

The Effects of Child Support Pass-Through and Disregard Policies

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In the United States single-parent families with children are economically vulnerable, with poverty rates of 36 percent in 2004, compared to 7 percent for husband-wife families with children (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2005). Several programs attempt to address this vulnerability: key federal efforts date back to 1935, with the beginning of the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program, later renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). This program was supported with a mix of federal and state government funding, with states making some decisions (for example on the benefit level) within parameters set by federal policy.

Providing support to single-parent families has often been controversial, however. Some believe that the government should not provide support unless there were no other resources available to the single parent. In the early years of ADC, when most single parents were widows, support from the children's father was not an issue. Instead, mothers' own earnings were the primary alternative resource. But as the caseload increasingly included mothers who were separated or divorced and those who had never been married to the father of their children, the appropriate division of responsibilities between the government and the nonresident parent (typically the father) received more attention.¹ Child support enforcement, motivated in large part by a desire to offset public welfare expenditures, became a formal federal and state responsibility in 1975.

As child support began to be collected for families receiving welfare, a key question emerged: When noncustodial parents pay on behalf of a family receiving public benefits, what should happen to that child support? In this report, we consider a variety of policy approaches to this question and examine the effects of different policies.

¹For ease of exposition, in this report we use "mother" and "custodial parent" interchangeably. While rates of father custody have increased, mothers remain the custodial parent in the vast majority of the cases.

I. POLICY CONTEXT

Policy History

In the child support enforcement legislation of 1975, the federal government provided some financing for states to establish child support agencies. These agencies were to try to establish paternity, institute child support orders, and collect support for single parents. Mothers receiving AFDC were required to cooperate with the agency in securing child support. For welfare participants who already had a child support order, the child support office was charged with collecting the ordered support. Welfare participants were not only required to cooperate with enforcement effort, they were also required to turn over the right to any uncollected support to the government as long as they received benefits.²

The relationship between child support payments and welfare benefits became a more important issue as more child support began to be collected. In the first years, collections were generally kept by the government and used to pay for the administration of the child support program; the child support collected was shared between the federal and state governments in proportion to their share of the costs of AFDC. Because collections were used to offset governmental costs, child support did not make an AFDC participant better off economically, and this was quickly recognized to reduce the incentive for her to cooperate with the agency. Why should mothers (or fathers) cooperate with a system in which their children did not benefit when support is paid? This concern led to implementation of a \$50 disregard—the first \$50 of child support received each month was disregarded in the calculation of AFDC benefits. The disregard policy might be expected to provide an incentive for mothers to cooperate with enforcement (in order to receive additional income of up to \$50 per month) while still allowing child support over \$50 per month to offset state and federal costs of child support enforcement and welfare.

²When participants leave AFDC/TANF, any amount of current child support paid goes to the family. If money toward back support is collected, there are a series of complicated rules about whether collections benefit the family or governments. See Turetsky (2002).

A few states implemented a more generous disregard, designed to compensate for AFDC benefits below the state “standard of need.” In particular, while most states’ AFDC benefit levels matched their established standard of need (the amount that was thought to be needed by a family of a given size), a few states adopted a maximum benefit amount (which might reflect the amount they thought they could afford) that was less than their standard of need. In these states, if child support was paid, it first went to “fill the gap” between the standard of need and the benefit level. Until the gap was filled, a family’s AFDC benefit was not reduced for any child support collected. This resulted in a higher effective disregard level in the “fill the gap” states.³

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) made dramatic changes to income support policies, including child support disregard policy. The AFDC program was overturned and replaced with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), in which each state was free to design its own assistance programs. In keeping with the philosophy of decentralization, each state was free to set the level of child support disregard that it thought most appropriate. Many states quickly ended the disregard, instead retaining all child support paid on behalf of TANF families (and sharing a portion of these collections with the federal government).

Even before TANF, states had freedom in how they administered the disregard and how they handled the mechanics of child support for welfare participants. In some states, participants were given a separate child support check for the amount collected up to \$50 (or up to the gap in fill-the-gap states). In others, no separate child support check was issued, but a participant’s welfare check was increased by the amount collected, again up to \$50. Another policy alternative was to issue the welfare participant a child support check for the entire amount of support collected, and reduce the welfare check dollar-for-dollar after the first \$50. In this report, we refer to the amount of child support received by the custodial parent

³States that have had fill the gap policies during the period covered here include: Maine, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wyoming.

as the “pass-through” and the amount that her total income increases when child support is paid as the “disregard.” While these amounts are typically the same, they need not be. Indeed, after PRWORA, states took very different positions. To illustrate, consider the policies in effect following PRWORA in Minnesota and Wisconsin. In Minnesota, a check for the total amount of child support paid on behalf of a TANF participant went to the family, and the TANF check was then adjusted dollar-for-dollar so that the family was no better off. We consider this a full pass-through with a zero disregard. In Wisconsin, for most families, a check for the total amount of child support collected was sent to the family, and the TANF check was not adjusted. This is a full pass-through and a full disregard.

II. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Some previous research has attempted to estimate the effects of variation in the level of the child support disregard and pass-through. Wisconsin’s full pass-through/disregard policy was subject to an experimental evaluation, the Child Support Demonstration Evaluation (CSDE). Mothers were randomly assigned to either the full pass-through/disregard group (the experimental group) or to receive the first \$50/month or 41 percent of what was paid, whichever amount was greater (the control group). The evaluation of this policy (Meyer and Cancian, 2001) demonstrated that the full pass-through and disregard were associated with increased paternity establishment, increased child support collections, and little additional governmental cost.

When appropriately implemented, experimental evaluations like the CSDE are particularly useful for identifying a precise difference between two alternative programs. Thus, the experimental evaluation generally provides an accurate estimate of the difference between a full pass-through/disregard and a \$50/41 percent pass-through/disregard. But it is difficult to extrapolate these results to a situation in which a state currently has a zero disregard/pass-through (the current policy in most states). What effects might be expected if that state were to move to a full pass-through/disregard? The experimental results are also difficult to apply to states considering an incremental increase in either their pass-through or disregard—if a state currently has a \$50 pass-through/disregard, what might be expected to result if it

changed to a \$100 pass-through/disregard? Finally, the results are difficult to apply to a state that would like to consider a full pass-through without a disregard.

In light of the interest in estimating the effects of a broader range of policy options, there are advantages to nonexperimental evaluations of alternative policies. One approach is to use the variation in pass-through and disregard policy over different periods in different states to see if these different levels are associated with different outcomes. This is the approach we take in this report, examining whether there is a detectable relationship between the generosity of the disregard and pass-through level and such outcomes as paternity establishment and child support collections.

We followed a similar strategy in an earlier report completed as part of the evaluation of Wisconsin's full pass-through and disregard (Cassetty, Cancian, and Meyer, 2002). In that report we contacted each state to ascertain the level of child support disregarded in each state during each year from 1985 to 1998. We then used national data that states report to the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement on the number of paternities established, the number of child support cases with a collection, and the amount collected during each of these years in each state. We compared these three outcome variables with the maximum level of child support that would have been disregarded in that state during that year, using a model with a variety of control variables and state and time fixed effects. We found that the maximum disregard was positively associated with the number of paternities established and the proportion of the AFDC/TANF caseload with a collection. No relationship was found for the average collection among cases with a collection.

In this report, we update and extend that analysis. First, we consider a longer time period post PRWORA, examining data through 2003. This extended time period is important because it includes more observations of outcomes in states and years in which there was a zero pass-through and disregard. Second, we consider the level of the pass-through in place in each state-year, as well as the level of the

disregard. Finally, we use an improved measure of the generosity of the disregard.⁴ In particular, our measure of the generosity of the disregard and pass-through is the amount that would be disregarded and passed through if \$150/month were paid. This is about the average amount collected among the control group in the Wisconsin CSDE in 1999 (Meyer and Cancian, 2001).⁵ We also conduct sensitivity tests to consider the amount that would be passed through and disregarded if \$50, \$100, or \$200/month were paid to see the extent to which our conclusions are robust to alternative specifications.

Several other states have evaluated the results of the pass-through and disregard policies they implemented.⁶ Most of these policies have increased the pass-through without changing the disregard. The earliest test was prior to PRWORA, in Georgia. Georgia experimented with a full pass-through combined with a fill-the-gap disregard, implementing the new policy in selected counties. The evaluation compared outcomes in these counties to outcomes in counties that did not implement the full pass-through. Bergquist and Orr (1993) found greater collections in the counties that did *not* implement the full pass-through; however, differences between the counties that did and did not implement the new policy made the evaluation results difficult to interpret. Vermont also instituted a full pass-through under its welfare reform prior to PRWORA, keeping the \$50 disregard. The increased pass-through was one component of a multi-component welfare reform that was administered as a random-assignment experiment. However, because there were multiple components in the “treatment,” it is difficult to disentangle which results can be attributed specifically to the child support reform. There was no

⁴Our previous analysis used the maximum amount disregarded. There are a number of limitations of this measure. First, a measure capturing the maximum disregard is not well suited to the Wisconsin situation, in which there is no effective maximum disregard. Second, in more generous states the maximum amount does not come into play for very many cases.

⁵In the Current Population Survey–Child Support Supplement of 2001, the average amount reported by mothers who reported receiving TANF and child support was almost \$250 per month (U. S. Census Bureau, 2003). But those not receiving support are likely to be expecting a lower amount than the average, so a lower child support amount seems appropriate.

⁶For a summary of the empirical studies of pass-through and disregard policies, see Wheaton and Russell (2004); for simulations of the effects of selected pass-through and disregard policies, see Wheaton and Sorensen (2005).

difference between the experimental group and control group in child support collections (Scrivener et al., 2002). Connecticut also implemented a full pass-through, but it combined the full pass-through with a \$100/month disregard, again as part of a multi-component welfare reform. The random-assignment evaluation found higher child support receipts, but this may have been a mechanical result of the policy, rather than resulting from increased collections (Bloom et al., 2002)

As mentioned above, Minnesota implemented a full pass-through, zero disregard policy. It implemented the policy statewide and did not have a control group, limiting the ability to separately identify an effect of the policy change (Venohr et al., 2002). The evaluation did not find a change in child support collections over time. One notable finding was that few individuals understood the policy change, which may have limited its effects.

As an alternative to these state-specific evaluations, some studies have examined child support amounts received by individuals in different states and different time periods when child support policies differed (including the child support disregard). An example of this type of study is Sorensen and Hill (2004). They examine data from 1977 through 2001 and find that the \$50 disregard policy was associated with increased child support.⁷

III. RESEARCH APPROACH, DATA, AND METHODS

Based on prior research and theory, what would we expect to be the effects of child support disregard and pass-through policy? In the absence of a disregard, a child support pass-through might be expected to increase the mother's information about the child support paid by the father, but it will have no effect on her current resources. Thus, with an increased pass-through, we might expect mothers to report receiving more child support. Passing through a higher proportion of what is paid may increase the

⁷A limitation of this type of study is that individuals in a state that has no pass-through may report zero child support received, even though an amount was paid on their behalf. Thus, even if a child support policy change was associated with increased collections, it may not be detectable in this type of analysis.

salience of child support to single mothers and may be important in clearly communicating how much child support has been paid. These messages could eventually be associated with increased collections and/or increased cooperation if, for example, mothers anticipated receiving more support when they left welfare. On the other hand, because an increase in the child support pass-through without a disregard will result in the same level of income for the custodial-parent family, there are reasons to expect little change in cooperation with the child support office. To the extent that cooperation is more likely to be motivated by immediate increases in financial resources, the pass-through alone will not serve. In fact, previous research generally finds no effect of increased pass-through policies instituted without disregards.

In contrast, disregards increase the amount of income a family receiving benefits has when child support is paid on its behalf. Consistent with theory and prior research, we would expect that when there are more generous disregards, noncustodial fathers who are motivated to provide for their children would be more willing to pay support, and custodial mothers would be more likely to cooperate with the child support enforcement office. This increased cooperation may lead to increased paternity establishment. Aside from a potential effect on paternity, will increased cooperation lead to increased collections? Some recent research (e.g., Bartfeld and Meyer, 2003) suggests that in states like Wisconsin, the child support collection system has generally become routine for those in the formal employment system.⁸ Noncustodial parents do, however, retain some choices about whether they will participate in the formal employment system (as long as they are willing to face the consequences of nonpayment). Some ethnographic research suggests that noncustodial fathers know that if they pay formal support, it does not generally benefit their children in states with less than a full disregard (see Waller and Plotnick, 2001). If the disregard were increased in these states, we could see some of these fathers move into the formal employment system, which would lead to an increase in the proportion of cases that are paying

⁸New hire reporting combined with immediate wage withholding gives noncustodial parents little control over how much they pay once they are in the formal employment system; their employer merely withholds the amount of their child support order from their wages.

something. Higher disregards might also be expected to increase collections through increased maternal cooperation with the child support system.

In summary, we generally expect higher disregards to be associated with increased paternity establishment and an increasing proportion of the caseload with collections. There is little evidence to date that higher pass-throughs would be associated with increased cooperation or collection, but there is limited prior research on this question.

Data

This research relies on annual state-level data collected by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) on the performance and characteristics of child support programs. While some previous studies have used data self-reported by individuals in the Current Population Survey, the OCSE data have the advantage of allowing us to focus on outcomes for AFDC/TANF cases, rather than the entire child-support-eligible population. Moreover, when mothers report child support data, they generally cannot provide information on the amount of child support paid on their behalf, only on the amount they received. Because we are interested in whether pass-through and disregard policy is related to amounts paid (not merely the amounts received), administrative data are superior to survey data because they provide accurate measures of amounts paid. We also merged annual state economic data, including the female unemployment rate and median income, with the OCSE data so that we would be able to control for the effects of other state-level factors. We contacted each state child support office (or TANF office) to gather information on the level of disregard and pass-through each year from 1990 on.⁹ In most

⁹In our earlier work, we contacted states to ascertain the level of the disregard in place from 1985 to 1998. We intended to update the disregard amounts through 2003, and were able to do so. But our initial attempts to gather the historical record of pass-through levels proved more difficult, so we collected pass-through data beginning in 1990.

analyses we consider information from each state (counting the District of Columbia as a “state”) in each year over a 14-year period (1990–2003). This provides a maximum of 714 state-year observations.¹⁰

Dependent Variables

We consider the effects of disregard and pass-through policy on three dependent variables:

- Proportion of TANF/AFDC cases with child support collections.
- Average amount of child support collected for the TANF/AFDC caseload.
- Proportion of TANF/AFDC cases in which paternity was established.¹¹

Unfortunately, OCSE changed the way the number of cases with a collection was reported in 1999, so for the first variable we have only nine years of data (maximum N=459).

Table 1 shows the over-time variation among our three dependent variables. It shows that while the trend is not always consistent, there has generally been improvement over time in each of the measures. For example, the mean proportion of cases with a collection improves from 14.8 and 14.6 percent in 1990 and 1991 to a high of 16.2 percent in 1996, before declining somewhat in 1998.¹² Table 1 also shows substantial variation across states in each of the variables. For example, considering the ratio

¹⁰As discussed below, we exclude from our base analysis observations for state-years that are major outliers. In particular, we exclude from our analysis of the proportion of cases on TANF with a collection and the proportion of cases on TANF with paternity established: (1) the top and bottom 1 percent of each variable, (2) any case that showed an unsustained change of ten percentage points or more. In other words, state-year observations that were greater (or less) than both the immediately preceding and subsequent year by at least ten percentage points were excluded. Cases that fell (or increased) by ten percentage points or more but remained at the new level were included. For the analysis of the average dollar amount of child support collected on TANF, we excluded: (1) the top and bottom 1 percent of each variable, (2) any case that showed an unsustained change of a factor of two. In other words, state-year observations that were 100 percent more (or 50 percent less) than both the immediately preceding and subsequent year were excluded. Cases that fell or increased by a factor of two and remained at their new level were included.

¹¹Our measure is the number of paternities established in a given year divided by the total number of TANF/AFDC cases.

¹²We note that the figures for support collected are higher than those reported in the CPS-CSS for TANF participants. This may be due to differences in the survey and administrative data sources (for example, reports from TANF participants in the CPS-CSS may reflect recipients reports of child support received (that is passed-through and/or disregarded), or other measurement issues).

Table 1
Distribution of Outcome Measures

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Ratio of TANF/AFDC Cases with Collections														
Mean state	14.8%	14.6%	15.0%	14.9%	15.3%	15.8%	16.2%	15.7%	15.4%					
25 th percentile state	9.8%	11.3%	11.0%	11.2%	11.6%	11.5%	10.4%	10.7%	9.4%					
Median state	13.8%	13.4%	13.5%	13.9%	13.7%	13.9%	14.7%	15.0%	14.2%					
75 th percentile state	17.8%	19.2%	18.3%	19.1%	18.5%	18.3%	19.8%	18.3%	18.7%					
Average Amount of Child Support Collected for the TANF/AFDC Caseload^a														
Mean state	\$549	\$507	\$521	\$504	\$502	\$541	\$589	\$645	\$687	\$801	\$857	\$919	\$978	\$858
25 th percentile state	\$331	\$309	\$351	\$336	\$337	\$315	\$360	\$416	\$480	\$474	\$453	\$427	\$518	\$467
Median state	\$485	\$446	\$458	\$464	\$470	\$483	\$571	\$631	\$600	\$648	\$799	\$716	\$802	\$766
75 th percentile state	\$680	\$678	\$686	\$662	\$614	\$696	\$749	\$797	\$892	\$1,106	\$1,057	\$1,214	\$1,144	\$1,173
Proportion of TANF Cases with Paternity Established														
Mean state	5.5%	5.7%	6.1%	5.9%	5.7%	6.5%	6.7%	6.3%	6.5%	5.4%	5.6%	5.5%	6.7%	6.4%
25 th percentile state	4.4%	4.0%	4.3%	3.7%	4.1%	4.6%	4.7%	4.2%	4.2%	3.5%	3.4%	3.1%	4.0%	3.9%
Median state	5.1%	5.6%	5.6%	5.5%	5.5%	6.0%	6.6%	6.1%	6.6%	5.0%	5.6%	5.2%	6.7%	5.4%
75 th percentile state	6.6%	6.8%	7.1%	7.4%	7.1%	8.7%	8.8%	8.3%	8.4%	6.8%	7.0%	7.0%	9.2%	7.9%

^aAll dollar values were converted to 1999 dollars using the CPI-U.

of cases with collections in 1990, one-fourth the states had scores lower than 9.8 percent and one-fourth had scores higher than 17.8 percent. Our analysis attempts to estimate whether some of this variation is due to differential child support pass-through and disregard policies.

Key Independent Variable

As described above, disregard and pass-through levels have varied across states and over time. Our estimation strategy depends critically on this variation. While most states had a \$50 disregard and pass-through from 1990 through 1996, fill-the-gap states had larger disregards.¹³ The variation in disregard and pass-through policy over time is shown in Appendix Table A. Since 1996, most states have discontinued the disregard; in contrast, Connecticut and Wisconsin increased it. Florida, Minnesota, and Vermont all moved to increased pass-throughs, without necessarily changing the disregard, and a handful of other states, such as Alaska, Kentucky, and Louisiana, maintained some disregard but discontinued their pass-through after 1996. We note that in every year the pass-through and disregard were identical in at least 42 states. In addition, with the exception of the major changes in pass-through and disregard associated with TANF implementation in 1997 and 1998 (when most states eliminated the \$50 pass-through and disregard) only one or two states changed their pass-through or disregard in most years. This limited variation reduces our ability to identify any independent effects of pass-through and disregard policy changes.

We are interested in a measure that reflects the generosity of the pass-through and disregard in place in each state during each period. In this report, we use:

- The total child support amount that would be disregarded given a monthly child support payment of \$150. (This includes both a “fixed” disregard, typically \$50, and any amount that would be

¹³States with waivers to experiment with disregard levels prior to 1996, such as Connecticut, also had divergent pass-through and disregard policies.

disregarded in a fill-the-gap state). We also include sensitivity analyses with the child support disregard given monthly child support payments of \$50, \$100, and \$200.^{14, 15}

- The total child support amount that would be passed through to a welfare participant, given a child support payment of \$150. As in the disregard case, the analyses were also conducted given the pass-through at a range of child support payments, including \$50, \$100, and \$200.

Control Variables

In addition to our primary variables of interest, our analysis includes explanatory variables that measure various aspects of state child support enforcement, based on prior research (see, for example, Cassetty et al., 2002; Freeman and Waldfogel, 2001; Garfinkel and Robins, 1994; Sorensen and Hill 2004; Sorensen and Oliver, 2002). More specifically, we include four measures of the child support policy in place during each state-year, including:

- An indicator variable for whether full federal certification of the state's automated system had been awarded.
- Indicator variables for whether legislation requiring employers to report all "new hires" to a state agency had been implemented and for whether immediate wage withholding legislation had been implemented by the state at least one year prior. Both of these variables should facilitate collections, so we expect them to be associated with both the likelihood of collection and the amount of collections, but not necessarily with paternity establishment.
- Average administrative expenditures of the IV-D child support enforcement program given the caseload in each year/state, 1999 dollars.¹⁶ In general, we expect states that spend more to have more effective programs, although of course it is also possible that states spend more if they recognize that they have weak programs.

We also include three variables to control for economic conditions: the female unemployment rate, median household income, and the AFDC/TANF benefit level for a family of three. Each is

¹⁴For states with low benefit levels, high child support could potentially lead to a family losing AFDC/TANF eligibility. The disregard is relevant for those who remain eligible. This is not a significant concern over this range of disregards.

¹⁵This variable measures only the mechanical effects of an increase in the disregard—the amount of child support that would be received given a fixed child support payment. If the amount of child support that fathers are willing to pay is a function of the disregard, then one might expect to see relatively higher child support payments in high disregard states than in low disregard states.

¹⁶All dollar values are converted to 1999 dollars using the CPI-U.

measured in each state and each year, and all are entered in 1999 dollars.¹⁷ Appendix Table B shows the data for two years, 1990 and 2003.

Basic Model and Sensitivity Tests

This analysis uses variation in state disregard and pass-through policy since 1990 to identify their effects on the proportion of cases with child support collections, average child support collected, and paternity establishment. In this initial analysis, we estimate a linear regression with state and year fixed effects. Changes in the disregard and pass-through following the 1996 welfare reform bill, in addition to variation in disregards preceding 1996 due to fill-the-gap policies, and other variation in the disregard and pass-through potentially allow us to separately identify the effects of the pass-through and disregard.

This approach, while useful as an initial investigation into the effects of the pass-through and disregard on child support variables, has a few limitations. First, the caseload could reasonably be expected to be correlated with the disregard and pass-through. A higher disregard might, for example, encourage women who expect, or have received, substantial child support to participate in AFDC/TANF. On the other hand, a higher disregard and pass-through might motivate fathers to pay more support, allowing more mothers to leave welfare. A second limitation, as discussed above, is the close co-variation of the child support disregard and pass-through. This makes it difficult to estimate the independent contributions of the two policy variables. Furthermore, the limited variation means that our estimates are potentially sensitive to a small number of observations—a problem of particular importance because our measures of historical policy are likely to be imperfect. Changes and ambiguity in reporting requirements also limit our confidence that our measures are appropriately capturing cross-state and over-time variation in child support outcomes.

¹⁷The authors thank Emma Caspar for supervising the collection of data on pass-through levels, and for updating and correcting other policy variables used here. We thank Cynthia Moore, Amber Yancey, and Royce Hudson for related research assistance, and Judith Cassetty, who supervised earlier data collection.

Finally, it is possible that other factors, which happen to be correlated with the pass-through and disregard, account for variation in our dependent variables. As discussed, we attempt to control for key policy and environmental factors. In addition, to confirm our interpretation, we estimate the same regressions on the non-TANF portion of the caseload. There is no reason that pass-through and disregard policy would have contemporaneous direct effects on non-TANF cases. However, this is not an ideal comparison group, since former TANF cases become part of the non-TANF caseload and the drastic TANF caseload reduction could lead to large changes in unobservable variables within the groups over time.

IV. RESULTS

Disregard and Pass-Through

Table 2 presents estimates from our main model, which includes the disregard and pass-through associated with a \$150 child support payment. Tables 3 and 4 summarize the results of our sensitivity tests using alternative measures of the disregard and pass-through. Our base model (Table 2), shows that higher child support disregards are associated with increased paternity establishment. This result is robust to alternative measures of the disregard, as shown in Table 3. In our base model there is no statistically significant relationship between the disregard and either of the other outcomes. However, as shown in Table 3, there is a significant positive relationship with the proportion of cases with collections when we measure the effective disregard associated with a \$50 or \$100 payment.

Increasing the disregard improves incentives for mothers on welfare to cooperate with paternity establishment, since the mother has higher income when child support payments are made. While the magnitude of the coefficient is rather small and caseloads have fallen dramatically, roughly 2 million women remain on TANF nationwide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Family Assistance, 2004); this small increase in the percentage of paternity establishment therefore represents a significant number of cases.

Table 2
Child Support Outcomes: Models with Disregard and Pass-Through Given a \$150 Payment

Independent Variables	IV-A Cases with Collections/IV-A Caseload		IV-A Total Child Support Collections/IV-A Caseload		Paternities Established/IV-A Caseload	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Disregard Given Child Support Payment of \$150	.00016	.00017	-.321	.653	.00016	.00007
Pass-Through Given Child Support Payment of \$150	-.00017	.00019	-.082	.697	-.00014	.00005
Certification	-.00720	.00834	128.580	43.362	-.00067	.00363
New Hire	.00539	.00655	<i>-78.742</i>	41.705	.00261	.00311
Immediate Wage Withholding	.01717	.01108	-6.774	46.334	.01377	.00519
IV-D Program Expenditures	.00007	.00005	1.010	.246	.00006	.00002
Welfare Benefit for Family of Three	-.00006	.00009	.276	.537	-.00007	.00002
Female Unemployment Rate	-.0066	.00264	-17.816	16.604	-.00499	.00119
Median Income (in thousands)	-.0043	.0014	-15.449	6.909	-.00042	.00052

*Italics indicate that the coefficient is significant at .10 level. Bold indicates significance at .05 level.

Table 3
Sensitivity Tests: Disregard Coefficient

Model Specification	IV-A Cases with Collections/IV-A Caseload		IV-A Total Child Support Collections/IV-A Caseload		Paternities Established/IV-A Caseload	
	Disregard Coefficient	SE	Disregard Coefficient	SE	Disregard Coefficient	SE
Base Model (effective disregard \$150 child support)	.00016	.00017	-.3206	.6527	.00016	.00007
Alternative Measures of Disregard						
Effective disregard \$50 child support	.00077	.00028	-1.4038	1.3785	.00021	.00011
Effective disregard \$100 child support	<i>.00042</i>	.00024	-1.6665	1.1301	.00020	.00009
Effective disregard \$200 child support	-.00001	.00011	.1661	.4212	.00013	.00006
Base Model with Outliers Included	.00060	.00039	-.397	.7021	.00022	.00008
Base Model for Non-TANF/AFDC Caseload	-.00046	.00097	-.711	.7170	-.00003	.00013

*Italics indicate that the coefficient is significant at .10 level. Bold indicates significance at .05 level.

Surprisingly, larger pass-throughs are associated with a lower likelihood of paternity establishment in our main model (Table 2) and in estimates using most alternative measures of the pass-through (Table 4). There is no discernible relationship between the pass-through and the other outcome measures in our base model, though there is a negative relationship between the pass-through and the proportion of cases with collections in one of the three alternative specifications of the pass-through variable (Table 4).

We expected that the child support disregard would have a larger effect than the pass-through, since the disregard affects the mother's total income, while the pass-through only affects the composition of mother's income between welfare and child support. However, we did not expect negative effects of the pass-through. Given the limited variation in the pass-through and disregard amounts across states and over time (see Appendix Table A), and the consequent difficulty of identifying separate effects, these results should be interpreted with caution.

In addition to examining a range of possible child support payments (from \$50 to \$200), we report two other sets of sensitivity tests in Tables 3 and 4. The penultimate row in each table shows the results of our base model without the exclusion of observations we classify as outliers (see footnote 10 for details). The results are similar to those reported for the base model with outliers excluded, though in the case of the pass-through the negative coefficient for cases with collections becomes marginally significant, while the coefficient for paternity establishment is no longer significant.

The final rows in Tables 3 and 4 report estimates of our base model for the non-TANF (or non-AFDC) portion of the IV-D caseload as an additional sensitivity test. We expect to see no (or smaller) effects for this group, since disregard and pass-through policy primarily affect the population on welfare. As seen in the last row of Table 3, we find no statistically significant relationships between the disregard and any of our outcomes for the non-TANF caseload. We find no significant relationship between the

Table 4
Sensitivity Tests: Pass-Through Coefficient

Model Specification	IV-A Cases with Collections/IV-A Caseload		IV-A Total Child Support Collections/IV-A Caseload		Paternities Established/IV-A Caseload	
	Pass-Through Coefficient	SE	Pass-Through Coefficient	SE	Pass-Through Coefficient	SE
Base Model (effective pass-through \$150 child support)	-0.0017	.00019	-.08183	.6973	-.00014	.00005
Alternative Measures of Pass-Through						
Effective pass-through \$50 child support	-.00061	.00027	1.2696	1.4505	-.00015	.00011
Effective pass-through \$100 child support	-.00037	.00026	.94400	1.1778	-.00017	.00007
Effective pass-through \$200 child support	-.00003	.00012	-.33820	.4746	-.00011	.00004
Base Model with Outliers Included	<i>-.00072</i>	.00041	-.54742	.7364	-.00007	.00007
Base Model for Non-TANF/AFDC Caseload	-.00034	.00097	<i>-1.0397</i>	.6055	.00019	.00021

*Italics indicate that the coefficient is significant at .10 level. Bold indicates significance at .05 level.

pass-through and most outcomes, though we do estimate a marginally significant *negative* relationship between the pass-through and total collections.¹⁸

Other Independent Variables

Returning to our base model in Table 2, we find a number of significant relationships between the child support policy variables and our outcomes. However, many of the relationships are not consistent across outcomes. Certification, immediate wage withholding, and IV-D program expenditures each have the expected positive relationship with the outcomes when a statistically significant relationship is estimated. However, the results are only significant for one or two outcomes in each case. For the New Hires directory, we actually find a negative and significant relationship with total collections, and no relationship with other outcomes.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The child support enforcement system has multiple, sometimes competing, goals. On the one hand, establishing paternity, ordering child support, and encouraging regular payments should provide economically vulnerable single-parent families with an important source of income. This income has the potential to reduce children's economic deprivation. Child support may also reduce the costs of public assistance. If child support provides sufficient income to help a single parent become self-sufficient—perhaps by packaging child support with own earnings and other work-related supports—child support

¹⁸We also estimated the base model excluding state and year fixed effects. These results are available from the authors. The effects of the disregard were similar without fixed effects, except the relationship with average collections became positive, and generally significant. In addition there were some changes in significance levels such that the relationship between the disregard and the proportion of cases with collections was consistently positive and generally statistically significant and the relationship with paternity establishment was consistently positive, but in some cases not significant at conventional levels. For the pass-through the negative (and significant) relationship between the pass-through and paternity establishment became insignificant (and the sign of the estimated coefficients was consistently positive), while the negative relationship between the pass-through and the average support collected was statistically significant in one case (and marginally significant in another).

may (indirectly) reduce reliance on, and the costs of, welfare. On the other hand, child support paid on behalf of families receiving public assistance can directly reduce the immediate costs of public assistance if it is retained by the government rather than passed through to the family and disregarded in the calculation of benefits.

The costs and benefits of retaining, or passing-through and disregarding, child support depend in part on the effects of pass-through and disregard policy on paternity establishment and the payment of child support. A policy of disregarding at least some child support has been promoted in large part as an incentive for parents to cooperate with the child support enforcement system. Especially in the context of time-limited welfare benefits, there are reasons to believe that the long-term benefits in improved paternity establishment and child support payment patterns would more than compensate for the shorter-term loss of any child support retained by government while the family received welfare. The experimental components of the CSDE suggested positive effects of the full pass-through and disregard in Wisconsin. But, as discussed above, there are a number of reasons to turn to the nonexperimental approach used here.

The CSDE experiment tested a single policy alternative: a full pass-through and disregard. A key reason to pursue a nonexperimental evaluation is the interest in other policy alternatives. In particular, while a disregard has immediate costs, a pass-through without a disregard does not increase government costs (of course it also does not increase families' incomes). If the positive behavioral effects associated with the disregard would also follow from a pass-through, a full (or partial) pass-through might be a preferred option—especially for states not willing or able to finance a disregard.

Our results suggest that a pass-through without a disregard is unlikely to yield the same benefits as a pass-through with a disregard. The results of this analysis with regard to the disregard are generally consistent with the findings of previous experimental and nonexperimental research. Our base model shows that higher child support disregards are associated with increased paternity establishment and models using two the four ways to measure the disregard show a positive relationship between the

disregard and the likelihood of collection. Because the pass-through does not have any effect on the family's total income, we did not expect to find a relationship between the pass-through and our outcome measures. We found no positive relationships, but we found evidence of a negative relationship between the pass-through and paternity establishment. While the lack of a positive relationship is not surprising, we acknowledge that the co-variation of pass-through and disregard amounts substantially limits our ability to detect separate effects. More research is needed to determine whether the lack of measured relationship (and negative relationship) is simply due to the limitations of a nonexperimental design.

Appendix Table A
Number of States with Various Disregard and Pass-Through Levels

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Disregard=0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	21	26	26	27	27	27	28
50>=disregard>0	45	44	44	44	43	43	43	21	17	17	17	17	18	18
Disregard>50	6	7	7	7	8	8	8	9	8	8	7	7	6	5
Change in disregard from previous year	-	4	2	2	2	1	2	27	8	3	5	2	3	3
Pass-through=disregard	45	44	44	44	43	43	43	42	44	43	44	43	43	43
Pass-through>disregard	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	3	2	2
Pass-through<disregard	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	5	5	6	6
Change in Pass-through from previous year	-	0	0	0	1	0	0	27	6	1	2	1	1	1

*Fifty states and the District of Columbia are considered.

**Appendix Table B
Data for 1990 and 2003**

	Given Child Support Payment of \$150		Certification*	New Hire	Immediate Withholding	IV-D Expenditures	Welfare Benefit Family of 3	Female Unemployment Rate	Median Income 89-90
	Pass-Through	Disregard							
1990									
Alabama	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	23,802,025	118	7.6	28,554
Alaska	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	6,463,709	846	6.8	48,170
Arizona	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	18,743,724	293	4.9	36,989
Arkansas	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	9,284,106	204	7.5	28,296
California	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	201,822,530	694	5.6	42,454
Colorado	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	14,042,937	356	5.7	36,783
Connecticut	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	27,134,608	649	4.1	52,054
Delaware	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	6,448,291	333	4.7	40,286
DC	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	7,629,860	409	6	34,664
Florida	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	66,444,755	294	6.5	33,785
Georgia	\$50	\$150	0	0	1	36,926,810	273	6	35,288
Hawaii	\$50	\$50	0	1	1	7,597,567	602	2.3	47,297
Idaho	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	5,697,465	317	6	31,984
Illinois	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	52,072,759	367	6.2	40,864
Indiana	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	15,642,993	288	5.7	33,813
Iowa	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	14,226,870	410	4.1	34,279
Kansas	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	16,289,655	409	4.4	36,311
Kentucky	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	23,518,766	228	5.9	30,755
Louisiana	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	19,408,184	190	6.4	28,997
Maine	\$50	\$150	0	0	1	9,350,919	453	4.8	35,674
Maryland	\$50	\$50	0	0	0	39,805,037	396	5.2	47,902
Massachusetts	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	46,587,235	539	5.5	46,321
Michigan	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	82,380,055	546	6.9	38,895
Minnesota	\$50	\$50	0	0	0	38,946,864	532	4.2	39,460
Mississippi	\$50	\$150	0	0	1	19,551,028	120	9.3	25,673
Missouri	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	27,577,002	289	5.1	34,459
Montana	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	3,222,857	359	5.5	30,148
Nebraska	\$50	\$50	0	0	0	11,698,347	364	2.3	34,436
Nevada	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	7,654,046	330	4.9	39,253
New Hampshire	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	5,557,951	506	5.3	50,113

(table continues)

Appendix Table B, continued

	Given Child Support Payment of \$150		Certification*	New Hire	Immediate Withholding	IV-D Expenditures	Welfare Benefit Family of 3	Female Unemployment Rate	Median Income 89-90
	Pass-Through	Disregard							
New Jersey	\$50	\$50							
New Mexico	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	7,212,979	264	6.2	30,469
New York	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	146,467,522	703	4.8	40,400
North Carolina	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	37,868,051	272	4.7	33,774
North Dakota	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	2,879,179	386	3.6	32,336
Ohio	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	67,891,146	334	5.4	37,790
Oklahoma	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	14,072,731	325	5.6	30,761
Oregon	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	17,456,925	432	6	37,010
Pennsylvania	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	70,541,816	421	5.1	36,943
Rhode Island	\$50	\$50	0	0	0	7,944,832	543	6.5	39,733
South Carolina	\$50	\$150	0	0	1	20,126,589	206	4.6	33,560
South Dakota	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	2,784,843	377	3.7	31,167
Tennessee	\$50	\$150	0	0	1	16,708,698	184	5.5	28,949
Texas	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	68,709,461	184	6.7	34,616
Utah	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	12,317,141	387	4.5	38,985
Vermont	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	2,588,368	662	4.5	39,961
Virginia	\$50	\$81	0	0	1	47,060,608	354	4.3	44,295
Washington	\$50	\$50	0	1	1	56,188,992	501	5.1	41,031
West Virginia	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	7,869,094	249	8	28,052
Wisconsin	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	41,906,176	517	4	38,292
Wyoming	\$50	\$50	0	0	1	2,120,690	360	5.5	37,773

(table continues)

Appendix Table B, continued

	Given Child Support Payment of \$150		Certification*	New Hire	Immediate Withholding	IV-D Expenditures	Welfare Benefit Family of 3	Female Unemployment Rate	Median Income 02-03
	Pass-Through	Disregard							
2003									
Alabama	\$50	\$0	2	1	1	64,233,813	215	6.3	37,860
Alaska	\$50	\$50	2	1	1	21,682,477	923	6.6	52,910
Arkansas	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	47,676,023	204	5.9	32,565
California	\$50	\$50	0	1	1	972,416,111	679	6.4	48,912
Colorado	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	72,067,723	356	5.8	49,670
Connecticut	\$0	\$50	2	1	1	59,275,853	636	4.8	54,788
Delaware	\$50	\$50	1	1	1	22,899,696	338	4.5	49,903
DC	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	24,481,801	379	6.7	42,505
Florida	\$0	\$0	1	1	1	230,616,251	303	5.5	38,934
Georgia	\$0	\$50	2	1	1	114,088,857	280	4.4	43,180
Hawaii	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	16,076,982	570	3.9	50,110
Idaho	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	19,868,113	309	4.9	40,476
Illinois	\$50	\$50	1	1	1	191,741,466	396	5.7	44,421
Indiana	\$0	\$0	3	1	1	54,842,575	288	4.4	42,206
Iowa	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	51,434,609	426	4.1	41,687
Kansas	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	50,083,945	429	5.3	43,914
Kentucky	\$0	\$50	1	1	1	60,998,713	262	5.7	37,270
Louisiana	\$0	\$0	1	1	1	57,084,130	240	6.1	34,147
Maine	\$50	\$150	2	1	1	20,634,465	485	4.1	37,405
Maryland	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	97,134,343	473	4.5	55,007
Massachusetts	\$50	\$50	1	1	1	81,756,096	618	5.2	50,976
Michigan	\$50	\$50	2	1	1	297,044,266	489	6.4	44,358
Minnesota	\$150	\$0	3	1	1	142,542,751	532	4.1	54,348
Mississippi	\$0	\$0	1	1	1	24,643,581	170	6.7	32,159
Missouri	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	92,119,226	292	5.5	43,759
Montana	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	14,368,225	507	4.3	34,871
Nebraska	\$0	\$0	1	1	1	47,362,837	364	3.8	43,875
Nevada	\$0	\$0	3	1	1	39,823,537	348	5.5	45,586
New Hampshire	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	18,125,076	625	4.1	56,078
New Jersey	\$50	\$50	1	1	1	170,238,325	424	5.6	55,932
New Mexico	\$50	\$50	2	1	1	42,850,806	389	6.2	35,687

(table continues)

Appendix Table B, continued

	Given Child Support Payment of \$150		Certification*	New Hire	Immediate Withholding	IV-D Expenditures	Welfare Benefit Family of 3	Female Unemployment Rate	Median Income 02–03
	Pass-Through	Disregard							
New York	\$50	\$50	1	1	1	287,129,649	577	6.1	42,858
North Carolina	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	107,657,065	272	6.5	37,315
North Dakota	\$0	\$0	3	1	1	11,645,878	477	2.7	38,720
Ohio	\$0	\$0	1	1	1	335,322,308	373	5.8	43,591
Oklahoma	\$0	\$0	3	1	1	50,470,419	292	5.5	36,598
Oregon	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	52,874,073	460	6.8	42,199
Pennsylvania	\$50	\$50	3	1	1	205,750,237	421	5.1	43,202
Rhode Island	\$50	\$50	2	1	1	12,325,753	554	4.9	44,050
South Carolina	\$0	\$150	0	1	1	38,731,071	205	6.9	38,579
South Dakota	\$0	\$0	1	1	1	7,495,613	483	3.2	39,131
Tennessee	\$0	\$150	1	1	1	69,969,809	185	6.2	37,701
Texas	\$50	\$50	2	1	1	288,660,594	201	6.6	40,170
Utah	\$0	\$0	1	1	1	35,663,343	474	5.4	49,116
Vermont	\$150	\$50	1	1	1	11,853,275	664	4.2	43,623
Virginia	\$50	\$50	3	1	1	79,061,476	389	4	52,776
Washington	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	140,225,984	546	6.8	46,863
West Virginia	\$25	\$25	2	1	1	36,674,530	453	5.7	31,397
Wisconsin	\$150	\$150	2	1	1	100,556,292	673	4.8	46,612
Wyoming	\$0	\$0	2	1	1	9,399,650	340	3.9	41,614

* 0 = no certification; 1 = partial certification; 2 = full certification; 3 = PRWORA certification

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