



From Compliance to Engagement: Challenges and Opportunities for Promoting Whole-Family Well-Being through the Child Support Program

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Any views expressed here are mine and not necessarily those of the sponsoring institutions

Roadmap

- What do we know about nonpayment of child support?
 - Why it matters
 - Data and time trends
 - Contributing factors
- What are child support programs doing about it?
 - Federal demonstrations
 - State and local initiatives
- Where might we go from here?
 - Aligning services with family needs & goals
 - Opportunities for engaging family input



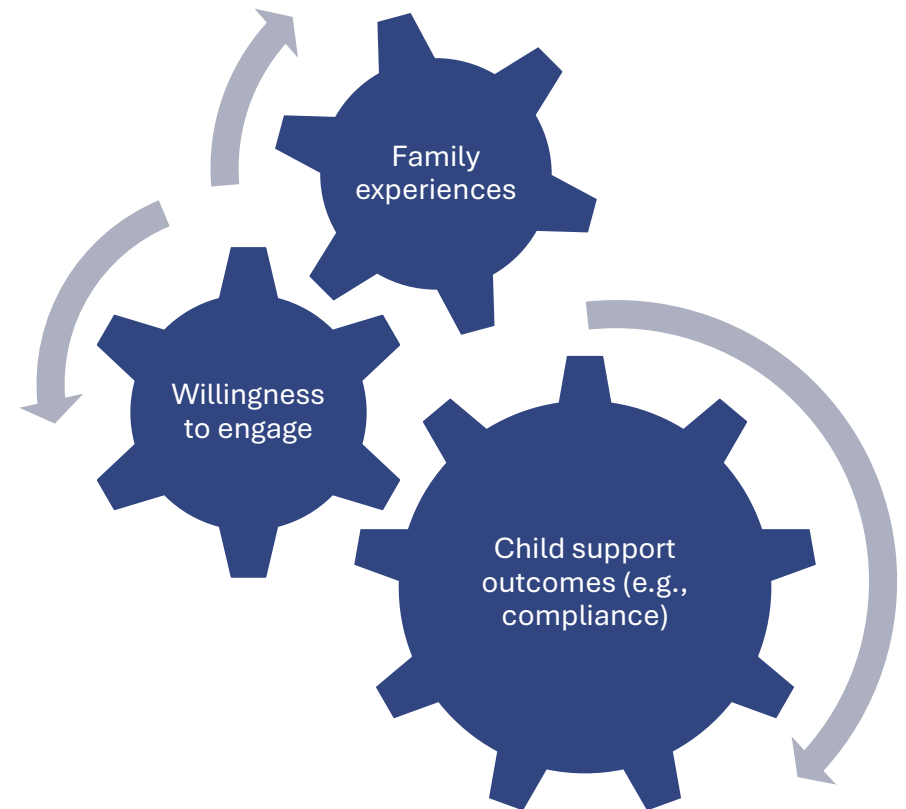
But First: Compliance Vs. Engagement

- What does **compliance** mean, and to whom?
 - Practitioners and policymakers
 - Parents
 - Researchers
 - Other community stakeholders



But First: Compliance Vs. Engagement

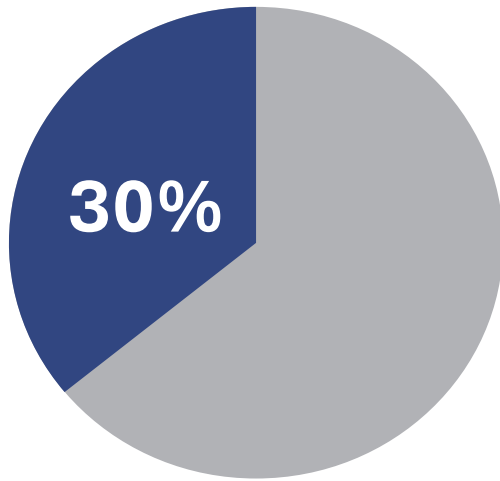
- Noncompliance matters for the whole family...
- But might not be the whole story
- **Engagement** and compliance go hand in hand
- Family experience shapes (and is shaped by) engagement and compliance



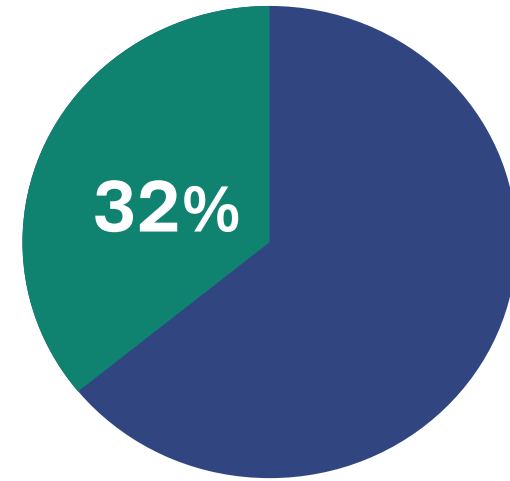


What Do We Know About Nonpayment of Child Support?

Child Support By The Numbers



Kids in single parent households



Kids in single parent households in poverty

U.S. Census Bureau, 2023

Child Support By The Numbers

12.6 million kids served by IV-D program



1.06 million CA IV-D kids



\$26.6 billion distributed to families



\$2.4 billion CA distributions



\$115.1 billion owed in arrears



\$17.2 billion CA arrears



National stats: OCSS, 2024

CA stats: CA DCSS FFY Performance Data Reports (FFY 2024)

Child Support Matters For Families

- Regular support payments associated with:
 - ↓ Child poverty (*Cuesta & Meyer, 2018*)
 - ↑ Regularity of total household income (*Ha et al., 2011*)
 - ↑ Custodial parent employment stability (*Cuesta & Ros Pilarz, 2024*)
 - ↑ Children's future earnings (**intergenerational** disadvantage implications) (*Kong et al., 2024*)

Unpaid Child Support Can Hurt The Whole Family

Obligors

Arrears, interest → potential labor market suppression

CSA sanctions → potential employment barriers

Legal system entanglements → ramifications for work, family, economic stability

Vogel et al., 2025; Berger et al., 2021; Vogel 2020a, b; Heinrich, 2011

Whole Family

Coparent conflict

Parenting stress

Reduced parent-child contact

Nepomnyaschy, 2007; Bartfeld, 2003

CPs and Kids

Fewer economic resources; increased risk of poverty

No “back up” if support goes unpaid → threats to everyday needs

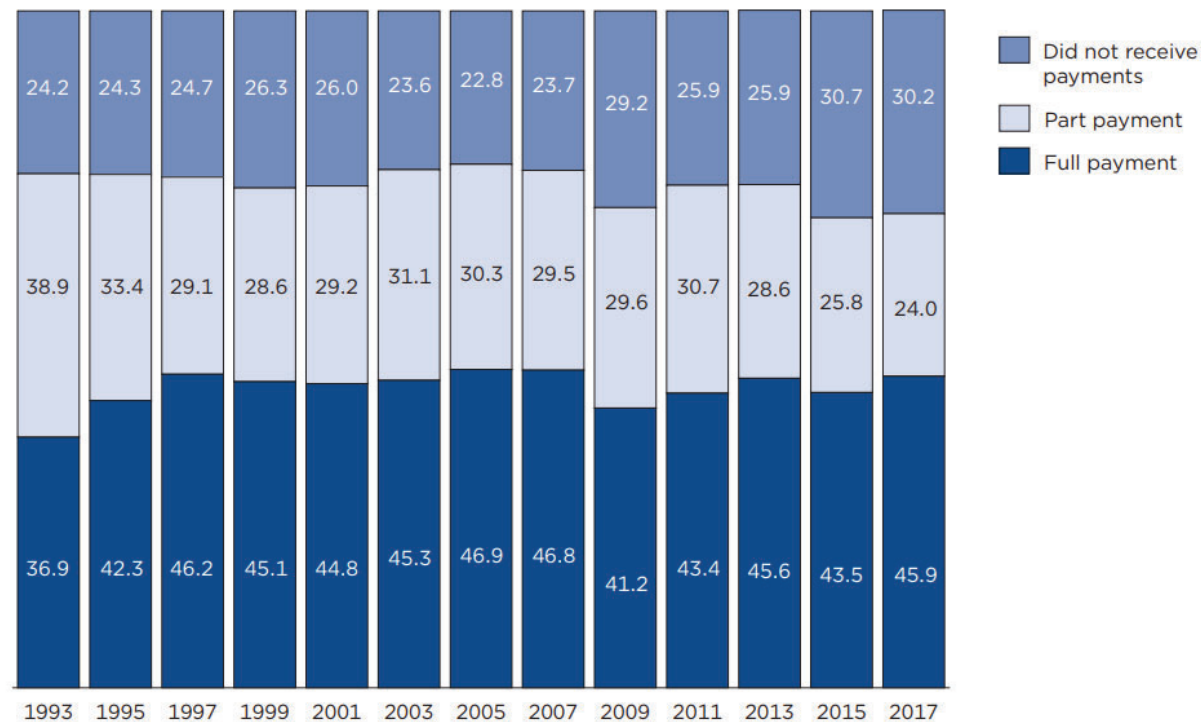
Increased burden on CP → added stressors

Vogel et al., 2024; Cuesta & Meyer; 2018; Ha et al., 2011

Stronger Tools, Yet Ongoing Challenges

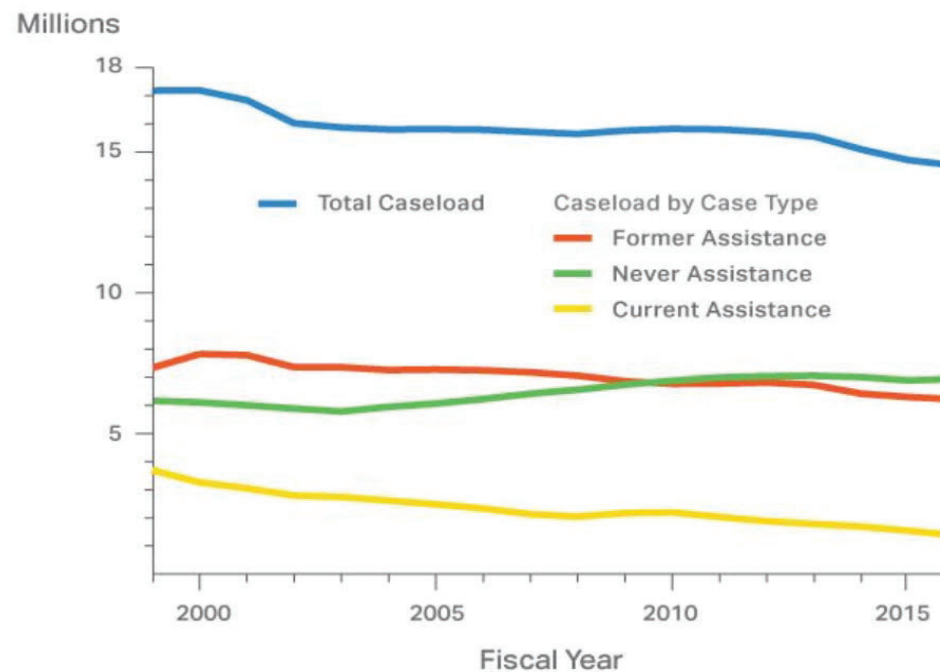
Payments Received by Custodial Parents Who Were Supposed to Receive Child Support Payments: 1993-2017

(In percent)



Source and Graphic by: Timothy Grall, 2020. "Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2017." Current Population Reports, U.S. Census Bureau.

Caseloads Have Declined Amidst Safety Net Changes



Source: OCSE Form 157, Line 1

Source and Graphic by: Tracy Graham and Melody Morales (2017). "Child Support Caseload Trends: 1999-2016." Archived Content, Office of Child Support Services, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The Child Support Program Plays A Crucial Role

- Guidelines facilitate order consistency & predictability
 - With implications for perceptions of fairness
- The child support program helps to:
 - Ensure both parents contribute to children's financial needs
 - Facilitate accountability
 - Mitigate power imbalances



“Who Is Not Paying Child Support?” (*Cancian et al., 2021*)

- Characteristics of Wisconsin obligor fathers who make full, partial, no payments
- **84%** paid **in full** (vs. **4%** who paid nothing) when:
 - Employed consistently throughout whole year
 - (Known) earnings >\$20K per year
 - No incarceration
- **92%** of **nonpayers**:
 - Incarcerated any point during year, *and/or*
 - Had 1+ quarters in year with no formal earnings

Associated Mothers

Inconsistent work (61%)

Low earnings (86% under \$20K)

What Gets In The Way Of Paying?

- A (perhaps deceptively simple) framework
(Bartfeld & Meyer, 2003)



Enforcement Tools: What Can Go Wrong?

- Can't take something someone doesn't **have**
- Can't take something the agency doesn't **know about**
- Some tools can make a bad situation worse, when **ability to pay** is the underlying problem
 - Concerns about license suspension & contempt (*Vogel et al., 2025; Vogel, 2020; Meyer et al., 2021*)
- Adversarial approaches can **erode trust**, contribute to system avoidance
- Whole-family, intergenerational engagement implications (*Vogel, 2020a, b; Vogel et al., 2024*)

Willingness To Pay (Or Comply)

- Especially salient when IWOs are not possible

Not wanting
to pay

- Lack of interaction with kids
- Coparent conflict
- Perceived unfairness of payment expectations

Not wanting
to engage

- Past negative experiences with program (personal or familial)
- Perception that program is extractive, punitive, criminalizing
- Experiencing program as complex, opaque
- Familial preference for making own arrangements

e.g., Vogel et al., 2024; Vogel, 2020a, b; Edin et al., 2019; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Noyes et al., 2018; Harris, 2015; Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2010

“Perceptions of Fairness in Child Support” Study (Vogel et al., 2024)

- **Goal:** Understand how families and program staff:
 - Perceive fairness in child support (generally and at specific process junctures)
 - Imagine a “more fair” system might work
- **Context:** Shifting landscape; calls for “establish and collect” alternatives
- **Approach:** Interviews with obligors, CPs, agency leaders, agency staff



“Perceptions Of Fairness In Child Support”

(Vogel et al., 2024)

- General agreement that having a program is *conceptually* fair
- Perceptions of fairness in *reality* varied considerably depending who you ask, “for who?”, and what is meant by “the child support program”
- Fairness discussed in several dimensions
 - **Treatment:** By individuals
 - **Policies and processes:** Rules and steps for setting, changing, and enforcing orders
 - **Outcomes:** Regardless of perceptions of treatment

“There needs to be someone, some agency. It is good thing to have because in certain cases there is a need to make sure these things are being done.” - Obligor



Does The Child Support Program Treat Parents And Children Fairly? (Vogel et al., 2024)



*“I mean, in an aspect of treating them fairly as being, no matter your race, your age, they give you your time of day in front of a judge, that’s fair. But that’s about as fair as I see, I guess.... **fathers definitely aren’t held accountable** so I don’t feel like they’re treated fairly as a mother-father situation.” – Custodial Parent*

*“Just because I’m a male and I’m a noncustodial parent, because I don’t have a kid [at home], now I can’t get any kind of resources to give me any support. Why can’t I get some W-2 for a minute so I can get on my feet? You know. I mean, I might be able to get a little rent assistance here or there. But, you know, why is it so hard for a noncustodial single parent, especially a male, to get some? ...**The noncustodial parent has nobody** there, he has no advocacy, nobody’s advocating for the noncustodial parent.” - Obligor*



Ability to Pay: Individual Challenges

Limited earnings

- Low pay
- Lack of fringe benefits
- Irregular employment

Multiple obligations

- Burdensome orders
- Competing priorities

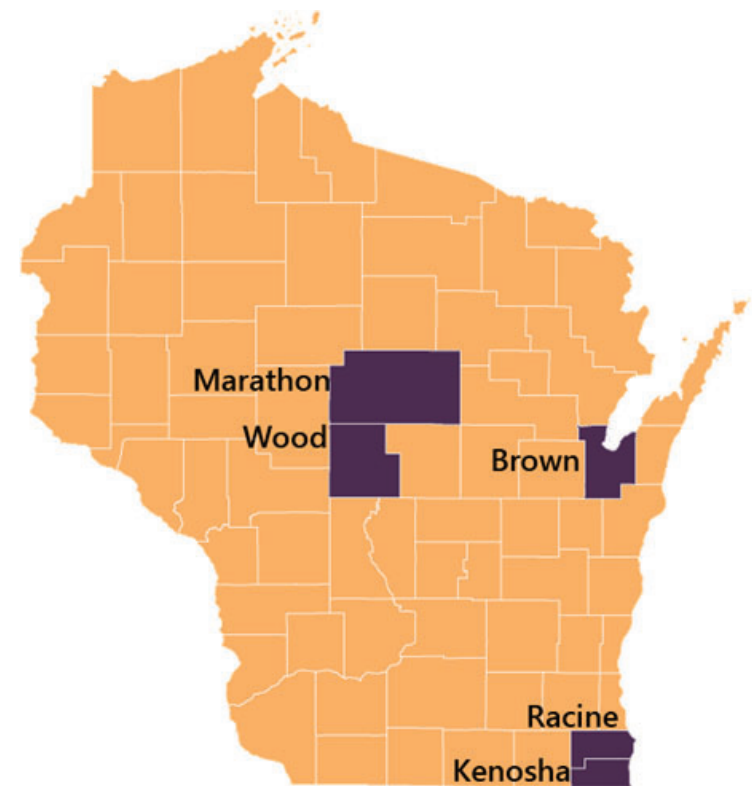
Employment barriers

- Limited educational attainment; literacy barriers
- Criminal record
- Lack of work experience; lack of a “hard skill”
- Lack of transportation
- Housing instability
- Substance use
- Mental and physical health difficulties

e.g., Cancian et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2021; Vogel, 2020a, b; Berger et al., 2019; Noyes et al., 2018; Eldred & Takayesu, 2013

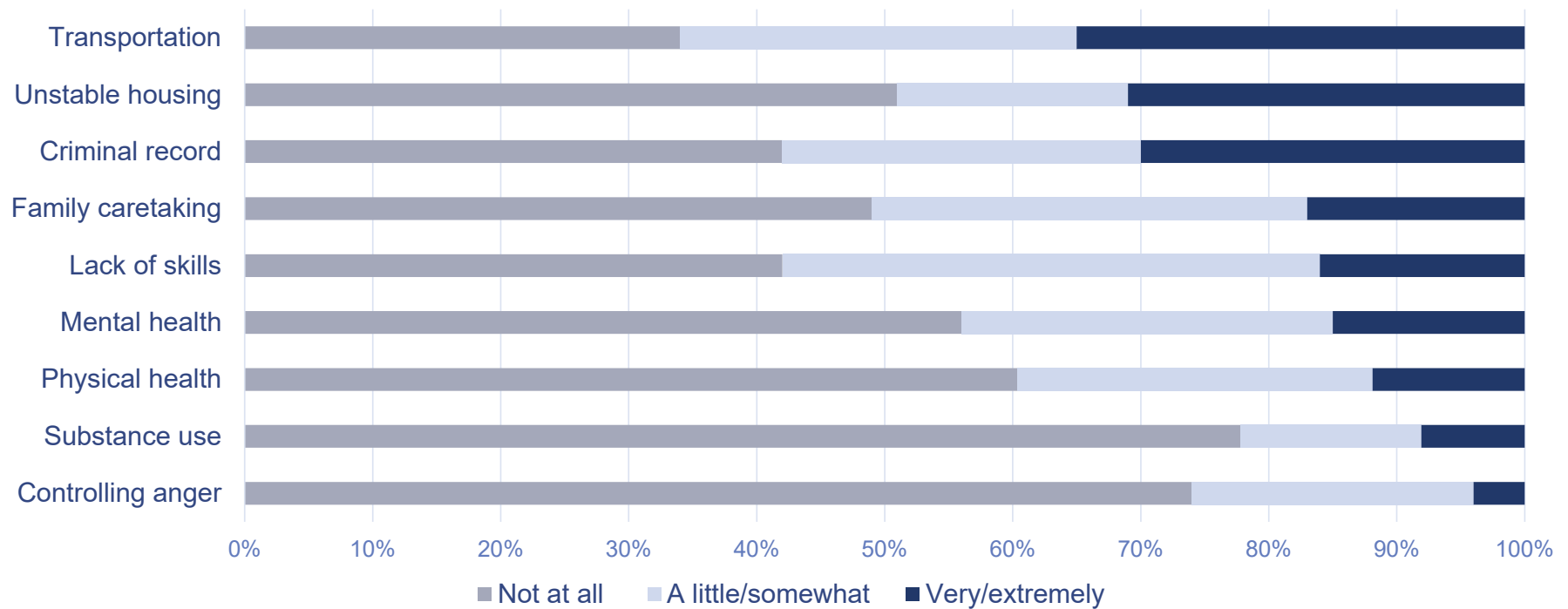
Employment Barriers: Evidence from the ELEVATE Evaluation *(Costanzo et al., 2024)*

- Evaluation tested an employment-based intervention *(Shager et al., 2025)*
 - For obligors not making payments; unemployed or underemployed
 - Employment, child support, case management, and parenting services
 - 5 Wisconsin counties (2020-22)
 - Impact and implementation studies
 - Baseline survey of program participants (n=992)



ELEVATE: Transportation, Unstable Housing, Criminal Record Most Common Barriers *(Costanzo et al., 2024)*

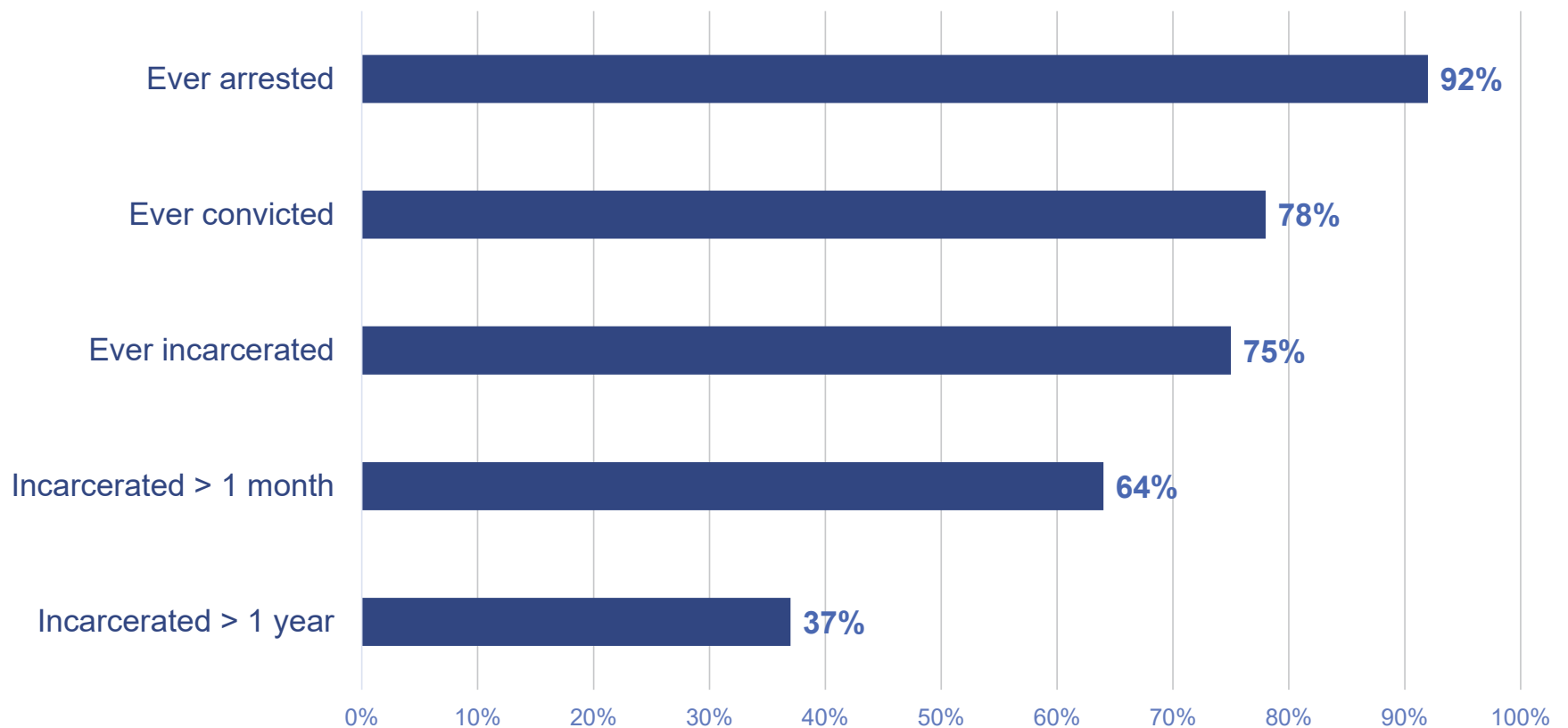
How hard has . . . made it to keep or find a job in the past year?



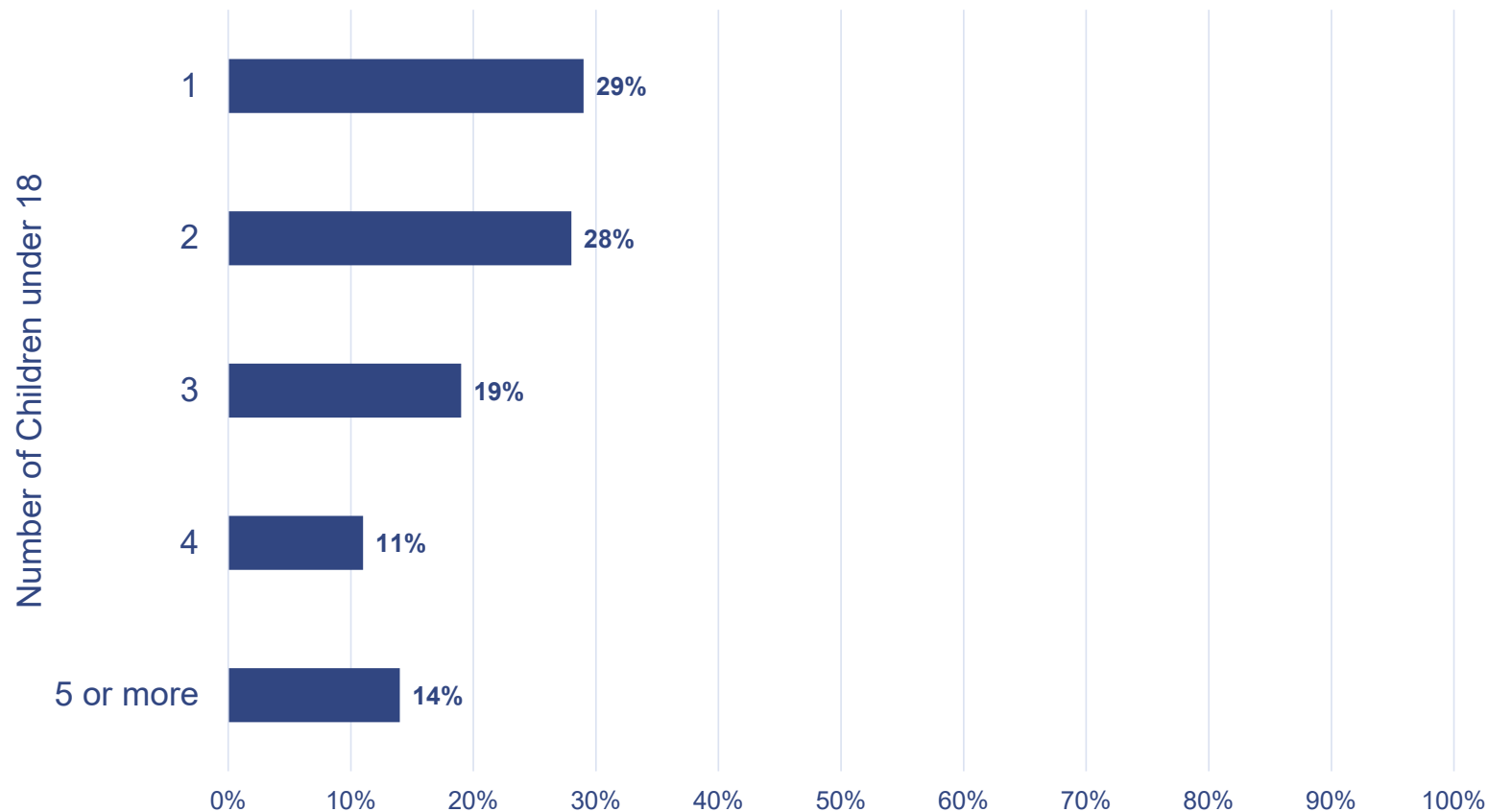
ELEVATE: Participants Had Physical And Mental Health Challenges *(Costanzo et al., 2024)*

- In the last month, average number of days with poor:
 - Physical health: 5.7
 - Mental health: 10.2
- 32% met clinical cutoff for depression

ELEVATE: Most Participants Were Justice-Involved *(Costanzo et al., 2024)*



ELEVATE: Participants Were Coparenting Multiple Children *(Costanzo et al., 2024)*



6.1

Average age of youngest child

12.4

Average age of oldest child

59%

Children with multiple co-parents

“Barriers to Formal Child Support Payment” *(Berger et al., 2021)*

Obligors Who:	Had Worse Outcomes in:
Had transportation, criminal record, family caregiving, physical health barriers	Rates of employment; earnings
Had transportation barriers	Any child support paid; amount paid
Had criminal record, housing instability barriers	Amount of child support paid
Had more barriers	Any child support paid; amount paid
Were Black and had a criminal record (vs. not Black with criminal record)	Rates of employment; earnings; any child support paid; amount paid

Ability To Pay: Systemic Issues

Labor market trends

- Deunionization
- Deindustrialization
- Increases in gig economy

Policy decisions

- Mass incarceration
- Lack of policies supporting obligors as parents (vs. earners)
- Constriction of social safety net, increasingly tied to work

Infrastructure investments

- Underinvestment in transportation, public utility infrastructure
- Underinvestment in services, supports to address barriers
- Inequities in resource accessibility

Ability To Pay: Things The Program Might Do (Or Not Do)

- Some program practices associated with reduced payments or compliance
 - Orders outsized to earnings (*e.g., Hodges et al., 2021*)
 - Orders set using imputed income or by default (*Costanzo et al., 2024*)
 - Enforcement actions that can impede work (e.g., license suspension, civil contempt) (*e.g., Vogel, 2020b; Vogel et al., 2025*)
- Structure, processes can hurt access (*e.g., Noyes et al, 2018; Harris, 2015; Vogel et al., 2024*)
 - Barriers to modification
 - System/paperwork complexity, communication challenges, difficulty reaching help
 - Historically adversarial relationship

Whose Job Is It, Anyway?

- Complex, time-intensive challenges
 - Many programs face resource constraints
- Many barriers beyond child support's immediate purview
 - And thus require a collaborative approach





What Are Child
Support Programs
Doing in Response?

Child Support Programs Are Changing

- **Shifts in philosophy:** Reconsideration of mission, focus, strategy
- **Shifts in branding:** “Enforcement” to “services”
- **Shifts in approach:**
 - Away from harsh tools as a first resort
 - Towards a more holistic, family-centered strategy
 - Towards proactive outreach, communication
 - Towards inclusion of family voice



Federal Demonstrations Offer Opportunities To Test And Learn

- Grants and Section 1115 Waivers
 - Employment preparation (CSPED, NextGen)
 - Procedural fairness (PJAC)
 - Parenting time (AV program)
 - Behavioral nudges (BICS)
 - Family violence and safety (SAVES)
 - And more! <https://acf.gov/css/grants/section-1115-waivers>

(Just A Few) Examples of State and Local Innovation

Debt reduction

e.g., **San Francisco**
Debt Relief Pilot

Early
intervention

e.g., **Iowa** school and
proactive case outreach

Strategic
enforcement
application

e.g., **Minnesota** driver's
license suspension pilot

Family voice
councils

Colorado, Michigan,
Wisconsin and more!

Connections to
community
supports

Evidence from
Wisconsin

SF: Hahn et al. (2018)

MN: Solmeyer et al.
(2024)

WI: Vogel & Hossain
(2023)

IA: McCurdy et al., 2021;
Lee et al., 2020

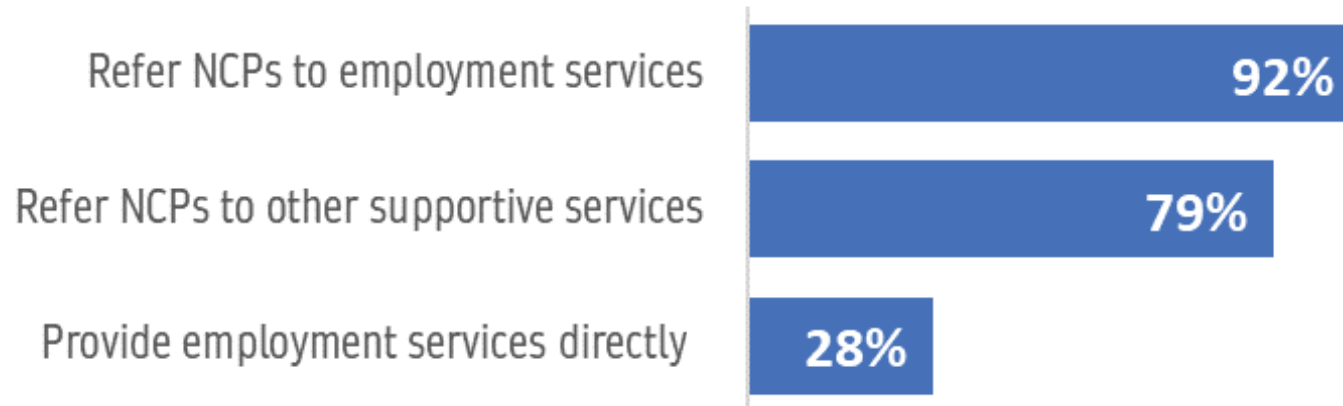
“Child Support Agencies As Connectors” Study *(Vogel & Hossain, 2023)*

- **Goal:** Understand where agencies connect obligors for services to address employment barriers (and more!)
- **Context:** Growing emphasis on helping obligors’ improve ability to pay
- **Approach:** Survey of Wisconsin agency directors + in-depth interviews

Director Perspectives On The CSA's Role

(Vogel & Hossain, 2023)

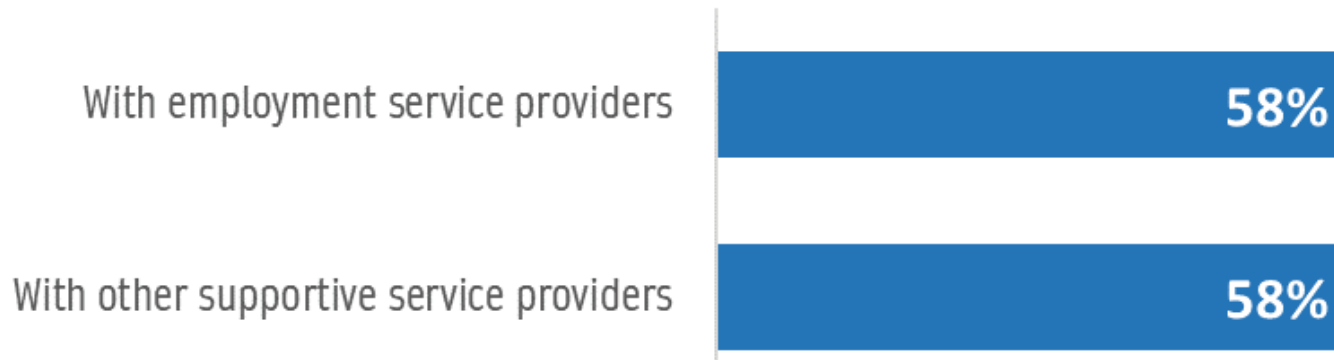
CSAs should be expected to...



“We’re not going to be specialists in all areas. But we certainly can link people to specialists. As long as we can continue exposure, we can at least give our clients an option.” - Agency Director

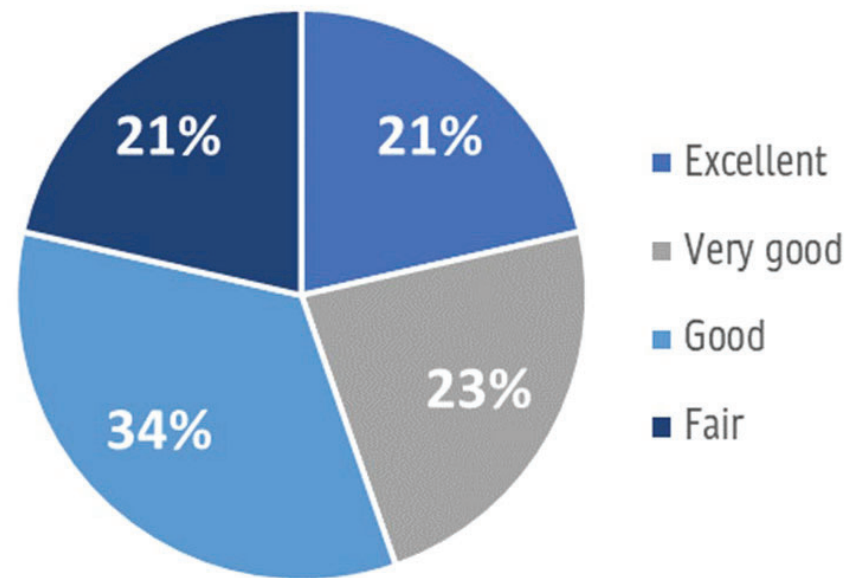
Growing Collaborative Relationships As A CSA Priority *(Vogel & Hossain, 2023)*

Building or strengthening relationships a “very” or “extremely” high priority:



“It’s really sad that... people in our community do not know that [the employment provider] is even there. Given all the resources they have, it’s a shame that they’re not being used by people who need those resources so badly.” – CSA caseworker

Overall Positive Perception Of Employment Resource Service Quality, But... (Vogel & Hossain, 2023)



“I think the programs are great but I think it’s hard to know every single parameter and ways to help all different individuals in all different situations... when you actually get into it, it gets to be more complicated.” - CSA caseworker

Lack Of Time, Resources Challenges Collaboration *(Vogel & Hossain, 2023)*

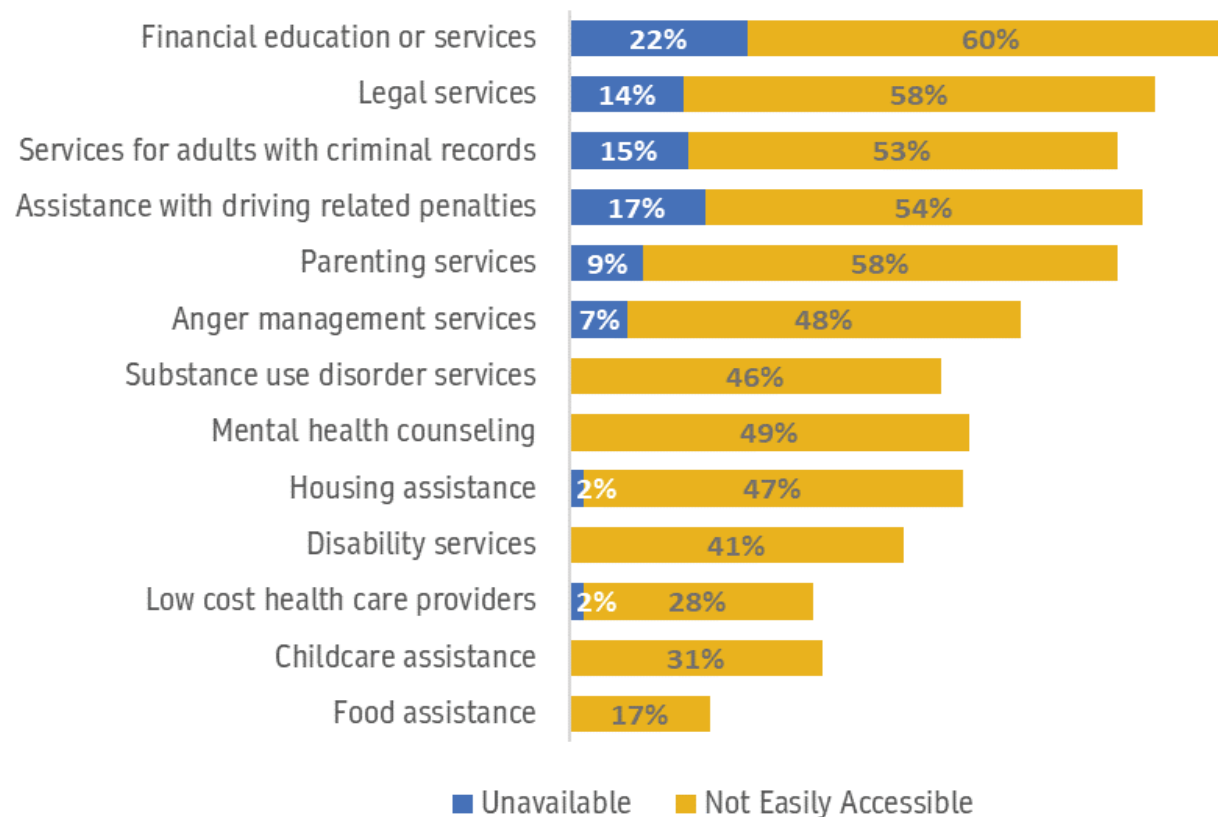
Factors that have challenged collaborative efforts with other service providers “a lot” or “a very great deal”:



“I think everybody is so busy. That's one challenge. It's so busy, and everybody wants to do all of it. You've got to prioritize.” - CSA Director

Service Gaps In Domains Related To Employment (*Vogel & Hossain, 2023*)

Ease of NCP access to supportive services in CSA's area:





Where Might We Go
From Here?

Opportunities For Alignment Between Child Support And Families


- Efforts to include family voice are crucial
 - For understanding family needs, goals, priorities
 - For obtaining input on parent perspectives
- Programs and research both play a role
- “Perceptions of Fairness” study asked parents and agency personnel what a “more fair” program of the future might look like
 - Some areas of difference – but lots of shared insights

A Brief Pause To Celebrate You!

- The work that brings you all here today directly relates to what comes next.
- A giant **THANK YOU** for the important work you do to serve families!



A “More Fair” Program Is Family-Centered, Approachable, Holistic *(Vogel et al., 2024)*



*“It would be more holistic. Like, understand that when people are looking for services via child support or whatever, they are probably not looking for just one service. If I need help with child care, I have to go to the childcare office and child support office, and I have to make those two separate phone calls, and they are not connected offices. They just sometimes bump into each other. So I think that would be the first thing; there would have to be **a way to make these services that overlap and are more connected.**” – Custodial Parent*

A “More Fair” System Recognizes That Families Are Unique *(Vogel et al., 2024)*



*“I think it would go case by case basis...That you would consider the whole picture instead of just going by a book. That **we are human beings**, treat them like human beings, not just like, ‘Hey, I’m doing 10 cases today.’” - Obligor*

*“Whoever does the portion of actually tracking down the information of the fathers, I would **have even more people** doing that or find another way to get that without being in court and asking the other parent - the one that’s supposed to be receiving - ‘Do you know that information?’ I feel like it should be the court system or child support, you know, part of their job to get that information... the other parent doesn’t always have communication with that absent parent.”*

– Custodial Parent



A “More Fair” System Might Serve A Narrower Set of Families *(Vogel et al., 2024)*



*“I think there are a lot of people who really want to have child support services, really need child support services. But it seems like we’re getting, you know, every single person [with] a medical card... I think it would be, you know, maybe more modest as far as the people involved in the system...So, we could **help the people who need and want help**, rather than spending a lot of time and resources on people who really don’t want us involved.” -*

Director

A “More Fair” System Has Frequent, Proactive, Open Communication *(Vogel et al., 2024)*



*“It is a matter of **investing in these services in a more meaningful way**. I think anything dealing with families and children tends to kind of fall by the wayside... I can’t expect them to make me a priority when they have 50 other cases that they’re dealing with, who also would like to be made a priority.” – Custodial Parent*

A “More Fair” System Makes Processes And Paperwork Transparent *(Vogel et al., 2024)*




*“I don’t know if you’ve ever seen the stipulation that Wisconsin courts has. It’s really long and difficult to understand, and so that’s a huge impediment. People will fill it out, and I’d say **at least half the time, they fill it out incorrectly.** And it gets rejected, and they get frustrated, and they say forget it. So that’s a huge frustration. ” - Director*

*“I just think having **multiple ways of communicating information** would be helpful. A lot of people do not adequately learn changes or new things from a piece of paper... I think that it can be really easily like a three-minute-long YouTube video that you could just click on and watch to see like what to expect for child support court in Wisconsin and just kind of say some of the questions that people normally have... I think that would be really helpful for families trying to navigate a system that, like, [they] never wanted to be in.” – Custodial Parent*



A “More Fair” System Helps Parents Reach Agreements *(Vogel et al., 2024)*



*“Just being in a courtroom is a little nerve-wracking, right? I mean more of a mediation approach where maybe you’re sitting down in a nice little office with a judge or somebody that is approved to handle those circumstances... **Being in a courtroom is just nerve-wracking in its own right.** Like, you feel like you’ve done something wrong and that you’ve broken the law or something in some way. You’re standing at attention for the judge. And there’s armed police officers in there. And it’s like, Jesus. I just want to see my son.” - Obligor*

*“There is the family court mediation, which we’ve had to utilize... I think it’s a good thing to have in place. And when it’s done properly, it can really **benefit the child.**”*
– Custodial Parent



A “More Fair” System Helps Parents Access Legal Supports *(Vogel et al., 2024)*



*“If you in a court, **shouldn’t I have some representation?** If this thing is a court order, shouldn’t I have a lawyer that you talking instead of just the child support authority and her staff or whatever talking to the judge?” - Obligor*

*“I consider myself, you know, a reasonably intelligent person, and trying to navigate those court forms was just really overwhelming. I can imagine for a lot of other parents, it’s similar, if not worse. You know, **the divorcees that have attorneys are in a good spot, but the rest of us, they might as well be in another language sometimes.**” – Custodial Parent*



For DV Survivors, A “More Fair” System Has More Awareness, Coordination, Options *(Vogel et al., 2024)*



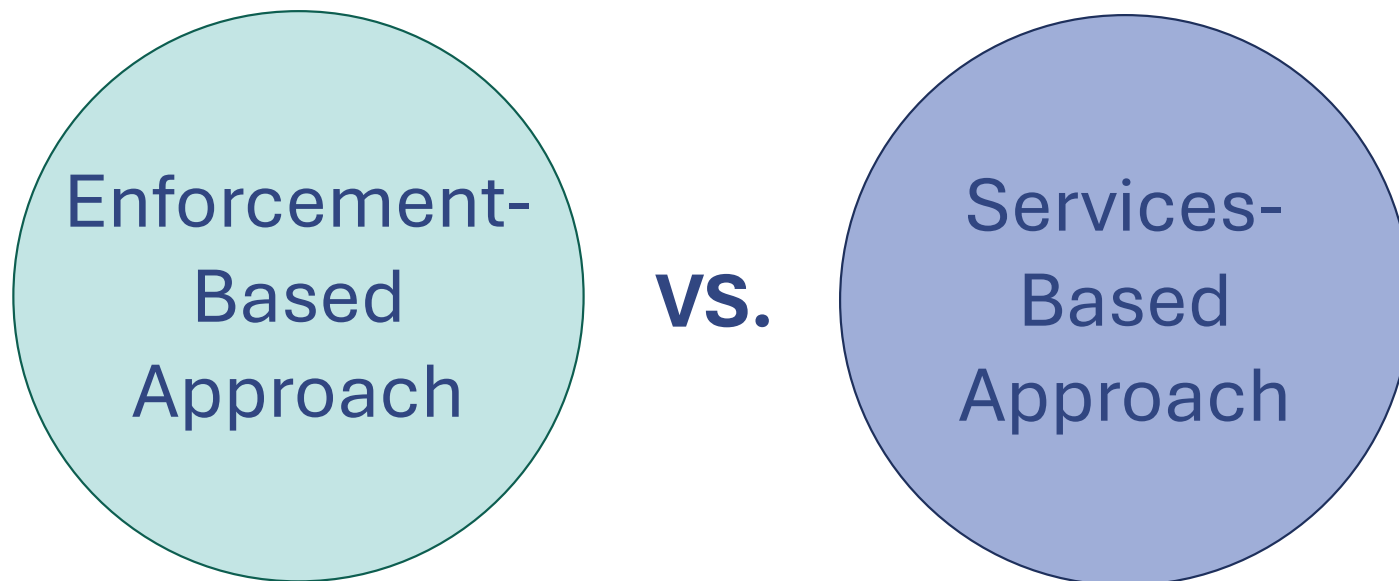
*“So, one of my understandings is, if I wanted to fight to change the order to, more adequately reflect his income changes that I would have to take him to court. But I do not want to take my abuser to court, because every time that happens, it’s like more abuse, basically, like he uses that. **He uses the court systems to stalk me**, almost. And like the last time he tried to take me to court, he and his lawyer requested four years of bank statements from me, and like phone records, and like all these things. Because he already has a history of stalking, I’m avoiding that.” - Custodial Parent*

“Custodial Parent Perspectives” Study *(Vogel et al., 2023)*

- **Goal:** Center custodial parent perspectives on agency services and supports
- **Context:** Interventions aimed at obligors do not typically account for custodial parent views
- **Approach:** Interviews and focus group with custodial parents (Spring 2023)

Custodial Parent Perspectives On Potential CSA Approaches *(Vogel et al., 2023)*

- Room for services and supports **and** enforcement
 - Services first (when underlying barriers)
 - Enforcement when unwilling, hiding resources



Desired Supports For Obligators *(Vogel et al., 2023)*

- Service Offerings that **address underlying barriers**

- Employment services
- (Co-)Parenting services & domestic abuse education
- Mental health & substance abuse support
- Stability
- Financial literacy
- Community involvement
- Motivational skills



Wish List: CSA Supports for Custodial Parents and Kids *(Vogel et al., 2023)*

More Transparency & Communication



More Empathy & Understanding



Less Reliance for Info-Gathering



Direct Financial Support & Help With Expenses



Legal Resources



Co-Parenting Supports; Parent-Child Bonding



Employment Services; Resource Connections



“I think [the child support system] favors the payor and not the one that receives the payment. I feel like it’s very lenient and helpful on that end, but for the custodial parent that has to pick-up the slack or have, you know, have credit cards and pay interest on things to pay for the child because the other person is not paying, or have their credit affected as things go into collections -there’s no one there to help the custodial parent. We’re always meant to just figure it out, and I think that that’s very unfair.”
- Custodial Parent

What Might We Consider As We Look To The Future?

- Pursue continued opportunities for innovation
 - Connecting parents to resources and **supports**
 - Making child support more **accessible**
 - Demonstrating the value of the program via **outreach** and impacts
- Advocate and **collaborate** to address challenges beyond child support
 - Broader investment and families and communities



What Might We Consider As We Look to The Future?

- Get **input from families**
 - And the people who work with them!
- Where and when possible, build in opportunities for evaluation
 - Spectrum of opportunities (e.g., [OPRE's Building Organizational Evidence Toolkit](#))
 - Share what you learn with others



Thank You For Your Time!

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Child Support As An “Equalizer” Vs. As A Targeted Resource (Vogel et al., 2024)



*“I thought that the goal of child support was that the child has their needs met, no matter which house they’re at. So, if one parent makes drastically more than the other, that there’d be some like **equaling of the scales** or equaling of like the household income so that **the child can have the things that they need in both houses...** It would never cover like 100% of everything. I don’t think that I ever thought child support would just be like, ‘No, I have child support, so I can just retire.’” – Custodial Parent*

*“It should be for **supporting your child**. You know, if a child is young, diapers, food, stuff like that, if they need clothing, the essentials, **basic essentials**, food, water, shelter. That's what child support should be for. Not for getting your nails done or car payments or taking trips.” - Obligor*



Child Support As An “Accountability” Tool

(Vogel et al., 2024)



*“In a perfect world, wouldn’t need a system, because [parents] would work out between them what the child needs. But we don’t live in a perfect world, and **divorce and custody is hard and contentious** and can get really nasty, really quickly. And so, I kind of see the child support agency as necessary...not ideal but it’s necessary.” – Custodial Parent*

*“I feel like child support is really for, you know, **those who don’t do for their kids**, are not in their kid’s life. Like, then, okay, the mama might need some type of help. And I’m not saying like help for herself, but like as far as the kids. Kids stay with their mothers, majority of the time. Kids need a roof over their head; they got to have lights; they got to have food. ...that’s when child support should play in. When the mama can’t count on the father to do that at all. But other than that, I feel like there are great fathers out here and **child support still be making them pay off top of what they’re already doing** outside of child support.” - Obligor*



Child Support As A Mediator Of Power And Control Vs. As A “Middleman” (Vogel et al., 2024)



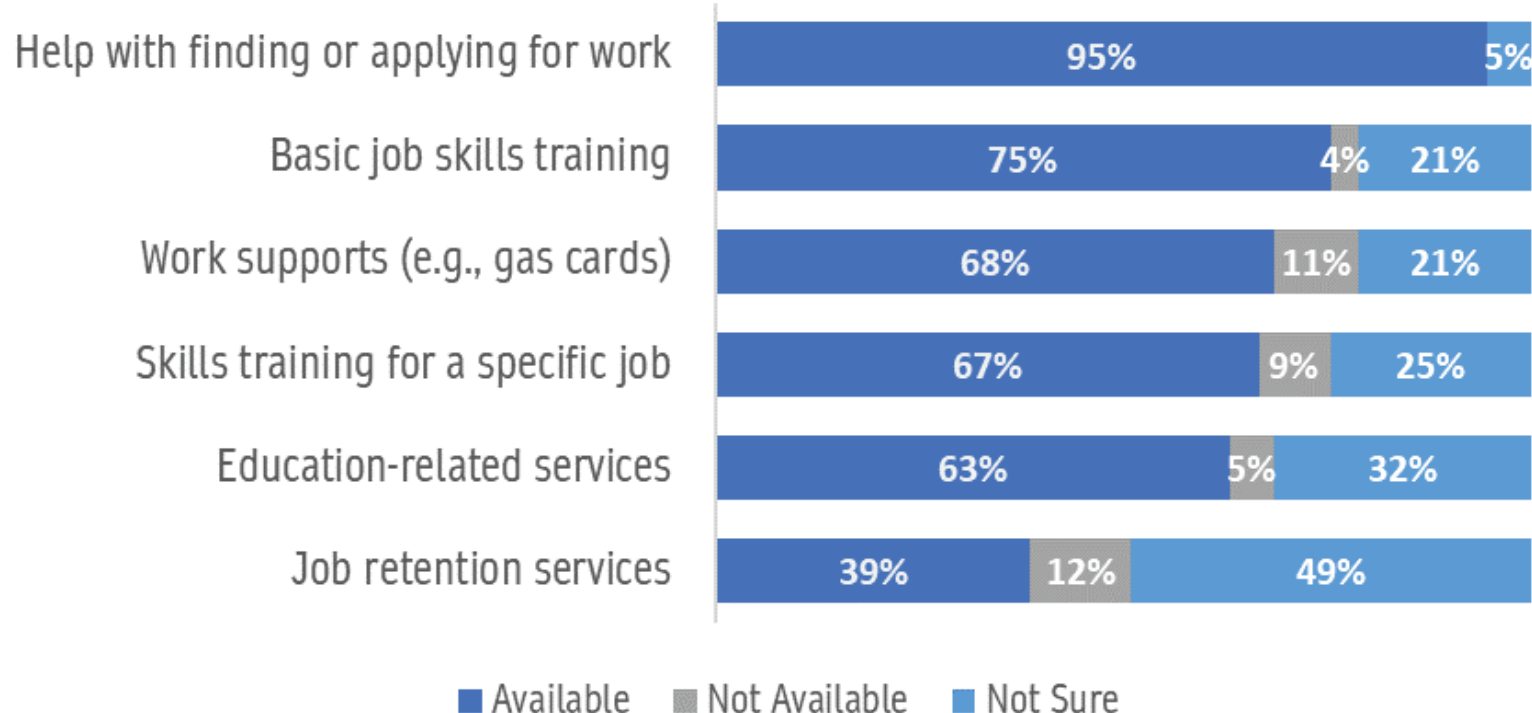
*“It would be really difficult to think about having to go to my ex-husband to get child support payments every month. And it would be a very, **very bitter pill for him to swallow** to have to write a check to me every month.” – Custodial Parent*

*“If they taking all your income, and then entrusting it to the mother, now you’ve taken half of the manhood and the fatherhood. So things I’m trying to provide for—there’s a middleman there. That takes away your manhood, and your ability as father...Because what’s happening is, he’s paying, but what he’s paying the system. **The government is in there playing like they the father.** Once they are like the father, the father has no real connection to make any decisions. Sometimes when you take care and you provide, it’s not just about a dollar. Sometimes its how that dollar gets spent.” - Obligor*



Some Uncertainty About Service Provider Offerings *(Vogel & Hossain, 2023)*

Primary referral partner offers the following services:



Location Matters For Collaboration, Accessibility *(Vogel & Hossain, 2023)*

In relation to CSA, primary referral partner is:

