

# Child Support Report

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## COMMISSIONER'S VOICE

### Are You Prepared?

Scott Lekan, Commissioner, OCSE



**H**urricanes, flooding, wildfires, mudslides, tornadoes, blizzards, and even a polar vortex have all occurred within the past year, destroying homes, businesses, and lives; and impacting power, connectivity, mail delivery, and other services for a significant time. In this issue we spotlight the U.S. Virgin Islands [Paternity and Child Support Division's](#) experience dealing with hurricanes Irma and Maria. Even if your program isn't located on the coast, a flood plain, or tornado alley, I encourage you to assess how well prepared your agency is to

handle any incident that could severely impact operations. The [Ready.Gov website](#) has information to help you prepare for many types of emergencies.

Within the [Administration for Children and Families](#), there are 13 program offices, and OCSE is one of only five that have mission essential functions. We are working with ACF's [Office of Human Services, Emergency Preparedness, and Response](#) (OHSEPR) to ensure that ACF's and our Continuity of Operations Plans are accurate. We will test the plans later this year during an HHS exercise. In regular meetings with OHSEPR, we are reviewing lessons learned from previous emergency events, some of which may help inform your assessment.



Woman with a Survivor t-shirt, St. Thomas Virgin Islands – Photo courtesy of Flickr user Lorie Shaull

## Preparedness

Communication is essential when services are impacted by an emergency. The telephone tree is no longer going to cut it. You need an emergency notification app that all employees, leaderships, and administrators have downloaded. Child support staff are among the most dedicated professionals, and they will try to get to work, despite possible dangers, unless notified otherwise.

Customer notification is also critical. The demand for services increases proportionally to the severity of the disaster. You must be able to reassure customers, including employers and other partners, that child support services will continue or, if they won't, provide realistic expectations regarding the delays they will experience. At the very least, update your website and customer service number immediately. An emergency notification app that customers can download is also a consideration. Local news media is always an option, although subject to power outage.

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## Analyze this

### How do child support collections vary by case type?

In Fiscal Year 2017, the child support program collected \$28.6 billion on 14.2 million child support cases. On average, agencies collected slightly more than \$2,000 per case.

Find out where your state ranked in the latest Analyze This blog, [2017 IV-D Collections per Case: How Do They Vary by Case Type?](#)

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## Response

Continuity of operations is the desired response to a disaster. To ensure continued service delivery when an emergency event disrupts normal activities, consider the technology updates you can make now. Electronic document imaging and cloud storage can eliminate the volume of paper files. Debit cards and direct deposit can eliminate those remaining paper checks. If your offices or buildings do not yet have wireless connectivity, I strongly encourage you to make that investment. While it won't be an absolute guarantee of redundancy during an emergency, it will increase the likelihood. When combined with a virtual private network, alternative work locations also become an option for continuity of operations. For our part, we keep the Federal Parent Locator Service running no matter what happens. And funding is available and allowable for these preparations as part of your normal operating budget.

Parents who need our services will also be in need of many other services during a disaster. Your response plan can include providing information and resources for parents to access other services. Consider reviewing the resource lists you have today to ensure they include the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#), [American Red Cross](#), and other emergency response services in your community. The [Disaster Distress Helpline](#), operated by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, is available 24/7 with trained crisis counselors at 1-800-985-5990 or by texting TalkWithUs to 66746.

## Recovery

When we see the structural impacts caused by a disaster event, the tangible, physical need to rebuild is obvious. Less visible are the range of losses experienced by families, and even by staff. Those collateral consequences for parents in your caseload can include lost jobs, housing, transportation, child care, or health insurance; and missed payments, arrears accrual, and disrupted parenting time arrangements.

Recovery for them may be solely focused on quickly securing a new source of income. Consider compiling a list of the industries — construction, health care, home repair — that flourish following an emergency event. Go the next step and reach out to those specific companies in your community to make them aware that parents who owe child support may be good temporary hires if there is ever a need. Review your arrears management policies at the same time. Consider the option to delay repayment of arrears for a few months after finding a new job to allow more disposable income for personal disaster recovery, such as car repairs or new housing.

If your agency has weathered a storm, please consider sharing your experience with others by submitting a *Child Support Report* article or convening several colleagues for a conference panel. The child support program's contributions to the economic and emotional well-being of families are more important than ever during a time of crisis.

**Scott Lekan**

## State Systems Symposium

For two days in early February, OCSE's Division of State and Tribal Systems welcomed 120 participants representing 40 states and territories for a systems symposium. Participants enjoyed networking with staff and information technology experts from the other state programs.

Participants heard from Colorado, Ohio, and Utah on their replatforming and refactoring projects and the benefits and challenges they experienced. Maryland's child support director and chief technology officer talked about the MD Think project, which is an enterprise project encompassing all human services domains. Oklahoma shared experiences on how an enterprise system build works for them. North Carolina and Rhode Island talked about why an enterprise-wide system did not work for their states. Overall, the state systems symposium was a huge success!



# Surviving and Working Amid Devastation

Kim Danek, OCSE

In September 2017, several Caribbean islands were hit by back-to-back hurricanes [Irma](#) and [Maria](#), causing a level of devastation that would have been hard to imagine. Stacey Plaskett, U.S. Representative to the Virgin Islands, said at a press conference a year later, “This is the only place in the United States that has been hit by two Category 5 hurricanes — ever — within a 10-day span.”

About 11 months after the hurricanes decimated the area, I sat down with the director of the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Justice, Paternity and Child Support Division, Charlotte Poole-Davis, to hear about what she and her staff went through.

“It’s a year later and the territory is still in a recovery mode, especially our schools, hospitals, and institutional buildings, including federal buildings, such as our post offices and major hotels,” said Poole-Davis at the time. The hurricanes were largely to blame as they rolled through destroying the landscape; ripping apart homes, businesses, and government buildings; and blowing out windows and doors throughout the territory. St. Thomas took the brunt of that destruction. The weather system that stalled over the islands for days afterward delivered the ultimate sucker punch, causing even more damage to the islands, especially St. John. The torrential rain soaked everything — including inside buildings that were missing all or part of their roofs — resulting in water, mold, and mildew damage.

## Damage assessment and repair

The St. Thomas Paternity and Child Support office suffered more physical damage than the St. Croix office; however, telecommunications and connectivity problems affected computer operations at both offices. Downed telephone lines and cell phone towers took months to reconstruct, which caused many businesses to remain closed and hampered their ability to provide necessary services.

After about four weeks, the St. Thomas and St. Croix Paternity and Child Support offices were able to open with the use of generators. Unfortunately, the generators were not able to power air conditioners for all the offices. Some staff used fans to help cool their work areas. Areas of the St. Thomas office required mold remediation and restoration work, so some staff had to relocate to the Justice Department until the work was completed.

## Systems down

There were continuous problems with the internet service and telephone and cable lines. Companies from several states came in to help rebuild the territory’s devastated infrastructure. A defect in the sub-oceanic T-1 cable caused connectivity issues between the islands and consequently affected operations between the St. Thomas and St. Croix Paternity and Child Support offices. To make matters worse,

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St. Croix, US Virgin Islands – Aerial view of the island shows destruction caused when Hurricane Maria touched down on the island in September 2017. Photo by Jocelyn Augustino / FEMA



people had cut lines that were laying across roads, which increased the workload and the timeline to restore phone, cable, and internet services to families and businesses.

Some staff had to remain at the St. Thomas division headquarters, since they couldn't move files and computers. Poole-Davis said, "Fortunately, the computer room housing the servers didn't suffer any damages and was run by its own generator and air conditioners. Luckily, we didn't lose computer data. But we lost the month of September and were only able to resume some of our operations during the month of October."

During the first few months after the storms, the disbursement unit had to perform many of their tasks manually. The staff had to sort, batch, and store the payment checks they received in the mail until the computer system was functional enough to start processing them. They disbursed some payments by hand-generating checks to custodial parents who desperately needed them. They gradually resumed electronic payments as the computer system became available. "I have a lot of respect for Disbursement Manager Gordon Grant and his unit; MIS Manager Christian Frorup; Lans Manager Lorne Penn; mailroom clerk Della Frazer; and one of our lead caseworkers, Denise Evely," said Poole-Davis. "They sacrificed a lot to restore operations at their headquarters after the two devastating hurricanes had ravaged the Virgin Islands, despite the conditions of the facility at that time."

## Basics were gone

"The difference between [Hurricane Hugo in 1989](#) and Irma and Maria, as I recall, Hugo didn't take out the St. Thomas post office." Poole-Davis said the long lines for mail at the post office continued until summer 2018. "When we finally started to get postal deliveries, some of the mail was weeks old and notices were past due, but many of us were glad that the territory's residents were finally getting some communication by mail."

## Lesson learned

The Virgin Islands must get a disaster recovery plan in place, according to Poole-Davis. "Although we didn't lose data, we were unable to bring up the system right away. We will have to have an off-island storage site so the system can be brought up and operational. The thing that held us back in the past was ensuring system security while still having the ability to access it offsite when needed." They are exploring the feasibility of both districts having the ability to connect to their child support computer program independently.

For more information, visit the [U.S. Virgin Islands Paternity and Child Support Division website](#) or contact [info@pcsd.gov.vi](mailto:info@pcsd.gov.vi).

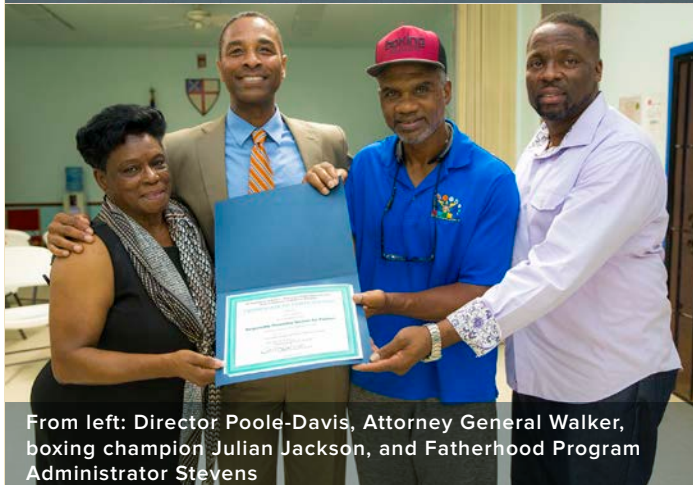
## Training for Dads

In the late summer of 2018, the Access and Visitation Program kicked off their Responsible Parenting sessions. Participants included 10 dads in the St. Croix district and 10 more in the St. Thomas and St. John district. When they completed the program, the staff hosted closing award ceremonies in both locations. "We had some community, public, and government officials relate inspirational stories to the younger people," Poole-Davis said.

One of the speakers was Virgin Islands native [Julian Jackson](#), a former three-time world champion boxer. The only parent Jackson had was his alcoholic mother. He didn't know his father, but another gentleman took interest in Jackson and taught him boxing. The man would sit on the floor and watch cartoons with Jackson, which meant a lot to the young boy because he had no one else. At 18, Jackson learned where his father was and went to find him. All that anger and animosity left him when the senior Jackson told him not to be the type of father he had been. Poole-Davis said Jackson has a wonderful relationship with his children because of his father's advice and could relay that to the audience.



Members of the St. Thomas Fatherhood group with Director Charlotte Poole-Davis (left) and Attorney General Claude Walker (right)



From left: Director Poole-Davis, Attorney General Walker, boxing champion Julian Jackson, and Fatherhood Program Administrator Stevens

## SPOTLIGHT – TEEN DATING VIOLENCE AWARENESS MONTH

# Caseworkers Huddle Up for Child Support Safety

Christina Principe, Program Specialist,  
*Family Violence Prevention and Services  
Program, Family and Youth Services Bureau,  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families*

February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month. Teen dating violence is the physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional aggression within a dating relationship, including stalking. Let's [Huddle Up for Healthy Relationships](#) (the 2019 theme) and raise awareness of this widespread issue facing youth in the United States.

Teens who experience dating violence have an increased risk factor for teen pregnancy. [One issue brief](#) reported that at least 25%, and as many as 80%, of adolescent mothers are in abusive relationships before, during, or after their pregnancies. Parenting in the context of dating violence poses many challenges for the young parent in an abusive relationship. The abuser often compromises a victim or survivor's ability to parent effectively and keep children safe.

## Effects of early exposure

Not only is the abused parent affected by the trauma and violence, but the children are too. Being exposed to dating violence, intimate partner violence, and parenting by young adults can be challenging and have impacts on a child's health, well-being, and development into adulthood. These children are more likely to have lower school achievement, enter the child welfare and correctional systems, drop out of high school, and become teen parents themselves as compared to other children.

In addition to dealing with the abuse and the effects of the abuse on the children, teen survivor parents face other challenges. Many teenage parents lack the financial stability to support a child on their own. [Statistically](#), teenage mothers are more likely to live in poverty and depend on public assistance, than many other young parents. Many parents with current or former abusive partners want to pursue child support if they can do so safely and confidentially. When received, child support is a primary source of income for custodial families and plays a key role in helping families struggling with an abusive relationship.

## Breaking free

When relationships end and there are children in common, applying for child support is often a logical next step for teen parents. The most dangerous time for victims experiencing abuse is when they decide to leave or terminate the relationship. The abuser may feel a sense of losing control. Filing or enforcing a child support or paternity order can trigger more abuse.

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[Reports](#) indicate that 1 in 3 teens in the U.S. has been the victim of physical, sexual, verbal, or emotional abuse by a dating partner. One in 10 teens have reported being hit, slammed into something, or injured with an object or weapon in a dating relationship. In a 2017 [national survey of youth](#), approximately 1 in 15 boys and 1 in 10 girls experienced physical abuse during the 12 months before the survey by someone they were dating. [Statistics](#) show that girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 24 experience the highest rate of intimate partner violence. It is also important to recognize that unhealthy relationships for young people may also include other forms of abuse and warning signs, such as isolation from family and friends, verbal put-downs and emotional abuse, jealousy, and other attempts to exert [power and control](#) in the relationship.

## Helping Men Be Good Dads

There is strong evidence that involved fathers can affect family stability and well-being in general. According to the [National Fatherhood Initiative](#), child support agencies understand involved fathers are important for the financial and emotional well-being of children, but many lack positive parenting role models and don't know what's expected of them to be good dads.

In efforts to prevent dating violence and to teach young people about healthy relationships, fatherhood programs can be a great resource for young men and their children. Many fatherhood programs are recognizing the importance of focusing on healthy relationships and co-parenting with young men. To connect with and make referrals to fatherhood programs in your area, go to the [National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse website](#) for more information.

If they don't relay the history of the abuse to a child support professional, teen parents will be asked to meet child support reporting requirements that could jeopardize their safety. Safety planning around pursuing child support or establishing paternity is important at this stage for teenage parents who are experiencing or have experienced dating violence from their co-parent. Because the child support program serves both parents, it plays a unique role in reducing the risk of violence and helping survivors pursue child support safely. Waivers for Good Cause are sometimes the safest option for a victim of dating or domestic violence. [Safely Pursuing Child Support: A Caseworker Desk Card](#) is a helpful resource for caseworkers.

## Additional resources

In the Family and Youth Services Bureau's [Family Violence Prevention and Services Program](#), we have grantees and programs that work with parents, children, and youth to lay the foundation for healthy relationships and promote safe and responsible behaviors. Our grantees have supported a number of efforts working with fatherhood programs and initiatives to address dating and domestic violence and promote healthy parenting practices. State domestic violence coalitions and tribal programs collaborate with fatherhood programs to share common messages. They focus on engaging boys, men, and especially fathers to reduce incidences of intimate partner violence.

Collaborating with programs that address dating violence, fatherhood, and child welfare can simultaneously reduce violence, build economic resources, increase father involvement, and improve child support outcomes.

By identifying and responding effectively to dating violence and abusive relationships, and developing safe and confidential responses to abuse, child support programs can put the safety of families and program staff at the forefront of child support work. Caseworkers can refer people to several different sites for help anytime:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline: call 1-800-779-7233(SAFE), send a text to 22522, or find someone to chat with on the [website](#)
- National Runaway SAFELINE: call 1-800-786-2929(RUNAWAY) or chat with someone on the [1800runaway.org website](#)
- Love is Respect.Org: call 866-331-9474, text LOVEIS to 22522, or find someone to chat with on the [loveisrespect.org website](#)

*To learn more about other types of violence prevention, visit the Family and Youth Services Bureau [Family Violence and Prevention Services website](#). To learn more about promoting healthy relationships, contact Christina Principe at [Christina.Principe@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:Christina.Principe@acf.hhs.gov).*

## Program Funding Available to Help Incarcerated Parents

The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is accepting applications for the [2019 Addressing the Needs of Incarcerated Parents and Their Minor Children Program](#), which is funded through the Second Chance Act.

This program provides funding to promote and expand services for incarcerated parents and their minor children younger than 18, and helps children of incarcerated parents gain more access to services that support their needs. The program will also provide states and localities with funding to implement positive family engagement strategies and activities that address the needs of incarcerated parents and their minor children. Program activities include developing strategies to increase and enhance communication between the child and their incarcerated parent while maintaining safe facilities, providing transitional reentry services that incorporate a focus on parental responsibility, and supporting the delivery of community-based services to meet the needs of minor children with an incarcerated parent.

Applications are due by April 15. For more information, visit the [funding details webpage](#).

## Electronic Process Helps Collect Past-Due Support

OCSE worked with child support agencies and financial institutions to develop a standardized, electronic process to exchange information about levying accounts to collect past-due support. In 2015, we implemented the Federally Assisted State Transmitted (FAST) Levy program, which allows child support agencies to create levy actions for distribution to multiple financial institutions, and allows financial institutions to receive and respond to levy actions from multiple states – all processed by OCSE.

FAST Levy can decrease your state's budget because it eliminates printing, postage, and handling costs. It can increase your staff's efficiency when trying to collect past-due child support. And it gets money to families faster.

Participation in FAST Levy is voluntary for both child support agencies and financial institutions. JP Morgan Chase is our newest FAST Levy financial partner.

For more information, visit the [FAST Levy Overview webpage](#) or contact OCSE at [FASTLevy@acf.hhs.gov](mailto:FASTLevy@acf.hhs.gov).

## Improving Collections through Noncustodial Employment

Without a job, paying child support is difficult, if not impossible. Over the last several decades, there have been efforts to provide employment services to unemployed noncustodial parents in order to increase collections. In [Information Memorandum 18-02](#), Commissioner Lekan reinforced the importance of work promotion and encouraged states to implement and strengthen employment programs for noncustodial parents. That memo focused on using IV-D incentive funds to support these programs. It's one of several funding mechanisms states are using for these activities. In the [November-December 2018 Child Support Report](#), we launched this series to feature examples of [noncustodial employment efforts in the child support community](#) and to share state successes and lessons learned. In this edition, we're focusing on the North Dakota PRIDE program.

### North Dakota's PRIDE Program Gets Results

Terry Peterson, Assistant Child Support Director for Regional Operations and Quality Assurance; Michelle Gee, Director of Economic Assistance; and Jim Fleming, Director, North Dakota Child Support

North Dakota's Parental Responsibility Initiative for the Development of Employment (PRIDE) program has been operating for more than a decade, and it's still going strong. PRIDE is a collaboration of the North Dakota district courts, the state workforce agency, and two divisions of the North Dakota Department of Human Services — child support and the division that administers the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

#### Program inspiration and background

The idea for PRIDE sprung from conversations between a forward-thinking judge and a local child support office. The judge had served on the bench for many contempt hearings and wanted to have a constructive alternative to sending the parent to jail, since jail usually did not lead to payment of the child support obligation. The judge was interested in focusing on employment through which child support could be secured.

PRIDE's primary purpose is to help parents who owe arrears by providing useful and effective employment assignments to those parents. In 2009, PRIDE expanded statewide due to its success and popularity. This was shortly after PRIDE got national recognition when it received the OCSE Commissioner's Award for Innovative Partnership.

#### Referral processes

Referrals to PRIDE can be either judicial or administrative, and the compliance rate is roughly the same for both. Judges make referrals as a mandatory purge condition in a contempt proceeding. Caseworkers often suggest administrative referrals in lieu of more restrictive enforcement approaches such as seeking a contempt hearing or suspending a license. Since parents need to drive while searching for or going to and from their jobs, caseworkers must consider the interaction of license suspension with the parent's potential participation in PRIDE.

#### Client services and employment obstacles

Upon referral, we immediately place job-ready participants in monitored job search activities. North Dakota modeled PRIDE's client services component after the state's [TANF Job Opportunities and Basic Skills](#) program. It provides case management, job skills improvement, and job placement to help parents obtain or improve their employment situations.

PRIDE case managers try to move participants into full-time employment as quickly as possible. Support services are available as needed to help remove obstacles to gainful employment. When a parent needs training to obtain employment, PRIDE works with other federally-funded employment and training programs, such as those funded by the [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act](#).

Criminal records can be a major obstacle to employment because employers may not take a risk by hiring an employee with a criminal record. We've found that the U.S. Department of Labor's [federal bonding program](#) helps eliminate that barrier to employment. It provides fidelity bonds that protect employers against losses caused by fraudulent or dishonest acts made by the bonded employee.

The combination of services that PRIDE offers provides noncustodial parents who want to work with support and opportunity. In turn, PRIDE provides the courts with an effective tool to assess the willfulness of parents who don't pay.

#### PRIDE increases payments

About 6% of the parents in our child support program who owe arrears participate in PRIDE. For all the obligors referred to PRIDE in the state fiscal year ending June 30, 2017, we found a 34% increase in the amount of child support paid and a 24% increase in the frequency of the child support payments. However, this includes people who were referred but didn't participate.

Looking at individuals that got at least as far as enrolling in PRIDE, for that same period, we found a 43% increase in the amount of child support paid, and a 32% increase in frequency of the payments.

By the very nature of how PRIDE referrals are made, parents participating in PRIDE are often the hardest to collect from, so we view these results as substantial and encouraging.

For more information, contact Director Jim Fleming, [North Dakota Child Support](#), at 701-328-3582.

## PROMISING PRACTICES

# Paycheck Plus NYC: An Expanded EITC Experiment

Gretchen Lehman, OCSE

One of OCSE's responsibilities is sharing promising practices and interesting research with the child support community. In September 2018, the final report for [Paycheck Plus New York City](#) (NYC) was released. One of its key findings was that the experiment increased child support payments. As one of the funders of Paycheck Plus NYC through a [Section 1115 waiver](#), we are excited to share findings that offer an opportunity to increase collections.

## Experiment overview

Paycheck Plus NYC simulated an expanded [earned income tax credit \(EITC\)](#) for individuals without dependent children that they could claim on their taxes, which included some noncustodial parents. The study used an experimental design, meaning that as people enrolled in Paycheck Plus NYC, they were randomly assigned to either the control group or the program group. Of the more than 6,000 adults that enrolled in the study, about 9% were noncustodial parents with open IV-D cases.

To determine its impact, the simulated expanded EITC was only available to the program group so the research team could compare outcomes, such as earnings and child support payments, between the control and program groups. Like actual tax refunds, earnings in one year would determine the bonus amount the participant received early in the following year. Under Paycheck Plus NYC, program group participants had three years of potential bonuses — 2015, 2016, and 2017 — based on their earnings in 2014, 2015, and 2016. The research team did not analyze child support data for 2017, so we do not have outcomes from the period when the final bonuses were received.

## Intercepting bonus refunds

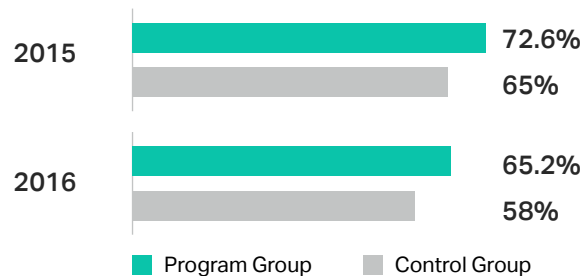
Because the EITC is a refundable tax credit, most people receive it in their annual tax refund. Just like federal tax refunds, officials could intercept the Paycheck Plus NYC bonus funds to pay past-due support. As mentioned in the opening paragraph, this experiment increased child support payments, but the low incidence of intercepts makes it unlikely that intercepted bonus funds was the main reason for this increase. In 2015, about 1 in 5 noncustodial parents had their Paycheck Plus NYC funds intercepted, and in 2016 that fell to 1 in 10. According to the research team, increased employment (which may have led to child support being paid by income withholding) and direct payments from noncustodial parents seemed to combine with the intercepts to produce the overall increase in payments in the program group.

## Payment trends

More parents that received Paycheck Plus bonus funds made child support payments than the parents that did not receive bonus funds. At the same time, between 2015 and 2016, the number of parents that made payments in both groups decreased. The research team indicated that this decrease is due, in part, to some parents' child support cases being closed over the course of the study. The percentage of participating parents who owed monthly support decreased from 93% in 2015 to 88% in 2016.

For additional research findings, see the [Noncustodial Parent Outcomes in Paycheck Plus NYC](#). For information about how the research team conducted the experiment, read [Paycheck Plus — New York City Testing Tax Credit Program in the May 2016 Child Support Report](#).

Percent of Noncustodial Parents That Ever Made a Payment



## Child Support Report

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