



PROCEDURAL JUSTICE-INFORMED  
ALTERNATIVES TO CONTEMPT

PROJECT BRIEF  
AUGUST 2022

## Parents' Reflections on Their Experiences with the Child Support Program in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration

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The Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration project integrates principles of procedural justice into enforcement practices in six child support agencies across the United States. Procedural justice is the perception 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 is favorable to them.<sup>1</sup>

Child support agencies aim to secure payments from noncustodial parents to support the well-being of their children.<sup>2</sup> The PJAC demonstration project targeted 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 by child support agency staff members. The goal of PJAC services was to address noncustodial parents' reasons for nonpayment, improve the consistency of their payments, and promote their positive engagement with the child support agency and the custodial parent.


The PJAC demonstration was developed by the Office of Child Support Enforcement within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families. MDRC,

in collaboration with research partners MEF Associates and the Center for Court Innovation, leads a random assignment study of the model's effectiveness. Between 2018 and 2020, over 11,000 noncustodial parents were randomly assigned, either to a group offered PJAC services or to a "business-as-usual" group who instead proceeded with the standard contempt process. The outcomes of these two groups will be compared to assess PJAC's overall effectiveness. The Georgia Division of Child Support Services provides oversight of the evaluation. For an overview of the PJAC demonstration, see ["A New Response to Child Support Noncompliance: Introducing the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Project."](#)

This brief is the ninth in a series developed primarily for child support practitioners and administrators that shares lessons learned as the six child support agencies implemented the PJAC model. It focuses on parents' perspectives on and experiences with the child support program. It draws from 121 structured, qualitative interviews conducted with noncustodial and custodial parents in the

<sup>1</sup>Swaner et al. (2018); Tyler (2007).

<sup>2</sup>The noncustodial parent is the parent who has been ordered to pay child support and is generally the parent who does not live with the child. The other parent is referred to as the custodial parent.



PJAC services and business-as-usual groups across all six study agencies.

The brief begins with background information on parents in the PJAC demonstration, including general characteristics of the overall study sample and of the subset of parents interviewed. Next, it focuses on parents' reports of their interactions with child support, including an overview of how parents communicated with staff members and described their experiences with enforcement actions. Finally, the brief summarizes the extent to which parents felt the principles of procedural justice were present in their interactions with child support, as well as their impressions of the benefits of the child support program overall. Throughout, the brief compares the responses of parents who received PJAC services with the responses of those who received business-as-usual services, highlighting differences when they are present.

Findings from the interviews include:

- ▶ **Parent characteristics.** Parents described backgrounds aligned with those expected for the PJAC demonstration, including cases that had not seen payments or that had seen only partial payments over many years or decades. At the time of their interviews, most noncustodial parents were employed but described work histories with inconsistent employment and wages that made it difficult for them to support their families.
- ▶ **Communications with child support.** Parents said they preferred to communicate with child support staff members by phone, and most parents said they received timely responses to their questions. When asked about their experiences with enforcement actions, parents expressed confusion about the status of enforcement on their cases and the contempt-of-court process.
- ▶ **Views of child support held by parents in the PJAC services and business-as-usual groups.** Compared with parents interviewed in the business-as-usual group, parents interviewed in the PJAC services group more often said yes when asked whether principles of procedural justice were present in their interactions with child support staff members. This difference suggests PJAC staff members were successful in their efforts to incorporate procedural jus-

tice into their work. However, only a minority of parents thought the child support program benefited their own children or made decisions in children's best interests, and parents interviewed in the PJAC services group had responses to these questions similar to those of parents interviewed in the business-as-usual group. Moreover, most parents in the PJAC services group said that their overall views of the child support program had not changed following enrollment in PJAC.

## SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

To be enrolled in the PJAC study, noncustodial parents had to be 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, they were deemed able to pay, but unwilling to do so.) Therefore, the noncustodial parents in the study had a history of nonpayment or underpayment, and it is likely that their child support agencies had tried various outreach and enforcement measures with them in the past, without success. Thus, the study sample of noncustodial parents reflects a group that is difficult to engage and obtain payment from, and is not representative of parents in the child support program overall.

Box 1 offers an overview of the selection and recruitment process for the parent interviews. Parent interviews were conducted between July 2020 and November 2020. It is important to note that interview participants are not representative of the overall PJAC study sample. Parents had to have valid contact information on file and at least some interaction with child support following study enrollment to be on the interview list, and those preconditions excluded at least one-third of noncustodial parents. Thus, the experiences and opinions of the parents reported in this brief may not reflect those of the study sample as a whole. Interviews were transcribed and coded in Dedoose, a piece of mixed-methods software. The team conducted reliability checks among interview coders to make sure the codes were standardized. This brief generally reports findings as broad proportions of parents who described an experience: "most" (75 percent or more), "a majority" (between 51 percent

## BOX 1

### Selection and Recruitment for Parent Interviews

#### Selection and Recruitment

The selection and recruitment process for the interviews was designed to focus on parents with valid contact information who had some level of interaction with the child support agency following their enrollment into the PJAC study, to ensure parents had some recent experience with either PJAC services or business-as-usual services. The selection and recruitment process for interviews was different for noncustodial parents and custodial parents. Noncustodial parents were selected from the overall study sample; parents were eligible if they had a contact with a PJAC staff member (among members of the PJAC services group) or successful process service (among business-as-usual group members), and if the agency first made contact with them at least six months before the interview sample was created.\* Custodial parents were recruited by each of the six child support agencies. MDRC provided a list of each agency's noncustodial parents who qualified for the interview and asked the agencies to recruit custodial parents associated with their cases to offer them the opportunity to be interviewed by the research team. All parents went through an informed-consent process and consented to be interviewed.

#### Parent Interview Sample

A total of 121 parents completed interviews. See the table below for a breakdown by study agency and research group.

Study Agency	Noncustodial Parents		Custodial Parents		Total
	PJAC Services	Business-as-Usual	PJAC Services	Business-as-Usual	
Arizona	8	2	6	4	20
California	7	4	6	1	18
Michigan	4	5	4	4	17
Franklin County, Ohio	7	3	8	5	23
Stark County, Ohio	3	5	6	6	20
Virginia	10	2	10	1	23
Total	39	21	40	21	121

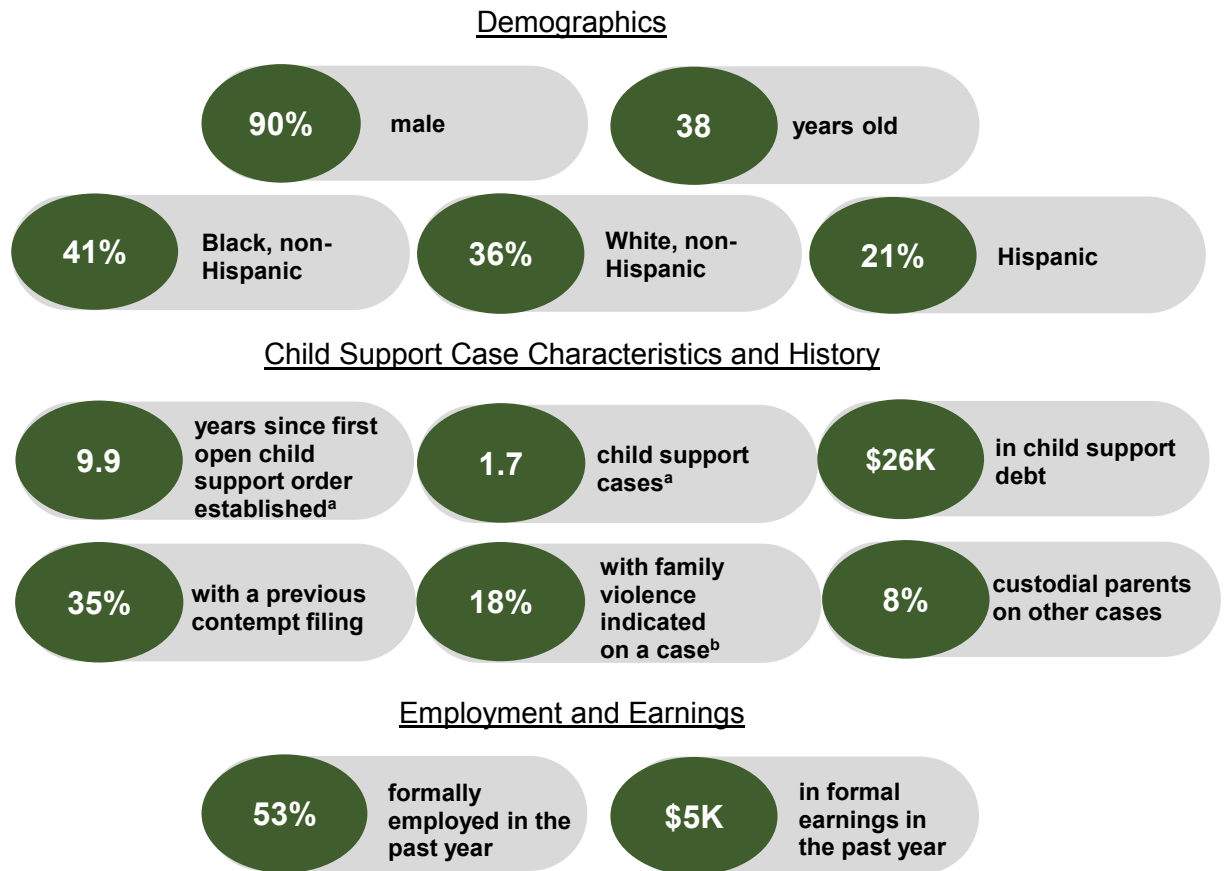
\*Successful process service is when a parent receives notice to appear in court with a hearing date; standards for delivery (for example, mail, registered mail, or personal service) vary by jurisdiction.

and 74 percent), “some” (between 25 percent and 50 percent), and “few” (fewer than 25 percent). A limited number of questions were asked of nearly all parents using standard prompts and are reported as exact percentages or counts. When these percentages were calculated, some responses were treated as missing (because, for example, the interviewee did not answer the question or because the response did not fit into the coding categories for the question).

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTS

This section describes some of the characteristics of parents. Because this information does not vary substantially by research group due to the nature of random assignment, findings are not presented separately by research group. Figure 1 offers an overview of noncustodial parents' characteristics at study enrollment for the full sample. As it shows, parents in the study had long case histories and considerable child support debt. Data from the interviews, provided below, offer addi-

**FIGURE 1** Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents at PJAC Enrollment



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on child support administrative records and employment and earnings data from the National Directory of New Hires.

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

<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 was the custodial parent or child).

<sup>b</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 when the noncustodial parent was indicated as the victim of family violence.

tional insights into the parents who participated in the interviews, including information about how they became involved in the child support program, their relationships with their children, and some of the factors that contributed to their child support debt accumulation.

### Case Establishment and Order Amounts

Child support cases can be opened for several reasons. Among both custodial and noncustodial parents interviewed, the most common reason given for case initiation was that the custodial parent opened the case. Custodial parents' reasons for opening cases included the relationship ending

with the other parent (sometimes through a divorce) and seeking financial support from the noncustodial parent to help raise their child(ren). Another common reason parents gave for why their child support cases were opened had to do with public benefit programs: A parent seeking benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or Medicaid is often required to open a child support case. Some states offset the cost of the benefits provided to the custodial parent by requiring child support payments from the noncustodial parent.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Tollestrup (2021).

Most parents said the experience of opening their cases was either neutral or negative, with noncustodial and custodial parents alike reporting feelings of confusion and frustration with the process. Half of the parents said they understood how the child support agency determined their order amounts when their cases were first established. Nearly half of parents felt that the order amounts themselves were unfair; this opinion was more commonly held by noncustodial parents, who described not being able to afford those amounts along with their other financial obligations or who believed their order amounts did not account for other ways they supported their children. Custodial parents who said their order amounts were unfair tended to think that the amount was not sufficient to help with the costs of raising a child. A small number of parents said that they felt like their order amounts were originally fair but had become unfair over time. For example, one noncustodial parent described earning less income but having the order amount remain the same, and said it no longer felt fair or feasible to pay it.<sup>4</sup>

### Relationships with Children

Most noncustodial parents interviewed said they were in contact with the children for whom they were ordered to pay child support. This contact varied from occasional calls to daily, in-person interactions. Box 2 has examples of how noncustodial parents described their relationships with their children. While some noncustodial parents expressed frustration about not seeing their children more often, many said they felt close with their children and enjoyed parenting, including teaching their children life skills and listening to them.

Most of the parents who were not in contact with their children expressed negative feelings about the lack of relationship or said they wanted the circumstances to be different. These parents identified challenges related to obtaining parenting-time agreements or problematic relationships with the

<sup>4</sup>When circumstances change and parents are unable to make payments at their previously determined order amounts, orders can be modified. Modifications are not automatic. Parents must apply for them and are subject to eligibility requirements. Parents with fluctuating incomes may not be able to request modifications often enough to match their earnings.

## BOX 2 In Their Words: Relationship with Children

We have a good relationship. We've always been close. . . . I would always be at his sports games and practices, pay for him, pick him up. Just trying to teach him right from wrong and how to be a man. So far he's doing good. He's got a good job. He's 19. He doesn't get into trouble.

—Noncustodial parent (age 40)

Me and [my daughter], we're really close because that's my little baby girl. She stays with me every weekend. . . . I spend a lot of time with her.

—Noncustodial parent (age 53)

I enjoy teaching [my son] things and he enjoys learning. Whenever I want to show him something or want him to learn a certain thing, he's always open and available . . . willing and ready to learn. He's a real good kid.

—Noncustodial parent (age 49)

Now [that my daughter] is in high school . . . she kind of wants to be a little more independent. But I mean, I know everything that she's doing.

—Noncustodial parent (age 41)

I could have a million bucks, but I would still feel [bad] because I don't have my kids. I'm out of sync in my relationship with my children.

—Noncustodial parent (age 30)

other parent as reasons they could not see their children.<sup>5</sup> While parents expressed frustration with the lack of time they spent with their children, they did not indicate that those frustrations had any bearing on their willingness to comply with their child support obligations.

<sup>5</sup>In some states, parents can enter into a parenting-time agreement, a formally documented agreement on the amount of time each parent is ordered to spend with the child or children.





## Employment

Sixty-seven percent of custodial parents and 56 percent of noncustodial parents said they were working at the time of the interview. Parents worked in a range of industries. Some of the most frequently mentioned careers among noncustodial parents included trucking and driving work, construction, and public service—for example, carrying mail for the U.S. Postal Service. Health care work was especially common among custodial parents interviewed. Most of the parents who said that they were currently employed worked full time. However, some parents, most commonly noncustodial parents, described inconsistent or changing employment. For example, a couple of parents said that they had only recently returned to the workforce following health-related issues. Other parents described changing industries or taking on additional jobs to meet their expenses. A small number of parents shared the factors contributing to their unemployment, including the COVID-19 pandemic, physical disabilities that made it difficult to work, and the inability to procure professional licenses due to criminal records.

## Payment History

The overwhelming majority of parents—regardless of their research group or custodial status—said that payments had been made at some point in the history of their cases. However, parents described a broad range when it came to the consistency of payments: Some noncustodial parents made regular payments every other week through income withholding, while others made sporadic and unpredictable payments.

When asked what challenges made it difficult to make payments, noncustodial parents' most common answer was that they lacked consistent employment. This finding aligns with ones reported in [a previous PJAC brief](#), in which PJAC case managers described inconsistent, low-wage employment and challenges to obtaining employment as significant barriers to payment for noncustodial parents, noting that parents who had been involved in the criminal legal system faced additional hurdles.<sup>6</sup> Though interviewers did not specifically ask parents wheth-

er child support enforcement measures affected their ability to make payments, a few parents volunteered that enforcement actions such as driver's license suspensions had contributed to their difficulty making payments. These parents noted that such enforcement measures created logistical challenges that affected their ability to work.

Noncustodial parents also said that competing expenses—such as housing, food, and other children or family members to provide for—made it difficult, or even impossible, to make consistent child support payments. Several noncustodial parents expressed concern about their ability to pay their bills and meet their own basic needs. Custodial parents explained how the lack of child support payments strained their ability to meet the costs of raising children, such as paying for food, childcare, diapers, and activities. Some custodial parents noted that even when noncustodial parents were making payments, the amounts they received were insufficient to meet their children's needs.<sup>7</sup>

## PARENTS' INTERACTIONS WITH CHILD SUPPORT

This section synthesizes what parents who participated in interviews shared about their interactions with child support, starting with how they communicated with the child support agency, followed by their experiences with enforcement actions, including civil contempt of court. Throughout, the section highlights major differences between how parents in the PJAC services group and parents in the business-as-usual group described their experiences or preferences. ([Other reports](#) provide descriptions of child support services, including how they were enhanced for parents in the PJAC services group.)<sup>8</sup>

### Communications with Child Support

Parents communicate with child support staff members for many reasons, from the initial establishment of their cases through follow-up discussions about the status of payments or enforcement

<sup>6</sup>Cummings (2020).

<sup>7</sup>Custodial parents might have felt that way because they perceived order amounts to be too low, because noncustodial parents had only made partial payments, or for both reasons.

<sup>8</sup>See Treskon, Phillips, Groskaufmanis, and Skemer (2022) and Skemer et al. (2022).

measures. This section summarizes how parents described their communications with child support.

- ▶ **Preferred method of communication.** When asked how they preferred to communicate with child support, parents across groups (custodial and noncustodial parents in the PJAC services and business-as-usual groups) most commonly said phone calls were their preference. A few parents felt that child support workers were more likely to view them as real people—and assist them accordingly—if they could hear their voices on the phone. Others said phone calls were ideal because they allowed them to get all the information they needed and ask questions in real time. A few parents preferred email or other electronic communications because it left them with records they could refer to in the future. In interviews described in [a previous publication](#), PJAC staff members said that text messaging was a frequently used, convenient option for outreach and engagement with parents.<sup>9</sup> However, texting was among the least preferred options for interviewed parents, with only one parent naming texting as a preferred mode of communication.
- ▶ **Main point of contact.** Custodial and noncustodial parents in the PJAC services group more often reported that they had one main point of contact at their child support agency than did parents in the business-as-usual group. This finding is not surprising given that PJAC case managers were assigned to work with all of the noncustodial parents' cases. PJAC case managers had the task of reaching out and introducing themselves and the PJAC project to parents in the PJAC services group as one of the first steps in their work with new parents. Box 3 describes the initial impressions of parents in the PJAC services group upon learning of PJAC.
- ▶ **Responsiveness of child support.** A majority of parents said that they received timely responses when they reached out to child support with questions. Rates were similar across

### BOX 3 Learning About PJAC

Parents interviewed in the PJAC services group described learning about PJAC through letters and phone calls from child support; their initial impressions of the program varied. For example, several custodial parents said they felt hopeful when the child support staff described PJAC. In contrast, others doubted that the program would improve their situations. A handful of noncustodial parents said that they were suspicious of the program when they first heard about it—particularly those who said that they had had negative experiences with child support in the past.

At the time of their interviews, though, nearly half of parents in the PJAC services group said they were not familiar with PJAC. This response was more common among noncustodial parents. This lack of awareness could be attributed to a number of factors, such as parents not knowing the program by name, forgetting their cases were part of a program, or not understanding the program when it was introduced to them.


research groups and custodial statuses. Parents also noted that when child support staff members returned their messages, they often got helpful answers to their questions.

#### Experiences with Enforcement

Noncustodial parents in the study had histories of inconsistent payments, often stretching back many years. Typically, because of the eligibility requirements for the PJAC study, noncustodial parents in both research groups would have already experienced multiple enforcement actions meant to compel payment—such as license suspensions, interceptions of tax refunds, credit bureau reporting, passport sanctions, and seizure of bank accounts, among others—before their enrollment into the study. This subsection describes both noncustodial and custodial parents' experiences with enforcement actions on their cases.

When asked whether their cases had been subject to any enforcement actions in the past year, about half of custodial and noncustodial parents said

<sup>9</sup>Treskon, Phillips, Groskaufmanis, and Skemer (2022).



yes.<sup>10</sup> The share of parents in the PJAC services group who said there had not been any enforcement actions on their cases in the last year was similar to that of parents in the business-as-usual group, with PJAC services parents just slightly higher (54 percent compared with 49 percent). PJAC case managers could suspend discretionary enforcement actions or referrals to contempt of court while pursuing other approaches to obtaining payment. The relatively small difference in enforcement actions between research groups among those interviewed probably stems from several factors, including limited options for discretionary enforcement actions by case managers (described in an [earlier report](#)) and confusion among parents about whether they had been subject to enforcement actions, as described below.<sup>11</sup>

Parents (both custodial parents and noncustodial parents in both the PJAC services and business-as-usual groups) described a similar range of experiences with enforcement actions: Some mentioned enforcement actions that had happened in past years, some said that enforcement actions had been threatened but had not occurred, and others stated they did not know what was going on with their cases, including the status of enforcement actions. Parents in both the PJAC and business-as-usual groups expressed confusion about the enforcement process. For example, parents indicated that they did not understand why child support had taken an enforcement action, were uncertain whether an action had been taken or not, or did not understand what was required to reverse an action. Few parents described enforcement actions leading to payments. When they did, parents explained that a suspension might have led to the noncustodial parent making a payment to get a license or passport back, but that the enforcement action did not lead to sustained payments.

Among the parents who mentioned enforcement actions, license suspensions were the most com-

mon. About one-third of noncustodial parents said their licenses had been suspended at some point. Some described recent license suspensions, while a few described suspensions dating back more than a decade. A few parents described a cycle of license suspension, payment, reinstatement, and resuspension. A small number of custodial parents said they wanted child support to suspend the noncustodial parents' licenses. However, all noncustodial parents and some custodial parents, representing both research groups, thought license suspensions were ineffective. As mentioned above, a suspended license could interfere with a parent's ability to work; a few parents also described how a suspended license could interfere with noncustodial parents' ability to spend time with children, share in taking them to activities, or attend medical appointments.

### Civil Contempt of Court

Civil contempt of court is a legal enforcement tool used by the child support program to compel non-paying noncustodial parents to meet their child support obligations. All parents in the PJAC study were eligible for contempt. Parents in the business-as-usual group were expected to continue in the civil contempt process. Parents in the PJAC services group were diverted from contempt to receive PJAC services, but their case managers could send them to contempt if they continued not to make payments and did not engage with those services. As expected from the study design, a larger share of parents in the business-as-usual group (50 percent compared with 20 percent in the PJAC services group) told interviewers their cases had been in contempt in the last year. Lack of understanding of contempt was prevalent in the responses of noncustodial and custodial parents in both the PJAC services and business-as-usual groups. It was common for noncustodial parents to say they were not in contempt but then describe having bench warrants because they had missed attending court hearings.<sup>12</sup>

When describing their experiences in contempt, noncustodial parents in both research groups expressed negative views of the process and the

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<sup>10</sup>Some enforcement actions are automatic and based on debt levels or on the number of months without payment. Additionally, some of the enforcement actions described by parents may have occurred before study enrollment.

<sup>11</sup>The similarity in levels of enforcement actions between the groups in interviews mirrors the finding for the full study sample based on administrative data. See Skemer et al. (2022).

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<sup>12</sup>These interviews were counted toward the share of parents in contempt. A bench warrant is a legal document issued by a judge that authorizes a person's arrest. One can be issued when a noncustodial parent does not show up at a court hearing.



courts. Descriptions of what led to their frustration were varied, sometimes stemming from the custodial parent, the judge, the child support attorney, or earlier concerns regarding their cases. Some noncustodial parents said that the court was focused on the money and did not recognize the other ways they were caring for their children. Noncustodial parents also described feeling confused and frustrated with the process. Some examples included getting warrants for hearings the noncustodial parents were unaware of and the court demanding payment when they thought it was obvious they could not afford to pay. A few noncustodial parents described relying on family members to resolve purge payments.<sup>13</sup> Some custodial parents expressed relief that their cases were going to court and they were finally getting help to obtain support, but some others said they did not think contempt would help. See Box 4 for parents' descriptions of contempt in their own words.

Parents described a range of outcomes for their court cases. Some cases never proceeded to a hearing because the noncustodial parent could not be located.<sup>14</sup> In other cases the noncustodial parent did not appear at the hearing, so a warrant was issued. A few parents noted payments resulting from the contempt process. Examples included a custodial parent describing a contempt hearing that led to a one-time payment, a noncustodial parent who went to jail and paid a purge payment to obtain release, and a noncustodial parent who was making regular payments but had to appear in court regularly to check in.

### EXPERIENCES WITH PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

This section examines how parents answered a series of questions about whether they felt they were treated in accordance with principles of procedural

#### BOX 4

#### In Their Words: Contempt of Court

I feel bad because they [the court] don't even know my heart. They don't even know that I love my kids, they don't even see what I do for my kids. I think they are wrong [to put me in contempt], but they don't think they're wrong because I'm not giving them the money to give to my kids.

—Noncustodial parent (PJAC services group, age 44)

Yeah, it made me completely bitter towards [the child support agency] as far as how they feel about the children and what really matters. They might as well just say that the money is the only thing that matters for them, not the kids. You don't know what type of father I am. You just know that I haven't paid child support this month. It has nothing to do with the child, in all reality.

—Noncustodial parent (business-as-usual group, age 26)

I have no clue [if the noncustodial parent has been referred to contempt]. Child support didn't even call me on the day they went to court. I would love to be there, but no one calls me, and I have no idea.

—Custodial parent (PJAC services group, age 31)

When we went to court, the judge had the nerve to scold me for not going in sooner and doing something about it. I wanted to cry when that happened. When she said that, and I held my tongue because I was there, and I was thankful to be present for that hearing. I was finally thankful, and felt a relief that after all these years, 20 years, that they were finally doing something.

—Custodial parent (business-as-usual group, age 44)

<sup>13</sup>A finding of contempt by the court often has a purge payment attached to it specifying an amount the noncustodial parent must pay to avoid jail.

<sup>14</sup>The research team interviewed some custodial parents who described this situation occurring. The noncustodial parents involved may have been included in the interview sample because their child support agencies had contact information for them at some point, but that contact information later fell out of date.

justice when interacting with child support staff members. As a reminder, the conclusions drawn from this analysis apply only to the parents interviewed, who are not representative of the broader PJAC study sample.

Procedural justice involves perceptions of fairness in processes that resolve disputes and result in decisions. The five principles of procedural justice are helpfulness, understanding, respect, voice, and neutrality (see Box 5). To gauge the extent to which parents felt these principles were present in their interactions with child support, interviewers asked a series of five yes-or-no questions, then prompted parents to provide explanations for their answers. The results—broken down by parents' custodial status and research group—are presented in Figure 2. In nearly all instances, noncustodial and custodial parents in the PJAC services group responded affirmatively to these questions more often than their counterparts in the business-as-usual group. Box 6 provides examples of some of the reflections parents offered in response to the questions.

### Helpfulness

Child support processes can be complex and technical. Parents may not understand the language in the communications they receive from child support (for example, “contempt of court”) or understand the paperwork or eligibility requirements to make changes to their orders. Case managers have an opportunity to help parents as they navigate child support by doing things like sending them reminders, explaining eligibility requirements, and answering other questions as they arise.

Parents were asked, “Do you feel like child support has been helpful to you in relation to your case?” As shown in Figure 2, parents in the PJAC services group more often said their case managers were helpful. Parents described helpfulness from child support staff mainly in terms of case managers' efforts to keep them informed about what was happening on their cases, answering their questions, and assisting them with paperwork. Parents in the PJAC services group were asked a separate question in the interviews about how their case managers were helpful to them. An example parents gave was case managers offering their direct phone numbers so parents did not have to navigate

## BOX 5 Procedural Justice

The five key elements of procedural justice as applied to the child support context

- ▶ **Helpfulness:** Parents should feel that the child support agency was helpful and interested in addressing their situations.
- ▶ **Understanding:** Parents should understand the child support processes and have their questions answered.
- ▶ **Respect:** Parents should believe they were treated with dignity and respect and their concerns were taken seriously.
- ▶ **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.

a customer service line. A number of custodial parents in the PJAC services group said that their case managers helped by encouraging the other parent to make payments.

### Understanding

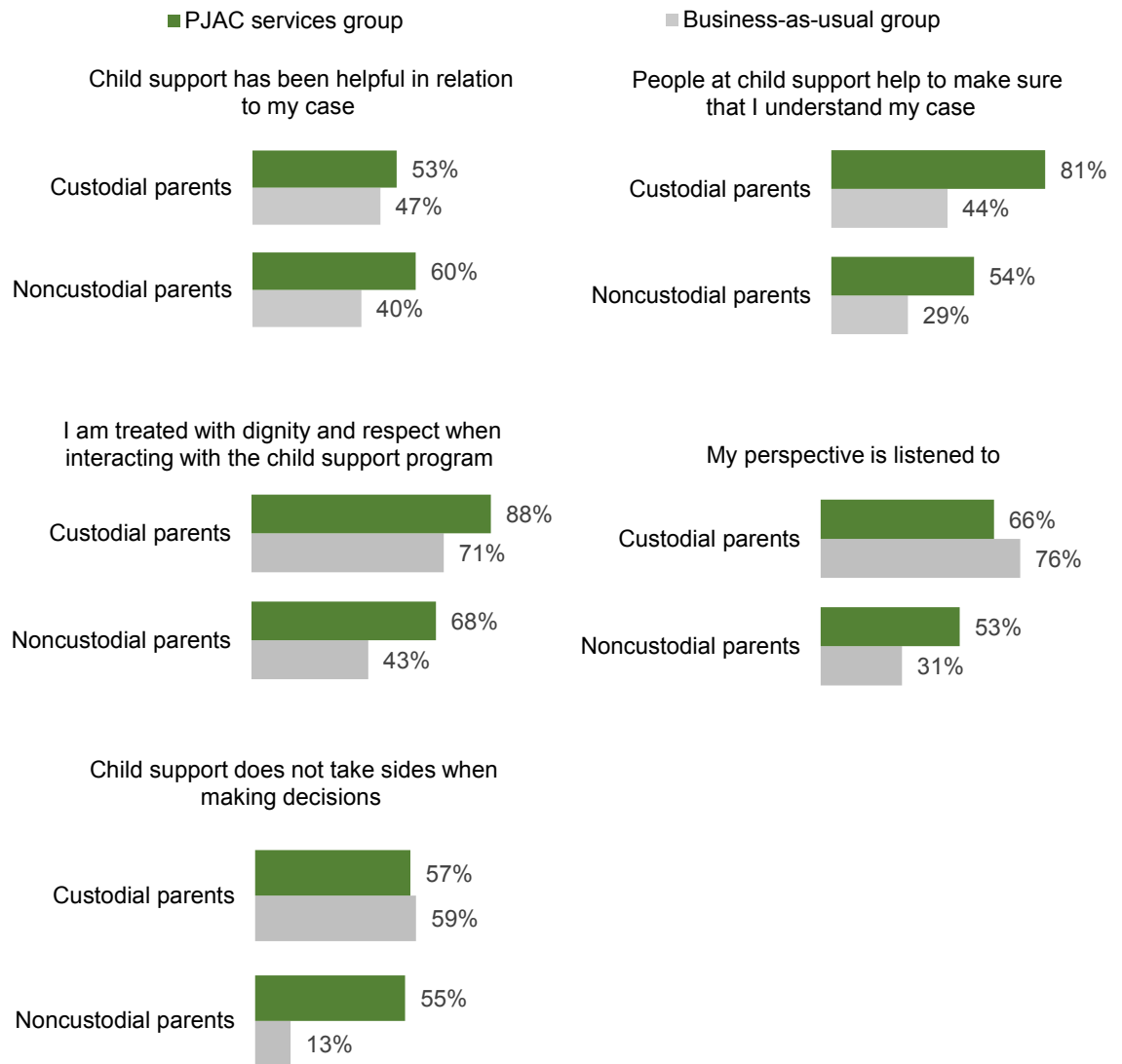
Before parents can make informed decisions about their child support cases, it is critical that they understand the options and processes that are relevant in doing so. *Understanding* is a core procedural justice principle, and PJAC case managers receive training designed to improve their ability to increase parents' understanding of child support.

Parents were asked, “Do you feel that child support has helped to ensure that you understand your case?” A majority of parents in the PJAC services group said yes. A minority of parents in the business-as-usual group said yes. Custodial parents reported feeling this way more often than noncustodial parents.

### Respect

There are many ways child support case managers can show respect—for example, by taking parents' concerns seriously and responding thoughtfully. In their own interviews, PJAC case managers iden-

**FIGURE 2** Responses to Procedural Justice Questions, by Custodial Status and Research Group



SOURCE: Parent responses to MDRC interview questions.

tified communications with parents—especially initial interactions—as an opportunity to demonstrate respect.<sup>15</sup>

Parents were asked, “Do you feel like you’re treated with dignity and respect when interacting with the child support program?” Parents in the PJAC services group said yes more often than those in the business-as-usual group. This difference was most marked among noncustodial parents: As shown in Figure 2, a majority of noncustodial parents in the business-as-usual group said no. Meanwhile a ma-

jority of noncustodial parents in the PJAC services group said yes, which suggests that, among the parents interviewed, the approach taken by PJAC case managers improved noncustodial parents’ perceptions of how they were treated by child support.

Parents who said they were treated with dignity and respect provided a range of examples to explain their responses. Parents shared that they felt that their case managers were kind, polite, and attentive to their needs. Other parents said that, while they thought that their treatment was polite and respectful, they did not feel like case managers made positive, material changes to their cases.

<sup>15</sup>Treskon, Phillips, Groskaufmanis, and Skemer (2022).

## BOX 6

### In Their Words: Procedural Justice

I think [my case manager] listens to me, but I don't think it actually has anything to do with the decisions that they're making. I think there's already algorithms on how they do things. . . . Either you meet that requirement or you don't. You could be one cent over, and you could have just told the story of your life, and that makes no difference of whether they can approve you or not.

—Custodial parent (PJAC services group, age 36)

My case manager been a really, really cool person through this bad time. It's good to know that there's somebody out there that is being straight up. I'm talking to Molly instead of talking to child support, if you get what I'm saying.\*

—Noncustodial parent (PJAC services group, age 30)

They listen. They're sympathetic . . . they understand my frustration. But it doesn't solve [issues with my child support case]. So that's why I said I think a lot of this comes down that there's things that need to change and it comes down to the state.

—Custodial parent (business-as-usual group, age 50)

I feel like they give me information when I'm there. Like when I needed help or with forms or something like that. I've really never been in a position where we were making a decision together and they needed my input. I can't even recall a situation like that.

—Noncustodial parent (business-as-usual group, age 42)

When I explained my situation, there's no sympathy. This is what you have to pay and this is what you owe, so pay that. We don't care if you live in a cardboard box, you pay this.

—Noncustodial parent (PJAC services group, age 35)

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\*Name changed.


### Voice

If parents can voice their concerns or give context about their circumstances—for example, by explaining that they have not been making payments because of losing a job, or expressing the desire to modify their current order amounts—case managers may better address their needs and encourage compliance. PJAC case managers learned about tools and techniques to help parents make their voices heard.

Parents were asked, “Do you feel that your perspective is listened to when interacting with child support?” The majority of parents interviewed in the PJAC services group said yes, and nearly as many noncustodial parents as custodial parents gave that response. Among parents in the business-as-usual group, there was a large gap between custodial parents and noncustodial parents, with a larger share

of custodial parents saying yes. Among custodial parents in the PJAC services group who answered no to this question, many said they were frustrated because they had asked for enforcement actions on their cases and the actions had not been taken. (Under the PJAC model, case managers attempted to avoid enforcement actions and instead were charged with working toward addressing parents' underlying reasons for nonpayment.) Though PJAC services were intended to increase opportunity for parents to have a voice in their cases, the data suggest that, among those interviewed, it only had that effect for noncustodial parents.

Among parents who said their voices were listened to, however, many expressed doubt that voicing their concerns would lead to changes. They distinguished the opportunity to share their perspectives from believing their perspectives mattered



when decisions were made about their cases. Nearly half of parents stated that they did not feel that their perspectives were taken into account when decisions were made. Among parents who said that their perspectives were listened to, many did not think their case managers had the power—or in some cases, the motivation—to make changes on their cases.

### Neutrality

Neutrality is a fundamental principle of procedural justice in the child support context because child support functions as an intermediary between custodial and noncustodial parents. Parents open child support cases for a number of reasons, but it is common for relationships between custodial and noncustodial parents to be complicated or tense. In PJAC, case managers aimed to demonstrate that they were not taking sides, but rather were resources and advocates for both parents.

Parents were asked, “Do you feel that child support takes sides when making decisions on your case?” Overall, about half of parents interviewed thought child support did not take sides. It was more common for noncustodial parents in the PJAC services group to say that the child support agency remained neutral than it was for noncustodial parents in the business-as-usual group. Custodial parents in both research groups thought that child support remained neutral at similar rates. This finding suggests, among parents who were interviewed, that PJAC services increased the share of noncustodial parents who felt that child support was neutral in making decisions.

Many noncustodial parents who did not think child support was neutral felt it was biased in favor of custodial parents. Most parents who said that child support chose sides felt that child support sided with the other parent. However, of those who felt that child support took their side, all were custodial parents.

## VIEWSON THE BENEFITS OF CHILD SUPPORT TO FAMILIES

This section synthesizes the perspectives of parents who participated in interviews in both the PJAC services and business-as-usual groups on the benefits of the child support program overall and on


how it benefited their children, and includes their suggestions about how to improve the program. The section concludes with perspectives shared in interviews by parents in the PJAC services group about whether their views on child support had changed since their enrollment in PJAC.

### General Perspectives on the Benefits of Child Support

When asked whether the child support program generally makes decisions with children’s best interests in mind, about one-third of parents said yes. Answers were similar across research groups and custodial statuses. In answering the question about the child support program in general, however, it was common for parents to give examples specific to their own cases. Some custodial parents who responded no to this question said that inconsistent or low payments from child support were insufficient to support their children. For this reason, they did not feel that the program had their children’s best interests in mind. Among noncustodial parents who said no, some said they thought that child support was biased in favor of custodial parents and made decisions based on custodial parents’ interests rather than those of their children.

Parents were also asked whether they felt that child support was beneficial to *their* children specifically, and again, about one-third of parents said yes. Answers were similar across research groups, and in both research groups custodial parents said yes more often than noncustodial parents. A few noncustodial parents who responded no to the question expressed uncertainty about whether their payments were actually going toward their children’s expenses. Others described how being behind on child support was harmful to them or their relationships with their children. Custodial parents who did not feel child support benefited their children referred to a lack of payments or payments that were too small to be helpful. Among the custodial parents who did feel that child support benefited their children, a handful noted that receiving some money was better than receiving none at all. Among noncustodial parents who thought child support benefited their children, they appreciated the structure child support provided for them to contribute financially to raising their children.





When parents were asked how the child support program could be improved, noncustodial and custodial parents in both research groups most often pointed to better communication. Many parents said that they felt confused by the status of their cases. One of the most frequent responses among noncustodial parents was that child support should look at the circumstances behind cases and better consider what order amounts are realistic for individual parents. Custodial parents often said child support should be less lenient with noncustodial parents and faster to take enforcement actions.

### Perspectives of Parents in the PJAC Services Group on Child Support

Noncustodial parents in the PJAC study often had long histories with the child support program; all had been out of payment compliance long enough to have their cases referred for civil contempt. By the time parents were enrolled in PJAC, many had already developed strong perceptions of the child support program based on years of communications, interactions, enforcement experiences, and more.

Parents in the PJAC services group were asked whether their views of the child support program had changed since their enrollment in the program; most parents said no, with both custodial and noncustodial parents responding this way at similar rates. Of the few parents whose perspectives had changed, most said that their impressions of child support had improved. A small number of parents volunteered that although their experiences with child support had improved since PJAC enrollment, they still viewed the overall child support system negatively. This finding suggests that improving how parents viewed their interactions with child support staff members—as evidenced by the findings presented in the previous section about procedural justice—did not translate into improved views of the child support program overall among the parents who were interviewed.

### CONCLUSION


Parents' perspectives are critical to understanding and addressing the challenges that exist in the child support system. Drawing on 121 interviews, this brief offers insight into how parents who have child support cases with long histories of inconsistent payment or nonpayment view their

interactions with child support staff members and the child support system in general, as well as the successes and limitations of the PJAC model in changing parents' views. Though the interviews are illuminating, the conclusions presented here should be interpreted with caution, as the interview sample is not representative of the larger PJAC study sample, nor of the larger population of parents who have child support cases.

Parents—regardless of custodial status or research group—described being confused about child support processes and enforcement actions. Parents were also largely in agreement that they did not view the child support program as beneficial to their children. However, the interview data indicate that, among those interviewed, PJAC services successfully increased the degree to which parents experienced elements of procedural justice in their interactions with child support. This finding suggests that training child support staff members in procedural justice can improve their interactions with parents—creating dynamics in which parents feel more heard and respected.

The goal of PJAC was to increase reliable child support payments by improving noncustodial parents' perceptions of fairness in the child support process, thereby making them more likely to comply with their orders. The interview findings show that although interviewed PJAC services group members' interpersonal interactions with child support staff members improved, their overall perceptions of the child support program remained negative. Parents may have felt that their case managers listened to them or tried to be helpful, but that did not translate into parents feeling that child support was taking their financial circumstances into account in setting their order amounts or using enforcement actions. It may be that parents' sense of fairness in the child support process is tied more to having order amounts they feel are within their financial reach (in the case of noncustodial parents) and experiencing improved payments (in the case of custodial parents).

Parents described factors that influenced the regularity and completeness of child support payments. Noncustodial parents spoke of the barriers they faced to making payments, even though child support had determined they had the ability to pay, cit-



ing insufficient wages, inconsistent employment, and difficulties related to criminal records. These descriptions align with findings reported in other PJAC publications about employment among noncustodial parents in the broader study sample and the limitations of PJAC services to address nonpayment resulting from limited earnings. Earnings data collected after the full sample was enrolled show that noncustodial parents had very low formal earnings—around \$5,000 per year (see Figure 1). Noncustodial parents' limited earnings point to the difficulty many experienced in complying with their orders. PJAC case managers had some tools to help parents who had difficulty paying. Modifications to make orders more in line with parents' income may have been helpful for some parents, but [a very small share of parents in the PJAC study](#)—regardless of research group—received downward modifications; this limited share can be attributed to the eligibility requirements

for such modifications.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, state regulations dictate minimum order amounts that still may have been beyond the reach of some parents, given their incomes and other financial obligations. Addressing the deep-rooted financial challenges of noncustodial parents was not within the scope of PJAC services.

Financial support from both parents can be essential to providing for children's material needs. PJAC aimed to increase parents' willingness to comply with their child support orders so that children would have the resources they require. These interviews are not able to determine whether PJAC achieved its ultimate goal of increasing reliable child support payments. The PJAC study will address this important question in a future report, slated for release in 2023.

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<sup>16</sup>Skemer et al. (2022).

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the support of many individuals and organizations. Staff members at Decision Information Resources, Inc., led the effort to reach and recruit eligible parents, and they conducted the interviews. We are grateful to the many people there who supported this effort, including David Getman and Heather Morrison. We are also grateful to the staff members at the six child support agencies participating in the PJAC demonstration who recruited eligible custodial parents for the interview sample. We would also like to thank staff members at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, for their helpful comments on previous drafts, including Michael Hayes, Tanya Johnson, and Melody Morales at the Office of Child Support Enforcement, and Megan Reid and Nicole Constance at the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation.

At MDRC, the authors thank Sara Ellis, who helped with coding the interview data. This brief benefited greatly from reviews by Kyla Wasserman and Melanie Skemer. We thank Joshua Malbin, who edited the brief, and Ann Kottner, who designed it, laid it out, and prepared it for publication.

Last, we would like to extend our gratitude to the many parents who participated in interviews and shared their experiences. Their voices are invaluable to this study and we are deeply appreciative of their contributions.

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