

---

Updated February 5, 2020

## How to Improve SNAP Participants' Child Support Participation Without Compromising Access to Food

By Joseph Llobrera

Some policymakers have proposed taking away benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) from families that they think should be participating in the Child Support program. Such proposals would not only jeopardize families' nutrition and health, but they would also be costly and complex to administer, and they ignore the realities of how low-income children receive financial support from their parents. Overlap between the two programs is already strong. Nearly one-fifth of all SNAP households with children, including those with parents living together, receive Child Support payments. Policymakers seeking to increase participation in the Child Support program should instead study the factors preventing it; expand current, successful efforts to boost participation and improve coordination between SNAP and Child Support; and offer support for parents struggling with payments, among other solutions beyond a blunt, punitive instrument like SNAP disqualification.

Most low-income custodial families already use the Child Support program to pursue payments they are due. Mandating that families formalize child support arrangements assumes that the small minority who don't participate are the same as those who have formal child support cases, when they may have good reasons not to or face unique challenges, such as unstable income or domestic violence. There is also no evidence that this costly policy would generate significantly more child support payments to custodial households. Rather, it would likely discourage some families from participating in SNAP, threatening the food security of the very children the policy seeks to help.

A better place to start would be to assess why parents do not or cannot engage with the program and design solutions that lower barriers to participation and drive higher collections. The solutions may require policy or programmatic changes in Child Support itself, including enhanced marketing efforts, streamlined referrals between SNAP and Child Support, and expanded supportive services.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Joseph Llobrera, "Child Support Cooperation Requirements in SNAP Are Unproven, Costly, and Put Families at Risk," CBPP, updated February 5, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/child-support-cooperation-requirements-in-snap-are-unproven-costly-and-put>; and CBPP, "Unproven, Costly Child Support Cooperation Requirements in SNAP Put Families at Risk," February 8, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/unproven-costly-child-support-cooperation-requirements-in-snap-put-families>.

## Child Support Program’s Family-Centered Policies Are a Better Option

In recent years, the Child Support program has moved toward a family-centered approach that aims to work with both parents, address families’ specific needs, and mitigate payment barriers, in part by distinguishing between non-custodial parents unwilling to pay versus those unable to.<sup>2</sup> To improve engagement, Child Support agencies are already testing digital tools and incorporating lessons from behavioral science and offering supportive services beyond the traditional enforcement functions of child support. These new approaches reflect a desire to transform Child Support into a service that families seek out because they value the support it provides, rather than a punitive system to be avoided.

### Improve Assessment of Non-Participation

Though important to address, the gap in eligible, low-income families unserved by Child Support is relatively modest. Census data show that 72 percent of custodial families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level and nearly 80 percent of custodial families below 100 percent of poverty are already engaged with the Child Support agency to pursue payments they are due.<sup>3</sup> When Utah assessed the costs and benefits of mandating participation, it similarly found that nearly 70 percent of custodial parents receiving SNAP already had an open child support case.<sup>4</sup>

Families who do not participate likely have good reasons not to. Mandatory cooperation may disrupt existing family arrangements. Some custodial parents may decide that the Child Support system does not provide the flexibility that non-custodial parents with unstable, low-wage employment need. Parents may instead work out a child support arrangement that responds to pressures they face, such as seasonal employment, family emergencies, or unexpected expenses. Custodial parents who choose not to pursue a child support case may be more likely to be completely disconnected from the other parent, may not understand the child support system, or may be frightened to initiate an enforcement action against the other parent. For instance, some survivors of domestic violence decide that seeking child support would threaten their or their children’s safety. Research from Texas found that more than 4 in 10 mothers who do not receive formal or informal child support are survivors of emotional or physical abuse.<sup>5</sup>

Before designing policies to increase participation and child support payments, state and local SNAP and Child Support agencies must conduct a thorough analysis of cross-program participation and the barriers preventing parents in their jurisdiction from participating. Non-participating families may require different types of recruitment and engagement. A targeted, evidence-based approach will likely be more effective than a blunt, punitive cooperation requirement.

---

<sup>2</sup> Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “National Child Support Strategic Plan for 2015-2019,”

[https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/national\\_child\\_support\\_strategic\\_plan\\_2015\\_2019.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/national_child_support_strategic_plan_2015_2019.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Kye Lippold and Elaine Sorensen, “Characteristics of Families Served by the Child Support (IV-D) Program: 2010 Census Survey Results,” Urban Institute, July 2013,

[https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/iv\\_d\\_characteristics\\_2010\\_census\\_results.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/iv_d_characteristics_2010_census_results.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Rodney W. Hopkins and Robbi N. Poulson, “Food Stamp Child Support Cooperation Study,” Social Research Institute, University of Utah, August 29, 2014, <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2014/pdf/00005534.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Child and Family Research Partnership, “Child Support Unpacked: Examining the Factors Associated with Order Establishment and Compliance in the Texas Child Support System,” LBJ School of Public Affairs, August 2015, <https://childandfamilyresearch.utexas.edu/child-support-unpacked-examining-factors-associated-order-establishment-and-compliance-texas-child>.

## Enhance Marketing and Streamline Referrals

Targeted promotion of child support services to non-participants and streamlining the referral process between SNAP and Child Support could boost engagement among low-income families, without threatening food access. Custodial parents may be more likely to engage with Child Support if they better understand the implications for themselves, the other parent, and their children. For example, a custodial parent concerned about the other parent's ability to pay may be willing to open a case if they believe an order amount will be determined based on the non-custodial parent's ability to pay and won't create undue hardship. A non-custodial parent, on the other hand, could be persuaded to cooperate if they understand the value of formalizing financial payments to create a legal record of their ongoing support for their child.

Advocates for mandatory cooperation presuppose that eligible parents actively avoid Child Support, and that only a sanction can compel their participation. In fact, even as Child Support caseloads overall have fallen, voluntary cases have increased over the last 15 years, suggesting that more families are recognizing the value of the program's services.<sup>6</sup> Targeted marketing could be an effective tool to reach low-income parents who don't know about the potential benefits of child support services or hesitate to engage because they have misperceptions or don't understand the program well.

Child Support agencies have already been testing new tools and approaches to attract more families to the program. In 2018, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) awarded \$2.2 million in grants to 14 state and tribal agencies to test digital marketing tools and strategies to increase non-participating parents' awareness of and interest in the program as well as engagement among participating families.<sup>7</sup> Grantees are testing a range of digital tools and approaches, including targeted advertising through social media, live chats between agencies and potential participants, online applications, and outreach campaigns to targeted audiences (such as Spanish-speaking populations and those residing in rural areas). Findings from the forthcoming evaluations of these grants can inform state outreach efforts to expand voluntary child support participation.

States could also test strategies to strengthen the referral process from SNAP to child support services. Child Support staff could be co-located with SNAP eligibility workers so that they can handle questions about the Child Support program, explain its benefits, and open a case if the family is interested, or SNAP staff could be trained to speak with SNAP participants about the Child Support program and refer them directly to Child Support staff. A demonstration project in Washington, D.C., found that co-locating Child Support intake staff in a local office administering Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) made it significantly more likely that TANF participants (who are already required to cooperate with Child Support) would complete various steps toward establishing a child support order.<sup>8</sup> Within six months of the intervention, TANF participants in the treatment group (who received child support services onsite through the co-located Child Support workers) were more likely to have initial contact with the Child Support

---

<sup>6</sup> Vicki Turetsky, "The Child Support Program: Performing at Record Levels," presentation, OCSE, December 5, 2016, [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/child\\_support\\_performance\\_jda.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/child_support_performance_jda.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> OCSE, "Using Digital Marketing to Increase Participation in the Child Support Program," August 2019, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/grants/grant-updates-results/digitalmarketing>.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Farrell *et al.*, "Evaluation of the District of Columbia's Child Support Co-Location Demonstration," Lewin Group, February 2007, <https://mefassociates.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Evaluation-of-the-District-of-Columbia%E2%80%99s-Child-Support-Co-Location-Demonstration.pdf>.

agency, have a court-ready case, or have a court see their case compared to those in the control group (who were referred to the Child Support agency office in a different location).<sup>9</sup> The treatment group was also more likely to have had paternity established, a child support order established within six months, and higher child support payments after 12 months. Not only did the co-located Child Support staff serve as a resource for TANF participants who had questions about the Child Support program and the enrollment process, but co-location helped increase coordination between the TANF and Child Support agencies and increased staff understanding of the partner agency's benefits and processes. States could test similar strategies to streamline the referral process between SNAP and Child Support.

### **Expand Supportive Services**

When non-custodial parents struggle to meet their own basic needs, it is important to increase their financial stability so they can support themselves and their children. As discussed, policies that take away fundamental support — like SNAP benefits — will only further destabilize them. Traditional child support enforcement methods rely on punitive sanctions to address noncompliance, including suspending driver's licenses or passports, seizing assets, and incarceration. With support from OCSE and partnership with other agencies, state child support enforcement agencies have been testing alternative approaches throughout the child support enforcement process that focus on supportive, family-oriented, non-punitive methods.

Rather than punishing non-custodial parents facing challenges in making regular payments, some states offer supportive programs that address barriers to employment. These programs offer a range of services, including case management, employment services, coaching and mentoring, parenting classes, domestic violence services, mediators to help arrange parenting time, and subsidies for transportation and work equipment. Agencies have also been testing enhanced and expedited review of child support orders, modifying a parent's support order if the payment structure is infeasible given their financial circumstances, and offering debt reduction planning or tying reduction of arrears to successful participation in a parenting program.

For example, between 2012 and 2017 Colorado received an OCSE grant to test a voluntary, whole-family, supportive approach to helping a non-custodial parent pay child support. The Colorado agency focused on the many non-custodial parents who are willing but unable to pay child support, giving program participants case managers to help with barriers such as unemployment or underemployment. The program also provided employment services, parenting classes, mediators to help create parenting time arrangements, and domestic violence services. Participants were not subject to the usual punitive sanctions, such as suspended driver's licenses. Within six months, nearly two-thirds of participants who were not working or paying child support before enrolling in the program found full-time employment and were paying child support. Within a year, three-quarters were working full time.<sup>10</sup> Based on these positive results, Colorado has continued to build on this whole-family supportive model even after federal funding for the demonstration ended in 2017. The agency even changed its name from Child Support Enforcement to Child Support Services to reflect the change in philosophy.

---

<sup>9</sup> States can use an administrative or judicial process for establishing child support orders — or a combination of both, as Washington, D.C., uses. Child support orders require judicial approval or ratification by the court. See <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/child-support-process-administrative-vs-judicial.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Brown, "Colorado emerges as national model by helping rather than pursuing parents who miss child care payments," *Denver Post*, January 8, 2018, <https://www.denverpost.com/2018/01/08/colorado-helping-deadbeat-parents-get-jobs-fight-addiction/>.