

**Interactions of the Child Support and Child Welfare Systems:  
Child Support Referral for Families Served by the Child Welfare System**

**Final Report**

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## **Interactions of the Child Support and Child Welfare Systems: Child Support Referral for Families Served by the Child Welfare System**

### INTRODUCTION

Many families served by the child welfare services system are also served by the child support system, but there has been very limited research or analysis addressing the interactions between these systems and the implications for dually served families. In part, this reflects important differences in the purpose, structure, and funding of these programs, as well as technical challenges associated with merging and jointly analyzing administrative data from these two systems. These challenges are mirrored in divisions in the research literature and data resources, which have also limited research and evaluation that considers child welfare and child support interactions. This report is part of a series of analyses that aim to begin to address these limitations, and analyze outcomes for families in Wisconsin who interact with both the child welfare and child support systems. In particular, here we consider the association between child support and child welfare involvement for families with children in an out-of-home placement (OHP), focusing on the relationship between child support and time to permanency.

Families coming into contact with the child protective services system are also frequently served by the child support system.<sup>1</sup> Two distinct factors account for the high probability of families' dual participation in these systems. First, children living in single-parent families are overrepresented in the child welfare system (Sedlak and Broadhurst, 1996; Sedlak et al., 2010). Since these children live apart from one of their parents, usually their father, they are generally demographically eligible for child support services. Second, federal and state policies call for parents whose children are placed in substitute care to be referred to child support enforcement so that parents may offset some of the costs of substitute care. Child support initially ordered from nonresident to resident parents may be redirected to offset substitute care costs. And, new orders may be established for pre-placement resident and nonresident

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<sup>1</sup>For an analysis of multiple program participation patterns in Wisconsin, including participation in the child support enforcement system and the child welfare system, see Cancian and Han (2010).

parents to cover the costs of care.<sup>2</sup> We are particularly interested in the frequency and consequences of referrals to child support among parents whose children are in an out-of-home placement (that is, pre-placement resident parents). However, especially given recent federal focus on related policy, we also consider the redirection of child support paid by nonresident parents from formerly resident parents to offset substitute care costs when children are placed out of home.<sup>3</sup>

The potential effects of child support payments on parents and families that include children in an OHP vary depending on who is making a payment and where the payment is directed. Consider the situation for our sample, in which the mother is the pre-placement resident parent and the father(s) is nonresident; the redirection of support initially ordered from father(s) to mother, as well as any new order for payments from the mother, are both designed to offset OHP costs. They can also be expected to reduce the economic resources available to the mother. To the extent that poverty or other resource limitations contributed to the initial OHP (see Yang, 2010, for a review), reducing resources in this way may increase barriers to reunification and permanency. In contrast, if families engaged in child welfare services also receive child support services that lead to new orders that may benefit the mother, the potential additional resources may facilitate economic stability and therefore speed reunification and permanency. In addition to these indirect effects on permanency through economic stability, a direct economic incentive for these parents to work towards more rapid reunification may result from charging parents for the costs of care.

As detailed below, our goal in this paper is first to document the patterns of child support orders and payments for families with children in an OHP. We consider the frequency of orders and payments from nonresident parents to resident parents before an OHP, and while the children are in substitute care. We also consider child support orders and payments for nonresident parents and pre-placement resident

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<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of policy related to referral of families with children in OHP to child support enforcement, see Chellew et al., 2012.

<sup>3</sup>*Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System* and the lead article by Vicki Turetsky (2009), Commissioner of the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement.

parents, to offset the costs of substitute care. We document the relationship between child support orders and the time to reunification. Finally, we evaluate the hypothesis that establishing a child support order to offset costs may delay reunification and increase time in an OHP.

## DATA AND METHODS

We use Wisconsin administrative data from the child welfare system, the Wisconsin Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (WiSACWIS), to identify families with children who are removed from their parent's (or parents') care and placed out of home. Our sample begins with all mothers in Wisconsin who had a child removed and placed in an OHP in a two-year period between July of 2004 and June of 2006 ( $N = 9,024$ ). We further restrict our sample to mothers with at least one child age 14 or less, who is therefore at risk for OHP for 48 months ( $n = 7,718$ ). For the initial descriptive analysis we focus on families in which the children transition to permanency (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other) within 48 months ( $n = 7,243$ ), though we include those who transition after 48 months in our multivariate analysis.

We analyze the first observed "spell" of OHP that starts after June 2004. We count a mother as entering a spell when any child is removed (that is, when she becomes a mother with at least one child in an OHP), and we count her as exiting the spell when all her known children achieve permanency (that is, when she returns to being a mother with no children in a temporary OHP, even if some children have been adopted or are in another permanent placement other than reunification). The appendix provides additional detail on the construction of the sample.

Drawing on data from WiSACWIS and from the child support administrative data system (KIDS), we aim to identify the family's living arrangements at the time of the first placement. Understanding family structure, particularly whether either or both the mother and the father are living with the children at the time of initial placement (that is, whether they are resident or nonresident parents), is important to our analysis. But, it is difficult to derive reliable estimates based on WiSACWIS

records. KIDS records are also limited, and are not available for most of those without child support orders. As described in the appendix, we aim to distinguish families in which:

- all the mother's children were living with her, and not with their father, at the start of the spell;
- all the mother's children were living with her, and all or some were also living with their father;
- some of the mother's children were living with her, but not all; some children may also be living with their father; and
- none of the mother's children were living with her at the start of an OHP; they may or may not have been with their father.

In this report we focus our analysis on the first, and most common, group. We further restrict the sample to those with at least one father identified in our administrative data. This results in a final focal sample of 2,857 resident mothers who experienced a spell with at least one child in an OHP during the period, and had no co-residing fathers at the time of initial placement.<sup>4</sup>

We begin by documenting child support outcomes for these families involved in the child protective services system. We compare outcomes in the month prior to the start of the OHP spell and during the OHP spell. We consider whether there is child support owed and paid by the nonresident father(s) of the mother's child(ren), and whether that support is owed and paid to the mother, or to the government to offset OHP costs. We also document orders and payments from the pre-placement resident mother to the government to offset OHP costs. In the case of nonresident fathers, orders to pay support to offset the costs of an OHP may be the result of existing orders being redirected from the resident mother to the government. In the case of pre-placement resident mothers, orders to pay child support to offset the costs of an OHP are typically new.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>These 2,857 mothers have had 9,969 children with 5,765 separately identified fathers (fewer than 100 fathers have children with more than one of the mothers in our sample).

<sup>5</sup>When a child is in an OHP, a new case is created but the child oftentimes remains active in the original (root) case. As we understand it, there is no requirement to inactivate the original case or indicate whether a child is still at home or emancipated. Moreover, in some cases some, but not all, of the children covered by a child support order will be removed to an OHP. Another complication results from the high proportion (over 60 percent) of mothers in our sample who have had children with multiple fathers. In these cases one (or more) father's children may be in an OHP, while another father's children remain with the mother. We are in the process of investigating KIDS data to better understand the status and consequences of orders during OHP.

We analyze how these orders and payments vary by child support history (whether there are pre-placement orders), as well as by the economic status (father's earnings, mother's earnings) and demographic characteristics (father's age, mother's age, mother's race, whether the mother has children with more than one father). Our primary focus is on child support owed and paid before and during an OHP for our sample of mother-only families. However, we also provide summary information on child support paid to offset substitute care costs for families with other living arrangements at placement.

We also consider evidence of the potential effect of child support system interactions for child welfare outcomes. Because referrals to child support may depend on characteristics that are also associated with later outcomes, it is challenging to identify any causal effects. For example, as detailed below, we find that children of parents who are ordered to pay support are more likely to be in an OHP for a longer period. It could be that the child support order increased the barriers to reunification. Alternatively, it could be that the order is the result of the longer period in substitute care. In particular, if the longer placement was anticipated based on the reasons for removal, that may have motivated the referral and pursuit of an order. Moreover, the longer placement provides more time for an order to be established. With this in mind, we use county-level variation in order probabilities to try to identify the causal effect. We discuss the estimation strategy and results below.

## RESULTS

### Child Support Orders and Payments before and during an Out-of-Home-Placement

To analyze patterns of child support obligations and payments, we first divide our sample according to the living situation of the children prior to the first observed OHP. The most common situation is a mother living with all her known children, with no father in the home (N = 2,857). The first panel of Table 1 shows the proportion of these cases (that is, mothers) in which the father(s) or mother owes child support, comparing outcomes before and during the observed spell of OHP. The first two columns show the percentage of nonresident fathers with an order to pay support to the resident mother

and to offset OHP costs.<sup>6</sup> The final column reports the percentage of mothers with an order to pay support to offset OHP costs.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1: Child Support Orders for Current Support Before and During Out-of-Home Placements**

	Owed by Fathers to Mother	Owed by Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Owed by Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
<b>Any Support Ordered</b>			
In month prior to the OHP	47%	6%	3%
During the OHP	51	34	21
<b>Mean Support Ordered</b>			
In month prior to the OHP	\$179	\$13	\$6
During the OHP	131	64	26
<b>Mean Support Ordered if Positive</b>			
In month prior to the OHP	\$377	\$230	\$185
During the OHP	305	225	172

*Note:*  $N = 2,857$ . Sample: Mothers in Wisconsin with (1) no children in an OHP in June 2004; (2) at least one child entering an OHP between July 2004 and June 2008; (3) all children transitioning to permanency (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other) within 48 months; (4) all mother's children live with her, and not with their father, at start of the OHP spell; and (5) mother has at least one child with an identified father in IRP Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF) data (though it may not be a legally established paternity). OHP = Out-of-home placement. Gov. = Government.

Our primary sample includes mothers who are initially observed to live with all their known children, and not with the child(ren)'s father(s). For these families, policy would generally provide for legally identified fathers<sup>8</sup> to have an order to pay child support to the mother prior to placement. When the children are placed in care and the placement is expected to be long-term, the case will generally be

<sup>6</sup>We also calculated the proportion of cases in which the father owed support to another party, but for simplicity of exposition these results are not reported in the tables. For example, among all cases ( $N = 2,857$ ) the father(s) owed support to the mother in 47 percent of cases, owed support to offset prior spells of OHP in 6 percent of the cases, and owed support to another party in 8 percent of cases. Overall, father(s) owed some child support in 54 percent of the cases.

<sup>7</sup>Orders to offset substitute care costs are generally directed to the county for nonrelative substitute care (64 percent of cases), though there are also a substantial proportion to offset the costs of kinship care (34 percent).

<sup>8</sup>While our sample is restricted to mothers with at least one identified father in our data, in some cases there may not be a legally established father. Two-thirds of the mothers in our sample have children with at least one father legally identified through paternity establishment. About 60 percent of these mothers have a child support order prior to OHP, higher than the 44 percent for the sample as a whole. Note, however, paternity establishment is unnecessary and irrelevant for children who were born to married parents—a status we cannot consistently observe in our data.

referred to the child support enforcement system and existing child support should be automatically redirected to offset costs associated with substitute care. If all of the father's children are placed out of home, all current child support paid may be redirected; if only some of the father's children are placed, only the child's proportionate share of the child support order should be redirected. In addition, fathers who do not have an order to pay support at the time of placement may have an order initiated after an OHP. A number of different factors may motivate the referral. Orders may be pursued in order to recover the costs of substitute care, to improve the long-term economic stability of the mother's household to facilitate reunification, because of a general commitment to enforcing parental financial support, or some combination of these reasons.

As shown in the first row of Table 1, prior to an OHP, 47 percent of the mothers are owed child support by the father(s). Few fathers (6 percent) or mothers (3 percent) owe support to offset substitute care costs, presumably for a placement prior to the current observed spell. The second row shows the percentage with an order to pay support at any time *during* the OHP spell. During that period, the percentage of fathers owing support to the mother is slightly higher (51 percent),<sup>9</sup> while the percentage owing support to offset substitute care costs rises dramatically (from 6 percent to 34 percent). The percentage of mothers owing support for substitute care also rises steeply (from 3 percent to 21 percent).

The second panel of Table 1 shows the mean dollar amount of child support orders; the third panel shows the mean order amounts for those with orders (that is, excluding those with no order, and averaging only across months with an order). We again distinguish support owed by the father(s) to the mother and from the father(s) and from the mother to offset substitute care costs, with the rows showing outcomes before and during an OHP. The first row of the third panel shows that when child support is ordered, mean order amounts are substantial—across all types of orders. Looking down the rows in this

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<sup>9</sup>Note that the relatively high rate of orders from fathers to mothers during OHP reflects in part orders during the first months of OHP. For example, for the 476 mothers who experience a 7- to 12-month spell of their child(ren) being placed out of home, the percentage with an order at some time during the placement falls from 51 percent (considering all months) to 46 percent if we exclude the first month following placement, and to 42 percent if we exclude the first two months following placement.

panel we see that mothers who are owed support by the father(s) of their child(ren) are owed an average of \$377 a month prior to the initial OHP; this falls to \$305 during placement. As discussed below, the decline in the order amount due to mothers during placement reflects at least two factors: (1) reductions in orders when at least some of the children are in an OHP, and (2) relatively small amounts for new orders established during an OHP. While few fathers owe support to offset substitute care costs prior to placement (about 6 percent; see first panel), fathers with orders owe an average of \$230. During an OHP, 34 percent of fathers owe an average of \$225 of support to offset substitute care cost. Similarly, while only 3 percent of mothers owe support prior to the OHP observed, those who do owe an average of \$185. During placement, 21 percent of mothers owe an average of \$172.

While Table 1 reports on child support orders, Table 2 shows child support paid, again distinguishing the periods before and during an OHP. The first row shows that in 21 percent of cases there were payments from the father(s) to the mother in the month prior to the start of the observed spell of OHP. This represents slightly less than half of the 47 percent of mothers who were owed support. Few parents owed support to offset OHP costs in the month before the OHP, but about half of those with an order paid something. When parents paid, they paid substantial amounts of support: in the month prior to an OHP, an average of \$389 for father(s)' payments to mothers, and \$181 and \$164, respectively, for father(s)' and mothers' payments to offset OHP costs.

We measure child support payments prior to an OHP in a single month, but measure payments during an OHP over the full period of placement. Thus, it is not surprising that payments, which are often irregular, are more common when measured over a longer period. During an OHP, fathers owe support to 51 percent of mothers, and made payments to 29 percent of mothers, or about 57 percent of those with orders. For orders to offset OHP costs, payment rates are even higher: in 34 percent of cases, fathers owe such support, and in 25 percent of cases they make payments; 21 percent of mothers owe such support, and 16 percent make payments—representing 74 percent of cases in which fathers have orders, and

**Table 2: Child Support Payments Before and During Out-of-Home Placements**

	Paid by Fathers to Mother	Paid by Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Paid by Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
<b>Any Support Paid</b>			
In month prior to the OHP	21%	2%	2%
During the OHP	29	25	16
<b>Mean Support Paid</b>			
In month prior to the OHP	\$84	\$4	\$3
During the OHP	64	30	13
<b>Mean Support Paid if Positive</b>			
In month prior to the OHP	\$389	\$181	\$164
During the OHP	314	220	217

*Note:*  $N = 2,857$ . Sample: Mothers in Wisconsin with (1) no children in an OHP in June 2004; (2) at least one child entering an OHP between July 2004 and June 2008; (3) all children transitioning to permanency (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other) within 48 months; (4) all mother's children live with her, and not with their father, at start of the OHP spell; and (5) mother has at least one child with an identified father in IRP Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF) data (though it may not be a legally established paternity). OHP = Out-of-home placement. Gov. = Government. Includes payments for current support and arrears.

76 percent of mothers with orders.<sup>10</sup> Again, when payments are made, they are often substantial. In months with a payment, average support paid from fathers to mothers was \$389 in the month prior to an OHP, and \$314 during an OHP. Support paid by the father(s) to offset OHP costs averaged \$181 for the few who made payments in that month, and averaged \$222 for those making payments during an OHP. Average payment amounts from mothers to offset OHP costs were substantially lower in the month prior to an OHP (\$159), but comparable during an OHP (\$217).

Overall, these results suggest that almost half the mothers are owed current child support from their child(ren)'s father(s), and about half those with orders receive a payment. The proportion with an order rises somewhat and the proportion with a payment rises more substantially, when we compare the month prior to an OHP to the full period of the OHP. To some extent the gains, especially in payments, reflect the longer timeframe—that is, more fathers pay something in at least one month of an OHP

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<sup>10</sup>The relatively high payment rates may in part reflect distribution rules. During episodes of OHP, payments are applied to offset the costs of OHP before they are applied to child support owed to the family.

compared to the single month prior to an OHP. Gains in child support owed and paid by the father(s) to the mother are modest relative to the dramatic increase in child support owed and paid by each of the parents to offset the costs of OHP.

### Factors Associated with Child Support Orders and Payments

We have documented substantial variation in the likelihood of child support orders and payments before and during an OHP. For example, during an OHP, about 51 percent of mothers are owed some support from the father(s)—leaving 49 percent without an order. During an OHP, in about 34 percent of cases the father(s) owe support to offset OHP costs, and 21 percent of mothers owe support for these costs, meaning most parents do not have such an order. In this section we consider factors associated with child support orders and payments, focusing on variation by child support history and economic and demographic characteristics of the family. Because there is a substantial literature considering the characteristics associated with child support orders and payments from nonresident to resident parents (Sorensen and Hill, 2004; Ha et al., 2008), we largely focus our attention on patterns of orders and payments to offset OHP costs.

#### *Pre-Placement Child Support History*

Table 3 shows the probability of an order for current financial support, and order amounts for those with orders. It distinguishes between mothers who were or were not owed support in the month prior to an OHP. As in Table 1, we show outcomes for families before and during the observed spell of an OHP. Among all the mothers in our sample, 47 percent have an order for support from the father(s) of their child(ren) in the month prior to an OHP. During an OHP, 99 percent of the mothers with pre-placement orders continue to have an order (though this falls to 78 percent if we exclude the first two months of placement; figure not shown). Among those with an order for support to the mother prior to an OHP, 51 percent have an order for the father(s) to offset OHP costs. In contrast, among those with

**Table 3: Child Support Orders for Current Support Before and During Out-of-Home Placements: Variation by Pre-placement Child Support History**

	N	% of Sample	By Fathers to Mother	By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
<b>Any Support Ordered</b>					
In month prior to the OHP					
Mother w/order before the OHP <sup>a</sup>	1,354	47%	100%	7%	4%
Mother w/out order before the OHP	1,503	53	.	4	3
During the OHP					
Mother w/order before the OHP <sup>a</sup>	1,354	47%	99%	51%	25%
Mother w/out order before the OHP	1,503	53	8	19	18
<b>Mean Support Ordered if Positive</b>					
In month prior to the OHP					
Mother w/order before the OHP <sup>a</sup>			\$377	\$213	\$175
Mother w/out order before the OHP			n/a	254	197
During the OHP					
Mother w/order before the OHP <sup>a</sup>			\$314	\$227	\$167
Mother w/out order before the OHP			206	218	178

*Note:*  $N = 2,857$ . Sample: Mothers in Wisconsin with (1) no children in an OHP in June 2004; (2) at least one child entering an OHP between July 2004 and June 2008; (3) all children transitioning to permanency (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other) within 48 months; (4) all mother's children live with her, and not with their father, at start of the OHP spell; and (5) mother has at least one child with an identified father in IRP Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF) data (though it may not be a legally established paternity). OHP = Out-of-home placement. Gov. = Government.

<sup>a</sup>Mother with an order for current support from any father.

no pre-placement order for support to the mother, 8 percent have support ordered for the mother and 19 percent have support ordered from the father(s) to offset OHP costs. The probability of a mother being ordered to pay support to offset OHP costs varies only modestly by pre-placement child support status: 25 percent of mothers owed support prior to the OHP, and 18 percent of mothers without pre-placement orders are ordered to pay support to offset OHP costs during the OHP.<sup>11</sup>

The second panel of Table 3 shows the amount of support owed when there is an order, again distinguishing outcomes for those mothers who were, and were not, owed child support from a father

<sup>11</sup>As we discuss below, rates of establishing orders to offset OHP costs are unusually low in Milwaukee County, which accounts for a high proportion of all cases. Rates in the balance of the state are substantially higher.

prior to an OHP. Mothers not owed support prior to an OHP who are owed support during an OHP have lower average order amounts (\$206, compared to \$314 for those with a pre-placement order). However, there are fairly modest differences in orders to offset OHP costs (for father or mother) by pre-placement order history.

Table 4 shows a similar pattern for payments from fathers, which are substantially more likely among those mothers with a pre-placement order for support from a father than among those without.<sup>12</sup> When the mother had a pre-placement order, she received a payment during an OHP in 52 percent of the cases, relative to only 8 percent for those without a pre-placement order. Payments from father(s) to offset the costs of OHP were also more common in cases with pre-placement orders (37 percent) than without (14 percent). We also observe a differential in the probability of payments to offset OHP costs from mothers by their pre-placement child support order status; 20 percent of those with a pre-placement order, relative to only 13 percent of those without, made a payment to offset OHP costs. Again, as we saw with order amounts in Table 3, we find somewhat higher payments from fathers to mothers by order history, but little difference in the amount of child support paid by either parent to offset OHP costs, especially when we consider payment during an OHP, when such payments are more common.

#### *Economic and Demographic Characteristics*

Tables 5 and 6 show the variation in orders and payments by parents' economic and demographic characteristics. We consider fathers' earnings and age; and mothers' earnings, age, race, and ethnicity, and whether the mother has had children with more than one father. When there is more than one father identified, we consider the earnings of the highest-earning father, and the age of the oldest father. For both mothers and fathers we have earnings information from the Unemployment Insurance wage records for the year prior to an OHP. While we consider orders and payments from fathers to mothers for context, we focus on orders and payments to offset the costs of OHP during the OHP.

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<sup>12</sup>Note that almost 4 percent of mothers without an order for current support in the month prior to OHP nonetheless received a payment in that month. This apparent discrepancy may be the result of our measuring current orders, but all payments (including those on arrears). See the conclusions for a discussion of related issues.

**Table 4: Child Support Payments Before and During Out-of-Home Placements: Variation by Pre-Placement Child Support History**

	N	% of Sample	Paid by Fathers to Mother	Paid by Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Paid by Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
<b>Any Support Paid</b>					
In month prior to the OHP					
Mother w/order before the OHP <sup>a</sup>	1,354	47%	41%	3%	2%
Mother w/out order before the OHP	1,503	53	4	1	1
During an OHP					
Mother w/order before the OHP <sup>a</sup>	1,354	47%	52%	37%	20%
Mother w/out order before the OHP	1,503	53	8	14	13
<b>Mean Support Paid If Positive</b>					
In month prior to the OHP					
Mother w/order before the OHP <sup>a</sup>			\$405	\$108	\$155
Mother w/out order before the OHP			236	294	178
During an OHP					
Mother w/order before the OHP <sup>a</sup>			\$324	\$217	\$228
Mother w/out order before the OHP			259	227	203

*Note:*  $N = 2,857$ . Sample: Mothers in Wisconsin with (1) no children in an OHP in June 2004; (2) at least one child entering an OHP between July 2004 and June 2008; (3) all children transitioning to permanency (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other) within 48 months; (4) all mother's children live with her, and not with their father, at start of the OHP spell; and (5) mother has at least one child with an identified father in IRP Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF) data (though it may not be a legally established paternity). OHP = Out-of-home placement. Gov. = Government. Includes payments for current support and arrears.

<sup>a</sup>Mother with an order for current support from any father.

**Table 5: Child Support Orders for Current Support Before and During Out-of-Home Placements: Variation by Parents' Economic and Demographic Characteristics**

	N	% of Sample	Any Support Owed			Mean Support Owed if Positive		
			By Fathers to Mother	By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Fathers to Mother	By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
<b>In Month Prior to an OHP</b>								
By Earnings of Highest-Earning Father in Year Before the OHP								
No earnings	1,587	56%	40%	5%	3%	\$349	\$262	\$184
\$1 to \$2,500	181	6	45	8	4	284	184	169
\$2,501 to \$5,000	101	4	52	7	1	306	193	208
\$5,001 to \$10,000	153	5	60	8	5	347	176	176
\$10,001 to \$25,000	367	13	59	7	3	356	203	154
\$25,001 to high	468	16	58	5	3	513	211	231
By Earnings of Mother in Year Before the OHP								
No earnings	1,677	59	43	6	3	365	245	198
\$1 to \$2,500	377	13	49	5	3	366	182	179
\$2,501 to \$5,000	153	5	53	6	3	361	208	161
\$5,001 to \$10,000	220	8	54	5	4	348	219	194
\$10,001 to \$25,000	305	11	59	5	4	405	172	126
\$25,001 to high	125	4	57	5	2	529	291	245
By Number of Men with Whom Mother Has Children								
One father	1,060	37	31	3	2	349	243	179
2 fathers	1,025	36	52	4	2	364	195	223
3+ fathers	772	27	63	11	5	410	241	168
By Mother's Race/Ethnicity								
None or missing	40	1	5	.	.	373	.	.
White	1,716	60	48	5	3	401	235	173
Black	671	23	52	8	3	306	186	193
Hispanic	186	7	40	5	4	401	207	181
Asian	8	0	38	.	.	435	.	.
Multiple	236	8	43	7	6	402	350	219
By Mother's Age At Start of the OHP								
Missing	25	1	4	4	.	300	142	.
Age 15–17	48	2	10	.	.	268	.	.
Age 18–20	178	6	17	3	.	182	146	.
Age 21–25	501	18	47	6	2	270	223	138
Age 26–30	419	15	57	6	3	347	195	144
Age 31–35	693	24	54	8	4	400	252	205
Age 36+	993	35	47	4	3	442	237	195

(table continues)

Table 5, continued

	N	% of Sample	Any Support Owed			Mean Support Owed if Positive		
			By Fathers to Mother	By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Fathers to Mother	By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
<b>By Age of Oldest Father at Start of the OHP</b>								
Missing	92	3%	2%	.	1%	\$197	.	\$200
Age 15–17	16	1	.	.	.	.	.	.
Age 18–20	57	2	12	.	.	160	.	.
Age 21–25	217	8	37	5%	0	248	193	167
Age 26–30	322	11	45	4	2	286	146	94
Age 31–35	488	17	52	6	3	341	248	173
Age 36+	1,665	58	52	7	4	417	237	198
<b>During an OHP</b>								
<b>By Earnings of Highest-Earning Father in Year Before the OHP</b>								
No Earnings			43	29	21	277	225	170
\$1 to \$2,500			52	45	19	230	168	172
\$2,501 to \$5,000			55	40	22	247	171	152
\$5,001 to \$10,000			62	48	23	282	193	186
\$10,001 to \$25,000			66	44	25	270	226	171
\$25,001 to high			62	35	19	445	278	178
<b>By Earnings of Mother in Year Before the OHP</b>								
No Earnings			47	33	19	291	232	168
\$1 to \$2,500			52	36	28	282	210	152
\$2,501 to \$5,000			60	40	25	279	224	177
\$5,001 to \$10,000			60	40	26	290	212	163
\$10,001 to \$25,000			62	35	21	326	226	188
\$25,001 to high			58	29	18	519	205	282
<b>By Number of Men with Whom Mother Has Children</b>								
One father			35	25	18	280	237	173
2 fathers			56	36	22	301	216	178
3+ fathers			66	45	24	328	224	164
<b>By Mother's Race/Ethnicity</b>								
None or missing			5	5	.	329	306	.
White			52	35	24	330	236	173
Black			55	37	12	238	173	161
Hispanic			44	37	25	321	230	171
Asian			38	13	13	397	329	151
Multiple			48	30	25	314	310	182

(table continues)

Table 5, continued

	N	% of Sample	Any Support Owed			Mean Support Owed if Positive		
			By Fathers to Mother	By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Fathers to Mother	By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
By Mother's Age At Start of the OHP								
Missing			8%	8%	4%	\$221	\$268	\$205
Age 15–17			19	35	17	206	169	136
Age 18–20			28	31	27	154	172	138
Age 21–25			52	42	23	201	206	164
Age 26–30			60	44	22	263	233	168
Age 31–35			57	36	21	338	239	178
Age 36+			50	27	19	372	235	184
By Age of Oldest Father at Start of the OHP								
Missing			2	1	16	194	94	180
Age 15–17			6	.	13	175	.	229
Age 18–20			23	33	23	137	143	158
Age 21–25			45	37	22	194	212	161
Age 26–30			50	37	20	221	209	164
Age 31–35			56	39	23	272	220	174
Age 36+			55	34	21	344	234	174

Note:  $N = 2,857$ . Sample: Mothers in Wisconsin with (1) no children in an OHP in June 2004; (2) at least one child entering an OHP between July 2004 and June 2008; (3) all children transitioning to permanency (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other) within 48 months; (4) all mother's children live with her, and not with their father, at start of the OHP spell; and (5) mother has at least one child with an identified father in IRP Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF) data (though it may not be a legally established paternity). OHP = Out-of-home placement. Gov. = Government.

**Table 6: Child Support Payments Before and During Out-of-Home Placements: Variation Parents' Economic and Demographic Characteristics**

	N	% of Sample	Any Support Paid			Mean Support Paid if Positive		
			Paid by Fathers to Mother	Paid By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Paid By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Paid by Fathers to Mother	Paid By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Paid By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
<b>In Month Prior to an OHP</b>								
By Earnings of Highest-Earning Father in Year Before the OHP								
No earnings	1,587	56%	16%	2%	1%	\$346	\$158	\$170
\$1 to \$2,500	181	6	9	1	1	195	6	543
\$2,501 to \$5,000	101	4	13	2	.	232	16	.
\$5,001 to \$10,000	153	5	33	3	3	282	150	127
\$10,001 to \$25,000	367	13	34	4	3	328	142	132
\$25,001 to high	468	16	33	2	1	577	389	102
By Earnings of Mother in Year Before the OHP								
No earnings	1,677	59	19	2	1	365	176	158
\$1 to \$2,500	377	13	21	1	2	313	43	92
\$2,501 to \$5,000	153	5	25	4	1	493	136	1,082
\$5,001 to \$10,000	220	8	24	2	4	439	254	109
\$10,001 to \$25,000	305	11	28	3	3	416	63	154
\$25,001 to high	125	4	28	2	1	530	1,043	426
By Number of Men with Whom Mother Has Children								
One father	1,060	37	13	1	1	428	265	133
2 fathers	1,025	36	22	2	1	377	137	174
3+ fathers	772	27	31	4	3	377	170	181
By Mother's Race/Ethnicity								
None or missing	40	1	.	.	.	.	.	.
White	1,716	60	25	2	2	423	186	184
Black	671	23	16	2	1	279	73	44
Hispanic	186	7	18	1	1	333	592	121
Asian	8	0	13	.	.	655	.	.
Multiple	236	8	19	2	1	356	254	173
By Mother's Age at Start of the OHP								
Missing	25	1	.	.	.	.	.	.
Age 15–17	48	2	6	.	.	231	.	.
Age 18–20	178	6	8	2	.	261	133	.
Age 21–25	501	18	19	1	1	314	131	125
Age 26–30	419	15	28	2	2	331	223	307
Age 31–35	693	24	25	3	2	420	163	155
Age 36+	993	35	21	2	2	440	209	129

(table continues)

Table 6, continued

	N	% of Sample	Any Support Paid			Mean Support Paid if Positive		
			Paid by Fathers to Mother	Paid By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Paid By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Paid by Fathers to Mother	Paid By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Paid By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
<b>By Age of Oldest Father at Start of the OHP</b>								
Missing	92	3%	.	.	1%	.	.	\$27
Age 15–17	16	1	.	.	.	.	.	.
Age 18–20	57	2	\$2	.	.	\$443	.	.
Age 21–25	217	8	13	0%	.	269	\$172	.
Age 26–30	322	11	20	1	1	275	96	631
Age 31–35	488	17	25	3	2	354	93	203
Age 36+	1,665	58	24	2	2	426	220	129
<b>During an OHP</b>								
<b>By Earnings of Highest-Earning Father in Year Before the OHP</b>								
No earnings			23	20	16	285	218	209
\$1 to \$2,500			23	27	11	249	136	189
\$2,501 to \$5,000			26	29	15	244	160	155
\$5,001 to \$10,000			40	35	20	348	156	237
\$10,001 to \$25,000			43	33	20	284	210	278
\$25,001 to high			38	30	17	415	297	199
<b>By Earnings of Mother in Year Before the OHP</b>								
No earnings			27	23	14	294	225	227
\$1 to \$2,500			29	24	20	320	214	154
\$2,501 to \$5,000			33	31	21	294	183	271
\$5,001 to \$10,000			33	30	22	338	191	173
\$10,001 to \$25,000			34	26	20	338	238	219
\$25,001 to high			32	24	17	449	246	357
<b>By Number of Men with Whom Mother Has Children</b>								
One father			19	18	15	311	244	205
2 fathers			30	26	16	310	200	220
3+ fathers			41	31	18	322	222	228
<b>By Mother's Race/Ethnicity</b>								
None or missing			.	5	.	.	180	.
White			33	28	20	319	234	207
Black			22	19	7	239	153	328
Hispanic			23	22	20	441	215	145
Asian			13	13	13	456	328	134
Multiple			31	21	17	358	257	243

(table continues)

Table 6, continued

	Any Support Paid			Mean Support Paid if Positive		
	Paid by Fathers to Mother	Paid By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Paid By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Paid by Fathers to Mother	Paid By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	Paid By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
By Mother's Age at Start of the OHP						
Missing	.	8	4	.	\$37	\$274
Age 15–17	13	25	15	\$651	226	134
Age 18–20	16	21	18	258	229	161
Age 21–25	30	29	17	250	193	186
Age 26–30	34	31	18	238	229	198
Age 31–35	33	25	17	348	209	247
Age 36+	27	20	15	361	242	237
By Age of Oldest Father at Start of the OHP						
Missing	.	.	14	.	.	249
Age 15–17	.	.	13	.	.	225
Age 18–20	12	25	19	480	165	125
Age 21–25	23	26	18	234	217	201
Age 26–30	25	25	16	251	214	196
Age 31–35	34	27	17	253	200	219
Age 36+	32	25	16	349	229	225

*Note:*  $N = 2,857$ . Sample: Mothers in Wisconsin with (1) no children in an OHP in June 2004; (2) at least one child entering an OHP between July 2004 and June 2008; (3) all children transitioning to permanency (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other) within 48 months; (4) all mother's children live with her, and not with their father, at start of the OHP spell; and (5) mother has at least one child with an identified father in IRP Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF) data (though it may not be a legally established paternity). OHP = Out-of-home placement. Gov. = Government. Includes payments for current support and arrears.

The first panel of Tables 5 and 6 show orders and payment by father's earnings in the year prior to an OHP. It is important to note that there are no reported earnings for the father(s) in the year prior to an OHP in 56 percent of the cases. On the other hand, among those with earnings, a substantial portion earned over \$25,000 (16 percent of all fathers, and 36 percent of those with earnings). It is also important to remember that when there is more than one father, we consider the earnings of the highest-earning father, and compare this to amounts owed and paid across all fathers. Considering orders and payments during an OHP, we see that both an order for support and a payment to the mother is generally more likely when the father has higher earnings, though the relationship is not consistent, and the probability of an order and a payment to the mother during an OHP falls slightly for the highest category. As expected given child support guidelines, order and payment amounts also tend to rise with father's earnings. In contrast, there is little consistent relationship between father's earnings and the probability of an order to pay support to offset OHP costs, and a remarkably weak relationship between father's earnings and the amount of the order to offset OHP costs. That is, we find little evidence of a relationship between orders to offset OHP costs and father's ability to pay. On the other hand, actual payments to offset OHP costs are somewhat more likely in cases in which the father has higher earnings, though the relationship is not consistent.

The second panel of Tables 5 and 6 show the relationship between orders and payments and father's age. Mothers associated with older fathers are more likely to be owed and paid support, but there is no consistent relationship between father's age and the likelihood that child support to offset OHP costs will be owed or paid.

The remaining panels of Tables 5 and 6 show orders and payments by mother's earnings, age, race, and number of partners. As with fathers, most mothers had no recorded earnings (59 percent), or very low earnings, in the year prior to an OHP. Only 15 percent of mothers had earnings over \$10,000. These higher-earning mothers were substantially more likely to be owed and paid support from the father(s) of their child(ren), but there is no consistent relationship between mother's earnings and the likelihood that parents owed or paid support to offset OHP costs. Similarly, older mothers are more likely

to have an order for support from a father, but there is no consistent relationship between mother's age and the likelihood that parents owe support to offset OHP costs. Considering white, black, and Hispanic mothers (the three primary racial and ethnic groups), we see that Hispanics are least likely to be owed support from a father (44 percent, relative to 52 percent and 55 percent for white and black mothers, respectively) during an OHP, though black and Hispanic mothers were less likely than white mothers to have support paid (22 percent and 23 percent, respectively, compared to 33 percent). Black mothers are least likely to have owed or paid support to offset OHP costs,<sup>13</sup> the fathers of white mothers' children are somewhat more likely to have owed and substantially more likely to have paid support to offset OHP costs. Mothers who have had children with multiple fathers are more likely to have been owed and paid support from at least one father, and to have at least one father who owed and paid child support to offset OHP costs. Mothers with multiple partners are also more likely to have had an order to pay support to offset OHP costs, and a payment, though the differences in payment rates are small.

#### *The Relationship between Child Support Orders and Payments and OHP Duration*

We have documented patterns of child support orders and payments made by nonresident fathers to pre-placement mothers, and by both nonresident fathers and pre-placement resident mothers to offset OHP costs. We have considered the relationship between the parents' child support history and characteristics measured *before* the observed spell of OHP, and patterns of child support orders and payment immediately prior to and during an OHP. We now turn to a key question motivating this analysis: Is there a relationship between the child support orders and payments during an OHP and the length of the observed spell of OHP? To address this question, we first present information on the simple descriptive relationships; we then discuss evidence from multivariate analyses that aim to identify causal effects.

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<sup>13</sup>The relatively low level of orders to offset OHP costs among black mothers in part reflects regional policy differences. As discussed further below, there is substantial variation across counties in the proportion of cases with orders. Milwaukee County, which includes a large share of cases involving black mothers, has relatively low levels of orders to offset OHP costs.

Table 7 shows the probability of having a child support order, and the amount of positive orders, by the length of the OHP spell. Recall that our sample includes only mothers with observed spells of OHP that last 48 months or less. Of these, almost half (48 percent) are observed to have a spell of OHP that is 6 months or less; only 15 percent have a spell lasting two years or longer. Whether the placement is expected to be long-term is one factor used to determine whether it is appropriate to refer families to the child support enforcement agency. Thus, we would expect longer-term placements to be associated with orders for the mother, father(s), or both, to pay support to offset the costs of OHP. We might also expect significant declines in orders, or the amount of orders, for fathers to provide support to mothers, when children are in an OHP longer.

As shown in the second panel of Table 7, there is no consistent pattern between length of placement and the likelihood of an order from the father(s) to the mother during an OHP. This is somewhat surprising, and reflects in part a delay in changes in orders, as well as that many mothers retain custody of some of their children, even while other children are in an OHP.<sup>14</sup> The probability of a payment from father to mother, shown in the second panel of Table 8, actually increases with duration of the OHP, as might be expected given that payments are often irregular, and our measure of payments at any time during the OHP includes a longer period for those with longer spells.

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<sup>14</sup>We continue to investigate the apparent continuity of orders from father to mother during OHP. As noted above, the proportion with orders declines if we exclude orders that remain only in the first few months of placement. We are also investigating changes over time, as it has been suggested that system interface improvements may have led to more consistent and faster changes in assignment. We are also investigating difference across counties, to see if staffing level, workload, or other factors may contribute to differences in the probability of order adjustments.

**Table 7: Child Support Orders to for Current Support to Offset Costs of Out-of-Home Placement: Variation by Length of Placement Spell**

	1–6 Months	7–12 Months	13–18 Months	19–24 Months	25–36 Months	37+ Months
N	1,377	476	326	243	262	173
%	48%	17%	11%	9%	9%	6%
<b>Any Support Ordered</b>						
During an OHP						
By father to mother	50%	54%	49%	47%	52%	61%
By father to offset OHP costs	18	43	46	48	58	63
By mother to offset OHP costs	7	28	35	35	39	41
<b>Mean Support Ordered if Positive</b>						
During an OHP						
By father to mother	\$358	\$290	\$242	\$248	\$239	\$238
By father to offset OHP costs	205	222	251	232	228	225
By mother to offset OHP costs	165	184	164	176	169	171

*Note:*  $N = 2,857$ . Sample: Mothers in Wisconsin with (1) no children in an OHP in June 2004; (2) at least one child entering an OHP between July 2004 and June 2008; (3) all children transitioning to permanency (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other) within 48 months; (4) all mother's children live with her, and not with their father, at start of the OHP spell; and (5) mother has at least one child with an identified father in IRP Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF) data (though it may not be a legally established paternity). OHP = Out-of-home placement.

Turning to orders to offset OHP costs, fathers are both more likely to have orders, and to make payments to offset OHP costs, in cases with longer spells (though the relationship is not consistent in the case of orders). In cases with OHP spells of 6 months or less, 18 percent of fathers are ordered to pay such support, compared to 43 percent to 58 percent of fathers associated with spells of 7 to 36 months, and 63 percent of fathers associated with spells of 37 months or more. As shown in Table 8, payments follow a similar pattern, being made by fathers in 10 percent of cases with a spell of 6 months or less and up to 54 percent of cases with a spell lasting more than 36 months. While the probability of an order and payment to offset OHP costs rises with spell length, for fathers there is no consistent variation between spell length and the dollar amount of orders or payments to offset costs. We find that child support orders and payments for pre-placement resident mothers to pay support to offset the costs of OHP are least likely for mothers with spells of 6 months or less (7 percent with orders, 4 percent with payments), relative to

**Table 8: Child Support Payments to Offset Costs of Out-of-Home Placement: Variation by Length of Placement Spell**

	1–6 Months	7–12 Months	13–18 Months	19–24 Months	25–36 Months	37+ Months
N	1,377	476	326	243	262	173
%	48%	17%	11%	9%	9%	6%
<b>Any Support Paid</b>						
During an OHP						
By father to mother	21%	35%	33%	34%	40%	46%
By father to offset OHP costs	10	30	37	35	45	54
By mother to offset OHP costs	4	23	28	27	32	38
<b>Mean Support Paid if Positive</b>						
During an OHP						
By father to mother	\$368	\$330	\$282	\$282	\$272	\$221
By father to offset OHP costs	221	221	226	223	202	227
By mother to offset OHP costs	170	219	197	185	274	240

*Note:*  $N = 2,857$ . Sample: Mothers in Wisconsin with (1) no children in an OHP in June 2004; (2) at least one child entering an OHP between July 2004 and June 2008; (3) all children transitioning to permanency (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other) within 48 months; (4) all mother's children live with her, and not with their father, at start of the OHP spell; and (5) mother has at least one child with an identified father in IRP Multi-Sample Person File (MSPF) data (though it may not be a legally established paternity). OHP = Out-of-home placement. Includes payments for current support and arrears.

those spells of 7 to 12 months (28 percent with orders, 23 percent with payments) and more than a year (from 35 percent to 41 percent with orders, 27 percent to 38 percent with payments). While order amounts do not vary systematically with spell length, mothers are more likely to make a payment when they have longer spells (perhaps due to the longer period of measurement) and there is some evidence that the amount of support paid increases with spell length as well.

Parents whose children are in an OHP for a longer period are more likely to be ordered to pay support to offset the costs of an OHP, are more likely to make a payment towards those costs, and in the case of mothers, make larger average payments. To our knowledge, this is the first systematic analysis of this relationship. While we observe a positive relationship between orders and payments to pay child support to offset OHP costs, and time to reunification or other permanency, additional analysis is needed to understand the factors that contribute to this relationship. The policy implications of a positive

relationship between orders and payments to offset OHP costs and the length of an OHP depend critically on the direction of causality. In particular, if caseworkers are accurately assessing family needs, determining that some children are likely to be out of home for a longer period, and referring parents of those children for child support orders to offset the costs of care, then we may have simply documented that formal policy and practice are somewhat consistent; one of the key criteria for appropriate referrals to child support is whether the placement is expected to be long-term. Parents of children in situations that require longer spells of OHP may be more likely to be ordered to offset the associated costs.

Alternatively, child support orders to offset costs may have a causal effect on the timing of reunification. As noted earlier, in theory, orders and payments to offset the costs of care could increase or reduce the length of an OHP. Orders for child support to offset OHP costs may burden families and increase time to reunification. In that case, interactions between child welfare and child support may be counterproductive; having an order to pay support to offset OHP costs may be interfering with pre-placement resident mothers' ability to achieve the conditions of reunification. Alternatively, orders to offset OHP costs could lead to shorter time in an OHP if the requirement to pay for the OHP motivates parents to meet the conditions of reunification more quickly. We observe a positive relationship across all families, but that relationship may mask a combination of positive and negative effects for different families—or even within a given family.

In an effort to identify the causal effect of child support orders to offset OHP costs on time to reunification, we use an instrumental variable approach. In particular, we note that there is substantial variation across counties in the proportion of parents ordered to pay support to offset OHP costs (see Appendix Table 1). We use this variation to identify mothers who are more likely to be ordered to pay support to offset OHP costs, and analyze differences in time to reunification or other permanency, essentially comparing mothers in low- and high-probability counties. This analysis provides an estimate of the causal effect of child support referral policy (at the county level), independent of the specific characteristics of the individual case and family.

To estimate the instrumental variable probit results, we first estimate the predicted child support order amount for each mother. We use the county-level probability of an order to pay child support to offset placement costs as an instrument—since it affects the likelihood that the mother will have an order, but is arguably otherwise independent of characteristics of the case that influence the time to reunification. Table 9 shows the results when we use this approach to estimate the effect of child support order amount on the probability of reunification within 36 months of the first child being placed in substitute care. We show these results for illustration; the results are qualitatively similar when we estimate effects on reunification within 12, 24, 36 or 48 months. The first column shows the coefficient estimates; the second column shows the marginal effects—that is, the change in the probability of reunification by month 36 given a change in the variable.

Our primary interest is whether imposition of an order to pay child support to offset the costs of substitute care delays (or accelerates) the time to reunification. The first row shows that child support order amounts are negatively associated with the probability of reunification or other permanency ( $p < 0.01$ ). As shown in the second column, a \$100 increase in the monthly child support order amount is predicted to reduce the probability of reunification or other permanency by 17 percent (from a baseline predicted probability of 67 percent). Thus, the negative relationship between orders to offset costs and reunification is confirmed.

The remaining results are largely consistent with expectations, though the lack of research on this topic means we cannot compare our results with prior analyses. Relative to white mothers, black mothers are significantly less likely to have their children be reunified (estimated effect is a 9 percent lower probability;  $p < 0.01$ ). This may be the result of differences in outcomes directly associated with race, or due to other circumstances (for example, neighborhood resources, reasons for the OHP) not captured by our relatively sparse set of control variables. There is no discernible difference in the reunification probabilities for white and Hispanic mothers. The coefficient estimates suggest older mothers are more likely to achieve reunification, but the estimates are not statistically significant at conventional levels ( $p = 0.14$ ). In contrast, older fathers are associated with lower reunification rates ( $p < 0.01$ ). As for the

**Table 9: IV Probit Estimation Results Dependent Variable: Reunification by Month 36**

Variables	(1) Coefficient Estimates †	(2) Marginal Effects ‡
Child Support Order Amount	-0.0048*** (0.0017)	-0.0017 (0.0006)
Mother's Race/Ethnicity		
Black	-0.2450*** (0.0676)	-0.0908 (0.0256)
Hispanic	-0.0165 (0.1030)	-0.0060 (0.0377)
Other (not white/black/Hispanic)	-0.0479 (0.0924)	-0.0176 (0.0341)
Mothers' Age at Start of the OHP	0.00808 (0.0056)	0.0029 (0.0020)
Age of Oldest Father at Start of the OHP	-0.0167*** (0.0037)	-0.0061 (0.0014)
Age of Oldest Children at Start of the OHP	0.0575*** (0.0073)	0.0209 (0.0027)
Number of Mother-Side Siblings	-0.0549*** (0.0147)	-0.0199 (0.0053)
Multiple Fertility (# of Men with Whom Mother Has Children)		
Two Fathers	0.0392 (0.0632)	0.0142 (0.0229)
Three Fathers	-0.0569 (0.0796)	-0.0208 (0.0292)
Earnings of Highest-Earning Father in Year Before the OHP		
Less than \$5,000	0.0198 (0.0889)	0.0072 (0.0321)
\$5,000–\$10,000	0.0793 (0.123)	0.0283 (0.0431)
\$10,000–\$25,000	-0.1560* (0.0820)	-0.0580 (0.0311)
Above \$25,000	-0.1500* (0.0780)	-0.0556 (0.0294)
By Earnings of Mother in Year Before the OHP		
Less than \$3,000	0.1600** (0.0766)	0.0565 (0.0263)
\$3,000–\$10,000	0.4900*** (0.0887)	0.1601 (0.0253)
Above \$10,000	0.4840*** (0.0849)	0.1599 (0.0249)
Percent Substantiated (in a county)	0.00623 (0.0040)	0.0023 (0.0014)
Percent Screened-In (in a county)	-0.0071*** (0.0016)	-0.0026 (0.0006)
Constant	0.7520*** (0.1850)	
Observations	2962	

† Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p&lt;0.01, \*\* p&lt;0.05, \* p&lt;0.1

‡ dy/dx is for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1.

number and age of children, having older children is associated with higher reunification rates, while having a greater number of children is associated with lower rates ( $p < 0.01$  in both cases).

As expected, mothers with higher earnings prior to the initial OHP are more likely to be reunified with their children within 36 months, with earnings of up to \$3,000 in the prior year associated with an estimated 6 percent increase in reunification ( $p < 0.10$ ), and earnings of \$3,000 to \$10,000 or over \$10,000 associated with a 16 percent increase ( $p < 0.01$ ). In contrast, when the father has earnings of \$10,000 to \$25,000 or over \$25,000, reunification rates are estimated to be 6 percent lower, relative to those for fathers with no earnings ( $p < 0.10$ ).

We use county variation in child support order rates for mothers to identify our estimates of mother's orders. While these county-level measures are arguably uncorrelated with the characteristics of individual cases, one potential concern is that child support order establishment rates are correlated with other aspects of child welfare practice, which in turn affect reunification probabilities. For example, a more "punitive" orientation could contribute to both more child support orders and slower reunification. With this in mind, we also include two measures of county child welfare practice: the percent of CSP reports screened-in, and the percent of substantiations. We find that higher rates of screened-in calls are associated with a slightly lower rate of reunification ( $p < 0.01$ ), while higher substantiation rates are associated with small increase in reunification (though the estimates are not statistically significant at conventional levels,  $p = 0.12$ ).

Our primary result, of a significant negative relationship between reunification and the imposition of child support orders for pre-placement resident parents to offset the cost of care, generally holds across a range of alternative samples and specifications. In particular, when we use the same IV probit approach to estimate the probability of reunification by 12, 24, and 48 months, our results are qualitatively similar. Our results also hold when we limit our sample to cases with only younger children, and when we exclude Milwaukee County cases from our sample.

## CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Parents whose children have been removed from their custody may be ordered to pay child support to offset the costs of out-of-home care. These payments are a potentially important source of revenue for counties with very limited resources to meet human services needs. In addition, there is significant support for the principle that parents should provide for their children financially, even when they are not able to provide custodial care. At the same time, there are concerns that requiring child support from pre-placement resident parents may lengthen the time their children spend in substitute care by reducing the economic resources available to help them achieve the conditions of reunification. Many of the same concerns apply to the policy of redirecting child support from pre-placement nonresident parents.

Notwithstanding the potential importance of these payments, and concerns about potential unintended consequences, there is remarkably little empirical analysis of the relationship between child support and child welfare services and the potential effects on family well-being and government costs. This interim report begins to fill that gap, providing one of the first systematic analyses of a statewide sample of families served by the two systems.<sup>15</sup> We find that a substantial minority of nonresident fathers and pre-placement resident mothers are ordered to pay support to offset costs associated with an OHP. Considering cases in our primary sample of mother-only families, in 33 percent of cases a nonresident father was ordered to pay such support, and 25 percent made a payment averaging \$220 per month in months with a payment. Mothers were ordered to pay support to offset OHP costs in 20 percent of cases, and made a payment in 16 percent of cases, averaging \$217 per month in months with a payment. We

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<sup>15</sup>The National Incidence Study 2, completed in the late 1980s, included a required report on the relationship between nonpayment of child support and the occurrence of child maltreatment (Westat, 1992). The NIS analysis is dated and relied on comparisons of child support receipts of three samples of substantiated child welfare cases, relative to all child support cases. We have been unable to find any other publication that includes a systematic analysis of the relationship between child support and child welfare outcomes, though we note that there is a growing concern with the relationship between the child support and child welfare systems in regards to the ways these systems interact with nonresident parents (for example, the creation of the National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System [[www.fatherhoodqic.org](http://www.fatherhoodqic.org)]). For a review of the literature on non-resident fathers and the child welfare system, see National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (2007).

found remarkably little variation between parents' earnings and the probability of an order or the amount ordered to offset public costs, suggesting that the system may not be particularly sensitive to parents' ability to pay.

A central question of interest is whether enforcing a child support order affects time in out-of-home care. We find evidence of a positive relationship—cases in which orders are imposed are more likely to have longer spells of OHP. Our multivariate analysis provides support for a causal interpretation, with orders leading to longer placements. Additional research is needed to confirm these results, estimate the magnitude of the effects and how these vary across subgroups, and to expand the evidence base to better support policy development.

There are other related issues, beyond the scope of this report, which merit further analysis. The relationship between orders to offset OHP costs and the stability of reunification is the subject of a companion report (Cancian et al., 2012). We are also developing plans for additional analyses that would aim to better understand how the child support and child welfare systems interact across different family types (for example, families with one versus two pre-placement resident parents, families with children from one father versus multiple fathers). Because the family's living situation is so fundamental to our analysis,<sup>16</sup> in this report we have focused only on families in which all the children live with their mother, but not with their father. Orders and payments to offset the costs of OHP are somewhat more common for these families than others (see Appendix Table 2), and additional analysis will be needed to estimate the implications of our findings for the full range of families served by the systems. A substantial portion of families served by the child welfare system include children born to parents with multiple partners (that is, the mother has had children with more than one father, the father with more than one mother, or both). Additional analysis is needed to more fully understand child support orders, for example, when only some of the paying or receiving parent's children are placed in substitute care. Additional analysis is also

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<sup>16</sup>Our analysis considers child support orders and payments from the nonresident father both to the mother and to offset OHP costs. When we extend the sample to consider families with at least one resident father, it is more complex to interpret orders to the mother and from the father(s), especially as we do not generally have information on changes in living situations following the initial placement.

needed to explore the relationship of child support and child welfare for families with different child welfare histories (for example, placements due to neglect versus those related to delinquency).

We continue to explore the data and consult with colleagues in an effort to refine our estimates. We are surprised at the number of families in which it appears that some, but not all, of the children are in an OHP at some time during the observed spell. However, additional analysis has largely confirmed the results presented in our interim report, as reflected here. We continue to explore differences over time and across counties in the establishment of orders for current support and arrears. While we have resolved many of the key issues associated with the merged administrative data from the child support and child welfare systems, puzzles remain and additional exploration and analysis is warranted.

Many families coming into contact with the child protective services system are also served by the child support system. In Wisconsin, state administration of these two systems falls within the same Department of Children and Families. This joint responsibility increases the feasibility of coordinating policy and practice to improve outcomes for families and effectively use scarce public resources. This report is part of an ongoing research project designed to create an evidence base to support the Department's initiatives in this area. While challenges remain, the results reported here clarify the importance of the effort.

## Appendix

We have drawn our sample using Wisconsin Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (WiSACWIS) data for mothers with children who are removed from their parent's (or parents') care and placed out of home in a 2-year period between July of 2004 and June of 2006, matched with the Wisconsin child support system (KIDS) data. This appendix documents the primary steps in the process of creating the merged data and selecting the sample.

### I. SAMPLE DEFINITION

- (1) We begin with 9,024 unique mothers in Wisconsin who had a child removed and placed in an out-of-home placement (OHP) in a 2-year period between July of 2004 and June of 2006.
- (2) Of the 9,024 mothers, we further restrict our sample to mothers with at least one child age 14 or less (who is therefore at risk for an OHP for 48 months [ $n = 7,718$ ]), and exclude a small number of mothers whose child died or ran away from substitute care ( $n = 19$ ).
- (3) Of the resulting 7,699 mothers, we further restrict our sample to mothers whose children transition to permanency (reunification for at least 6 consecutive months, adoption, or guardianship) within 48 months ( $n = 7,243$ ).
- (4) Of the 7,243 mothers, we focus our analysis on those with at least one identified father in our data, and selected those mothers who we identified as living with all their children at the start of the OHP, but who were not living with any of those children's fathers ( $n = 2,857$ ). See the next section for an explanation of how we identified these living arrangements.

These sample selections result in a final focal sample of 2,857 mothers, with 9,969 children.

### II. PRE-PLACEMENT FAMILY STRUCTURE

We identify pre-placement family structure based on data from WiSACWIS. First, we used living arrangement variables that are reported at the time of the initial assessment and appear on the INVESTIGATION table in WiSACWIS (TS\_INVS\_BGN). This field is available only if there was an investigation. If either the primary or secondary caretaker ID matches with a child's mother or father IDs, then we consider that the child is living with mother or father (or both) prior to the OHP.

In a minority of situations where there was no investigation, or if information on caretakers was missing from the investigation table, we then used a field attached to the beginning of the OHP

(CD\_CRTKR), which describes the structure of the family in the case. This variable does not provide caretaker's ID per se, but for some cases this variable allows us to determine if the children are living with one or both of their parents.

Using both these variables we were able to distinguish for each mother, whether all, some, or none of her children were living with her at the time that her first child started an OHP, and in most situations whether all, some, or none of her children were also living with their father at that time (for some mothers determining whether children were living with their father was not possible).

The living arrangements of each mother's children were categorized as:

- All the mother's children were living with her, and not with their father, at the start of the spell (this group, the largest, was used for the analysis in the paper, as all these fathers are potentially liable to be ordered to pay child support);
- All the mother's known children were living with her, and all or some were also living with their father (i.e., a father lived with the mother, and she might not be eligible for child support);
- Some of the mother's children were living with her, but not all; some children may also be living with their father (child support eligibility for children not living with mother is unknown); or
- None of the mother's children were living with her at the start of the OHP; they may or may not have been with their father.

### III. DEFINITIONS AND SOURCE OF OTHER KEY VARIABLES:

- (1) Out-of-Home Placement (OHP): This is based on a set of monthly variables that indicate whether each child is in or out of home in the given month (regardless of the time in the substitute care system). We created a mother-level variable that measures whether any of a mother's children are out-of-home and placed in a substitute care system.
- (2) Length of the OHP Spell: This variable counts the number of months from the first month of an OHP until all children exit from substitute care. Mothers with spells longer than 48 months are excluded from the analysis. (WiSACWIS)
- (3) Time to Reunification: This variable counts the number of months from the first month of an OHP until the permanency. (WiSACWIS)
- (4) Child Support Order (father[s] to mother): Total monthly amount of current child support owed on child support cases where the payor is the father(s) of any of the mother's children and the payee is the mother. (KIDS)
- (5) Child Support Order (to offset OHP costs): Total monthly amount of current child support owed on child support cases where the payor is either the mother or the father(s) of any of the mother's children, and the payee is county or state-administered substitute care or kinship care. (KIDS)

- (6) Child Support Payments (father[s] to mother): Total monthly payment amounts on child support cases described in (5) above.
- (7) Child Support Payments (to offset OHP costs): Total monthly payment amounts on child support cases described in (6) above.

**Appendix Table 1: Child Support Orders to Offset Costs of Out-of-Home Placement: Variation by County**

	N	Any CS Owed during First OHP Spell		
		By Fathers to Mother	By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
Full Sample	2,857	51%	34%	21%
By County				
Ashland	15	60%	53%	33%
Barron	45	47	31	29
Brown	134	46	34	17
Burnett	13	46	23	23
Calumet	14	36	36	21
Chippewa	24	50	33	21
Clark	9	56	56	33
Columbia	20	60	15	20
Dane	200	52	33	19
Dodge	30	77	53	47
Door	11	36	27	9
Douglas	15	20	13	13
Dunn	34	32	15	15
Eau Claire	51	69	59	39
Fond du Lac	48	52	35	23
Forest	9	67	22	22
Grant	12	25	8	8
Green	23	35	17	35
Iron	7	29	0	0
Jackson	10	40	20	10
Jefferson	27	44	26	19
Juneau	6	33	0	33
Kenosha	126	59	55	43
Kewaunee	7	43	14	14
La Crosse	75	52	48	31
Lafayette	9	67	44	44
Langlade	17	59	24	12
Manitowoc	43	47	33	21
Marathon	53	55	45	19
Marinette	26	50	12	4
Menominee	9	22	11	0

(table continues)

Appendix Table 1, continued

	N	Any CS Owed during First OHP Spell		
		By Fathers to Mother	By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
Milwaukee county and region codes	666	49%	34%	7%
Monroe	29	62	41	28
Oconto	10	20	40	20
Oneida	21	48	48	57
Outagamie	28	64	43	39
Ozaukee	19	58	26	26
Pierce	10	20	20	0
Polk	19	16	11	16
Portage	30	53	57	37
Price	18	44	39	33
Racine	111	67	65	50
Richland	11	55	27	36
Rock	113	44	23	12
Saint Croix	16	31	31	19
Sauk	43	53	14	28
Sawyer	9	56	44	78
Sheboygan	101	64	26	28
Taylor	8	50	50	13
Trempealeau	8	13	38	50
Vernon	8	50	13	25
Vilas	12	58	25	17
Walworth	25	44	40	40
Washburn	11	9	18	18
Washington	53	51	17	11
Waukesha	66	45	41	20
Waupaca	16	50	50	25
Waushara	8	38	38	38
Winnebago	169	59	21	13
Wood	47	70	49	32
State	6	50	33	17
All Others*	44	44	34	3

\* Counties with 5 or fewer cases.

**Appendix Table 2: Child Support Orders and Payments to Offset Costs of Out-of-Home Placement: Comparison for Alternative Samples**

	N	By Fathers to Gov. for OHP Costs	By Mothers to Gov. for OHP Costs
<b>Any Child Support Owed During an OHP</b>			
All families with an OHP in the period	7,496	25%	16%
Children living just with mother (base)	2,857	34	21
Children living with both biological parents	429	24	18
Other living arrangements	4,210	19	12
<b>Any Child Support Paid in During an OHP</b>			
All families with an OHP in the period	7,496	17	12
Children living just with mother (base)	2,857	25	16
Children living with both biological parents	429	21	15
Other living arrangements	4,210	12	9

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