

New York Initiative Helps Fathers Increase their Earnings and Child Support Payments

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Summary

New York implemented a pilot employment program for parents behind in their child support in four communities as part of the Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative. These pilot programs found that employment assistance, coupled with case management and other support services, substantially increased the earnings and child support payments of disadvantaged parents who were not meeting their child support obligations (nearly all of whom were fathers).

Background

More than one-quarter of all children in the United States live apart from one of their parents and nearly 30 percent of these children are poor.¹ Child support is an important source of income for these families. It lifts a million people out of poverty every year and represents, on average, 40 percent of the income of poor custodial parents and

their children when they receive it.² However, less than half of poor custodial families receive child support.

The national child support program collects substantial amounts of child support every year. In FY 2010, it collected \$26 billion. The New York child support program collected \$1.6 billion that year.³ Most child support is collected through automatic income withholding and thus the child support program works well for families in which the parent living apart from the children (referred to as a noncustodial parent) is steadily employed. The program is less effective for families when the noncustodial parent does not have a steady job.

The secular decline in earnings and employment of less-educated men, especially African-American men, over the past 30 years has made it more difficult to collect child support.⁴ Most noncustodial parents have at most a high school education and a disproportionate

Charley enrolled in the Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Pilot program in October 2007 after seeing a flyer in the community. Upon enrollment, Charley was working part-time at McDonalds. He did not have court-ordered visitation with his son and was unable to see him on a regular basis due to a poor relationship with his son's mother. Pilot staff helped Charley complete and submit a Joint Custody/Visitation Petition, and after several court appearances, Charley was awarded joint custody and a regular weekly visitation schedule with his son. With the help of the pilot program, Charley was also able to secure full-time employment with T-Mobile, where he was subsequently promoted to Assistant Manager.



share are African American.⁵ Thus, the secular decline in the earnings and employment of this group of men has meant that more noncustodial parents lack a steady job.

Most unpaid child support is owed by noncustodial parents with little or no reported earnings.⁶ New York has a particularly high proportion of noncustodial parents in this situation. In 2009, an estimated 291,819 noncustodial parents in New York owed back support and had less than \$10,000 in reported earnings that year.⁷ Many of these parents face multiple employment barriers that affect their ability to pay child support, including intermittent employment, limited education, and criminal records. These employment barriers are often compounded by other circumstances of poverty, such as unstable housing, lack of access to transportation, and no health insurance.⁸

The Intervention

To help low-income noncustodial parents find work and pay their child support, the New York Legislature enacted the Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative in 2006. Part of this initiative included a pilot program to test the effectiveness of providing employment and other support services to low-income parents behind in their child support.⁹

The Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the agency assigned to implement the pilot, contracted with five large, well-established organizations to provide the services. These organizations operated in four cities: Buffalo, Jamestown, Syracuse, and New York City.

All the contracting agencies used a case management model to deliver services: participants worked with a case manager to assess their needs, develop a service plan, and manage service delivery. The services focused on employment and included job readiness training, job search assistance, and job placement. Some sites offered job skills training, transitional jobs,

Lessons Learned

- The pilot projects associated with Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers successfully recruited large numbers of participants through court referrals, internal referrals, advertisement, and outreach.
- Participants were a disadvantaged population and needed services.
- All pilot projects used a case-management model to deliver services, which included one-on-one case management services, employment services, parenting and relationship services, and child-support-related services, as well as other support services and referrals to services in the community.
- Local child support programs contributed to the success of these projects in a variety of ways, including recruitment, verification of eligibility, education for staff and participants about the child support program, and one-on-one case reviews.
- In the end, the pilot projects worked—they increased the earnings and child support payments of low-income parents behind in their child support.

and work supports. Each site also provided parenting or relationship skills workshops and child-support-related services.

The pilot programs used a variety of methods to recruit participants. Some pilots relied almost exclusively on the family courts for referrals. Others received relatively few court referrals and relied instead on internal referrals, advertisement, and outreach. One program was co-located in a high-volume one-stop career center and received large numbers of referrals from the center.

Each contracting agency had a relationship with its local child support agency, but the nature of the relationship varied. At one site, the local child support agency was the contracting agency and played a central role in the day-to-day operations of the pilot. At other sites, the local child support agency had a supportive role that mostly involved verifying eligibility, resolving individual child support issues, and conducting child support workshops.

Participant Characteristics

Over the course of the demonstration (October 2006 to September 2009), the pilot programs served 3,668 parents, 93 percent of whom were fathers. These participants were a disadvantaged population—72 percent had an arrest record, 79 percent had at most a high school education, and 89 percent were unemployed at enrollment. Eighty percent of the participants were African American or Hispanic and 69 percent of them had never married. Their average age was 34 years old. They owed, on average, \$11,856 in child support arrears. Charley exemplifies the parents served.

Impact of the Intervention

To assess how participants were affected by the pilots, we compared their outcomes with those of a comparison group of nonparticipants who had similar characteristics. Our analysis shows that participants' earnings increased more than the comparison group in the first quarter following enrollment in the pilot program. Furthermore, those gains continued for at least a year after enrollment

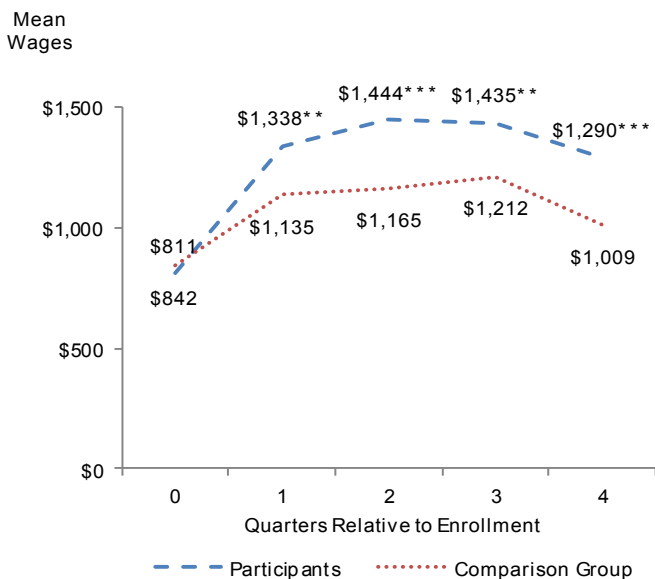
(the length of time we followed participant outcomes). As shown in figure 1, during the quarter of enrollment, participants earned, on average, \$811 (this average includes participants without earnings). By the fourth quarter after enrollment, they were earning \$1,290 on average.

- During the year after enrollment, participants earned an average of \$986 more than the comparison group, a 22 percent increase in wages.

For child support payments, we were only able to examine participants in the final year of the program. However, results for this final year suggest positive impacts similar to the wage outcomes discussed above (child support outcomes were measured quarterly to correspond to earnings outcomes). As shown in figure 2, participants paid more child support than the comparison group in the first quarter following enrollment and this difference grew over time, remaining substantial one year after enrollment.

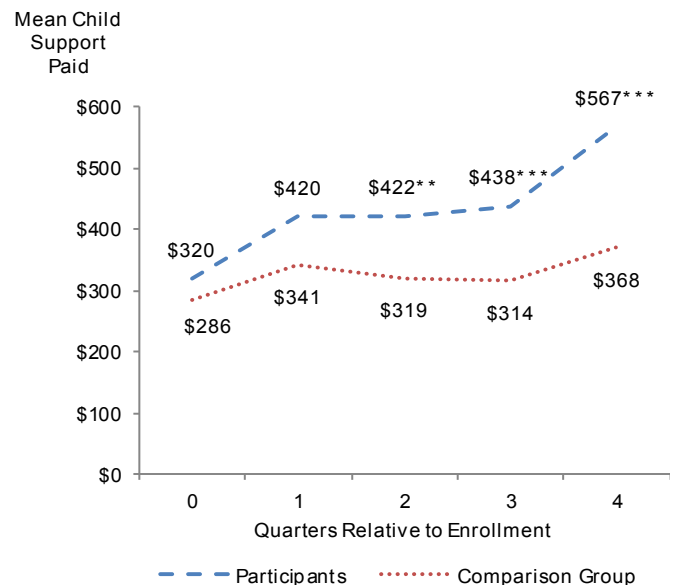
- During the year after enrollment, participants paid an average of \$504 more in child support than the comparison group, a 38 percent increase.

Figure 1. Quarterly Wages of Participants and Comparison Group During and After Enrollment



Stars indicate significant difference between groups: † p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001. Enrollment quarter mean is unadjusted for covariates, but presented for comparison purposes.

Figure 2. Child Support Paid by Participants and Comparison Group During and After Enrollment (in final year of program only)



Stars indicate significant difference between groups: † p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001. Enrollment quarter mean is unadjusted for covariates, but presented for comparison purposes.

Recommendations

The evaluation of the Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative pilot projects shows that the programs successfully boosted the earnings and child support payments of low-income parents who owed back child support. After the pilot phase ended, the New York Legislature allocated \$2.7 million in FY 2009 so that the employment programs could continue. Eight programs (four of which were in the original pilot) were selected through a competitive process to receive funding to operate programs for one year. These funds have now been spent and the Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative no longer funds employment-oriented programs.

In 2010 and 2011, the New York Legislature expanded the authority of the family courts to refer unemployed noncustodial parents to employment-oriented programs at order establishment, order modification, and order enforcement hearings if an employment program is available, but no funding was included to operate these programs.¹⁰

Employment-oriented programs that generate such large benefits for disadvantaged fathers and their children are uncommon. Given the success of this program, funding this program makes sense. If it is continued, some of the nearly 300,000 noncustodial parents in New York who have no or low reported earnings and owe back support could find work and pay their child support, benefiting them and their children. Parents like Charley could get the break they need, improving their employment situation and connecting with their children.

Notes

1. Author's analysis of the 2010 Current Population Survey, Child Support Supplement.
2. Elaine Sorensen, "Child Support Plays an Increasingly Important Role for Poor Custodial Families." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2010.
3. Department of Health and Human Services. Office of Child Support Enforcement. "Child Support Enforcement FY 2010 Preliminary Report."
4. Rebecca Blank and Heidi Shierholz, "Exploring Gender Differences in Employment and Wage Trends among Less-Skilled Workers," in *Working and Poor*, edited by Rebecca Blank, Sheldon Danziger, and Robert Schoeni (23–58). New York: Russell Sage Foundation. 2006.
5. Elaine Sorensen, "A National Profile of Nonresident Fathers and Their Ability to Pay Child Support." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59(4): 785–97.
6. Elaine Sorensen, Liliana Sousa, and Simone Schaner, "Assessing Child Support Arrears in Nine Large States and the Nation." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2007.
7. Author's analysis of data from the New York Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.
8. Elaine Sorensen and Helen Oliver, "Policy Reforms Are Needed to Increase Child Support from Poor Fathers." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2002.
9. NY Social Services Law § 335-c.
10. A.8952/S.5570 was enacted in 2010. A.7794A/S.4091B was enacted in 2011.

© 2011, The Urban Institute. This brief is funded by the Open Society Foundation under a grant to the Urban Institute. It draws from a series of reports that the Urban Institute completed under contract for the New York Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance as part of the evaluation of the Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative. The Urban Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy research and educational organization that examines the social, economic, and governance problems facing the nation. The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.