

Executive Summary

Background

In recent decades, changes in family structure have led to a substantial increase in single-parent households in the United States. As a result of high divorce rates and a growing proportion of births to unmarried parents (Cancian, Meyer, and Han, 2011), almost a third of children did not live with both parents in 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The child support system is designed to address one of the potential negative consequences of children living apart from one of their parents by ensuring that noncustodial parents contribute financially to their upbringing. Changes in the social safety net, which no longer include an entitlement to cash assistance for low-income single parents, have increased the importance of reliable child support. For example, in 2015, 37 percent of children with a parent living outside of the household lived in poverty. For custodial parents living in poverty who received all of the child support owed to them, child support made up 58 percent of their personal income (Grall, 2018). However, many noncustodial parents, including a disproportionate share of those whose children live in poverty, have limited earnings and ability to pay child support. Additionally, child support orders often constitute a high proportion of their limited income (Meyer, Ha, and Hu, 2008; Takayesu, 2011). Children in single-parent households could therefore benefit from a child support system that enables, as well as enforces, noncustodial parents' contributions to their support (Mincy and Sorensen, 1998).

The CSPED Model

In Fiscal Year 2012, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), used its grant-making authority under Section 1115 of the Social Security Act to launch the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED). As described in the program's Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) (DHHS, 2012), OCSE sought to examine the effectiveness of child support-led employment programs for noncustodial parents. The goal of CSPED was to improve the reliable payment of child support in order to improve child well-being and avoid public costs.

OCSE outlined CSPED's key features in the FOA (DHHS, 2012):

- **The demonstration's lead agency must be a child support agency.** The child support agency was expected to manage the day-to-day operations of the demonstration. OCSE hypothesized that employment programs for noncustodial parents would be more likely to deliver improved child support outcomes if they were led by the child support program because these programs had ready access to the target population and they had more at stake than other agencies in seeing child support payments increase.
- **A comprehensive set of core services must be provided.** The core services were to include: (1) case management; (2) employment-oriented services, including job

placement and job retention services; (3) parenting activities using peer support; and (4) enhanced child support services, including review and, if appropriate, adjustment of child support orders. OCSE also required that a domestic violence plan accompany these services.

- **Child support agencies should partner with other agencies to deliver parenting and employment services.** The child support agencies were not expected to provide these services. They were expected to focus on the provision of child support services while their partners, using grant funds, were to deliver parenting and employment services.

OCSE described the target population for CSPED programs as noncustodial parents involved with the child support program who were not regularly paying child support, or who were expected to have difficulty paying, due to lack of regular employment.

As described in the FOA (DHHS, 2012), OCSE constructed these required program elements based on findings from previous demonstrations, including the *Parents' Fair Share* demonstration (Miller and Knox, 2001); the *Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative* (Sorensen and Lippold, 2012); and the state of Texas's *Noncustodial Parent (NCP) Choices* program (Schroeder and Doughty, 2009).

CSPED Grantee and Evaluator Selection

In fall of 2012, OCSE competitively awarded grants to child support agencies in eight states to provide enhanced child support, employment, and parenting services to noncustodial parents who were having difficulty meeting their child support obligations. Grantees chose a total of 18 implementation sites, ranging from one county each in Ohio, Iowa, and California to five counties in Colorado. Upon selection, grantees began a one-year planning process to more fully develop participant recruitment and service delivery systems in consultation with OCSE, and form partnerships with other organizations to provide employment and parenting services. This planning process lasted from October 2012 through September 2013.

Also in 2012, OCSE competitively awarded a cooperative agreement to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families to procure and manage an evaluation of CSPED through an independent third-party evaluator. The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families chose the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, along with its partner Mathematica Policy Research, to conduct the evaluation. The Institute for Research on Poverty also partnered with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center, which worked in conjunction with Mathematica Policy Research to collect data from study participants. Implementation research products from the evaluation include this final report, as well as an interim report documenting CSPED's first year of implementation (Paulsell et al., 2015). Other reports will describe the baseline characteristics of CSPED study participants, the demonstration's impact on key outcomes of interest, and the results of a benefit-cost analysis.

Eligibility, Recruitment, and Enrollment

OCSE provided direction to grantees about the eligibility criteria that should be used to select CSPED participants. OCSE required that grantees enroll participants who had established paternity and were being served by the child support program. OCSE also required grantees to enroll participants who were not regularly paying child support, or were expected to have difficulty making payments, due to lack of regular employment. In addition, OCSE recommended additional criteria to grantees related to the noncustodial parent's ability to work, location relative to services, and child support order. OCSE's guidance provided a common framework from which grantees operationalized their own definitions of key terms. Some grantees added to or modified OCSE's eligibility criteria prior to enrollment; some grantees modified their eligibility criteria after enrollment began.

Grantees used a variety of approaches to recruit the target population in order to enroll them in the study, including referrals from child support staff, the courts, and other agencies as well as through direct recruitment methods such as letters and phone calls from grantee staff. Recruiting a sufficient number of participants to meet OCSE enrollment targets challenged grantees, particularly those that faced external constraints, such as recruiting from only one implementation site, delayed implementation launch, or court-based delays that limited participant flow into the program. Grantees refined their recruitment strategies over the first year to boost enrollment numbers. Strategies included broadening referral sources and recruitment venues, bringing on additional staff, and increasing referrals from child support staff and program participants. Ultimately, child support staff became the most important referral source for CSPED grantees.

Using these eligibility criteria and recruitment strategies, grantees set out to enroll noncustodial parents into CSPED. All grantees, except South Carolina, began enrolling participants in the last quarter of 2013; South Carolina began in June 2014. By the end of study enrollment on September 30, 2016, a total of 10,161¹ noncustodial parents (85 percent of OCSE's target) had enrolled in CSPED. Grantees randomly assigned one-half of enrolled noncustodial parents to receive CSPED services (the treatment group), and the other half to a control group that did not receive the extra services.² Three grantees reached 95 percent or more of their enrollment target.

Characteristics of CSPED Participants

Nearly all noncustodial parents who enrolled in CSPED were men; the mean age was 35 years. Participants generally had low levels of educational attainment—nearly 70 percent had a high school education or less. They were also unlikely to be married, with 14 percent married at the time of study enrollment. The largest racial and ethnic group was non-Hispanic blacks or African

¹In total, 10,173 noncustodial parents enrolled in CSPED. However, the research team determined that 12 study participants did not meet study eligibility criteria and were enrolled in error. These study participants were excluded from the final analysis. The final analytic sample for the evaluation is, therefore, 10,161 study participants.

²The CSPED Evaluation uses *extra services* or *enhanced services* to refer to additional supports provided to participants randomly assigned to the treatment group, and *regular services* in reference to those given to participants randomly assigned to the control group.

Americans (40 percent), followed by non-Hispanic whites (33 percent), and Hispanics (22 percent).

A key potential barrier to employment that many participants faced was a criminal record; 70 percent of participants reported that they had been convicted of a crime. In addition, participants' employment and earnings illustrate their economic disadvantage. For example, just over half (55 percent) reported working during the 30 days prior to enrollment. Further, among those who reported working, their average monthly earnings were below the poverty threshold for a single person.

Leadership, Staffing, and Collaborations

The FOA (DHHS, 2012) required that the child support agency provide leadership for CSPED. In response, each grantee designated an overall project lead who was a Child Support Program Director or Manager. The project lead served as the main champion for CSPED within the child support agency, and communicated policy set by OCSE to CSPED staff and partners. In some sites, the project lead also functioned as the project manager; in others, a second individual was assigned these responsibilities. The project manager, a FOA-required position, was responsible for overseeing day-to-day operations and managing partner relationships. These staff oversaw the work of child support staff within the child support agencies, and the work of site managers in grantees with multiple sites. Child support staff were responsible for providing enhanced child support services and, in some grantees, case management services.

The FOA (DHHS, 2012) also required that grantees partner with and provide grant funding to partners to administer employment, parenting, and domestic violence services. All grantees partnered with more than one partner. Each partner had a partner agency director, responsible for coordinating with the grantee on service implementation. Partners also employed frontline staff to provide employment, parenting, and in some grantees, case management services, to participants depending upon the partner's role.

Grantee structures for delivering services varied. For example, grantees used several models for utilizing child support workers. In one, child support workers were fully dedicated to CSPED. In another, child support workers split their time between CSPED and their regular caseload. Under the third, CSPED participants stayed on a regular child support worker's caseload and a CSPED case manager communicated with the child support worker about the participant's child support service needs. In addition, the grantees differed in their partnership arrangements for the provision of employment and parenting services. Regardless of the model adopted, staffing structures and project leadership generally remained consistent within grantees throughout the demonstration. Programs hired additional staff to address staffing and workload needs, and to replace staff following turnover.

Partnerships were crucial to CSPED's implementation. On staff surveys, CSPED staff reported needing each other to implement services successfully and valuing the services each partner brought to CSPED. To facilitate partnerships, CSPED programs engaged in communication strategies, such as meetings, informal communication, shared case management, and use of the program's service tracking system. CSPED leaders helped facilitate partnerships by engaging

partners, encouraging communication, providing information about expectations, and delineating roles.

CSPED Services

CSPED services were provided from October 2013 through September 2017. Grantees provided services in four core areas: case management, enhanced child support, employment, and parenting.

Case management. Each CSPED participant was to be assigned a case manager to assist them in obtaining the services they needed and assuring that they followed through with the program. Case managers were expected to assess participant's needs, develop personalized service plans, provide individualized assistance to participants throughout their time with the program, and monitor participant progress. Case managers were also expected to work with the program's partners to assure that participants received the right mix of services and adhered to the program.

Enhanced child support services. CSPED was designed to offer a package of enhanced child support services to promote reliable payment of child support. OCSE directed grantees to include expedited review of child support orders, order modification if appropriate, and temporary suspension of discretionary enforcement tools while participants were actively engaged in the program, including the revocation of driver's license suspensions that had been imposed by the child support agency for failure to pay child support. In addition, OCSE encouraged CSPED grantees to offer a compromise of state-owed arrears in exchange for successful program outcomes.

Employment. Employment services were intended to help noncustodial parents obtain and keep stable employment. The services participants received were to be based on their needs and the design of their programs. OCSE expected all programs to include job search assistance, job readiness training, job placement services (including job development and ongoing engagement with employers), job retention services for both the noncustodial parent and the employer, and rapid re-employment services immediately following job loss. OCSE also encouraged grantees to include short-term job skills training, on-the-job training, vocational training, education directly related to employment, and work supports, such as transportation assistance.

Parenting. CSPED parenting services were intended to promote positive child support outcomes by addressing the importance of being a responsible parent. They were to consist primarily of providing parenting classes with peer support. A specific curriculum was not required, but classes had to include the following topics: personal development, responsible fatherhood, parenting skills, relationship skills, and domestic violence. All parenting curricula had to be approved by OCSE and the parenting component of programs was expected to include 16 hours of instruction.

Grantees also provided screening and assessments for domestic violence, as well as referrals for services and information related to domestic violence in group-based classes. Some grantees also provided services related to financial education and parenting time. All grantees adapted service delivery strategies to align with their local contexts and participant needs.

Service Dosage

By the end of the demonstration, participants had received an average (or *mean*) total of 21.7 hours of CSPED services, with 19.1 of these hours occurring in their first year of enrollment. Mean hours of service receipt per participant varied across grantees, ranging from 14 to 37 hours throughout a participant's time in CSPED. In contrast, participants who received the *median* number of service hours (participants in the middle of the distribution) received 14.8 service hours. The mean is higher than the median because it is skewed by participants at the top of the distribution. Across grantees, participants in the 75th percentile received 33 hours of services while those in the 25th percentile received only 5.5 hours of services.

Participants spent nearly one-half of their time throughout the demonstration in employment services, 18 percent in parenting services, 16 percent in enhanced child support services, 12 percent in case management services, and 9 percent in other types of services. Services were delivered in both individual and group modes. About one-half of services were delivered individually and one-half were delivered in a group setting. The time allocation across each service category, average hours per service category, and mode of service delivery varied across grantees. On average, participants who enrolled in CSPED at the start of the demonstration received more service hours than those who enrolled towards the end, as would be expected given their longer exposure to the program.

Key Implementation Lessons

CSPED provided the opportunity to learn from grantees about factors that supported implementation and helped staff overcome implementation challenges. We summarize several of these key lessons below.

Adopting a child support agency leadership structure is consequential. CSPED's defining characteristic was its child support agency leadership. Unlike in previous demonstrations not directed by OCSE, OCSE required grantees to be child support agencies with fiscal and operational responsibilities; parenting and employment services were to be provided by partner agencies. CSPED's child support-led structure provided direct access to the target population, helped ensure focus on child support outcomes, and, ultimately, facilitated cultural change in many child support agencies. However, recruitment and participant engagement were complicated by noncustodial parents' initial mistrust of CSPED as a sincere offer of service. Resistance, especially early on, among some child support staff to CSPED's service-oriented, rather than enforcement-oriented, approach presented another complication.

Recruiting large numbers of participants into a child support-led, service-focused program requires creativity to reach and enroll the target population. Grantees that expected to recruit from a single venue, or primarily through passive means, had to broaden their approach in order to make progress toward enrollment targets. Grantees who faced additional external constraints, such as delayed implementation, delays related to court filings on potentially eligible participants, and recruitment from only one implementation site, had a particularly difficult time meeting OCSE's enrollment targets. Child support staff ultimately became the best recruitment

source for CSPED. Gaining the support of staff and the trust of participants required child support agencies to communicate and demonstrate the benefits of CSPED services.

Cross-agency programs, such as CSPED, require strong partnerships and thoughtful communication strategies. CSPED’s innovative approach to service delivery required strong relationships across partners to recruit participants, coordinate services, and keep participants engaged. Promising coordination strategies included frequent meetings and informal communication, co-location of services, warm handoffs, clear assignment of roles and responsibilities, and presenting the case management team as a “united front” to participants.

Program staffing levels need to sufficiently address growing caseloads, participant needs, and staff turnover. Case managers struggled at times to provide services of the intensity required to meet participants’ complex needs, particularly as caseloads grew. Staff turnover worsened service delivery challenges by creating gaps in service availability and institutional knowledge. Promising remedies included hiring new or leveraging existing staff, cross-training staff to temporarily fill multiple roles, and sharing case management responsibilities.

Services for noncustodial parents behind on their child support obligations should be designed to meet multiple and complex needs. Many participants had complex concerns that limited their ability to engage in services, as well as to secure employment. These included criminal records, lack of work history, and lack of education and training. Programming staff identified participants’ service needs beyond the scope of CSPED, which included assistance with parenting time, obtaining and reinstating driver’s licenses, accessing subsidized employment, and issues related to substance abuse, mental health, and housing. For some participants, these service needs presented barriers to program participation that CSPED programs could not overcome. We recommend that future programs consider whether services beyond the CSPED program design, such as substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment services, and assistance with parenting time, should be made available.

Sustained engagement with program services requires a well-developed and flexible approach. Maintaining participant engagement was a key challenge. Promising strategies for promoting engagement included front-loading group-based classes, co-location of services to facilitate ease of access, and flexibility in service-delivery timing. Grantees also used reminder calls ahead of appointments, follow-up calls after missed appointments, incentives to maintain engagement, and work supports, such as bus passes and gas cards, to overcome attendance barriers.

A new approach to service delivery requires a cultural shift within organizations. For many regular child support workers, who were asked to make referrals to the program, as well as CSPED case managers, who were asked to facilitate service provision, CSPED represented a distinct change from their previous focus on using enforcement actions to secure child support payments. Implementing this new approach required them to undergo a philosophical shift to a more client-centered approach, which differed from how most child support staff were trained. If child support leadership backed this cultural shift, the entire child support office sometimes underwent a cultural shift as child support staff saw the benefit of referring customers to CSPED.

We suggest investments be made to promote and manage such a cultural shift. Leadership and signaling play key roles in facilitating cultural change.

While flexibility in program implementation parameters allows for adjustments based on local needs and resources, it results in variation in service delivery and receipt. OCSE gave CSPED grantees some latitude in determining which noncustodial parents to enroll in CSPED, how to implement services, and dosage of services provided. While this flexibility allowed grantees to adjust to local constraints, needs, and resources, service delivery packages and hours of services received ultimately differed across grantees.

Looking Forward

CSPED's impacts on participant outcomes remain to be determined. The CSPED Impact Report is slated for release in spring of 2019. However, even without knowing CSPED's ultimate effects, the grantees' experiences, as they developed and implemented services, offer valuable insight into the domains of planning for services; identifying, recruiting, and enrolling participants; developing partnerships, leadership, and staffing structures to support service delivery; and service implementation. In confronting challenges, CSPED programs identified and tested a broad array of strategies from which future programs serving similar populations can learn, adapt, and innovate.

Regardless of the challenges they faced, CSPED grantees uniformly believe that the CSPED model helped participants become employed and make their child support payments. In addition, many grantees point to a cultural shift their child support agency experienced during the demonstration period as a key outcome, as described by CSPED project managers: "more empathy and [providing services in] a more client-centered and family-centered manner moving forward," because "staff have changed the way they view noncustodial parents." Specifically, grantees that experienced culture change and buy-in among agency leadership believe this cultural shift will persist, regardless of funding. This attitude, coupled with an interest in continuing to work with partner agencies and make referrals for services in the community, may reveal a key outcome of the demonstration not reflected in program impacts. The effects of this cultural shift may be felt far into the future.