



Maria Cancian And Dan Meyer On Final Results From The CSPED Impact Evaluation

March 2019 podcast episode transcript

Maria Cancian, Dean of the McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University
Daniel R. Meyer, Professor of Social Work, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Chancellor Hello and thanks for joining us for this episode of the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor. This is our March 2019 episode, and our guests for this podcast, Maria Cancian and Daniel Meyer, say that in some ways, the U.S. child support system works least well for the families that need it the most. According to 2015 Census data, just 43 percent of custodial parents reported that they received all child support that was owed to them. The remainder – well over half – said they received no child support payments at all, or just part of what was owed to them during the year.

Cancian and Meyer are the primary investigators of a team that evaluated a large, eight state experiment that aimed to see if a different approach to child support services could lead to better outcomes. The experiment is called the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration or CSPED. And the results of their evaluation, including an impact evaluation and a benefit cost analysis are being released alongside reports describing the implementation of the demonstration and the characteristics of the participants that were released in January of this year.

Cancian is the Dean of the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University and she is also a former director of the Institute for Research on Poverty. Meyer is Professor of Social Work here at the University of Wisconsin and an IRP affiliate. Over the course of the interview, we talked about how this project came to be, what it looked like for child support offices to change their approach to child support services for this demonstration, and what they learned. We hear from Professor Cancian first, followed by Professor Meyer, and when we first started talking, I asked them to tell us more about what CSPED is and what they hoped to learn in the evaluation.

Cancian So CSPED is a large scale random assignment design--that is, an evaluation that aims to ask the questions, can child support agencies take the lead in an innovative program that combines child support services, employment services, and parenting services? And, will that help noncustodial parents who are having trouble meeting their child support obligations to be better able to meet those obligations and have a number of other good impacts on the program and on the families served?

Meyer So it really came about from a recognition that current policy doesn't work very well. That some parents get behind in their child support payments, either because they're having some employment difficulties or maybe they owe an amount of child support that's really hard for them to pay, and so then they get further and further behind in their payments. In the child support system, the main response to that is to threaten and then punish under an assumption that if the system is harsh enough, people will begin to pay. And that system, for many observers, doesn't work very well. So this is an opportunity to try a different approach and see if that different approach can work.

Cancian And one of the key things about CSPED is that it targets noncustodial parents who are behind in their child support or having employment difficulties. Because the current system works quite well for folks who are regularly employed and have an order, which is paid typically through income withholding.

Cancian, And so there's a whole set of folks for whom the current child support systems works well. But then continued there's a whole set for whom it doesn't work very well, and one of the real challenges is that those non-custodial parents are often the parents of children who particularly need child support. They often are noncustodial parents where the custodial parent doesn't have high earnings either, and so it's a problem that the child support system works least well in some ways for the families that need it the most. And those are the families and the noncustodial parents that were really the focus of this intervention.

Chancellor The actual implementation of CSPED began in the fall of 2012 but I asked them to tell us more about what led up to this project taking off.

Meyer The project stems from this recognition that the child support system doesn't work very well and that we should try this alternate approach with these different kinds of services. And so the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement wanted some states to try this alternate approach and so they put out a call for states to respond, and eight states were selected to try this innovative approach. And then the federal government also wanted this to be rigorously evaluated. The idea was that one state should be the evaluator of all of these other state programs, and so there was a call for that as well. Wisconsin bid for that and was selected as the evaluator. And then the State of Wisconsin, Department of Children and Families asked us, IRP, if we would be the main evaluators. We partnered with Mathematica Policy Research and with the UW Survey Center to carry out the evaluation.

Chancellor Cancian and Meyer have been collaborating on child support research at the Institute for Research on Poverty since the 1990s and, in their time working together, they've completed a number of large-scale child support policy evaluations. So I asked them what it is about this issue of child support that continues to sustain their interest not just for a multi-year project like CSPED, but for a large portion of their academic careers.

Cancian So I'm the new addition to this team so I've only been working with Dan on this for 25 years or so. And I think we were maybe both assistant professors when we started this? We were both younger than we are now and less experienced, and I think in a lot of ways that solidified a particular approach to kind of large scale analysis of a policy intervention. But it built on, really, decades on decades of work that had been done here at IRP by people like Irv Garfinkel and Margo Melli, and the infrastructure and other investments that had been made by IRP and people like Pat Brown. And so the other piece, I think, of that history is that we were used to working with just a tremendous number of really strong colleagues who brought different perspectives and strengths to the team. And one of the real challenges of this CSPED project has been managing this very large scale collaborative project with lots of different interested parties, and I think that drew on that past experience.

Meyer I think the history - for me this is a topic that I've been interested in for long time and partly it's a topic that has sustained my interest because I'm interested in families and their economic well-being. In the U.S., a lot of economically vulnerable families are single-parent families, so trying to think about ways that policies can improve or affect their economic well-being. And child support is one of the places that to look for that. It's also interesting because it brings some fundamental questions to the fore. What do we expect of families and what do we expect of the government? What do we expect of a parent who is not living with their children, what do we expect of a parent who is living with their children? What do we expect about how that decision about where those children live should be made? And in all of this for me there's an underlying theme of, how can we ensure the wellbeing of children in potentially difficult situations? That's kind of the big picture framing that got me and I think maybe both of us interested in the topic.

Cancian And I think one of the really nice things and different things about CSPED is that we're looking at it from the perspective of noncustodial parents, which is typically fathers. And a lot of the work that we have one has started from moms. So I think more and more we're asking questions like the ones that Dan highlighted about what do we expect of parents and how are those expectations different for custodial and noncustodial parents? To what extent are those gendered expectations? And how might

Cancian, continued those gendered expectations be changing or evolving? So, one of the things we look at in CSPED is noncustodial parents attitudes about their responsibility for children, and the way that they parent, and the way that they interact with other parents. And one of the questions we ask is how much time do they spend with their children, and is that as much time as they would like to spend? And I think those questions even reflect changes in our attitudes about the system, that it's not just about getting money from dad and care from mom. Over the last couple of decades we've started to really expect that moms are going to be working, not just taking care of their kids and we're kind of starting to think about the fact that fathers may have obligations and also maybe rights and desires to be active parents in ways beyond just providing financial support. Or at least, we're thinking more about how financial support and emotional and caretaking support are related. And so CSPED really gave an opportunity to look at those and more generally, the child support program is more generally the primary program targeting vulnerable families that is typically focused on fathers. It focuses on non-custodial parents, but those are most typically fathers. And that's unusual, so it provides a different framework and it provides maybe an opportunity to reach out to a population that in a lot of ways has been underserved.

Chancellor Meyer and Cancian say that noncustodial parents – and this is especially true of parents in the CSPED intervention – often have quite negative impressions and experiences with the child support services that they've received.

Meyer So, we know from ethnographic work that fathers feel like the system does not look out for them, noncustodial parents, like it's really on the side of their ex-partners. And like the system is focused on only enforcing monetary transfers, not helping them have better relationships, so treating them just as a great big wallet without recognizing the interpersonal connections. So, in many ways, this is a project that starts with a group of people who are quite skeptical of the services that are trying to be provided. So, we weren't certain, and the designers of the intervention were not certain, that they would be able to overcome that skepticism and negative past experiences and develop a more positive and collaborative and working together relationship between a child support worker and noncustodial parent.

Cancian And that required change on both sides. So, we're here to talk about the impact findings, but the impact findings really build on the implementation analysis that was done. And one of the key reasons that we were so interested in that was that this really did require a culture change in a lot of ways. I don't want to suggest that this was something that wasn't occurring, and then CSPED happened, and all of the sudden it flipped. But there's been a real evolution over the last, say, ten years, and the thinking of child support enforcement I think away from a pure enforcement and more accounting kind of system, to thinking more broadly about not just enforcing but also, to use Ron Mincy's term, enabling noncustodial parents to meet their obligations. That's been uneven over time and very uneven across jurisdictions, but part of what CSPED was, was an ability for grantees in eight different states to embrace the promise of that new approach and then really try to implement it and see the ways in which it did and didn't work.

Chancellor As they mentioned earlier, the evaluation took place in eight states and the states varied in terms of how many counties provided the services. In Ohio, Iowa, and California, just one county provided services, while Texas and Wisconsin provided services in two counties, South Carolina and Tennessee in three, and Colorado in five counties. And each of these sites were to offer certain services and components as part of the demonstration.

Meyer So the office of child support enforcement had some parameters, some suggestions, some things that were required and some things that were suggested about what this program should look like. And among the things that it had to do was that it had to be a child support-led intervention and that there had to be several components. One component was there needed to be a case manager. And typically that was done within the child support office and they often set up a separate CSPED unit that contained people who were providing a great deal of one on one assessment and services and

Meyer, continued helping people navigate a variety of services they needed.

Cancian And then one of the key questions is that if they did that, would they come? If you rolled out a program where you provided this, would noncustodial parents think that this was a logical place to get support? To talk about the challenges? To find a path to employment services? To engage with parenting services? Or was the kind of packaging or the door that they needed to walk through actually a problem? And I think one of the things that we have found in this evaluation is that child support agencies were remarkably effective in doing that even though they did have to confront challenges and they were successful often when they relied on community partners that had different profiles. But we also found that noncustodial parents' attitudes about the child support system really were remarkably transformed over a relatively short period of time in the face of a relatively modest intervention. We saw very big impacts on fathers' attitudes about the system, which we hope over time will be a stepping stone towards more productive engagement with that system.

Chancellor Again, the two main packages of services through CSPED were parenting services and employment services. And the CSPED program was targeted to noncustodial parents who were struggling to pay their child support and had difficulty finding and keeping good paying jobs.

Meyer And so those employment services, again depended a little bit on what was provided within that location, but included everything from some assessment of what people's skills are, to some assistance with the job search process to there was in every site a worker who tried to identify jobs that would be appropriate and bring that information back to noncustodial parents. So, this wasn't just an idea that you give people a little help with their resume and then send them out. It was intended to be a more robust approach than that. And then another service was the parenting services. So the parenting services looked a little bit different in each of the these eight states, but in general they covered a variety of topics like how to engage with their kids when you're living apart. How you and your ex-partner can work together to provide the right kind of environment for your kids. Some things that are basic child development. What do you expect from a two year old? Can a seven year old make their own choices about different areas of their life or is that something you need to provide more structure? So some basic things about, what does it mean to be a parent? And then there were these components that were peer support. Again, mostly men, so it's mostly a father talking to another father about how hard it is to be a dad when my kids are elsewhere. And maybe, how hard it is to be a dad when I've had kids with more than one person and how do I try to engage with all those kids, differently and maybe when I have different relationships with each of those moms? And then in every place there were also some services dealing with domestic violence and ensuring safety. They didn't want to bring noncustodial parents to a family where there were concerns about the safety of children. So those were services that were sometimes the case management inside the child support system, the employment and parenting were generally delivered by community partners.

Chancellor And a key thing here is that through the CSPED model used in the demonstration, the child support system itself worked differently.

Meyer Often the current approach is you're behind in your payments, we send you a letter. The letter warns you to start paying or else. And then what follows with the "or else" can be everything from "or else" we'll suspend your driver's license or else we'll take away your fishing license. So a variety of penalties can occur. It might be 'you need to come to a court hearing to make a plan for how you're going to pay off this back amount of support that you owe, and if you don't show up in court, then we have the authority to arrest you'. So there's a variety of things that typically happen to people who are behind and the CSPED services tried to rethink what should happen when somebody's behind, and maybe instead of starting with punishment, we should start with an intervention that asks people what's going on, tries to provided services appropriate to the problem. So that was a different kind of child support service approach.

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Cancian, continued And part of that was thinking about right sizing orders. Part of what child support does is establish expectations about how much every noncustodial parent is going to be providing to their children on a regular basis. And the central goal of the intervention was to increase reliable child support and the understanding that I think many people have is that sometimes noncustodial parents are less likely to regularly pay support because they become overwhelmed by perhaps the debt or the level of child support order that they have. That's one of the concerns, one of the hypotheses out there. One of the things that happened in all of these agencies, some places more than others is that child support orders for folks that were assigned to the treatment group, or the extra services group in the parlance of CSPED, was that their child support orders were evaluated and in some cases they were reduced. In some cases they were increased, but more often they were reduced or what we would consider to be "right-sized." So I think that's useful to recognize because when we're evaluating the outcomes for CSPED, what the designers were hoping would happen is that folks would get appropriately-sized orders and parenting services and employment services and that would cause them to pay more regularly to comply with their child support order. It wasn't clear whether orders should go up or down, though I think given the target population, which was noncustodial parents who were having trouble with employment and child support, we probably would have hypothesized that orders would go down.

Chancellor So, in the CSPED impact evaluation that's being released, one of the questions the evaluation team addressed was, "what would happen if child support orders went down?" If orders went down, would the actual payments go down just as much?

Cancian If that were the case, then that's probably not a win. In the most optimistic, you might think that orders would go down and payments would actually go in the other direction. People would be so enthusiastic about these lower orders that they would pay even more than they used to. Or it might be somewhere in between. And that's that what we actually found, was somewhere in between. We found that child support orders fell modestly by about \$15 on average per month, but we found that payments fell considerably less than orders did. They fell by \$4 or 5 per month on average group when you compare people in extra services to the regular services group. We didn't find that a decline in orders suddenly increased the amount of money that custodial parents were getting. But we did find that an intervention that substantially ratcheted down these kinds of punitive enforcement actions, so much less of a stick, and reduced orders didn't have as much of an impact in reducing payments. In some sense, it's a glass half empty, half full -- so leave it to listeners to decide how much of a success that was. And, as I mentioned before, that also was associated with a big improvement in noncustodial parents' understanding and their evaluation of child support services, which we would be hopeful -- first of all, it's good when citizens feel like they're being well-served, but also we hoped that that would lead to more productive engagement with the system going forward.

Meyer So we just talked about the impacts on child support orders going down, child support payments going down a little not as much, and satisfaction with child support services, which went up substantially. There were a couple other areas where they were hoping to see an impact and one of them was employment and earnings. We did not see employment effects. We saw some small earnings effects. People who follow a wide variety of efforts to try to increase employment and earnings for any individual with low skills know that that's a very hard job and most of those evaluations result in very small or no impacts. And, similarly, this evaluation resulted in no impacts on employment and low impacts on earnings. What's more encouraging is the impacts on parenting. We did measure several different parenting impacts. We decided before we looked at the data that the most important thing that we were trying to assess was a sense of responsibility for children and there we see a significant impact. We also saw some other impacts, an increase in contact, a decline in harsh parenting, so that was an area, a parenting area, where we do see some impacts from CSPED.

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Cancian The way this worked differed a little bit across grantees. Some grantees had more involvements in the court process. Some folks, the random assignment process was more in the child support office. But in general, because this was conducted in compliance with human subjects rules and all of that, people were invited to participate and they were recruited in a number of ways. They were invited to participate and they were told that they had a 50-50 chance of either receiving regular, business as usual services or enhanced, or extra services, that would include parenting and child support services and employment services. And then they filled out a short baseline survey that they did by telephone with the UW Survey Center. That allowed us to kind of understand the situation of these noncustodial parents and to understand things like -- about two-thirds of them had had children with more than one other parent. That 60 or 70 percent of them had some criminal justice involvement. Some of that came from the baseline, some from administrative data, so we collected that information and then they were randomly assigned to either be in the extra services or the regular services. Those that were in the regular services were typically given some printed information about things that were available in the community, but they weren't provided with extra services. Those in extra services, depending on the location, either immediately got some case management and some referrals or it might have been - the process varied from place to place.

Chancellor And Cancian and Meyer say that when we think about this evaluation, it's really important to realize that all of the agencies that put in a proposal to provide CSPED were interested in providing this more robust set of child support services.

Cancian They were interested in considering what impact might have of both enforcing and enabling noncustodial parents to pay their support. So we're pulling from not a random sample of child support agencies. But then, by engaging in this, to some extent we would expect the culture, if you will, of the office to change. And in some places, there was a separate unit that was doing this and in other places it was a little more diffuse. So, one of the challenges of a random assignment design is that there are some changes that might be in the air that might affect both regular services and extra services folks. Now, we did see a large and differential level of satisfaction between extra and regular services folks, so obviously, those in the regular services presumably didn't get exactly the same treatment as extra services. But there is that difference. And then the other difference is that there are services available -- the other challenge is that there are other services available in the community so there are folks who got some parenting services or employment services or other things who were in the regular services group. So we're not testing what we hoped would be given to nothing -- because the folks in the regular services group got some services and the folks in the extra services group, some of them got the 16 hours of parenting services they were supposed to get, but many of them did not, most of them did not get the full. Employment services were more than a resume workshop in many places, but they typically did not include trial jobs or subsidized jobs or some of the more kind of expansive employment services. And they didn't include things that, you know, in many places there may not have been access to criminal justice expungement services. We have some sense, some evidence from the implementation analysis that things like mental health services that might have been very useful or substance treatment wasn't available. So there was a set of services that were available to those in the extra services group and I think some people would call it a major expansion. I think other folks say, well, you know, it's a pretty modest intervention, and I think that's reflected in the results of the benefit-cost analysis.

Meyer So I want to highlight the advantages of the random assignment experiment even though many listeners will understand this. The reason this is so popular and seen as such an important evaluation tool is because if we only look at people who received services, we don't really know that outcomes that we observe are due to or caused by that intervention. So to understand what the impact of an intervention is, you need to compare, in an ideal world, someone who received that service with that same someone, or someone exactly like them, who didn't receive that service. So what random assignment gives you is, through the process of random assignment, and with enough people, that there is essentially, exactly that same person who didn't get the service and that person who did get the service. Or at least, who was offered the service. So, following Maria's point, what you have is a great comparison between a group of people who are offered extra services and a group of people who are offered business as usual, the regular services.

Cancian And we had 10,000 -- a little bit more than 10,000 participants, so we had what Dan noted, which is enough individuals that we could be confident that there weren't important underlying differences. And of course we did statistical tests to confirm that random assignment had worked and that there weren't significant differences in the baseline characteristics of the folks who are participating and not. And that was really key, and it was key in that I think there are two threats to evaluations that don't have random assignment and both of them I think are really salient here. So people in most of these sites had to volunteer in some sense to participate. And folks who volunteer are often motivated to change and they're often in a bad spot, which is part of their motivation. And so they often do better later, or they might not do as well, because they were kind of desperate and that's why they volunteered. The other thing that happens is the world around them changes. And in all of the sites where we did, where we implemented CSPED, there were pretty substantial declines in unemployment over the period of the evaluation and so we might have expected there to be changes in earnings and employment and maybe child support, just because the economy was changing. And actually we see that when we look at the sample as a whole. But because we had this random assignment, we were able to not ask, 'did the earnings for CSPED participants go up?', but rather we were able to ask, did the earnings of CSPED participants go up by more than the earnings of that essentially identical person who was assigned to the regular services group?

Chancellor The evaluation team wrote a report -- which is available to everyone on the IRP website -- that covers a wide range of characteristics of the people who participated in CSPED.

Meyer And this is really important because this is a group of folks who we don't know very much about. Who, in the past have been quite reluctant to respond to surveys or reluctant, if they are responding to surveys, to acknowledge that they're a noncustodial parent. It's an area where not much is known systematically. This is one of the features, really of CSPED, is being able to contribute to what the lives of noncustodial parents who are having difficulty with their child support are like. So, a couple of things just to highlight, so in the last month, only about half of them had worked for pay and that group earned about five hundred dollars, so that's way below the poverty line, and is not enough to cover rent in many of the cities where we were studying. So, very low economic circumstances and substantial barriers to try to improve their work. So, 60-70% with criminal records, a large number with transportation difficulties, some who acknowledge difficulties with the right kinds of skills for jobs.

Chancellor And, in addition to this wide range of barriers for these noncustodial parents, many of them also had a wide range of other responsibilities.

Meyer I think the designers of the child support system in the very early days had in mind two parents who lived together and they might have had one or two kids together. And what we see here is that many of these noncustodial parents have a child that they live with, I think 30 percent, and then children who they don't live with. As Maria said, two-thirds roughly -- kids with more than one partner, so if they're trying to spread these very limited resources, these very limited prospects for the future across a wide range of kids and it's a very difficult situation.

Chancellor And Cancian and Meyer say that if we are going to offer a more holistic approach to the child support system -- one that has the potential to help noncustodial parents address the challenges in their lives -- it will likely require that child support workers themselves have the flexibility and discretion to react to noncustodial parents' individual situations.

Cancian One of the things we've seen in other work that we've done and in related work is workers who feel like when something's going wrong, they can make a phone call or they can take time to reach out to a noncustodial parent and say why aren't you paying? Oh, you have a health problem or oh, you lost your job or this, they can maybe hold back on some enforcement actions and give that noncustodial parent a chance to catch up, which kind of might sound to somebody like that's common sense -- well that can't be your approach if your caseloads are so large and if the enforcement is so automated that that's not possible.

Chancellor And, more broadly, they say that one of their hopes is that services like those in CSPED might be part of a growing set of efforts to make child support offices more approachable to noncustodial parents.

Cancian So I think one of the hopes that CSPED will contribute to is that partly because of the new federal regulations around child support, and partly because of a whole bunch of kind of related but not directly to CSPED but related to this movement, a bunch of efforts by OCSE and individual states and jurisdictions to do things like develop apps that will remind noncustodial parents that their child support payment is due. Or give people better access to the system to make it easier for folks to have that kind of positive relationship. To think some of the work that's being done, to look at behavioral responses. And, how do you write a letter to somebody who is first being introduced to the child support system, or who is behind, to signal to that person that engaging with the system might actually help them get ahead? So that noncustodial parents don't just throw the envelope from child support in the garbage as soon as they see the return address because they know it's just going to be more bad news? One of the hopes is that the implementation analysis, the baseline characteristics report, as well as the impact analysis will all kind of move us forward in better understanding this population of noncustodial parents who are struggling so that we can design programs that are more effective and help them move ahead, but also help them provide more effectively for their families.

Chancellor Clearly, CSPED is a large and complicated project – and Cancian and Meyer say there a couple main areas that they want to highlight that helped to make this project possible.

Cancian So this is a complicated project that has a lot of moving parts and I think there's at least two things that would be useful to highlight. One is none of these data could have been collected, this couldn't have been done, had it not been for the participants obviously, who were willing to provide their time and to be part of this project not knowing whether they were going to be randomly assigned to get more services or not. But then, the agencies that were willing to take on all this new work and to be scrutinized -- to have researchers in there asking them annoying questions because we didn't understand what they did, to take surveys, to participate in interviews, to do all of that. The leadership of these agencies, who are really working hard on their regular programs, taking on the added burden of kind innovating -- and again, innovating under a microscope, with people asking you what you're doing and why you're doing it. I also think this project is a nice example of what you can do when you have a university-state partnership. We worked very closely with our colleagues at the Department of the Children and Families in Wisconsin in designing the evaluation, getting their input on what was policy relevant and appropriate, but then we had the benefit of being at the Institute for Research on Poverty with a lot of technical expertise and then partnering with Mathematica and the UW Survey Center to bring some cutting edge technology and some approaches to the analysis that really enriched what we were able to do and how we'll be able to use these data going forward. So this builds on a long tradition at IRP and elsewhere but especially at a state land grant institution of doing work that moves scholarship forward but that is fundamentally designed to inform better policy.

Chancellor Thanks so much to Maria Cancian and Dan Meyer for talking about CSPED with us. If you're interested in learning more about CSPED and the evaluation, the evaluation report and benefit-cost analysis report were just released and are available on the IRP website along with the baseline characteristics report and implementation report. This podcast was supported as part of a grant from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at the Department of Health and Human Services, but its contents don't necessarily reflect any views or positions of ASPE, any other agency of the federal government, or the Institute for Research on Poverty. To catch new episodes of the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast, you can subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, or Google Play Podcasts. You can also find all of our past episodes on the Institute for Research on Poverty website. Thanks for listening.

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