

**Selected Child Support Administrative Enforcement Tools:  
How Are They Used in Wisconsin?  
Summary**

Over the past twenty years the child support system has undergone significant changes, fueled partly by state efforts to increase collections and partly by new requirements set by the federal government. Among these changes is an expanded set of tools designed to improve the enforcement of child support orders. The authors of this paper interviewed local officials and analyzed administrative data from the Wisconsin child support information system (known as KIDS) to better understand how the new techniques are implemented by county child support agencies and whether they contribute to increased child support collections.

Officials in four county child support agencies (Chippewa, Eau Claire, Racine, and Winnebago) were interviewed to determine how county staff make decisions about what enforcement actions to take and when to act. The four counties exhibited marked differences in organization of the enforcement process, many of which appeared to stem from differences in such factors as access to court time and relationship with other county agencies. In two counties staff members worked as teams and in the other two they worked as individuals. Similarly, in two counties they were specialists in particular enforcement actions and in two they were generalists who performed many different types of actions.

Officials in all counties reported that they rely primarily on notification from KIDS to identify cases with delinquencies, but that other information sources are also important in prioritizing cases. In some counties, workers are given broad discretion to determine what cases should receive greater attention; other counties attempt to allocate scarce staff resources by implementing standards for triggering worker action. All counties reported that contacts with custodial parents and employers were important triggers.

To examine particular types of enforcement actions, the authors selected two samples of child support cases from KIDS: those with orders first established in 1997 and those with orders first established in 2000. For each order, a record of payments and enforcement actions through December 2002 was created. Cases identified as delinquent in paying child support were those in which arrears exceeded the amount of one month's order. Paternity cases and cases with only one child were more likely to have delinquencies than were divorce cases and cases with two or more children. Cases in Milwaukee County were more likely to have delinquencies than cases elsewhere in the state, and cases in which the mother was black were more likely to have delinquencies than cases in which the mother was white or of another race.

Over time, child support collections have improved: the proportion of obligors who pay nothing or pay only part of what they owe has declined, and the proportion of obligors who pay all of what they owe has increased. However, greater rates of noncompliance occurred among cases with orders first established in 2000, as compared to cases with orders first established in 1997.

Some enforcement actions—alternative payment plans, criminal nonsupport actions, and driver license revocations—were used too infrequently to be analyzed. Analysis thus focused on three types of enforcement tools: enforcement letters, contempt hearings, and Notice of Lien and Credit Bureau Reporting. Beginning in 2000, the use of these and other enforcement actions increased substantially, coinciding with increased availability of such things as use of administrative liens and denial of professional, recreational, and driver licenses. About one third of cases with arrears lower than the threshold for administering liens received at least some form of enforcement action, suggesting that county agencies are attempting to enforce cases before the arrears become large.

An event history-model was used to analyze those enforcement actions that were associated with payment of support among cases in which no payment was made for at least two months after an order was established. The most effective method of initiating payment was through wage withholding. Among other enforcement techniques, nonpayers in the 2000 sample who received an enforcement letter were, on average, about 1.3 times more likely to pay than nonpayers who did not receive a letter. In both samples, the use of a contempt hearing was effective: noncustodial parents in the 2000 sample were about 1.7 times more likely to begin paying after a contempt hearing than those who did not have a contempt hearing, and in the 1997 sample, those with hearings were almost twice as likely to begin paying as those without hearings. In the 1997 sample, fathers in paternity cases were somewhat less likely to begin paying than were fathers in divorce cases. This difference disappeared in the 2000 sample. Fathers in cases in which the mother was black were less likely to begin paying than in cases in which the mothers were of other races.