model.

## Case Action Plans

Case action plans were written documents created by PJAC case managers with noncustodial parents' (and sometimes custodial parents') involvement, and signed by noncustodial parents and their case managers. They were used to document agreed-upon next steps to address reasons for nonpayment and set a path to reliable payment. These plans were developed after PJAC case managers had completed case review, initial outreach, and, if applicable, a case conference. Once noncustodial parents signed the plans, case managers used them as a tool in further communications about compliance. Through case action plans, PJAC case managers could give parents *voice* into next steps with their

cases, make sure they *understood* how decisions would be made, and document how the child support agency could *help* them.

Commonly the plans included general goals that would apply to many parents, such as making consistent payments, finding employment or engaging in an employment program, and keeping in touch with case managers. PJAC case managers also said they could contain more specific goals, such as specific actions related to parenting time or plans to address transportation barriers. Case action plans could also document agreements between parents related to child support debt compromises.<sup>30</sup> If errors were uncovered on a case and needed to be corrected by the PJAC case manager, the case manager could document those actions as steps for the child support agency to take.

Though the approaches to case action plans described by PJAC case managers had some shared elements, there were no standardized procedures across sites in terms of the timing for creating the plans, the content of plans, or the participation of custodial parents in developing the plan. Some PJAC case managers gave examples of how they would use the principles of procedural justice to give *voice* to noncustodial parents through case action plans. For example, one PJAC case manager described putting the case action plan into noncustodial parents' words by asking them what they wanted to work on and writing it down. Another PJAC case manager described taking what noncustodial parents said about their barriers to making payments and translating that information into goals. For example, if a noncustodial parent cited a lack of reliable transportation as a challenge in getting to work, the goal would be to stabilize transportation.

PJAC case managers said that custodial parents did not have to be included in the development of case action plans. PJAC case managers could develop them with noncustodial parents in instances where they could not reach custodial parents. Custodial parents might sign case action plans where they had action items (such as waiving child support debt). A noncustodial parent with multiple cases would have one case action plan that applied to all those cases.

Once completed, case action plans served several purposes. PJAC case managers and parents could use them to guide further communications and steps, supporting the parents' *understanding*. They could be updated if the parents' circumstances changed. PJAC case managers described referring to case action plans in discussions with noncustodial parents who were not complying with their plans. PJAC case managers at one site said that if parents were not following their plans and were not responding to efforts to engage them, the next step would be to mail them copies of their case action plans with letters notifying them that lack of compliance with the plans could result in further legal action, meaning contempt of court.

As shown in Figure 4, about half of noncustodial parents (52 percent) had case action plans after one year. Site averages ranged from 41 percent to 62 percent (see Appendix Figure A.1). Among noncustodial parents whose case managers completed a case review and made initial contact with them suc-

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<sup>30</sup> Child support debt compromises were agreements between the noncustodial parent and the child support agency or custodial parent, with the noncustodial parent agreeing to certain actions (such as making consistent payments for six months or completing an employment program) in exchange for the other party forgiving some or all of the debt the parent owed. See Phillips (2021).





cessfully, 76 percent had case action plans after one year (see Figure 4). This number ranged from 65 percent to 83 percent at the site level (see Appendix Figure A.1). The fact that more parents had case action plans than participated in case conferences suggests that this component was easier for PJAC case managers and noncustodial parents to complete, probably because case action plans required no mediation between parents and were something that PJAC case managers could do with the involvement of only the noncustodial parent. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, not all cases were appropriate for a case conference.

## Enhanced Child Support Services

The components of the PJAC model described earlier focused on understanding the history of a case, identifying the challenges to consistent payments, and engaging parents in determining solutions. Child support agencies offered some potential solutions through enhanced child support services. Box 6 provides a list of some of these services, along with a description of each. In general, these child support services were similar to those available to business-as-usual parents. But PJAC case managers made a point of offering them and supported parents in navigating the paperwork and legal processes required to gain access to them. These enhancements aligned with the principles of procedural justice. PJAC case managers *helped* parents get services, promoted *understanding* by explaining what services were available and how to gain access to them, and supported perceptions of *neutrality* by providing clear information about eligibility and how decisions about access to services were made.

PJAC case managers described enhanced child support services as having two primary purposes. First, in the short term, they could promote engagement with PJAC, serving as a way for PJAC case managers to demonstrate helpfulness and as an incentive that might encourage noncustodial parents to speak with them. Second, they were used to promote longer-term compliance by addressing identified barriers to payment. Case managers identified services that might be helpful to parents starting with the case review and continuing through parent engagement and the case conference.

For example, during a case review, a PJAC case manager might notice a change in a noncustodial parent's income due to the loss of a job, and realize that that change was never accounted for in the amount of the parent's obligation. In such instances, the parent might not understand that an order modification might be possible—research suggests that many parents who are eligible for modifications do not apply for them.<sup>31</sup> Demonstrating the procedural justice principles of *understanding* and *helpfulness*, the PJAC case manager could explain the parent's options and help the parent request a modification of the order to a more appropriate amount.

The availability of these services depended on a parent's specific circumstances, which meant that the type and number of services that a PJAC case manager could offer varied from parent to parent. For example, noncustodial parents whose orders had been established or reviewed recently might not

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<sup>31</sup> Data on the share of eligible parents who apply for order modifications are limited. One case study of incarcerated parents eligible for modifications found that 31 percent submitted applications to modify their orders in response to letters notifying them of their eligibility. For more information, see Farrell, Anzelone, Cullinan, and Wille (2014).

## BOX 6 Enhanced Child Support Services

**Child support debt compromise:** an agreement made between custodial and noncustodial parents in which a noncustodial parent's debt balance is reduced or forgiven with the agreement of the custodial parent. Often, compromises are made in exchange for some action from a noncustodial parent—for example, agreement to pay more regularly moving forward or to take on greater parenting-time responsibility. Many states also have debt-forgiveness programs in which parents can take steps to receive forgiveness of debts they owe the state. Debt owed to the state can accrue in two ways: (1) If a custodial parent and children receive public assistance (for example, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), the state may claim portions of child support payments as reimbursement for its financial support, and if payment is not received, the costs will accrue as debt owed by the noncustodial parent. (2) A noncustodial parent can incur fees associated with child support actions, such as processing fees for child support payments, and those fees can go unpaid.\*

**License reinstatement:** a process that restores one's license (driver's, sporting, or professional license) after it has been suspended for child support noncompliance.

**License suspension suppression:** a process in which case managers suppress automated license suspensions.

**Order modification:** an adjustment to the amount owed by a noncustodial parent, as outlined by the parent's child support order.

**Parenting-time assistance:** help navigating parenting-time orders—including assistance with adjustments.

**Property lien suppression:** a process in which case managers suppress a claim on property that prevents the sale or transfer of that property until payment is made, reinstating a noncustodial parents' ability to sell or transfer that property.

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NOTE: \*Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (2021); California Child Support Services (2021); Virginia Legislative Information System (2021).

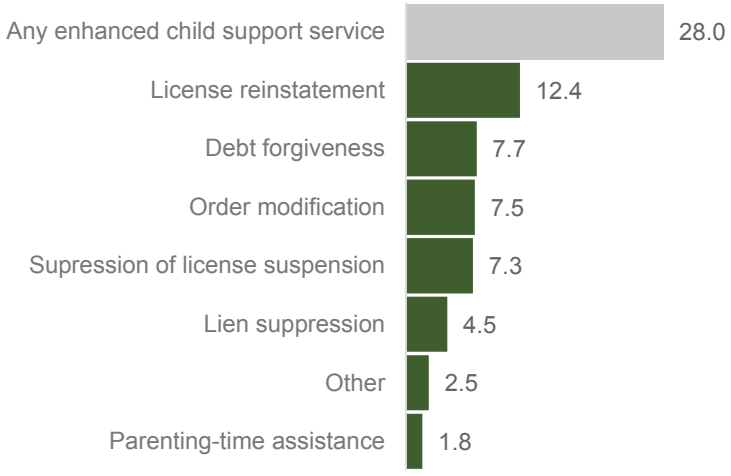
be eligible for order modifications, nor would those whose incomes were unchanged. Parents who did not have their licenses suspended could not have their licenses reinstated, and those who did not owe child support debt to the state could not qualify for state debt-compromise programs. However, PJAC case managers could offer these service options to noncustodial parents who had experienced recent changes in income, who had suspended licenses, or who owed debts to the state.

The enhanced child support services available were similar across sites, though the extent of their use varied.<sup>32</sup> In interviews, PJAC case managers said they used license reinstatements, debt compromises, order modifications, and parenting-time assistance the most. PJAC management information system data (shown in Figure 5) essentially tell the same story. As shown in Figure 5, more than one-fourth of noncustodial parents (28 percent) received an enhanced child support service within the first 12 months after enrollment in PJAC. This share was much higher (57 percent) among noncustodial parents who had a case review, successful contact, and a case action plan (as shown in Figure 6). Across the sites, there was a large spread in this share (see Appendix Figure A.1), from a low of 36

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<sup>32</sup> All sites offered debt compromises, order modifications, parenting-time assistance, license reinstatements, and lien suppressions. All but two offered license-suspension suppressions. These services are described in greater detail below.

**FIGURE 5.** Percentages of Parents Who Received Different Types of Enhanced Child Support Services



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on PJAC management information system data.

NOTES: This figure includes parents enrolled into the study from February 1, 2018 through May 31, 2020. All measures are based on the year following study enrollment. See Box 6 for definitions of all enhanced child support services. The “other” category includes debt payment amount modification (when the child support agency modifies the monthly amount the noncustodial parent owes on child support debt), credit for direct payments (when the child support agency gives the noncustodial parent credit for direct payments to the custodial parent), and interest modification.

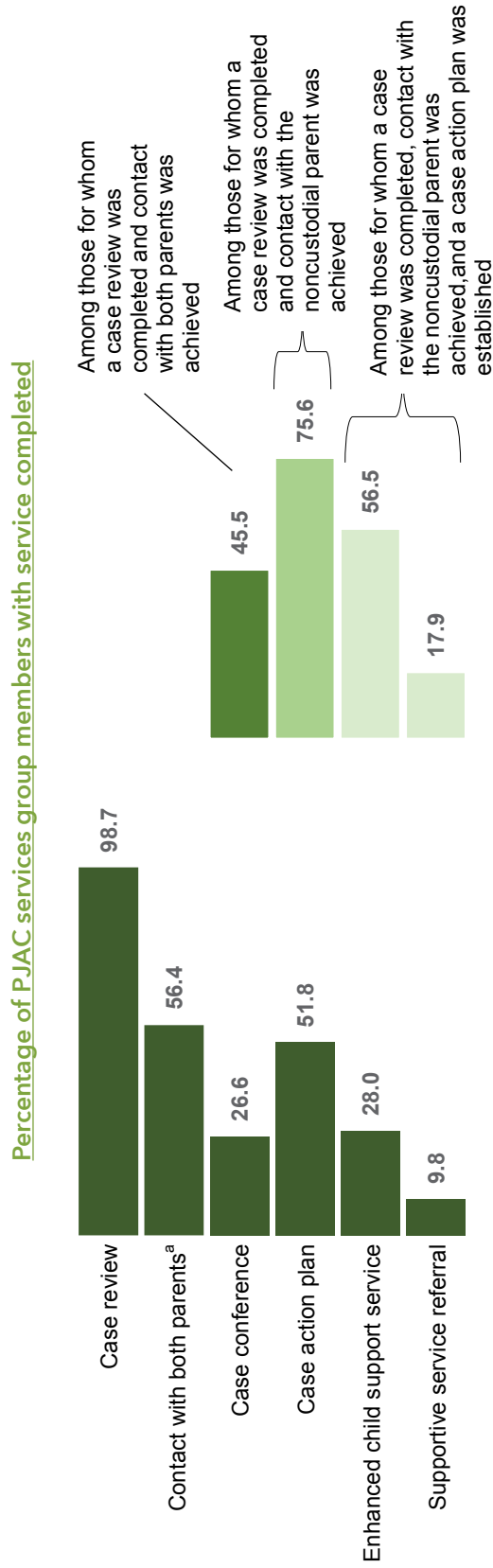
percent in Michigan to a high of 88 percent in California. Some of this variation is attributable to differences in the services available, described in more detail below.

## License Reinstatements, Suppressions of License Suspensions, and Suppressions of Liens

License reinstatements and suppression of license suspensions were the most frequently used services, though their use varied by site.<sup>33</sup> The proportion of noncustodial parents who had licenses reinstated ranged from under 1 percent in Arizona to 30 percent in California and 28 percent in Franklin County. Unsurprisingly, since a license must be suspended before it can be reinstated, California and Franklin County also reported regularly using license suspensions as part of enforcement. Thus, at those sites, noncustodial parents were far more likely to have suspended licenses at the time they were enrolled in PJAC than they were at other sites. In states where licenses were rarely suspended in the first place, such as Arizona, license reinstatements were seldom provided. Sites that used license suspensions infrequently noted that having their licenses suspended could make it harder for noncustodial parents to get and maintain employment and were thus counterproductive. Suppressions of license suspensions were most common in California (where 33 percent of noncustodial parents received them) and infrequent at the other sites. Franklin County, which also used license suspensions regularly, did not offer this service. The low rates at other sites align with the overall low use of

<sup>33</sup> The overwhelming majority of licenses reinstated were driver’s licenses. However, other types of licenses—such as professional or sporting licenses—could also be reinstated.

**FIGURE 6.** PJAC Services Provided



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on PJAC management information system data.

NOTES: This figure includes parents enrolled into the study from February 1, 2018 through May 31, 2020. All measures are based on the year following study enrollment.

<sup>a</sup>This measure includes all noncustodial parents for whom case managers were able to reach at least one custodial parent.

license suspensions as an enforcement tool. See Box 7 for an example of how a license reinstatement affected one parent.

Suppressions of liens showed a similar pattern. Though a small share of noncustodial parents received this service overall, those who did were nearly all in Virginia, where nearly one-fourth of parents received it. In Virginia, liens were generally filed after 90 days of nonpayment unless they were suppressed.

## Order Modifications

Order modifications were infrequent. Eight percent of noncustodial parents received order modifications, and that percentage was relatively even across sites. PJAC case managers said that, compared with business-as-usual enforcement, PJAC parents received more hands-on support with modifications. This support was a way that PJAC case managers demonstrated principles of procedural justice. When PJAC case managers made a point of suggesting to eligible noncustodial parents that they seek modifications, it demonstrated *helpfulness*. Assisting them with modification paperwork supported parents' *understanding* of the process.

A few sites also described establishing alternative ways that parents could adjust their orders by mutual agreement or through mediation, allowing them easier methods to modify their orders that bypassed the court processes usually involved. Not all sites recorded these mutual agreements as modifications, so they are not fully reflected in the numbers in Figure 5.

Case managers at a couple of sites said they reviewed order-modification documents initiated by some noncustodial parents but would not continue with the modifications if the parents' obligation amounts would increase. This decision was intended as a form of *helpfulness*, and while noncustodial parents may have perceived it that way, it illustrates the tension in balancing both parents' interests and maintaining *neutrality*, as custodial parents might not perceive the practice as fair. One PJAC site manager framed this practice in terms of the goal of bringing cases into compliance, as noncustodial parents were already having issues meeting their monthly obligations, and increasing their order amounts would probably not lead to more consistent payments.

In summary, only a small proportion of noncustodial parents received order modifications. Modifications to align order amounts with parents' incomes and what they can afford to pay—whether they increase or decrease the order amounts—can help improve parents' perceptions of the fairness of child support. They can also help noncustodial parents pay their full order amounts and reduce the amount of debt they accrue.

## Child Support Debt Compromises

As described in more detail in a [separate brief](#), child support debt compromises were a strategy PJAC case managers used to engage noncustodial parents and provide incentives for payments and participation in supportive services.<sup>34</sup> Both debt owed to the state and debt owed to the custodial parent

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<sup>34</sup> Phillips (2021).

## BOX 7

### Case Study 2: Sean\*

Sean has always had a relatively negative view of child support. He does not understand which factors went into calculating his support order and he does not think that the order amount is fair—in part because after his order was established, he was unable to pay some of his own bills. Sean felt that the determination of his order amount did not fully consider his financial obligations and whether he would be able to live on the amount that remained in his paycheck after his child support payments. He also is not in regular contact with his child’s mother or his child, whom he only learned of when his child support order was initiated. Sean says that, for the most part, his interactions with child support have given him the impression that case managers are biased in favor of custodial parents.

While Sean’s experience in the PJAC program did not completely alter his impressions of child support, he did find that working with a PJAC case manager was a markedly different experience for him. “It was the first time a caseworker has actually been helpful to me.”

After he was enrolled in the program in 2018, Sean and his case manager started by looking over his case together, which gave him an opportunity to explain that he had been out of work for a year. In the time that he was unemployed, he was not able to make consistent payments, his license was suspended, and he was unable to open a bank account. Because Sean works in a job that requires him to drive, these actions affected him deeply and compounded his problems.

With help from his PJAC case manager—who understood the intricacies of Sean’s case and had learned about his needs through conversations and outreach—child support staff members were able to reinstate his license and release the liens on his bank accounts.

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NOTE: \*Names changed to protect anonymity.

could be the subject of compromise. For debt owed to the custodial parent, the noncustodial parent could agree to pay X amount to the custodial parent in exchange for the custodial parent agreeing to forgive Y amount. At all the PJAC project sites, custodial parents have to grant approval before any debt owed to them is forgiven. The child support agencies also have their own programs and criteria for waiving or compromising on debts owed to the state. Given the contempt-related eligibility criteria, all noncustodial parents in PJAC owed child support debts to the custodial parent, the state, or both. The amounts owed could be daunting—noncustodial parents averaged nearly \$26,000 in child support debt. While debt compromises were beneficial when they could be achieved, they were used infrequently: About 8 percent of noncustodial parents received one. When debts were owed to custodial parents, it was often difficult for parents to reach debt-forgiveness agreements, and when debts were owed to the state, noncustodial parents often did not meet the requirements for state debt-forgiveness programs.

## Parenting-Time Assistance

Case managers identified disagreements over parenting time as a barrier to payment, as noncustodial parents could be less likely to pay child support for children they did not often see.<sup>35</sup> PJAC case managers said that they therefore helped noncustodial parents establish or modify parenting-time agreements. The courts handled parenting-time orders at all sites except for Michigan, where child support staff members can set such orders. Child support agencies could not establish or amend visitation or custody orders on their own. PJAC case managers helped parents navigate what could be a complicated and intimidating process by explaining the steps, assisting with the paperwork, or connecting parents to legal-aid organizations. Compared with business-as-usual enforcement workers, PJAC case managers may have provided more hands-on support and direct referrals to legal services because they had closer relationships with parents and established contacts at legal services. Still, for both groups, courts were ultimately responsible for the outcomes.

In summary, PJAC case managers used enhanced child support services as an incentive for noncustodial parents to engage in PJAC services and to help address their identified barriers to consistent payments. By offering these services, PJAC case managers demonstrated *helpfulness*, *neutrality*, and *respect*, since they could show they understood what may have been preventing parents from paying child support consistently. Though the services available through PJAC were often available to all parents, PJAC case managers made sure to offer them and played a more hands-on role in helping parents navigate the processes involved in receiving them. Services at various sites were subject to local policies (such as the availability of compromise programs for debts owed to the state) and influenced by the prevalence of past enforcement actions such as license suspensions or liens. These local differences help explain some of the site-to-site variation in the use of services, even among those parents who were engaged and had case action plans completed.

## Referrals to Supportive Services

PJAC case managers connected noncustodial parents to services offered by partners in the community to help address the underlying issues outside of the child support program that prevented them from making consistent payments. These services included those related to employment, housing, parenting, substance use, domestic violence, transportation, and legal issues. Some supportive services, such as the help legal-aid organizations could provide with parenting time and dispute resolution, could help address noncustodial parents' unwillingness to pay. Other services aimed to help parents obtain and sustain employment. Though parents in PJAC were determined to have an ability to pay (an eligibility criterion for contempt of court), in practice "ability to pay" often really meant a *lack of obvious inability to pay*. Case workers would review cases to see whether noncustodial parents did not meet specific inability-to-pay criteria, such as being on disability insurance or being incarcerated. Accordingly, it was common that parents who had been deemed able to pay in fact had challenges

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<sup>35</sup> Turner and Waller (2016); Waller, Dwyer Emory, and Paul (2018).



obtaining and maintaining jobs that earned family-sustaining wages. Past research has also shown that parents who are behind on child support often lack jobs in the formal economy; parents with jobs in the formal economy are usually subject to income-withholding orders, and child support is deducted from their paychecks automatically.<sup>36</sup>

The PJAC sites generally relied on the same service-provider partnerships their broader child support agencies had already established. Sometimes the agencies adapted these existing relationships to include more direct, “warm” hand-offs between PJAC case managers and partner staff members, rather than “cold” referrals, a common practice under the business-as-usual approach where parents are given the contact information for a service provider and expected to reach out themselves. Direct hand-offs to supportive services were also a way for PJAC case managers to demonstrate *helpfulness*.

### COVID-19 Adaptations

COVID-19 initially disrupted the services provided by partners, but by the summer of 2020, providers had modified their services to adapt to COVID-19, many by converting to virtual services. PJAC case managers said that demand for employment support services did not necessarily rise during the pandemic since expanded eligibility for unemployment benefits helped many parents obtain those benefits, a portion of which were withheld and applied to noncustodial parents’ child support cases.

Service referrals were only made for noncustodial parents with identified service needs and an interest in receiving additional support; it was not expected that all noncustodial parents would receive referrals. Overall, referrals were entered in the PJAC management information system for about 10 percent of noncustodial parents (as shown in Figure 6). Among noncustodial parents with case reviews, successful contacts, and case action plans, 18 percent received referrals to supportive services (also shown in Figure 6). The share of parents referred did vary among sites: 28 percent of noncustodial parents in Franklin were referred, compared with 4 percent in Arizona (see Appendix Figure A.1). Among parents who received referrals, the overwhelming majority received referrals to employment services (79 percent of referred parents), followed by legal services (13 percent of referred parents). PJAC staff members interviewed in Franklin County noted that they referred many noncustodial parents to employment services, in part because the employment services partners had strong case management and connections to other supportive services they could offer parents. The referral rates described in this section reflect only those made by PJAC case managers directly; parents may have been engaged with supportive services through other channels, as in the Franklin County example. Referrals to employment partners were a way to connect noncustodial parents to additional support they may have needed.

PJAC case managers reported that, once referred, noncustodial parents did not always engage in the services. Some sites gave noncustodial parents incentives for participation: For example, noncustodial parents in Stark County could have a portion of their state-owed debt forgiven for completing an employment program. One parent referred to a parenting program described why it was hard to participate:

The parenting class, with no license, I couldn’t show up. It was on the opposite side of town. Didn’t have time to ride a bus from work and then ride the bus home afterwards without

<sup>36</sup> Berger et al. (2019).



neglecting the children. I think I went to two classes and I was like, man, I can't do this. I've got to Uber in order to do this, and that's 40 bucks worth of travel for this class.

Case managers cited other reasons for nonpayment that could not be easily addressed by referrals to supportive services. Across PJAC locations, case managers said that noncustodial parents with criminal records had a particularly hard time finding employment. They also noted that some noncustodial parents may have applied for disability benefits and were unemployed while awaiting the outcome of their applications. Additionally, PJAC case managers noted that some parents may have resisted finding formal employment because they did not want a significant portion of their paychecks to go to child support through wage withholding. These case managers explained that noncustodial parents who earned low wages indicated that they did not make enough to support themselves and the children who lived with them. Barriers to payment such as these are not easily solved through supportive services, which may explain why referrals were made for a minority of noncustodial parents.

## Enforcement

Given the complex, challenging child support histories of noncustodial parents eligible for PJAC, it was anticipated that PJAC case managers would not be able to bring all parents into compliance. Since the primary goal of child support programs is to improve children's well-being, in part by enforcing child support obligations, PJAC case managers could use enforcement tools typically used under business-as-usual child support services for those unwilling to engage in PJAC services or those who did not comply with their case action plans consistently. Case managers only implemented these enforcement actions when, even after multiple attempts over several months, they could not reach and engage noncustodial parents to communicate the consequences of not engaging with PJAC services. Since parents enrolled in PJAC had already been determined to be eligible for contempt of court, most had already been subject to many enforcement actions before their enrollment in the study.<sup>37</sup> Contempt would be the next step for many of them, particularly at sites that made limited use of other enforcement measures. This section describes how PJAC case managers adapted and implemented enforcement actions for PJAC. A future report will compare the extent to which parents in the PJAC services group and the business-as-usual group experienced enforcement actions, including contempt proceedings.

## Enforcement Actions

If PJAC services were not successful in bringing cases into compliance, there were some limited additional actions that case managers described taking before making contempt referrals. When taking these actions, PJAC case managers said they would use procedural justice to inform the process. To promote *understanding*, they would attempt to communicate with parents about what they were about to do and why. They would also give parents an additional opportunity to *voice* their perspectives and explain their situations.

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<sup>37</sup> Treskon and Skemer (2021).

Most commonly, PJAC case managers described using license suspensions or warnings of license suspensions as an enforcement tool to promote compliance. The use of license suspensions varied significantly by PJAC site, with PJAC case managers describing them as anywhere from rare to automatic, depending on the site. Parents may have had their licenses suspended before PJAC, then had their licenses reinstated or the enforcement action suppressed as part of their case action plans; their PJAC case managers could subsequently resuspend their licenses or allow the suspension to go through. Some other enforcement actions occurred automatically. PJAC case managers did not have discretion over them; noncustodial parents were subject to them if their cases met the criteria, often related to their child support debt balances and other case specifics. Such enforcement actions included being denied passports, being reported to credit bureaus, and having federal payments (such as tax refunds and stimulus funds) diverted to pay child support debt.<sup>38</sup>

Case managers at two sites described “seek-work” orders as an interim step they might take before making contempt referrals. These orders required noncustodial parents to demonstrate that they were looking for work by submitting lists to their case managers of places they had applied for employment. Stark County implemented a “motion-to-compel seek-work” order, a process for attempting to enforce a seek-work order through a hearing before a magistrate. The idea behind such a hearing was to demonstrate to a noncustodial parent that the situation was serious, without the need for a contempt filing that came with the possibility of jail time. Other enforcement actions included bank levies and property liens.<sup>39</sup>

## Referrals to Contempt

When all other options for bringing cases into compliance were exhausted, PJAC case managers referred noncustodial parents for contempt. At about half of the sites, once a noncustodial parent in the PJAC services group was sent to contempt, the proceedings were very similar to the standard ones experienced by business-as-usual group members, and the PJAC case manager had minimal contact with the parent after that point. At the other half of the sites, agencies modified their regular contempt procedures for parents in PJAC to incorporate elements of procedural justice. Contempt at the PJAC sites is described in an [earlier brief](#).<sup>40</sup>

## PJAC Case Manager Responsibilities and Case Management Approaches

On average, PJAC case managers had far fewer cases than regular enforcement workers. As mentioned above, on the staff survey, PJAC case managers reported median caseloads of around 255 on average, while business-as-usual enforcement workers reported caseloads of approximately 1,155. PJAC case

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<sup>38</sup> U.S. Department of State (2021).

<sup>39</sup> A bank levy is a process where a creditor (in this case child support) takes money from a bank account and can also take future money from the account until a debt is resolved.

<sup>40</sup> Treskon and Skemer (2021).

managers described a trade-off between the size of their caseloads and the amount of attention that PJAC cases required, both because of the more intensive approach to service delivery and the more challenging nature of nonpaying cases that were all eligible for contempt of court. In addition to the elements of the PJAC model that required time—case review, outreach and engagement, case conferences, and monitoring—PJAC case managers at many sites shouldered responsibilities that regular enforcement workers did not. These tasks included ones often handled by special staff members under business-as-usual enforcement, such as conducting order modifications, doing debt calculations, and attending court hearings. PJAC case managers also had the additional burden of entering much of the same case data twice, once into their standard child support information systems and once into a separate information system for evaluation purposes.<sup>41</sup>

Since PJAC was a new program, PJAC case managers' caseloads built slowly over time, as additional noncustodial parents met the eligibility criteria and were enrolled into the study. Though cases could be reassigned among PJAC case managers to balance caseload sizes and in response to staff turnover, all cases remained on PJAC caseloads regardless of their compliance statuses. PJAC case managers at all sites noted that the effort required to manage their caseloads was not just about the number of noncustodial parents they were working with, but also the number of cases. Noncustodial parents had an average of 1.7 cases. So for many noncustodial parents, PJAC case managers had to conduct multiple case reviews and reach out to more than one custodial parent, among all the other tasks that multiplied with additional cases. As PJAC caseloads rose, PJAC case managers reported that their caseloads were becoming difficult to handle. Sites received additional funding from OCSE in 2019 to bring on additional case managers and reduce caseload sizes.

PJAC case managers reported that their responsibilities and caseload sizes affected their ability to provide active outreach to parents, for example by calling them to remind them about upcoming payments or checking in with them soon after missed payments. A couple of PJAC case managers said they had the goal of “touching” all their cases every month, but that it was not always achievable. Another challenge was that the PJAC model intended for case managers to be readily available to parents. PJAC case managers described how needing to take a trip to court or jail to meet with a parent, or answering a phone call from a parent, could derail the tasks they had slated for the day. PJAC case managers also noted that the case-review process was very time-consuming, and it could be difficult to keep up with case reviews for newly assigned parents while monitoring and responding to the needs of parents with existing cases.

When PJAC services began, each site had timeline goals for completing important activities such as case reviews, outreach, and case conferences. Sites loosened these timelines as implementation progressed and PJAC staff members developed a more realistic sense of the time it took to complete these activities. For example, while initial service-delivery plans had PJAC case managers completing case reviews for each parent within a week, it actually took about 27 days to finish a case review, according to PJAC management information system data.

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<sup>41</sup> This burden is not part of the PJAC model and would not exist in the absence of an evaluation.

PJAC case managers also explained that cases did not all reach and stay in compliance, instead often requiring revisiting and further action. Parents who were in compliance also required some level of continuing effort from PJAC case managers (for example, reminder notices for payments and updates on PJAC services). Parents could receive PJAC services for a year or more, therefore, and still require case managers' attention. An analysis of contact attempts found that case managers made an average of 13 contact attempts per noncustodial parent in the 12 months after that parent was enrolled in PJAC (including contacts with custodial parents and other relevant people, such as employers, and including successful and unsuccessful attempts at contact). While more than half of these contact attempts occurred in the first three months after enrollment, at a year after enrollment, PJAC case managers were still averaging one contact attempt every two months.

In summary, though PJAC caseloads were much smaller than typical enforcement caseloads, the intensive nature of the intervention, the characteristics of the cases eligible, and the additional responsibilities shouldered by PJAC case managers made their caseloads challenging to manage. PJAC case managers had to balance many competing demands for their time, leading to delays in completing case reviews or making contact with or responding to parents.

## Staff and Parent Perceptions of PJAC

Research on the adoption of new interventions suggests that staff members' perceptions of an intervention can affect their implementation of it, with strong beliefs in an intervention being associated with stronger implementation.<sup>42</sup> In interviews with PJAC staff members and parents, the research team inquired about their general perceptions of PJAC services. Overall, PJAC staff members felt that the procedural justice-informed approach to case management was beneficial in several ways. They enjoyed the greater focus on helping parents, ensuring parents felt respected, and helping parents understand their cases. They said the procedural justice approach could lead to better relationships with parents, improved cooperation and compliance, and a better image for the child support program.

PJAC case managers further explained that the procedural justice approach helped them understand their cases better and understand parents' needs and concerns better, mainly through the case-review process and conversations with both parents. Often this understanding helped case managers build trust with parents and offer potential services tailored to their case histories. However, this increased level of understanding also presented challenges for case managers. The more contact-heavy, holistic approach often involved difficult conversations with angry parents who were upset with child support and the other parent, and tough discussions regarding mental health problems, substance use issues, and domestic violence and other traumas. One PJAC site manager said that PJAC case managers functioned as counselors in many ways, which they may not have been used to. As a result, case managers relied on self-care strategies, including seeking advice and support from cowork-

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<sup>42</sup> Damschroder et al. (2009); Flottorp et al. (2013).

ers, taking walks, coloring, and stretching after particularly challenging phone calls.

Staff survey responses provide evidence that, in addition to their generally positive views of the PJAC model's procedural justice-informed approach, PJAC case managers internalized the principles of procedural justice and incorporated them into their work with parents. Compared with business-as-usual enforcement workers, PJAC case managers averaged higher scores on a scale measuring their appli-

cation of procedural justice. The scale includes eight items and measures case manager agreement with statements such as "At the end of each meeting with customers, I verify that they understand what is expected of them going forward," and "When speaking to customers, I acknowledge unfair or difficult prior experiences they may have had with regard to their child support case." Responses to the eight items were averaged, with all scores falling between one and four, where one indicates the low end of procedural justice orientation and four indicates the high end. PJAC case managers averaged 3.59, compared with business-as-usual enforcement workers' average of 3.08. (For additional detail regarding this analysis, see Appendix B.) Sites applied to be in PJAC, and interviews with agency leaders revealed that some agencies were already implementing customer-oriented approaches to enforcement, so business-as-usual enforcement workers may have received training in elements similar to PJAC. For example, 46 percent of business-as-usual enforcement workers reported receiving training in dispute resolution. Therefore, though PJAC case managers scored higher than business-as-usual enforcement workers, the contrast may not be as large as would be observed in child support agencies that did not focus on customer-oriented approaches.

In interviews, some noncustodial parents in PJAC gave examples of how their case management experiences changed after they started in PJAC. Examples include case managers giving parents regular reminders to make payments, taking time to answer parents' questions and make sure they understood what was happening with their cases, assisting them with paperwork, and including parents in decision-making processes. Parents also noted an overall improvement in how they were treated, compared with their previous experiences with the child support program.

Not all parents shared positive experiences. Some PJAC noncustodial parents reported that they had not been in contact with their case managers in a long time. They did not feel their case managers understood what was happening in their cases or thought the handling of their cases was biased.

### PJAC Staff Views on the PJAC Model

"We could really change how people see child support and really turn it towards the social service aspect of what our customers need and provide services through PJAC. It's great and rewarding and I'm grateful to have been a part of this program."

–A PJAC case manager in California

"I love it. There are some things I'd change, but overall, I find it rewarding to know that I'm possibly helping them with a stressful situation."

–A PJAC case manager in Virginia

"I understand the principles, what PJAC is trying to do. I don't think it's realistic. These people don't want to be contacted. We put in 100 percent, but people do not want to take care of their cases."

–A PJAC case manager in Michigan

These reports could, at least in part, reflect the challenging nature of PJAC caseloads, where parents often had long, complicated histories with child support—histories that may be difficult to overcome quickly. Additionally, case managers could not communicate with parents as regularly or as thoroughly as they would have liked.<sup>43</sup>

In summary, interviews with PJAC staff members and parents suggest that case managers put procedural justice concepts into operation in their work. PJAC staff members overwhelmingly felt positive about using procedural justice principles in their interactions with parents and other case management responsibilities. Still, they described challenges associated with the increased level of interpersonal engagement required by this approach, mainly related to the mental toll of increased exposure to parents' traumas.

## Overall Reflections on the Implementation of PJAC Services and Its Implications

PJAC parents had complicated cases and a history of not complying with their child support orders. To implement the model as designed, at a minimum PJAC case managers needed to be able to understand complex cases, engage parents who had often been disengaged for some time, and set plans to address the reasons cases had fallen out of compliance. And they needed to do all these things while infusing the principles of procedural justice into their communications with parents and overall approach to case management. Completing these tasks was a tall order for PJAC case managers. They needed to locate and engage both parents, attempt to mediate between them, and determine a path toward compliance. Often these parents had negative perceptions of the child support program and faced barriers to obtaining and sustaining jobs that would allow them to meet their child support obligations fully. Ultimately, the implementation research found that the PJAC model was generally implemented as intended, and principles of procedural justice were put into operation in case managers' delivery of services. This assessment is based on staff descriptions of implementation and data on PJAC service receipt.

The case review, the first step in PJAC services, occurred for nearly every noncustodial parent. PJAC case managers said that while it was time-consuming the case review was foundational to their work.

Engagement—successfully making contact with both a noncustodial parent and custodial parent—proved to be more challenging for PJAC case managers. For only 56 percent of PJAC noncustodial parents were PJAC case managers able to reach both the noncustodial parent and at least one associated custodial parent. This percentage reflects the challenges associated with reaching parents who may not have been in contact with child support for a long time. Such parents might deliberately avoid outreach attempts because they owed child support and were probably subject to enforcement actions.

However, among noncustodial parents who had case reviews with whom case managers established contact, most had a case action plan created (76 percent) and received an enhanced child support

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<sup>43</sup> As stated in Box 2 (on data sources), parent interviews are not necessarily representative of the larger PJAC sample.



service (57 percent). Among those whose case managers also completed a case review and established contact with an associated custodial parent, 46 percent had a case conference, underscoring PJAC case managers' reports that case conferences could be hard to achieve. Among those parents who had case reviews, successful contact, and case action plans, a smaller proportion (18 percent) were referred to supportive services.

There was variation in the share of parents who received PJAC services across the sites, except when it came to case review. This variation reflected differences in local child support policies constraining the services case managers could provide, and differences in how PJAC staff members delivered services.

By the time noncustodial parents came to PJAC case managers, their cases already had long periods of noncompliance, which meant that they had accrued significant child support debt. The child support program had attempted nearly all available enforcement actions at least once and sometimes had not been in contact with these parents for years. Relationships between parents were often tense. These characteristics of PJAC cases affected the implementation of the model in important ways. Long case histories meant that PJAC case managers dedicated considerable time to case reviews. Because noncustodial parents had not communicated with child support in months or years, PJAC case managers had trouble reaching them. This difficulty sometimes extended to custodial parents as well. Prior encounters with child support, including enforcement actions, could also lead parents to have negative views of child support and resist engaging with their PJAC case managers. They may have felt the child support agency was biased, and the PJAC demonstration may not have been able to offer them enough to overcome those feelings.

Despite these challenges, PJAC case managers were able to connect with both parents most of the time. When they did, they were usually able to develop a plan with the noncustodial parent to address the parent's noncompliance, and they were also able to offer some support. As described, PJAC services were tailored to the circumstances and needs of each case, and thus it was not expected that all parents would need or be eligible for all the services provided through PJAC. Though case confer-

### PJAC Parents on PJAC

"Pretty much before he [PJAC case manager] does anything on my case, he would always talk to me about it. And then whatever I tell him about my opinion, or what I feel should be done with my case, he always takes it into consideration."

—A PJAC noncustodial parent in Arizona

"I think decisions are already made before I had anything to say anyway. Everything's fixed. I mean, they listen, but the decision's already been made."

—A PJAC noncustodial parent in Virginia

"I mean, it may not be what I want to hear, but they operate within their means. I've never felt like they've picked one side over the other. I think, in my case, they've empathized with me several times."

—A PJAC custodial parent in Franklin County

"She [PJAC case manager] didn't treat me as an outcast.... I hate it when they treat me like I'm an outcast or like I'm no good.... And she's never seemed to treat me that way."

—A PJAC noncustodial parent in California

ences were central to the model as originally conceived, they occurred for a minority of parents and most did not happen in person. However, shuttle case conferences may have allowed parents to have a *voice* and *understand* how decisions were made while avoiding the difficulties inherent in bringing parents with complicated histories together.

PJAC case managers were also limited by existing policies and processes in what they could do for parents. Parents had been determined to be able to pay before they were assigned to PJAC. But often this assessment focused on identifying concrete barriers to payment, such as being incarcerated or receiving disability benefits. Ability-to-pay determinations excluded only people with an apparent inability to pay. PJAC case managers explained that some parents struggled with obtaining and sustaining employment. Child support agencies could refer parents to supportive services to help, but could not address underlying issues like the challenges people who have been incarcerated face in obtaining employment, how systemic racism has affected educational and employment opportunities for people of color, and how long histories of not paying child support could result in child support debts that parents could not repay with earnings from low-wage jobs.

A challenge with assessing the implementation of a new intervention such as PJAC is that there was no prior research to show the amounts and types of services needed to achieve effects. All parents had different case histories, personal circumstances, and needs, and not all parents required or qualified for all services. Additionally, new interventions evolve during implementation in real-world conditions. The expectations for how services are delivered and who should receive what services change in response to what program staff members learn about what works. Future analyses will provide information about the extent to which the parents in PJAC received services that were different from business as usual, and the extent to which PJAC achieved its intended outcomes.

## Practical Lessons from PJAC

PJAC staff members identified best practices to help address the challenges of engaging parents, and those best practices are applicable to PJAC and child support more broadly. Though case reviews took a lot of time, PJAC case managers said they were helpful. They helped case managers identify and fix errors, offered context for their communications with parents, and gave them a sense of the barriers to payment noncustodial parents might be facing, along with ideas for addressing those barriers. PJAC case managers also noted that speaking with custodial parents about cases helped them locate noncustodial parents and generate ideas about engaging them in PJAC services.

PJAC case managers found that the PJAC model could be challenging to implement, since it gave them more responsibilities and asked them to engage more with parents on a personal level. It probably helped with the implementation that PJAC case managers believed in and were committed to the model. Future interventions would benefit from case managers who were aware that the model asked more of them but still supported it. Case managers said procedural justice gave them tools to communicate with parents, even in tense and stressful situations, and applied to new challenges in their work (for example,





communicating with noncustodial parents in the spring of 2020 about why child support intercepted their CARES Act economic impact payments to pay down their child support debts).

PJAC case managers made an active effort to offer parents child support services such as order modifications and debt compromises; this fact may have helped to get orders adjusted to a manageable size and get payments back on track for some parents. These services are generally available to all parents, not just those in PJAC, but parents have trouble making use of them because they do not know they exist, do not know how to gain access to them, or do not know how to navigate the paperwork and potential legal processes involved. Child support agencies could do more to help parents understand their options for addressing underlying reasons for inconsistent payments—they could be more *helpful* and promote parents' *understanding* of available services. Additionally, though services were intended to help with compliance, some reversed prior enforcement actions such as license suspensions. These reversals are meaningful to the parents they affect, but they can only be used with parents who have been subject to these enforcement actions. Child support agencies may want to consider what other types of enhanced child support services they could offer to parents who have not experienced enforcement actions, so case managers have more tools with which to engage parents.

## Looking Forward

On average, parents in the PJAC services group probably had a different experience with the child support program than did those in the business-as-usual group due to the active engagement of their PJAC case managers, who focused on identifying solutions and offering support to help bring their cases into compliance. Future reports will focus on the contrast between the PJAC services and business-as-usual groups in the services they received and the enforcement actions they experienced, and on PJAC's effects on payment outcomes.



# Appendix A

Baseline Characteristics of Parents  
in the Demonstration and Services  
Provided by Site



**APPENDIX TABLE A.1. Baseline Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents in the PJAC Demonstration**

Characteristic	Arizona	California	Michigan	Franklin County	Stark County	Virginia	All PJAC Sites
<u>Parent characteristics</u>							
Male (%)	93.5	92.9	88.7	92.6	86.6	87.7	90.2
Age (years)	39.7	37.2	35.7	37.3	39.0	39.0	38.1
<u>Race/ethnicity (%)</u>							
Black, non-Hispanic	16.6	16.4	44.8	61.1	33.8	84.8	41.2
White, non-Hispanic	32.6	19.7	50.2	36.3	64.6	13.6	35.5
Hispanic	46.3	60.0	1.8	1.4	0.9	1.3	20.9
Other	4.5	3.9	3.2	1.2	0.7	0.3	2.4
Noncustodial parent is a custodial parent on another case (%)	1.4	12.1	17.6	5.7	7.6	5.3	8.4
<u>Case characteristics</u>							
Number of cases per noncustodial parent <sup>a</sup>	1.3	1.3	2.1	1.8	2.1	1.8	1.7
Year's since the order on a parent's oldest case was established <sup>b</sup>	9.7	8.8	10.2	8.4	10.7	11.4	9.9
Monthly amount due (\$)	427	522	259	528	340	455	420
Total debt due (\$)	44,742	33,943	15,362	21,431	16,747	21,311	26,146
Months since last payment, among those who made a payment in the year before study enrollment	4.8	5.2	5.0	4.7	6.0	5.4	5.2
Ever referred to contempt before study enrollment (%)	24.2	8.0	63.9	38.5	31.9	50.2	34.9
Family violence indicated <sup>c</sup> (%)	5.7	10.2	43.2	6.3	5.6	29.9	17.8
Has a debt-only case (%)	29.1	17.3	32.7	19.8	34.6	43.9	30.7
Custodial parent and child(ren) on the primary case receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families <sup>d</sup> (%)	1.3	21.5	4.5	4.4	11.3	14.9	10.0
Sample size	2,085	2,070	1,730	1,416	2,166	1,905	11,372

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on child support administrative records.

NOTES: Sample sizes may vary because of missing values and gaps and delays in data.

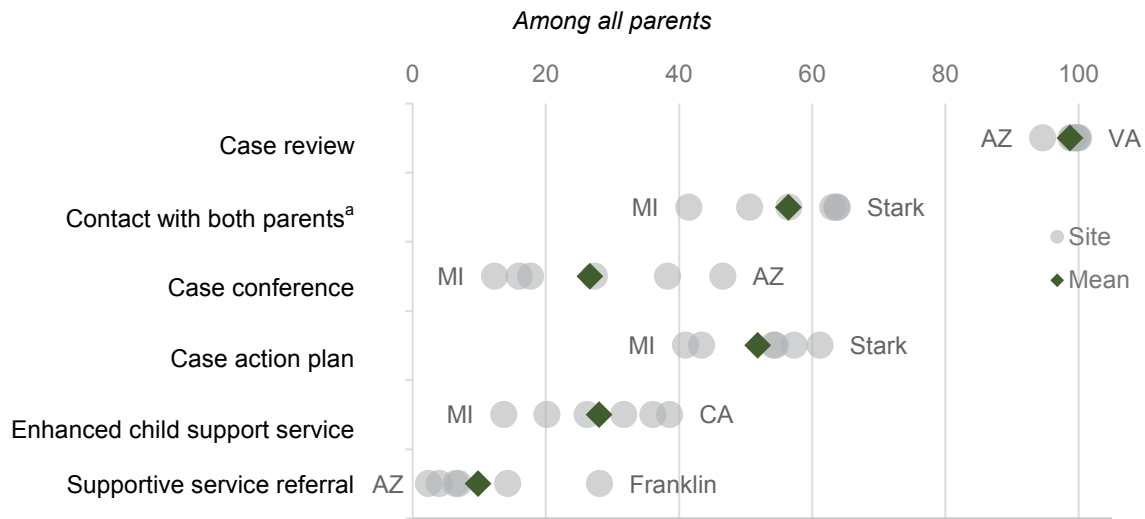
<sup>a</sup>This measure includes cases in which the sample member was the noncustodial parent only (as opposed to cases in which the sample member is the custodial parent or child).

<sup>b</sup>This measure is calculated among cases open at the time of study enrollment only.

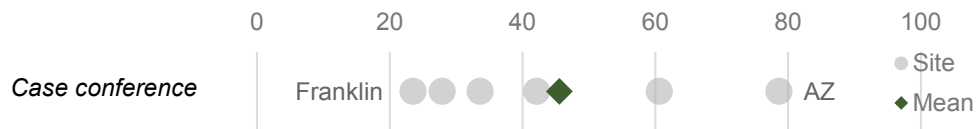
<sup>c</sup>This measure indicates family violence for either the noncustodial or the custodial parent on a noncustodial parent's cases except for in Arizona, where the measure only includes instances where the noncustodial parent is indicated as the victim of family violence.

<sup>d</sup>A noncustodial parent's primary case is the case that made the parent eligible for contempt and the PJAC study.

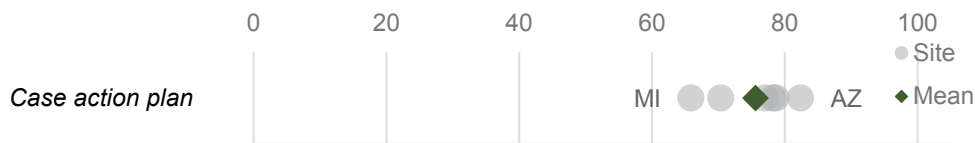
**APPENDIX FIGURE A.1 PJAC Services Provided, by Site**



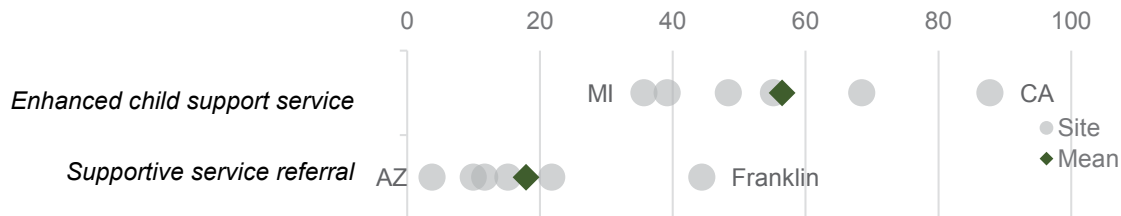
*Among those for whom a case review was completed and contact with both parents was achieved*



*Among those for whom a case review was completed and contact with the noncustodial parent was achieved*



*Among those for whom a case review was completed, contact with the noncustodial parent was achieved, and a case action plan was established*



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on PJAC management information system data.

NOTES: This figure includes parents enrolled into the study from February 1, 2018 through May 31, 2020. All measures are based on the year following study enrollment.

<sup>a</sup>This measure includes all noncustodial parents for whom case managers were able to reach at least one custodial parent.

# Appendix B

Factor Analysis of Procedural  
Justice Questions from the Staff  
Survey





To measure child support case managers' application of procedural justice principles in their work and assess any differences in practice between case managers in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration and business-as-usual case managers, the research team included a module of 13 relevant rating scale questions in the PJAC staff survey. These questions are displayed in Appendix Table B.1, along with the primary procedural justice principle each question was intended to assess.

The team conducted an exploratory factor analysis on these 13 survey items to reveal patterns across survey items and condense data. In all models with more than one factor, conceptually distinct constructs for the different factors failed to emerge. In response, the team shifted to a single-factor model, as all the survey items were designed to connect to the broader construct of procedural justice. Items that did not load on the factor are in italics in Appendix Table B.1. Of the original 13 survey questions, 8 loaded. Upon reviewing the loadings, the team defined the factor that emerged as "procedural justice orientation."

To create a measure of procedural justice orientation based on this factor, each of the eight survey items that loaded on the factor was converted to a numerical value based on the selected response category where Never = 1, Sometimes = 2, Often = 3, Always = 4. The team created a procedural-justice-orientation score for each respondent from these numerical values by averaging the respondent's scores across the eight items.<sup>1</sup> Procedural-justice-orientation scores can range from one to four, where one indicates the weakest procedural justice orientation to one's work and four indicates the strongest such orientation.

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<sup>1</sup> If a respondent had missing values for more than two survey items in the factor, that respondent was excluded from score creation.

## APPENDIX TABLE B.1. Procedural Justice Questions from the PJAC Staff Survey

Procedural Justice Principle	Survey Item <i>Response options are Never, Sometimes, Often, and Always</i>
Understanding	<p>At the beginning of each meeting with customers, I provide a summary of what will happen during the session.</p> <p>At the end of each meeting with customers, I verify that they understand what is expected of them going forward.</p> <p>I explain to customers the process by which decisions will be made.</p> <p>I ask customers if they understand the legal language that has been used for their case.</p>
Helpfulness	<p>I provide customers with written reminders about future meetings, court dates, and other court requirements.</p> <p>I provide customers with verbal reminders about future meetings, court dates, and other court requirements.</p> <p>I ask customers how I can be helpful to them.</p> <p><i>I let customers know about relevant services that could help them make their child support payments.</i></p>
Voice	<p><i>I ask open-ended questions (versus yes/no questions) to solicit information from customers.</i></p> <p><i>I provide customers with an opportunity to express their views, concerns, or experiences.</i></p>
Respect	<p><i>When customers are waiting at our office, I explain to them why there may be delays and how long they might have to wait.</i></p> <p>When speaking to customers, I acknowledge unfair or difficult prior experiences they may have had with regard to their child support cases.</p>
Neutrality	<p><i>I communicate in the same way to custodial parents as I do to noncustodial parents.</i></p>

NOTE: Items that did not load on the factor of orientation to procedural justice are in italics.

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# Earlier MDRC Publications on PJAC

*Integrating Procedural Justice Principles into Child Support Case Management: How Staff Members Experienced the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) Demonstration*

2021. Jacqueline Groskaufmanis.

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