

Transform the Child Support System to Strengthen Families

Heather Hahn, Kathryn Edin, and Lauren Abrahams

Child support is a vital tool for providing income to children living in poverty. For families living in poverty who receive child support, it makes up 41 percent of their income on average. But the system can be punitive, requiring noncustodial parents—typically fathers—with low earnings to pay unrealistically high levels of support and driving a wedge between coparents and children. But promising reforms are under way. We propose an ambitious, three-point strategy to complete the transformation of the child support system into a truly family-building institution.

The Problem

The child support system can alienate fathers from their children, create high hurdles for parents trying to comply with support orders, and result in fewer resources for the children it is meant to help.

The system treats many fathers as antagonists.

Research suggests that many fathers want to be more to their children than a paycheck. Yet when fathers fall behind on child support, they can be driven away by a system that assumes they need threats to remain involved in a child's life.

.....

Inability to pay child support can lead to property seizure or the loss of a driver's or professional license

.....

The system creates a vicious cycle. States can garnish up to 65 percent of fathers' wages for child support, and orders are rarely adjusted, as they should be, if a

father loses his job. States can intercept tax returns, withhold or revoke driver's licenses, deny professional licenses, and seize assets. States can also throw fathers in jail for not paying child support. All this discourages employment and reduces child support payments.

When fathers pay, the government keeps a portion to cover the costs of social programs.

In 28 states in 2016, families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance received none of the child support their fathers paid. Research shows that when governments keep child support payments, fathers are less likely to pay support.

The Solution

Empower parents to decide together how best to support their children. States can encourage parents to collectively agree to child support payments and reframe the system as a family resource rather than a punitive enforcement program. States can also allow a father's noncash and informal contributions to count toward his child support obligation, if parents agree.

Apply reasonable standards to child support orders.

Research shows that fathers who owe more than 35 percent of their earnings are less likely to comply. We propose evaluating a standard of 20 percent of a father's disposable income. Orders should also be modified when necessary.

End child support as a mechanism to recoup welfare costs. States should not cover program costs by keeping a share of child support payments. Although federal cost recoupment would require legislative change, states can voluntarily end the practice. Costs will be offset by lower child poverty, stronger family relationships, higher child support payments, and more fathers establishing paternity.

WHAT PHILANTHROPY CAN DO

Philanthropy can fund demonstration projects with states and localities to build additional evidence to help legislators understand the need to change the child support system. Philanthropy can also fund demonstration programs to increase understanding of the costs and benefits of services designed to support both parents and increase noncustodial parents' ability to pay child support.

WHAT GOVERNMENT CAN DO

Government can help parents collaborate on how to support their children. States and localities can rename and reframe their programs to emphasize family-building, and states can authorize judges to approve coparenting plans.

The federal government can end the cost-recovery aspect of child support. Meanwhile, states can give up child support dollars as a revenue source and use state funds to meet their federal obligations. States and counties could begin immediately to limit child support orders or forgive debt owed under child support orders.

WHAT DOES "MOBILITY" FROM POVERTY MEAN?

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty's definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community. These principles drive five mutually reinforcing strategies:

- Change the narrative
- Create access to good jobs
- Ensure zip code is not destiny
- Provide support that empowers
- Transform data use

Transforming child support is part of the strategy to provide support that empowers.

HOW CHANGES TO THE CHILD SUPPORT SYSTEM CAN IMPROVE MOBILITY

- **Economic success:** We expect increased earnings for noncustodial parents, greater compliance with child support orders, and improved social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes for children that may eventually boost educational attainment and income.
- **Power and autonomy:** We expect lower arrearages, fewer noncustodial parents facing sanctions for failure to pay, and better mental health for parents and children.
- **Being valued in community:** Non-custodial parents will feel more important in their children's lives and have higher perceived standing in the community.

This brief summarizes the paper *Transforming Child Support into a Family-Building System*. The paper lists sources for the research summarized here.