



Factors That Impact the Child Support Program's Role in Reducing Child Poverty: Convening Summary

Maretta McDonald and Sofi Martinez, ASPE
Rebekah Selekman and Eliza Abendroth, Mathematica

HIGHLIGHTS

This brief summarizes an expert convening focused on the child support program's current ability and future potential to help address child poverty. The convening focused on the current state of child support services, how child support services intersect with other programs and institutions, and innovations in service design and provision. Key findings include the following:

- Various factors were suggested that may contribute to current child support program participation trends, including difficulty navigating the child support program, negative perceptions of the program, potential disruptions of family dynamics resulting from participation, and not adequately meeting the needs of the low-income and diverse family structures within the child support program. Addressing these barriers, both perceived and real, may attract more families experiencing poverty, who could benefit from child support services, to participate.
- Partnerships with other programs and sectors were viewed by experts as important factors to consider when addressing the ability of the child support program to tackle child poverty. Some of the most important partners can come from other public human services programs, the justice systems, workforce development agencies, and community-based organizations.
- Experts offered several factors that can contribute to successful partnerships for the child support program. These include alignment of goals and policies across partners, the ability to exchange data, and how partners can leverage and share resources.
- Several opportunities to improve how the child support program addresses child poverty were offered, including the following:
 - Distributing all child support to the families on whose behalf it is collected
 - Re-examining cooperation requirements
 - Formally recognizing informal and in-kind child support contributions
 - Providing access to services to establish parenting time orders
 - Offering flexible, holistic services
 - Providing staff training to enhance customer service and equity

INTRODUCTION

The child support program, also known as the Title IV-D program, facilitates the transfer of economic resources from noncustodial parents to the households where their children live most of the time. It is the third-largest human services program affecting children, serving more than 12.8 million children in 2022.¹ In fiscal year 2022, the program collected about \$30.5 billion on behalf of children with a parent living outside the home, with nearly 96 percent of the money going directly to families.^{2, 3} Even with this accomplishment, in 2017, about 33 percent of children served by the child support program lived in families with incomes below the official poverty line and another 28 percent lived in families with incomes between 100 percent and 200 percent of the poverty line.⁴

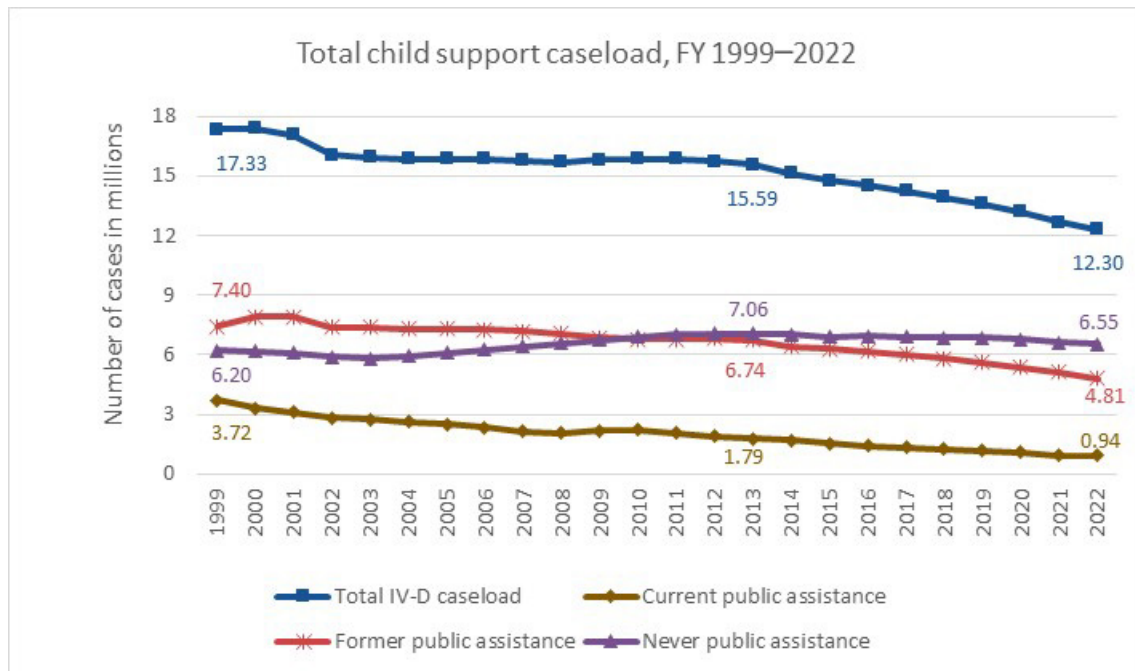
Research shows that some families are lifted out of poverty by receiving child support payments.^{5, 6, 7} However, child support alone is limited in its ability to reduce child poverty because less than 50 percent of families with child support orders receive their full child support amount and nearly one-third receive no payments.⁸ An additional consideration for child support to serve as an anti-poverty program is that children living in poor families often have noncustodial parents who have low and irregular incomes, which constrains their ability to make full and regular payments.^{9, 10, 11} Although the child support program alone may not be the only answer to child poverty, it can be an important part of a more comprehensive cross-cutting strategy.

Not everyone eligible for child support services receives them. In fact, the child support program experienced a reduction in participation over the last three decades, as shown in Exhibit 1. This was primarily driven by the reduction in receipt of cash assistance from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).¹² Child support caseloads are closely tied to cash assistance caseloads because families receiving cash assistance are required to cooperate with the child support program's efforts to open and enforce a child support case (known as mandatory cooperation). In 1999, shortly after the TANF program was enacted, over 11 million child support cases either received or formerly received TANF. By 2022, this figure had been cut nearly in half. The immediate consequence of the reduction in child support program participation is that many children in poverty who are eligible for and may benefit from child support services are not receiving them. We estimate as many as 3 million children living in single-parent homes and in poverty may be eligible and not participating.¹³

To understand how the child support program can better alleviate child poverty given the context described above, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) partnered with Mathematica Policy Research to convene experts to address the following questions:

- Question 1: How do child support and child policy experts understand the current trends in child support participation?
- Question 2: How do overlapping institutions influence current trends in participation in the child support program as well as its ability to reduce child poverty?
- Question 3: What are concrete examples and ideas of opportunities that would enable the child support program to reduce poverty?

Exhibit 1. Total IV-D child support caseload, 1999–2022



Source: Data for FY 1999 through FY 2016 were taken from Table 2 of the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) Annual Reports to Congress. Data for FY 2017 through FY 2022 were taken from the OCSS Preliminary FY 2022 Data Reports and Tables. Public assistance cases refer to individuals with TANF and/or foster care participation.

The convening brought together over 60 child support and child poverty experts on January 30, 2024. Experts included child support and child poverty researchers, state and local leaders in child support and anti-poverty programs, federal partners from different human services agencies, community organizations, and individuals who have lived experience with child support programs. This brief summarizes the key takeaways from the convening. We detail the development of the convening, including the guided group facilitation strategies. Next, we detail the key takeaways from the convening. The views and strategies arising from the panel do not necessarily represent positions or perspectives of the US Department of Health and Human Services or ASPE and should not be taken as such.

This project was supported by the Children’s Interagency Coordinating Council (CICC), established at ASPE in 2023. See the sidebar for more information on the CICC.

Children’s Interagency Coordinating Council

The purpose of the Children’s Interagency Coordinating Council (CICC) is to coordinate and provide actionable research for federal partners who have a role to play in improving children’s economic well-being and addressing child poverty. Poverty persists and was projected to have increased last year. In addition, the many federal programs designed to promote family economic stability are fragmented and complex for families and administrators. The CICC brings together federal agencies and departments. Meaningful engagement with communities and individuals with lived experience is an important part of the CICC’s work to break down silos and improve coordination, efficiency, and effectiveness. More information about the CICC can be found on [this website](#).

APPROACH TO THE CONVENING

The convening experts were selected based on several criteria related to the convening’s goal of breaking down silos and exchanging ideas from people with different levels of engagement with child support and child poverty policies. An initial list of researchers was compiled from a scan of the child support literature to identify experts on issues related to child support policies and practices. Experts who are child support program administrators were suggested through conversations with the National Child Support Engagement Association (NCSEA), National Council of Child Support Directors (NCCSD), and the National Association of Tribal Child Support Directors (NATCSD). NCSEA also provided suggestions for child support experts with lived experience, researchers, child support directors, and nonprofit leaders. Conversations with the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) yielded suggestions for experts who were TANF administrators, community and nonprofit organization leaders engaged with child support, as well as experts who had lived experience with child support. The National African American Child and Family Research Center provided suggestions for community-based fatherhood associations and experts with lived experience. After this set of initial contacts, recommendations from experts were used to fill any gaps within the areas of expertise. We selected 64 experts to participate in the convening, which included several experts who acted as discussion facilitators. A list of attendee affiliations can be found in Appendix A.1.

CONVENING CONSTRUCTION

The convening was structured to make possible meaningful discussions and have smooth transitions between the convening questions. The convening consisted of three sessions, each of which began with a short presentation from a representative of a federal agency, a person with lived experience with the child support program, and two researchers. Experts were assigned to one of eight tables, with an emphasis on maximizing diversity of experience, opinion, and profession at each table. Following the presentations in each session, experts took part in breakout discussions held at each table. An abbreviated convening agenda can be found in Appendix A.2. Each breakout session had a facilitator and a notetaker. The facilitator used human-centered design methods to engage all voices in the room in the discussion.¹⁴

The topics of each session and the associated activities were as follows:

Session 1: What’s going on in child support. This session focused on gathering knowledge related to Question 1 by discussing possible explanations for the root causes and effects of current trends in child support participation. The discussion used a technique known as problem tree analysis, an interactive activity where experts map causes and effects to better understand the chain of connected circumstances that lead to a current situation. This activity helps untangle complex problems, reveals various causes and effects, builds a shared understanding, and provides a direction for problem-solving.¹⁵

In the first session of the convening, each expert received a worksheet with the following problem statement: “The child support program is not reaching all families experiencing economic hardship who could benefit from its services.” The activity began by experts individually generating potential reasons why the child support program is not reaching all families experiencing economic hardship. After a few minutes, experts were asked to

generate potential effects of the problem. Following independent brainstorming, experts at each table came together as a group and discussed the potential causes and effects they identified. The worksheet can be found in Appendix B1.

Session 2: What’s going on with programs and institutions that intersect with child support.

This session focused on Question 2 by directing the experts to identify partnerships that could increase child support participation among low-income families that could benefit from child support services and the facilitators and barriers that support or impede those partnerships. This discussion used radar diagrams, which help reveal what people are thinking and rank priorities. Typically, this method uses a diagram that is split into four quadrants, with three concentric circles bisecting the quadrants. The quadrants are used to identify priority topics, and the concentric circles are used for ranking priorities of items related to the topics.¹⁶

Experts were provided with a modified radar diagram that was split into four quadrants and had only one bisecting circle. Experts began the activity by working with others at their table to identify four partners—one for each quadrant—that they felt were particularly important for child support to work with. Once each partner was identified, experts worked individually to brainstorm barriers that hinder collaboration (written down inside the circle) and facilitators that promote collaboration between child support and each partner (written down outside the circle). After the individual brainstorming, the experts shared their ideas with the other people at their table. The worksheet for this activity can be found in Appendix B2.

Session 3: What’s going on that’s new and innovative in child support and related programs.

To address Question 3, this session focused on identifying strategies for improving child support participation for those who could benefit from its services and for reducing child poverty. The discussion centered around a “How Might We” activity, which uses open-ended questions related to a problem or challenge to find solutions. Creative matrix activities help generate many diverse and unique ideas. A modified creative matrix was provided to experts to help them brainstorm different types of solutions.

Experts were provided with a worksheet that had a table with three rows and two columns. The rows included two pre-populated “how might we” questions and a third blank row, where the experts could insert the “how might we” question generated by their table based on the root causes identified during the first breakout session. The columns included icons for categories of possible enabling solutions. These categories included technology, policy, data, partnerships, resources, and training. Experts were encouraged to think broadly about potential solutions, both those that they saw as far-fetched as well as those that seemed more easily attainable. Experts spent time individually brainstorming and then sharing their solutions. A copy of the worksheet can be found in Appendix B3.

FINDINGS FROM THE CONVENING

This section describes key takeaways from the breakout discussion from each session of the convening.

Session 1: What's going on in child support

In the first session, four explanations emerged from the expert discussions of why the child support program is not reaching all families experiencing economic hardship, which focused on the reasons that families may avoid taking part in the child support program or that might lead them to close their case and not re-engage in the future. They agreed that current child support participation trends could impact children's economic and social-emotional outcomes.

Factors that may be contributing to current participation trends

1

The child support program can be difficult to navigate and physically inaccessible.

Experts noted that the child support program is a complex program that can require completion of many documents, attendance at court hearings, meetings with caseworkers, interactions with other program benefits, and other activities.

Difficulties navigating the child support program may discourage families from seeking services. In recent years, most child support programs have offered more virtual service delivery, but not all families have the technology or technological abilities to access services this way.¹⁷ Programs that deliver services in person require parents to have transportation to an office, but many families may not have reliable transportation. Families' inability to anticipate how child support payment might impact their receipt of other public benefits may also deter families from seeking services. In addition, families may not fully understand the services the program can provide and may be unaware of services that could be beneficial to them.

I hear the horror stories about what's happening in the program. When you dig into it, there's a logical reason why it's happening, but it's not being communicated.

—Convening participant

2

Families can have negative perceptions of and experiences with the child support program. Experts reported that many families can have negative perceptions of the child support program and may not want to be involved with it. These perceptions can come from personal experiences of being badly served or mistreated by the program as well as from what other families have told them about the program.

Consequently, families may avoid initial or further engagement with child support. Experts also noted that marginalized populations disproportionately experience the negative impacts of interactions with state institutions through policies and practices that limit their opportunities, resources, and well-being. They asserted that this can be reinforced through the child support program and that it is a significant contributor to the negative opinion of child support in marginalized communities. For example, a recent survey of child support-eligible parents found that Black parents are more likely to describe the child support program with negative terms, while White parents are more likely to use positive terms.¹⁸ Other research has found that the child support system reinforces class stereotypes, penalizes poverty, and sanctions alternative family structures such as never-married parents.^{19, 20, 21, 22}

3

Child support participation can disrupt family dynamics. Experts discussed how families often prefer to establish informal agreements so that parents can maintain more control over their relationships. Experts also suggested that many parents can be concerned that formal agreements may lead to unwanted consequences such as noncustodial parents being incarcerated for their inability to pay child support. Both

custodial and noncustodial parents may want to avoid potential negative outcomes. It was suggested that noncustodial parents may reduce their involvement with their children as a result of formal child support engagement. Experts also emphasized that families with histories of intimate partner violence may fear retaliation for participating in the child support program and be concerned that involving the government may lead to more conflict. Grandparents, who have custody of their grandchildren, may experience family strife when the child support program requires that their children, who are noncustodial parents, pay them child support.

4

The child support program may not adequately meet the needs of the low-income and diverse family structures that exist.

Experts suggested that the initial program was designed in 1975 from a perspective of divorced families, with a noncustodial parent

who had an adequate and stable income to regularly pay ordered amounts and the ability and time to navigate complex participation requirements. However, most of the families involved in the child support program, then and now, did not fit this description. Experts noted that the program has not adapted to serve the range of family structures children live in.

Children are increasingly born to never-married parents, who have less time and resources to navigate the child support program.²³ Children involved in the child support program are also likely to live in households experiencing economic hardship. Additionally, noncustodial parents engaged with the child support program often have children in their own or additional households to support, which strains their resources. They may also be experiencing their own economic hardships that prevent regular child support payments. The processes and procedures developed to establish and enforce child support orders do not always align with these actual family structures and economic realities.

//////

If the other person can't pay, why get an order at all? If there's not enough money in the first place, [you are] just moving resources around rather than addressing the lack of resources.

—Convening participant

Potential effects of low participation in child support on poverty and family relationships

Experts identified both potential negative and positive consequences of relatively low participation in the child support program, exacerbated by the declining trend in caseloads. According to the roundtable experts, the current trends in child support participation could lead to important program and social implications. On the one hand, some experts thought that low participation—particularly because it has been declining—contributes to increased or sustained family poverty, which could persist across generations. Relatedly, experts noted that families with low income may depend on other public benefit programs for financial support if they are not receiving child support services.²⁴

On the other hand, some experts suggested that the current declining child support participation

trends may not be negative, but rather better meeting families' preferences. For many families experiencing economic hardship, child support involvement may contribute to family disruption, which can negatively affect father involvement and support and increase tension between parents.^{25, 26, 27} In these cases, fewer families in the child support program may result in fewer families experiencing negative familial consequences of program involvement.

SESSION 2: WHAT'S GOING ON WITH PROGRAMS AND INSTITUTIONS THAT INTERSECT WITH CHILD SUPPORT

In the second session, the experts identified four partners that could help the child support program reach more families that could benefit from its services (Exhibit 2). One consensus across discussion groups was that organizations and institutions outside the child support program can influence the extent to which the child support program reaches families and addresses child poverty, in both positive and negative ways.

Exhibit 2: Four main SYSTEMS critical in addressing participation in the child support program



Public human services programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and child welfare



Justice systems, including both civil and criminal justice systems



Workforce development organizations



Community-based organizations, including fatherhood service providers and mental health service providers

Other potential partners that were not identified as frequently included schools, legal services, employers, legislators, and parents.

Factors That May Influence the Quality of Collaborations in Partnerships

Although experts noted some unique facilitators and barriers for specific partnerships, the factors influencing quality partnerships were largely the same regardless of the partner organization. The similarities across partner agencies and institutions suggest that strategies to improve collaboration between child support and other agencies and institutions are largely independent of the specific partner. Strategies for developing quality collaboration in one partnership might improve other partnerships as well. The primary factors that can inhibit or support partnerships are presented below.

Improving communication and joint service delivery across programs

Developing cross-program communication practices, aligning programmatic goals and performance

measures that encourage collaboration, and fostering trust across programs can support and facilitate collaborative partnerships. Experts emphasized underutilized approaches to facilitate communication across programs that are used less because of increased integration of technology and automation. For instance, experts suggest that joint service delivery may improve if child support staff have direct contact information for service providers in other program offices whom they can call directly with questions about cases. Child support staff can also create opportunities to meet with staff from community-based organizations and share information about what each program does to facilitate successful partnerships.

Experts suggested approaches to have more systematic communication and service coordination to further support information sharing and improve collaboration. They discussed physically co-locating offices or staff, developing staff positions to help individuals navigate services across partners, and having other in-person opportunities to work together to serve families. For instance, among partnerships with the family court, experts noted that having navigators or holding pre-mediation meetings with court staff can help connect child support programs to their court system partners and can help participants more easily access services.

Some experts reported that child support programs and other human services programs do not have aligned strategic goals and objectives. Subsequently, their performance measures are not aligned, so these programs may not be incentivized to collaborate in supporting families in the child support program. These experts recognized there may be benefits to developing shared goals and measures. Previous ASPE work has found that aligning performance indicators across human services and workforce programs (including child support) can facilitate efficiencies in program management and service delivery.²⁸ Doing so may require developing common indicators, improving data infrastructure, and increasing connections between programs with shared measures, among other steps.

Exchange of data

Having the ability to share data on participants across partnering agencies can reduce staff burden, particularly when partnerships include referrals of participants across programs. Integrated data systems across child support and other programs can facilitate data exchange and improve service delivery. However, experts noted that institutional policies on privacy and information security, legacy data systems, and other factors, can create barriers to this sharing. Developing data sharing agreements and memoranda of understanding to support data exchange can be complex and burdensome, and in many cases, not permissible.

Experts provided an example of a successful collaboration to support information sharing from a child support–child welfare collaboration. The Foster Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 expanded child support programs’ authority to share data with state child welfare agencies for the purposes of identifying individuals with parental rights to a child or a relative of a child. With this act, child welfare programs could search the Federal Parent Locator Service database to find potential out-of-home placements for children rather than rely solely on information gathered from parents and other relatives. This act increases the potential for child support programs to address outstanding child support issues, such as a change of the custodial parent as well as determining whether child support payments should be rerouted or terminated.

Resources

Programs often have limited funding or staff time to offer all the activities and services they would like to provide. Partnering with other government and community agencies can open opportunities to combine funding and expand available services. For instance, child support programs can use funds allocated under the TANF block grant to support employment activities for noncustodial parents. Additionally, child support programs may establish partnerships with community fatherhood programs to broaden their outreach to noncustodial parents and share information about child support services. Finding innovative and flexible ways to share funding sources or other resources can benefit both partners in the collaboration. However, sustaining effective partnerships often requires staff to have dedicated time to work with partners.

////////////////////
Our performance measures don't tell us how well we collaborate across programs—if we are held to our performance measures, we aren't encouraging collaboration across programs.

—Convening participant

Experts also suggested that leaders of human services programs may not be fully aware of the flexibilities of their funding as well as other existing funding streams they could leverage to provide services to child support program participants. This was especially salient in discussions about partnerships with child welfare, TANF, and various employment and training programs. Receiving guidance about or examples of funding flexibilities and opportunities for resource sharing could facilitate more partnerships in the future.

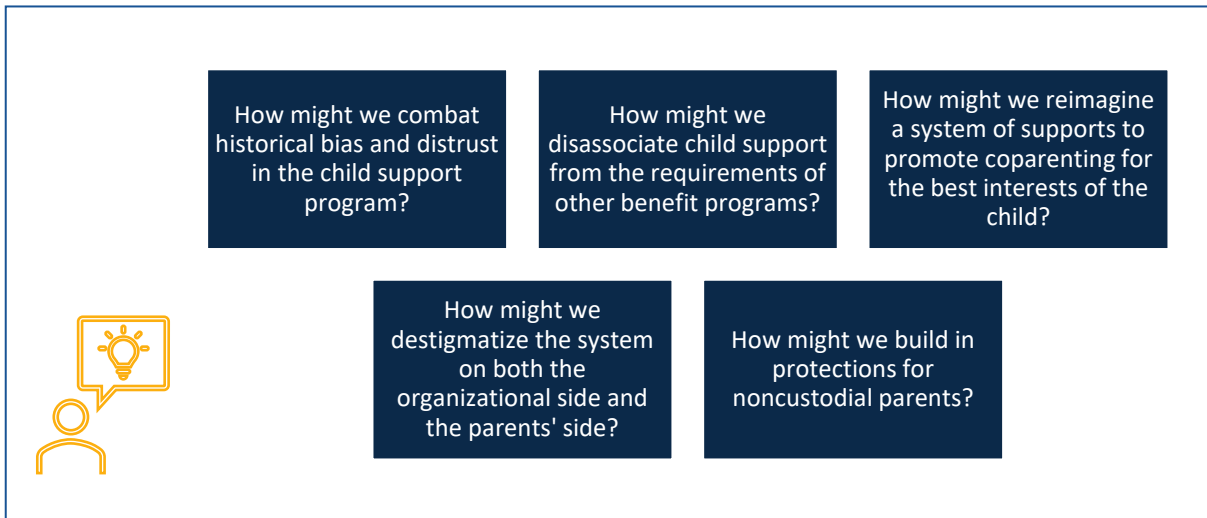
SESSION 3: WHAT'S GOING ON THAT'S NEW AND INNOVATIVE IN CHILD SUPPORT

In the final session, experts identified solutions based on open-ended questions about improving child support participation and reducing child poverty. They were presented with the following questions:

- How might we improve child support engagement with families experiencing economic hardship?
- How might we reimagine the child support program as a part of a holistic plan to combat child poverty?

Each table was also asked to develop its own open-ended question that addressed a root cause mentioned in the first breakout session. Examples of the questions generated can be found in Exhibit 3. Following the development of a third statement, experts brainstormed potential solutions to these statements.

Exhibit 3. Questions developed by experts during Session 3



Opportunities to reach impoverished families and address child poverty

Experts generated several ideas for reaching families that may benefit from participation in the child support program. Most of their solutions were related to policy changes, ways to change how child support interacts with other systems, and strategies for improving public perception of the child support program.



Distribute child support collected on behalf of families who receive TANF directly to them.

Families receiving TANF cash assistance are required to relinquish their legal rights to receive child support income to the government through a policy called “assignment”.²⁹ Any child support collected on their behalf is kept by the government to recoup the cost of providing cash assistance to the family in another policy known as “cost recovery”. States can choose to pay TANF families some or all of the child support collected on their behalf, which is referred to as a “pass-through”. More than half of states pass through some child support payments to TANF families.³⁰ Experts suggested that the pass-through amount should be increased or the assignment of rights eliminated so that families receiving cash assistance can have access to more financial supports when their economic well-being is most precarious. Increasing the pass-through not only ensures that more child support payments go to the TANF family, but it can also encourage noncustodial parents to pay more child support because their payments are going to their children instead of the government. Research found this positive effect on noncustodial parents’ payment behavior in Wisconsin and Colorado when they increased their pass-through amount, but not in Maryland.^{31, 32, 33, 34} Making this a federal mandate would require a statutory change.



Re-examine cooperation requirements. As a condition of receiving TANF cash assistance and Medicaid in all states—and in some states, food assistance and subsidized child care—families are required to cooperate with the child support programs’ efforts to open cases and establish and enforce support orders. If families do not cooperate with these efforts, they risk losing some or all of

their benefits.³⁵ Mandatory cooperation is one strategy that states can use to increase child support participation. Policymakers have considered expanding mandatory cooperation to other programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). However, although expanding cooperation requirements would increase the number of child support cases, experts expressed concern with this approach because there is no clear evidence on how the expansion would impact the families being served.^{36, 37, 38, 39} Many experts in attendance said cooperation requirements make families feel coerced to work with child support, which leads to families feeling resentful and makes them hard to engage. Experts generally thought a policy that would encourage referrals to the child support program for those interested in services without threat of penalty if they are not interested in receiving services would be more effective. To help states determine their cooperation requirements, the federal Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) has issued joint guidance with the Children’s Bureau on child welfare referrals to child support. Additionally, SNAP recently updated its policy guidance on mandatory SNAP referrals.^{40, 41}



Allow for informal and in-kind child support contributions. Experts agreed that many noncustodial parents support their children in ways that are not recognized by the child support program. Research shows that in 2013 about 10 percent of custodial parents who reported having a child support agreement had an informal agreement instead of a legal order.⁴² One suggestion to help address current trends in participation in the child support program would be to allow informal payments—the noncustodial parent paying what they can to the custodial parent, when they can—and in-kind contributions such as providing child care or purchasing clothing for the children to count as payment toward a child support order. Although it could be difficult to capture and quantify the provision of informal support, accepting such support as a formal child support contribution could improve noncustodial parents’ perspective of the program and would be more flexible for complex family dynamics. Tribal child support programs currently have the authority to recognize these types of in-kind child support contributions and OCSS is considering expanding this to state programs.



Provide access to establish parenting time orders. Currently, child support programs have limited funding available to support and manage noncustodial parents’ access and visitation with their children.⁴³ Experts suggested that implementing statutory changes to expand the scope of the child support program to include establishment of parenting time, or otherwise expanding funding to support these efforts, could improve noncustodial parent satisfaction with the program, compliance with child support orders, and child-parent relationships.



Offer flexible, holistic services. All child support programs provide participants with a specific set of required services. Programs could encourage more engagement by taking a more flexible approach to service delivery, such as providing families with only those services they request. For example, if requested, they could help establish paternity, without requiring establishment of orders. Additionally, being able to provide more services that meet the needs of the whole family, such as parenting education, parenting time orders, or employment services, could also encourage engagement. Finally, experts noted that enforcement measures that penalize noncustodial parents for nonpayment undermine the ability of the child support program to act as a family-focused program. To transform the child support program to a family-focused program, experts suggested increasing flexibility of the child support program to suspend enforcement actions when those actions are unlikely to lead to more payments, which could improve relationships in the family, increase the likelihood of later payments, and, as a result, improve the reputation of the child support program in the community. Child support practitioners noted that additional flexibilities could encourage states to make changes. Some of the changes OCSS has made to increase flexibility and holistic services in child support are described in the Conclusion and Next Steps section below.⁴⁴



The criminalization of poverty does not create trustworthy relationships between the people who are trying to access the system and the people operating the system.

—Convening participant



Provide staff training to enhance customer service and equity. Experts noted that participant experiences in the child support program may be improved with more staff training on best practices for supporting participants and equitable service delivery. Experts suggested incorporating trainings on trauma-informed care and providing information about domestic violence. Regarding equity, discussions centered on acknowledging how the child support program has historically perpetuated racism and unintentionally harmed marginalized groups and on determining how to better equip frontline child support staff to work with these families. Improving the experience of current child support participants can help address public perception about the program. Experts also speculated that these changes might encourage families who could benefit from child support program participation to feel safe requesting child support services. OCSS has taken steps toward these goals through delivering training to state and tribal child support staff on domestic violence, improving services for Spanish-speaking customers, and publishing a starter kit that child support professionals can use to engage people with lived experience in the child support program.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

This convening of experts on child support and related programs was a key step to building a shared understanding of and generating strategies for increasing child support participation among those families that would benefit from it, addressing family needs, and reducing child poverty. Experts generally agreed on several actions that child support programs can take in partnership with other systems.

Over the last decade, OCSS has taken several measures to update its practices and procedures to

better align the child support program with the needs of modern families and to focus on providing holistic services. Such measures included developing guidance to set order amounts based on ability to pay; sharing strategies to increase reliable payments; encouraging programs to establish employment programs for noncustodial parents and offering related trainings; providing states the ability to offer paternity-only services; issuing guidance on partnering with other programs, making referrals, and family-centered strategies; and changing the name of the federal office from Office of Child Support Enforcement to Office of Child Support Services.⁴⁶

Understanding and addressing current trends in child support participation is complicated and requires the involvement and collaboration of child support practitioners and leaders, other human service providers, and researchers. More research is needed on how participation trends continue to change over time, why, for whom, and the implications for child poverty. Child support leaders should continue to work together and with partner agencies to develop and evaluate innovative strategies for engaging those who would most benefit from services.

Future conversations about child support participation at the local, state, and federal levels should include and elevate voices of individuals with lived experience with the child support program so that any strategies for addressing participation in child support are informed by those with direct experience. With such continued efforts, child support can become a stronger part of a united human services strategy to reduce child poverty.

¹ Office of Child Support Services. “2022 Child Support: More Money for Families.” Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/2022_infographic_national.pdf.

² Ibid.

³ The remaining 4 percent of child support collected from noncustodial parents is withheld by the state or tribe to reimburse itself and the federal government for the public assistance provided to the individual.

⁴ Sorensen, Elaine. “Characteristics of Custodial Parents and Their Children.” Office of Child Support Services, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021.

⁵ Park, H., M. Cancian, and D.R. Meyer. “The Role of Child Support in the Economic Well-Being of Custodial Mothers.” Report to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. University of Wisconsin–Madison, Institute for Research on Poverty, 2005.

⁶ Cancian, M., and D.R. Meyer. “Child Support and the Economy.” In *Working and Poor: How Economic and Policy Changes Are Affecting Low-Wage Workers*, edited by R.M. Blank, S.H. Danziger, and R.F. Schoeni. Russell Sage Foundation, 2006, pp. 338–365.

⁷ Shrider, Emily A., and John Creamer. “Poverty in the United States: 2022.” Current Population Reports, P60-280. U.S. Census Bureau, September 2023.

⁸ Grall, Timothy. “Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2017.” Current Population Reports, P60-269. U.S. Census Bureau, 2020.

⁹ Brito, T.L., D.J. Pate Jr., and J.S. Wong. “‘I Do for My Kids’: Negotiating Race and Racial Inequality in Family Court.” *Fordham Law Review*, vol. 83, no. 6, 2015, pp. 3027–3052.

¹⁰ Sorensen, E., L. Sousa, and S.G. Schaner. “Assessing Child Support Arrears in Nine Large States and the Nation.” Urban Institute, 2007.

¹¹ Cuesta, L., and D.R. Meyer. “Child Poverty and Child Support Policy: A Comparative Analysis of Colombia and the United States.” *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 93, 2018, pp. 143–153.

¹² The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 ended Aid to Families with Dependent Children and replaced it with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. It

also introduced more stringent work requirements and time limits for cash assistance, which contributed to the reduced number of people receiving cash assistance. Around the time the cash assistance policy changed, the number of families receiving cash assistance declined from nearly 5 million (1994) to fewer than 3 million (1998) (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1999).

¹³ Authors' calculations using 2022 CPS data.

¹⁴ Human-centered design is a framework and set of activities for engaging people in co-designing from the user's perspective. Such activities engage all voices in a mix of individual brainstorming and group discussion that taps the creative potential of participants, invites outside-the-box thinking, and tests traditional limits.

¹⁵ Luma Institute. "Problem Tree Analysis." <https://www.luma-institute.com/problem-tree-analysis/>.n.d.

¹⁶ Luma Institute. "What's on Your Radar." <https://www.luma-institute.com/whats-on-your-radar/>.n.d.

¹⁷ Swenson, K., and R. Ghertner. "People in Low-Income Households Have Less Access to Internet Services." 2021. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/low-income-internet-access>.

¹⁸ See https://www.ncsea.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/National-Child-Support-Research_FINAL-NCSEA-003.pdf.

¹⁹ Battle, B.P. "The Carceral Logic of Parental Responsibility." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 85(3), 679–700. 2023. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jomf.12902>.

²⁰ Haney, Lynne. "Incarcerated Fatherhood: The Entanglements of Child Support Debt and Mass Imprisonment." *American Journal of Sociology*, 124 (1), pp. 1-48. 2018. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/697580>.

²¹ McDonald, Maretta. "Child Support Enforcement as Social Control: Black Fathers and Multi-Partner Fertility." In *Introduction to Africana Demography*, edited by L. Martin. Brill, 2020. <https://ffcws.princeton.edu/publications/child-support-enforcement-social-control-black-fathers-and-multi-partner-fertility>.

²² Kim, Yoona, Katarina Liptrot-Ploch, and Daniel R. Meyer. "Racial and Ethnic Disproportionality and Disparity in Child Support: A Scoping Review." 2024. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/racial-and-ethnic-disproportionality-and-disparity-in-child-support-a-scoping-review/>.

²³ Wildsmith, Elizabeth, Jennifer Manlove, and Elizabeth Cook. "Dramatic Increase in the Proportion of Births Outside of Marriage in the United States from 1990 to 2016." Research brief. Child Trends, 2018.

²⁴ Some income-contingent programs allow participants to have incomes over 100 percent of poverty, including SNAP and Medicaid.

²⁵ Turner, Kimberly J., and Maureen R. Waller. "Indebted Relationships: Child Support Arrears and Nonresident Fathers' Involvement with Children." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 79. pp. 24-43.2017. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12361>.

²⁶ Edin, K., and T. Nelson. *Doing the Best I Can: Fatherhood in the Inner City*. University of California Press, 2013.

²⁷ Seltzer, J., S. McLanahan, and T. Hanson. "Will Child Support Enforcement Increase Father-Child Contact and Parental Conflict After Separation?" In *Fathers Under Fire: The Revolution in Child Support Enforcement*, edited by I. Garfinkel, S. McLanahan, D. Meyer, and J. Seltzer. Russell Sage Foundation, 1998, pp. 157–189.

²⁸ See https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/migrated_legacy_files//190091/empoweredperformancemeasuressummary.pdf.

²⁹ Turetsky, Vicki, and Diana Azevedo-McCaffrey. "Understanding TANF Cost Recovery in the Child Support Program." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2024.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Meyer, Daniel R., and Maria Cancian. "W-2 Child Support Demonstration Evaluation Phase I: Final Report." Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2001. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/csde-p1v1-full-report.pdf>.





-
- ³² Colorado Department of Human Services. “Evaluating the Effect of Colorado’s Full Child Support Pass-Through Policy.” n.d.
- ³³ Cancian, Maria, Daniel R. Meyer, and Emma Caspar. “Welfare and Child Support: Complements, Not Substitutes.” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 27: 354-375. 2008.
- ³⁴ See www.ssw.umaryland.edu/media/ssw/fwrtg/child-support-research/cs-initiatives/Child-Support-Pass-Through,-Early-Outcomes.pdf?&.
- ³⁵ Selekmán, Rebekah, and Pamela Holcomb. “Child Support Cooperation Requirements in Child Care Subsidy Programs and SNAP: Key Policy Considerations.” Mathematica, 2018. <https://www.mathematica.org/publications/child-support-cooperation-requirements-in-child-care-subsidy-programs-and-snap-key-policy>.
- ³⁶ Doar, R. “Child Support Cooperation Requirements Are a Welcome Addition to SNAP.” American Enterprise Institute, 2019.
- ³⁷ Llobrera, J. “Child Support Cooperation Requirements in SNAP Are Unproven, Costly, and Put Families at Risk.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2020.
- ³⁸ Cancian, M., and R. Doar. “Child Support Policy: Areas of Emerging Agreement and Ongoing Debate.” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 43, 938–943. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22590>.
- ³⁹ Holcomb, P., R. Selekmán, Q. Moore, A. Glosser, S. Bardin, L. Ochoa, N. McInnis, et al. “Evaluation of Child Support Enforcement Cooperation Requirements in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.” U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, 2024. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/snap/child-support-enforcement-requirements>.
- ⁴⁰ See <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/policy-guidance/childrens-bureau-ocse-joint-letter-updated-child-support-referral-policy>.
- ⁴¹ See <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-policy-options-child-support>.
- ⁴² Grall, Timothy. “Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2013.” U.S. Census Bureau, 2016. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/P60-255.pdf>.
- ⁴³ Selekmán, R., and L. Antelo. “Coordinating Parenting Time and Child Support: Experiences and Lessons Learned from Three States.” Mathematica, 2020. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/private/pdf/263506/Child-Support-Parenting-Time-Brief.pdf>.
- ⁴⁴ “Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization in Child Support Enforcement Programs.” 45 CFR Part § 302.56(b). <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-12-20/pdf/2016-29598.pdf>.
- ⁴⁵ See <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/training-technical-assistance/lived-experience-starter-kit>.
- ⁴⁶ OCSS published [IM-22-03](#) setting forth the family and state benefits of debt compromise to help increase consistent and reliable child support payments and improve the economic well-being of families. On May 31, 2024, OCSS issued the Employment and Training Notice of Proposed Rulemaking regulation to provide economic relief and recovery to families by positively impacting parents in the child support program who have difficulty paying due to unstable or sporadic employment. The regulation will improve the ability of child support agencies to collect regular and reliable payments to help ensure family self-sufficiency and child well-being. OCSS has worked with both [state](#) and [tribal](#) child support programs to develop materials and deliver trainings that can assist with employment and job training. Under the Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization Final Rule issued in December 2016 states have the ability to offer paternity-only limited services pursuant to [45 CFR 302.33\(a\)\(6\)](#). OCSS has issued guidance in [PIQ-12-02](#) and [PIQT-19-01](#) on partnering with other programs, making referrals, and using family-centered strategies. OCSS changed its name on June 5, 2023, laying the foundation to address negative perceptions and communicating the office’s commitment to providing services to all families with whole family strategies.

Appendices

APPENDIX A.1: EXPERTS' AFFILIATIONS

Experts' affiliations	Number of experts
Lived experience with child support	7
Tribal agency	1
Nonprofit or community organization	8
State child support program	10
State TANF program	8
Researcher	15
Federal agency	12
Think tank or foundation	4
Total	64

APPENDIX A.2: AGENDA OF CONVENING PRESENTATIONS

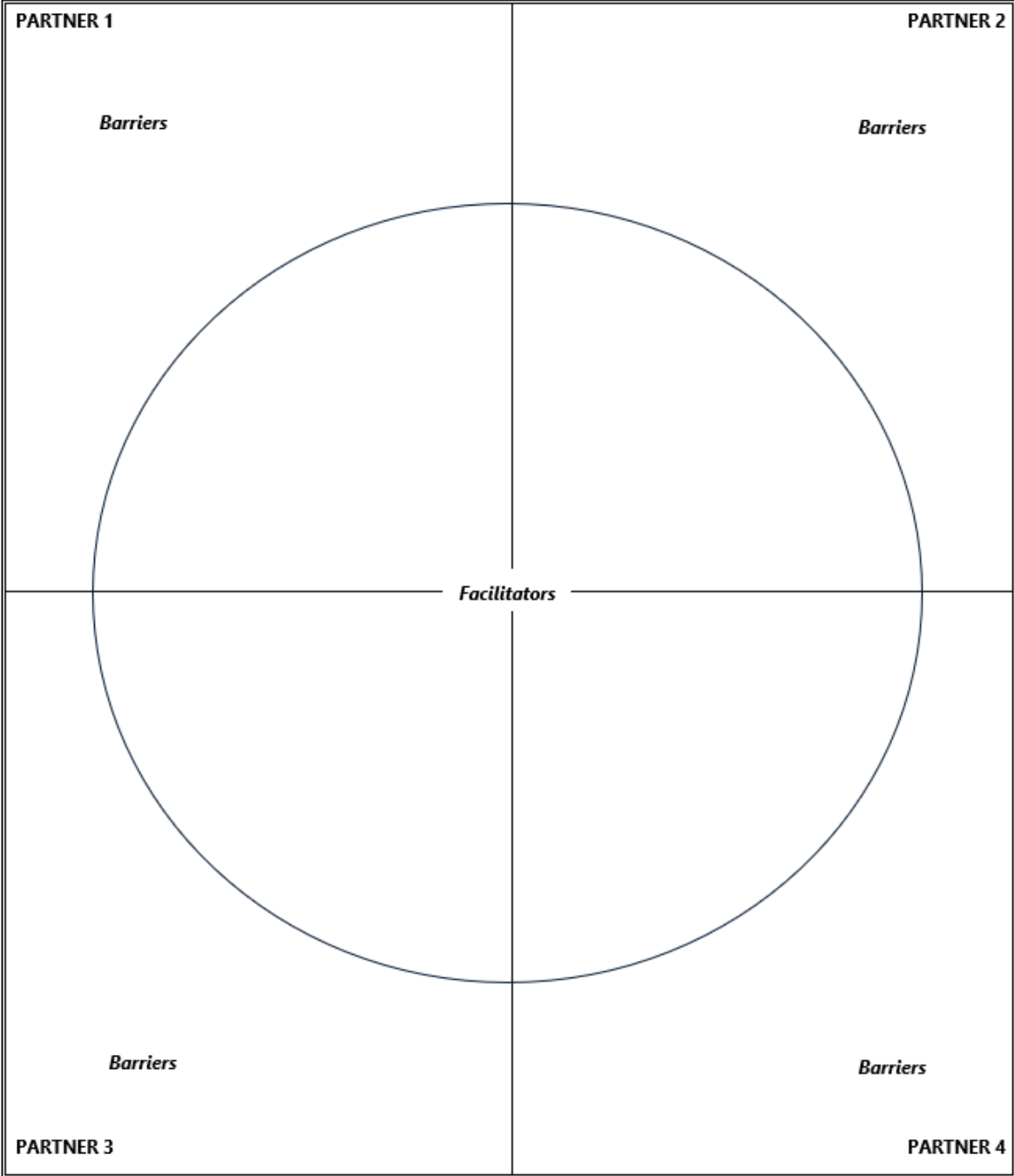
	Session 1: What's going on in child support	Session 2: What's going on with intersecting programs and institutions	Session 3: What's going on that's new and innovative
	Maretta McDonald (ASPE) <i>Child Support and Child Poverty: By the Numbers; What's Going on with Child Support and Child Poverty?</i>	Suzanne MacCartney (ASPE) <i>Multiple Program Participation for Children and Parents in the IV-D Program</i>	Tangler Gray (OCSS) <i>OCSS Recent Program Innovations</i>
	Robyn Wind-Tiger (Caretaker Custodial Parent and Grandparent Advocate) <i>Perspective of caretaker custodial parent and grandparent advocate</i>	Cortney King (Parent and Author) <i>Perspective of child support–involved parent and author</i>	Katie Zelenka (Parent and Kings County California Child Support Professional) <i>Perspective of child support–involved parent and child support professional</i>
	Maria Cancian (Georgetown University) <i>How Important Is Formal Child Support?</i>	Grace Landrum (University of Wisconsin–Madison) <i>Custodial Mother's Perspectives of Non-Custodial Fathers' Financial Contributions Over Time</i>	Erin Frisch (Michigan Office of Child Support) <i>National Child Support Market Research</i>
	David Kilgore (California Department of Child Services) <i>California Caseload Trends</i>	Latrice Rollins (National African American Family and Children Research Center) <i>African American Fathers' Child Support Experiences: An Overview of Social Characteristics</i>	Letitia Passarella (University of Maryland) <i>Early Outcomes of Maryland's Partial Child Support Pass-Through Policy</i>

Effects



Causes

APPENDIX B2: RADAR DIAGRAM



APPENDIX B3: ENABLING SOLUTION CREATIVE MATRIX

Examples of enabling solutions



Technology



Data



Partnerships



Policy and
Procedures



Training



Other
Resources

How might we improve
child support
collaboration with other
government programs
and institutions?

How might we
reimagine the child
support program as a
part of a holistic plan to
combat child poverty?

How might we....

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation

200 Independence Ave. SW, Mailstop 447D
Washington, DC 20201

For more ASPE briefs and other publications, visit:

aspe.hhs.gov/reports



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Maretta McDonald is a Social Science Analyst in the Data and Technical Analysis Division in the Office of Human Services Policy in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

Sofi Martinez is a Senior Social Science Analyst in the Family and Community Policy Division in the Office of Human Services Policy in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

Rebekah Selekman is a Senior Researcher at Mathematica.

Eliza Abendroth is a Survey Analyst at Mathematica.

SUGGESTED CITATION

McDonald, Maretta, Sofi Martinez, Rebekah Selekman, and Eliza Abendroth. "Factors That Impact the Child Support Program's Role in Reducing Child Poverty: Convening Summary." Issue brief. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2024.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

All material appearing in this report is in the public domain and may be reproduced or copied without permission; citation as to source, however, is appreciated.

DISCLOSURE

This communication was printed, published, or produced and disseminated at U.S. taxpayer expense. Links and references to information from non-governmental organizations is provided for informational purposes and is not an HHS endorsement, recommendation, or preference for the non-governmental organizations.

Subscribe to ASPE mailing list to receive
email updates on new publications:

<https://list.nih.gov/cgi-bin/wa.exe?SUBED1=ASPE-HEALTH-POLICY&A=1>

For general questions and
information about ASPE:

aspe.hhs.gov/about