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Effects of Medicaid Birth Cost Recovery Policy Changes on Child Support Outcomes

2020–2022 Child Support Policy Research Agreement: Task 8

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BACKGROUND

In 2018, nearly 40 percent of U.S. children were born to unmarried parents, representing a nearly twofold increase over the past three decades (Martin et al., 2021; Livingston, 2016). Recent data also demonstrate that approximately 31 percent of U.S. households with children under 18 are headed by single parents and the same is true of 33 percent of Wisconsin households with children under 18.[1] Compared to children living in two-parent families, children in single-parent families are more likely to experience worse health, cognitive, and emotional outcomes (Kane, 2016; Osborne, 2007; Buckles & Price, 2013). Unmarried birthing parents[2] are also more likely to have adverse pregnancy outcomes and experience worse health and relationship stability, as well as lower paternal involvement. This is particularly true among parents with low socioeconomic status (Osborne, 2007; Buckles & Price, 2013; Amato, 2005). Such inequities are the result of social policies that both privilege marriage and exacerbate the costs of unmarried parenting (Teti et al., 2017; Downey, Crowder, & Kemp, 2017). Identifying these policies and their disparate impacts is a critical first step towards improving the health and well-being of low-income unmarried families.

Understanding birth cost recovery. In the present report, we focus on one such social policy that could have implications for low-income unmarried parents and their children: Birth cost recovery. Birth cost recovery (BCR) is the practice of billing unmarried, non-custodial fathers for childbirth costs paid for by the state Medicaid program (Lavigne, 2019). Several

[1]Note: This statistic captures households with own children of the householder under 18 years of age. Reference: U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). S1101| Households and Families [data table for 2021]. *2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.* Retrieved from U.S. Census Bureau, https://data.census.gov/table?q=DP02&t=Families+and+Living+Arrangements&g=040XX00US55, April 26, 2023.

[2]Birthing parent refers to the person who has or will give birth, and can refer to cisgender women, nonbinary persons, and transgender men.

states, including Kansas, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have interpreted federal Medicaid law in a way that allows them to impose financial liability on unmarried fathers (Lavigne, 2019; Title 42 U.S. Code § 1396). Although policy implementation varies, an unmarried pregnant person is generally required to identify the father of their child upon enrolling in prenatal Medicaid. In turn, the state embeds a portion of delivery costs within the child support order after the child is born (Peterson et al., 2018). Some states will also disenroll otherwise eligible postpartum birthing parents from Medicaid if they fail to identify the father. While states can technically hold married fathers liable, in practice, only unmarried fathers are subject to BCR (Peterson et al., 2018).

Birth cost recovery is a longstanding policy in Wisconsin. Wisconsin is the top enforcer of BCR in the United States, having collected $106 million in BCR funds from 2011 to 2015 (State of Wisconsin, Department of Children and Families. Bureau of Child Support).[3] County Child Support Agencies (CSAs) have wide discretion about whether to pursue repayment; the most common BCR judgment historically totals about half of average regional birth costs (≈$3,162 in 2017) (Lavigne, 2019; Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2020). CSAs retain 15 percent of all recovered funds and state and federal Medicaid keep the remainder. While the state can remove birthing parents from (non-pregnancy) BadgerCare 60 days postpartum[4] if they fail to disclose paternity, birthing parents can request "Good Cause Exemptions" for situations like domestic violence. Importantly, a 2018 rule change instructed

[3]Birth Tax Collections by State in Millions-2015, https://www.safetyweb.org/healthwatchwi/birth-tax.html

[4]The Wisconsin legislature recently voted to expand postpartum Medicaid/BadgerCare Plus from 60 to 90 days, though the Department of Health Services has not yet implemented this change https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/medicaid/waiver-postpartum.htm.

CSAs to avoid pursuing BCR in cases where parents were cohabiting (i.e., the "intact families rule") (Peterson et al., 2018).

The impacts of birth cost recovery are uncertain. In Wisconsin, there is an ongoing debate about whether to strengthen or eliminate BCR (Assembly Bill 103, 2019; Jones, 2019). BCR supporters assert that the policy promotes paternal responsibility and that the funds recovered support the solvency and sustainability of state Medicaid and safety net programs (Gunn, 2019). In contrast, critics of the policy contend that BCR impedes paternal involvement and leads to additional financial strain for low-income families (Lavigne, 2019; Peterson et al., 2018; Roulet & Rust, 2004). However, we have very little robust evidence on the effects of BCR on the well-being of low-income families—leaving policymakers little guidance for proposing and implementing policies that promote optimal outcomes among this population.

Recent policy changes allow us to begin assessing the impacts of birth cost recovery on low-income unmarried families in Wisconsin. Historically, Dane and Milwaukee Counties collected more BCR funds than all other Wisconsin counties.[5] However, in January 2020, Dane County ceased collecting BCR funds while Milwaukee County opted to continue BCR collection (Milwaukee County Journal of Proceedings, 2020; Parisi, 2019). This policy change provides an unprecedented opportunity to rigorously investigate the effects of BCR. As such, we have leveraged the comparison opportunities provided by this policy change to assess the effect of BCR, and its elimination, on the well-being of birthing parents, fathers, and children in low-income unmarried families.

[5]Birth Cost Recovery Collections and Payments to Counties for the Calendar Years Ending 12/31/2011–12/31/2016 State of Wisconsin-Department of Children and Families, Bureau of Child Support, https://www.safetyweb.org/healthwatchwi/birth-tax.html

In this report we focus on the impact of ending birth cost recovery on outcomes related to the establishment and payment of child support orders. Previous research has shown that orders for repayment of birth costs contribute to reduced child support compliance for low-income fathers (Bartfeld, 2005), so it is important to investigate whether the ending of birth cost recovery orders in Dane County led to increased payments of child support orders, and related outcomes such as paternity establishment and formal labor market employment.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Methodology

To determine the changes in outcomes associated with ending birth cost recovery practices, we compare two groups of BadgerCare recipients who gave birth over the period 2016 to 2021: 1) individuals giving birth on Medicaid who had birth costs imposed (i.e., those living outside of Dane County *before* 2020 and those living outside of Dane County during the entire period 2016–2021), and 2) with those for whom no new birth costs were assigned (those residing in Dane County in 2020 and later years).

One important consideration is that there are important demographic and policy differences across counties that could influence child support-related outcomes. For example, Dane County differs from other Wisconsin counties (e.g., poverty rates and average education levels) and likely enforced birth cost recovery policies differently prior to the 2020 policy change. Even within Dane County there are differences between the economic and policy situations before and after the January 2020 policy change, most notably the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and the many changes to government practices that resulted.

Given these circumstances, we adopt a statistical methodology that allows us to control for the cross-county and cross-time differences that would obscure the changes in outcomes due to the change in birth cost recovery policy. This methodology, called difference-in-differences estimation, allows us to look at the change in outcomes pre-2020 to post-2020 that occur in the treatment county that experienced the birth cost recovery policy change (Dane County) and compare that to the change in outcomes that occur in the control counties (remaining counties in the state). Using this strategy controls for all fixed differences in county characteristics and all statewide year-to-year changes in other policies or the socioeconomic environment, including the general effects of the pandemic. We also include additional control variables in the model to account for changes in case and county characteristics over the time period such as birthing parent's education and county-level poverty (see *Control variables* subsection below).

In order to ensure our results are robust, we also use the synthetic control method. The synthetic control method is being used to figure out what happened after a policy was changed by creating a synthetic "control" group that is similar to the group that was actually affected by the policy. In this case, we use the synthetic control method to figure out what happened after Dane County ended the birth cost recovery program in 2020. To do this, this approach involved matching counties on baseline characteristics (i.e., characteristics prior to 2020) and then comparing child support outcomes before and after birth cost recovery cessation. These characteristics included: birthing parent's age at the time of the birth, birthing parent's education, race/ethnicity, earnings in year before the birth occurred, county-by-year level poverty rate, unemployment rate, percentage of the population that is Non-Hispanic (NH) Black, and percentage of the population that is NH White. This allows us to compare counties that are more

similar to Dane County (i.e., comparing apples to apples vs. apples to oranges) but did not experience birth cost cessation to Dane County that actually did experience this policy change.[6]

While both difference-in-differences and synthetic control approaches can be used to estimate the effect of the ending birth cost recovery practices, they rely on different underlying assumptions. Difference-in-differences assumes that if nothing had changed (e.g., no birth cost recovery cessation), the groups that were affected by the policy change and the groups that were not would have had similar outcomes over time. Synthetic control methods generally assume that the potential outcomes (e.g., child support) in the 'control' counties that experienced no policy change are linearly related over time. The difference-in-differences approach is often preferred when it is feasible because it can provide a more straightforward interpretation of the treatment effect (i.e., how a policy change impacted an outcome or outcomes of interest).

Data

Data used for these analyses was drawn from the Wisconsin Administrative Data Core (WADC), a collection of matched administrative data from several state data systems, including data on Medicaid enrollment and Medicaid claims, child support, and earnings reported to the state Unemployment Insurance system. We appended child support outcome data from 2022, to allow us to observe outcomes for at least a full year (and up to two years) after each child's birth. From WADC2021, we selected all children born from 2016–2021 with a birthing parent identified (N=237,240). We also limited our analyses to those children who were that birthing parent's only child born during the time period (N=122,151), and whose birthing parent had an

[6]The synthetic control method will choose a distinct group of control counties for each outcome. As an illustration, let's consider the outcome of "any child support the birthing parent received 12 months after birth." In this case, the synthetic control method has identified the following counties as controls: Brown, Calumet, Door, Marathon, Milwaukee, and St. Croix as they are the most 'similar' to Dane County relative to other counties.

active Medicaid enrollment in the month of the birth (N=83,462). Finally, we removed a small number of births that were missing county locations (N=83,102) and children whose birthing parent was reported as having a spouse in the household at the time of the birth (N=62,280).

Control variables. As we note above, we include controls in the model to account for changes in case and county characteristics over the time period including the birthing parent's age at the time of the birth, birthing parent's education, race/ethnicity, and earnings in year before the birth occurred. Finally, we include county-by-year level controls: poverty rate, unemployment rate, and percentage of the population that is Non-Hispanic (NH) Black. Ordinary least squares regressions are used to estimate continuous outcomes, while linear probability models are utilized for binary outcomes.

Outcome measures. We examine whether birth cost recovery policy changes were associated with the following outcomes: 1) changes in paternity establishment; 2) child support payments, receipts, and compliance with orders; and 3) paternal employment and earnings.

First, we measure whether a child had paternity established by 6, 12, 18, or 24 months (yes/no). Next, we assess child support-related outcomes, including whether the birthing parent received any child support net of support retained by the state of Wisconsin (yes/no) and the total amount of child support received by the birthing parent (in U.S. dollars). We also assess whether the father paid any child support (yes/no), the total amount that the father paid (including to the state of Wisconsin, in U.S. dollars) and the extent to which a father complied with child support orders (percentage of child support paid relative to child support owed). **We distinguish between these two sets of measures because the first set (*child support received*) captures direct benefits to birthing parents and their families alone, while the second set (*paid child support*) also includes payments to the state which may not actually benefit families.** Similar

to the paternity establishment measures, we assess each of the above child support outcomes at 6, 12, 18, and 24 months after the birth of the (relevant) child.

Finally, we capture paternal employment and earnings. Specifically, we assess whether the father was employed in an Unemployment Insurance (UI)-covered job in Wisconsin at any time during the year after the child was born (yes/no), and the total earnings during that period (in U.S. dollars).

The resulting sample sizes are shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Study Sample

	Child Support Outcomes		Father Employment Outcomes	
	2016–2019	2020–2021	2016–2019	2020–2021
Dane County	2,672	1,325	1,879	772
Black	703	347	522	211
White	1,029	445	834	322
Hispanic	567	328	269	113
Other Counties	40,450	17,833	28,877	10,013
Black	8,935	3,978	6,432	1,692
White	19,692	8006	15,638	5,706
Hispanic	7,152	3,767	3,834	1,550
Total	62,280		41,541	

Note: Father's employment and earnings can only be observed when father has been identified (i.e., for those fathers whose paternity has been established).

Paternity Establishment and child support outcomes were constructed using KIDS data from 2016 to 2022, allowing for an analysis covering one year after the child's birth and up to two years for a subsample of those children born in 2020. Paternal employment and earnings outcomes were constructed using data from UI wage records covering 2016 to 2021 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Outcome Measures and Definitions

Outcome Measures	Definitions
Paternity Establishment	
Paternity Established (By 6, 12, 18, or 24 months)	Whether the child had paternity established by 6, 12, 18, or 24 months after birth.
Child Support	
Any CS Received (Though 6, 12, 18, or 24 months) Total CS Received (Though 6, 12, 18, or 24 months)	Based on total amount of child support that the mother received as payee across all active cases in the first 6, 12, 18, or 24 months after the child's birth, does not include any child support retained by the state.
Any CS Paid (Though 6, 12, 18, or 24 months) Total CS Paid (Though 6, 12, 18, or 24 months)	Based on the total amount of child support paid on all child support cases where birthing parent was payee, in the first 6, 12, 18, or 24 months after the child's birth. Includes amounts distributed to payee and to state.
Any CS Owed (Though 6, 12, 18, or 24 months) Total CS Owed (Though 6, 12, 18, or 24 months)	Based on total amount of current child support owed on all child support cases where birthing parent was payee, in the first 6, 12, 18, or 24 months after the child's birth. Includes amounts owed to payee and to state.
Child Support Compliance (Though 6, 12, 18, or 24 months)	Based on the total amount of child support paid as a percentage of the total amount of current support owed, on all child support cases where there was an order with birthing parent as payee, in the first 6, 12, 18, or 24 months after the child's birth. Birthing parents with payments greater than 100% of the owed amount are coded as 100%. Includes amounts distributed to payee and to state.
Employment and Earnings Measures	
Father Employed (In Year After Birth) Father's Earnings (In Year After Birth)	Based on total earnings in the 4 full quarters after birth reported to Wisconsin Unemployment Insurance system for established fathers of sample children. Employment is indicated for any father with positive earnings during the four quarters.

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

Prevalence of Birth Cost Recovery

To provide initial context for the magnitude of birth cost recovery orders, we describe the prevalence of such orders and their mean amount (results not shown but available upon request). An examination of the birth cost recovery orders for the 44,779 births in this sample during 2016–2019 (before the Dane County policy change and before the COVID-19 pandemic), shows

that, in the two years after birth, 28.1 percent of children had a birth cost recovery order in place, with Dane County having a higher order rate—35.6% versus 27.5% in the rest of the state. It is not unexpected that many individuals in the sample may not have had a birth cost recovery order given the complexity of the legal system and that various factors such as parental cohabitation or lack of paternity establishment likely decrease the likelihood of having a birth cost recovery order. Average order amounts were $2426 in Dane County and $1774 in other counties. This sums to about $2.4 million (or $600,000 per birth year) owed in birth cost recovery charges in Dane County and about $20 million (or $5 million per birth year) owed in the rest of the state (note that this is an undercount of the full BCR charges, since it does not include BCR orders set more than 2 years after the birth and our analysis sample only includes birthing parents with single births in the time period).

Outcomes Before and After Policy Change

As an initial analysis we simply compare the outcomes for Medicaid births in our sample that were not subject to birth cost recovery (those occurring in Dane County in 2020 and 2021), with those who were still subject to cost recovery policies (i.e., those occurring in Dane County before 2020, and those occurring in other counties both before and after 2020).

Overall trends. Table 3 displays mean outcomes separately for Dane County births and other county births, before 2020 and after the Jan 2020 policy change.

Table 3. Comparison of Mean Outcomes Pre-Post 2020 in Dane and Other Counties

	Dane County Pre-2020 Births	Dane County 2020–2021 Births	Dane County Pre-Post Change	Other County Pre-2020 Births	Other County 2020–2021 Births	Other County Pre-Post Change
Paternity Establishment						
By 6 months after birth	47.6%	43.1%	-4.5%	47.0%	41.1%	-5.9%
By 12 months	67.0%	57.4%	-9.6%	61.2%	51.6%	-9.5%
By 18 months	70.5%	63.8%	-6.7%	65.4%	56.8%	-8.7%
By 24 months	72.5%	68.5%	-4.0%	67.5%	60.2%	-7.3%
Child Support Owed						
Any owed in first 6 months	26.5%	19.1%	-7.4%	28.1%	16.8%	-11.3%
In first 12 months	31.3%	22.7%	-8.6%	33.9%	21.4%	-12.5%
In first 18 months	34.1%	26.6%	-7.5%	36.8%	25.2%	-11.6%
In first 24 months	36.2%	27.6%	-8.6%	38.8%	28.3%	-10.5%
Total owed in first 6 months	$520	$396	$-124	$473	$288	$-185
In first 12 months	$1,228	$923	$-305	$1,114	$661	$-453
In first 18 months	$2,003	$1,572	$-431	$1,830	$1,164	$-666
In first 24 months	$2,837	$2,442	$-395	$2,586	$1,724	$-862
Child Support Paid						
Any paid in first 6 months	31.6%	18.6%	-12.9%	31.6%	16.9%	-14.7%
In first 12 months	45.7%	25.1%	-20.6%	42.2%	23.8%	-18.4%
In first 18 months	50.9%	31.1%	-19.8%	47.0%	29.5%	-17.5%
In first 24 months	53.6%	34.4%	-19.2%	50.0%	33.5%	-16.5%
Total paid in first 6 months	$464	$334	$-130	$440	$263	$-177
In first 12 months	$1,142	$704	$-438	$1,081	$592	$-489
In first 18 months	$1,880	$1,140	$-739	$1,789	$1,046	$-742
In first 24 months	$2,573	$1,718	$-855	$2,483	$1,513	$-970
Child Support Compliance						
In first 6 months	58.0%	63.1%	5.1%	63.3%	63.5%	0.2%
In first 12 months	62.9%	62.8%	-0.1%	67.1%	63.5%	-3.6%
In first 18 months	64.6%	62.5%	-2.0%	69.6%	66.5%	-3.2%
In first 24 months	64.8%	61.1%	-3.6%	71.4%	67.0%	-4.3%
Child Support Received						
Any received in first 6 months	22.3%	16.4%	-5.9%	24.4%	14.4%	-10.0%
In first 12 months	28.0%	20.1%	-7.9%	30.9%	18.7%	-12.2%
In first 18 months	31.2%	24.1%	-7.1%	34.4%	22.9%	-11.5%
In first 24 months	33.3%	25.7%	-7.6%	36.9%	26.0%	-10.9%
Total received in first 6 months	$411	$305	$-105	$390	$242	$-148
In first 12 months	$922	$659	$-263	$907	$526	$-381
In first 18 months	$1,487	$1,072	$-414	$1,486	$918	$-568
In first 24 months	$2,067	$1,626	$-441	$2,096	$1,333	$-763
Father Employed/Earnings						
Any employment in year	78.2%	42.5%	-35.7%	77.9%	42.5%	-35.4%
Total earnings in year	$40,450	$27,123	$-13,327	$40,855	$25,801	$-15,054

Variation in paternity establishment and child support outcomes between Dane County and the remainder of Wisconsin prior to 2020 and 2020–21. Comparing pre-2020 and post-2020 paternity establishment, child support, and employment/earnings in Dane County, we can see that for almost every outcome there are decreases that occur that are contemporaneous with the change in the birth cost recovery program in Dane County. Some of these changes are quite large: paternity establishment in the first year after birth decreased by 9 percentage points (p.p.), (from 67.0 to 57.4%) in Dane County, the percent of birthing parent with child support paid on their cases in the first year after the birth fell by 20 p.p. (from 45.7% to 25.1%), and father's earnings in that first year declined by $13,227. We do not observe similarly large decreases in some other outcomes. For example, child support compliance in the first year is fairly flat at about 62% in both periods.

We cannot, however, necessarily attribute the large decreases in paternity establishment, child support payments, and employment that we see in Dane County—all or in part—to the cessation of new birth cost recovery collection in January 2020. These increases may reflect other longer-term trends that are unconnected with BCR policies and/or may be the result of other policy or societal changes occurring simultaneously. The most obvious competing explanation could be the societal and administrative upheaval associated with the COVID-19 pandemic which started in March 2020. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic led to dramatic changes in employment and earnings opportunities, and also impacted child support agencies' ability to proceed with normal enforcement mechanisms.

As we see in the "Other Counties" columns in Table 3 many of the changes observed in Dane County were also observed elsewhere in the state. Paternity establishment in the first year decreased in other counties by 9.5 p.p. (similar to the 9.6 p.p. change in Dane County); paying

child support in the first year fell by 18.4 p.p., only slightly less than the 20.6 p.p. change in Dane, and first year earnings in Other Counties declined by $15,054 which is more than the $13,327 increase seen in Dane. Since the birth cost recovery policy did not change in these other counties, but parents in those counties also experienced decreases in paternity establishment, child support payment, and employment/earnings, it seems likely that some, if not all, of these decreases might be attributed to sources other than the change in Dane County's BCR policy.

Racial/ethnic variation in paternity establishment and child support outcomes over time between Dane County and the remainder of the state pre-2020 and 2020–21. We were also interested in whether the changes in outcomes observed among the general population of birthing persons were experienced equally by birthing parents across racial/ethnic groups. In Table 4 we observe the changes in outcomes, both in Dane and Other Counties, for Non-Hispanic (NH) White, NH Black, and Hispanic birthing parents.[7] We limit the analysis to these three groups as the population of birthing parents belonging to other racial/ethnic groups (Asian, Native American, Other) is unfortunately too small to generate robust estimates, especially in the Dane County post-2020 sample. For the paternity establishment and child support outcomes we only show outcomes at 12 months after birth, as outcomes at other points in time show similar trends and differences.

Racial/ethnic variation in paternity establishment and child support outcomes. As with prior research studies, we observe racial/ethnic disparities in paternity establishment and child support-related outcomes. These differences may be attributable to differences in socioeconomic circumstances and structural inequalities, which persist even among low-income populations

[7]For clarity, we refer to NH White individuals as "White" and NH Black individuals as "Black" throughout the remainder of this report. We also note that infant and child race is assigned based on the race of the birthing parent (e.g., children of White birthing parents are assigned as White).

such as BadgerCare recipients. Paternity establishment is higher for the children of White birthing parents compared to their Black and Hispanic counterparts. Similarly, child support payments made to White birthing parents are higher, as are fathers' earnings and rates of compliance with child support orders. For example, in Dane County before 2020, the fathers of White children earned an average of $48,939 in the year after the birth, while those of Hispanic children earned $42,047, and those of Black children just $26,777. Similarly, in the other counties before 2020, the fathers of White children earned $47,079 in the year after the birth, while those of Hispanic and Black children earned $40,751, and $26,651, respectively.

Similar to trends in the overall sample, we see declines in almost all the paternity establishment, child support, and earning outcomes for each of the three racial/ethnic groups. (Note: Child support compliance for the fathers of Black children is one notable exception.) However, there are important differences across racial groups in the size of the declines over time (i.e., pre-2020 compared to 2020–21). Paternity establishment declined the most for Black children in general; this was especially true of those residing outside of Dane County (23.9 percentage point decline in the paternity establishment rate compared to 3.5 and 9.0 percentage points for White and Hispanic children, respectively). Likewise, the declines in child support owed also declined the most for the fathers of Black children in both regions.

Notably, child support payments declined the least for the fathers of Black children living both within and outside of Dane County, resulting in an actual increase in child support compliance for this group, compared to the declines in child support compliance seen for their White and Hispanic counterparts. These differences in child support compliance are carried over to the amounts of child support received. While all groups saw declines, the amounts received by Black birthing parents declined the least. Some of these better outcomes for Black birthing

parents may be a result of the smaller declines in earnings observed for the fathers of their children. In Dane County the earnings of Black children's fathers fell by only $5,080 compared to $17,420 and $19,034 for the fathers of White and Hispanic children, respectively. Similarly, in other counties, fathers' earnings declined by $8,606 for Black children, while fathers' earnings for White and Hispanic children fell by $18,708 and $15,301, respectively.

As we note above, these descriptive differences do not provide clear evidence about the impact of birth cost recovery cessation on child-support related outcomes, given that individuals living outside of Dane County also experienced changes over the relevant time period. These decreases might be attributed to sources other than the change in BCR policy. To ascertain whether the birth cost recovery policy impacted child support-related outcomes above and beyond general trends and other societal or policy changes going on at the same time, we move from these descriptive analyses to statistical modelling techniques that allow us to control for these external factors.

Table 4. Comparison of Mean Outcomes Pre-Post 2020 in Dane and Other Counties, by Birthing Parent's Race/Ethnicity

	Dane County Pre-2020 Births	Dane County 2020–2021 Births	Dane County Pre-Post Change	Other County Pre-2020 Births	Other County 2020–2021 Births	Other County Pre-Post Change
Paternity Establishment						
By 12 months						
White	75.2%	66.7%	-8.5%	69.8%	66.3%	-3.5%
Black	60.3%	47.3%	-13.0%	51.1%	27.3%	-23.9%
Hispanic	65.0%	55.0%	-10.0%	56.1%	47.1%	-9.0%
Child Support Owed						
Any Owed in first 12 months						
White	30.6%	23.1%	-7.5%	35.1%	23.9%	-11.2%
Black	43.5%	30.8%	-12.7%	42.0%	24.1%	-17.8%
Hispanic	22.8%	14.0%	-8.7%	26.1%	16.2%	-9.9%
Total Owed in first 12 months						
White	$1,358	$1,043	$(315)	$1,367	$865	$(502)
Black	$1,398	$975	$(423)	$893	$482	$(411)
Hispanic	$990	$641	$(349)	$900	$503	$(397)
Child Support Paid						
Any Paid in first 12 months						
White	49.3%	27.4%	-21.9%	47.0%	27.9%	-19.0%
Black	48.9%	30.8%	-18.1%	43.1%	23.5%	-19.6%
Hispanic	39.9%	16.2%	-23.7%	34.1%	18.4%	-15.7%
Total Paid in first 12 months						
White	$1,524	$814	$(711)	$1,428	$809	$(619)
Black	$957	$734	$(223)	$706	$398	$(308)
Hispanic	$838	$446	$(392)	$810	$424	$(386)
Child Support Compliance						
In first 12 months						
White	73.5%	65.6%	-7.9%	75.6%	70.0%	-5.6%
Black	50.9%	61.1%	10.2%	53.0%	53.5%	0.4%
Hispanic	64.0%	55.8%	-8.2%	66.4%	60.0%	-6.4%
Child Support Received						
Any Received in first 12 months						
White	29.1%	21.1%	-7.9%	33.4%	21.8%	-11.6%
Black	37.4%	27.1%	-10.3%	35.8%	19.9%	-15.9%
Hispanic	18.9%	11.3%	-7.6%	22.8%	13.4%	-9.4%
Total Received in first 12 months						
White	$1,224	$775	$(448)	$1,188	$720	$(469)
Black	$813	$659	$(154)	$611	$350	$(261)
Hispanic	$663	$410	$(253)	$685	$373	$(312)
Father Employed/Earnings						
Any Employment in year						
White	83.7%	45.0%	-38.7%	81.1%	43.7%	-37.4%
Black	70.9%	37.4%	-33.4%	69.8%	39.9%	-30.0%
Hispanic	74.3%	40.7%	-33.6%	79.0%	42.7%	-36.3%
Total Earnings in year						
White	$48,939	$31,519	$(17,420)	$47,079	$28,371	$(18,708)
Black	$26,777	$21,697	$(5,080)	$26,651	$18,046	$(8,606)
Hispanic	$42,047	$23,013	$(19,034)	$40,751	$25,450	$(15,301)

RESULTS: DIFFERENCE-IN-DIFFERENCES MODELS

As described above, our primary statistical procedure for determining the effects of the change in BCR policy is difference-in-differences modeling. These models compare the pre-post change in outcomes in the jurisdiction where the policy change occurs (in this case, Dane County), with the pre-post change in the jurisdictions where the policy change did not occur (here, the Other Counties). This procedure controls for the general trends and all the societal and administrative changes that were experienced in all counties across the state, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, state and federal governmental responses to the pandemic, and anything else that may have occurred statewide at that time. In addition, as mentioned, we control for many other factors that may explain differences in county-level effects such as personal demographic and economic characteristics of the individuals in each county, and the economic situation in each county.

For the full models there were a few births that were dropped due to missing information on some of the control variables used in the models, such as birthing parent's education. This resulted in a sample size for the 12-month child support outcomes of N=59,045. Sample sizes for other outcomes are smaller: 24-month outcomes are observed for only part of the post-2020 sample; child support compliance can only be calculated for those with an order, and father's post-birth earnings and employment can only be observed when father has been identified (i.e., for those fathers whose paternity has been established).

Tables 5 to 7 show the difference-in-differences model results indicating the extent to which the pre-2020 to post-2020 change in outcomes were different in Dane County (which implemented the elimination of new birth cost recovery collections) from the change in other counties (which retained birth cost recovery polices).

Each table shows the pre-post change in outcomes across all counties associated with birth cost recovery cessation (labeled "Birth Cost Recovery Cessation in Dane County"). All models control for the birthing parent's demographic and economic characteristics, and for county indicators of economics and demographics.

Table 5. Difference-in-Differences: Any Child Support Received, Paid, Owed

	Any CS Owed 12 Months	Any CS Owed 24 Months	Any CS Paid 12 Months	Any CS Paid 24 Months	Any CS Received 12 months	Any CS Received 24 months
Birth Cost Recovery Cessation in Dane County	**.0387*** **	**.0188** **	**-.0129**	**-.016***	**.0399*** **	**.0318*** **
Dane County	-.1061***	-0.0591	.052*	.0297	-.0609**	-0.0452
Post 2020	-.1788***	-.1499***	-.2775***	-.2369***	-.1678***	-.1458***
Observations	59,045	50,307	59,045	50,307	59,045	50,307
R-squared	0.092	0.074	.1127	.0885	0.093	0.0737

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.10

Table 6. Difference-in-Differences: Total Child Support Received, Paid, Owed

	Total CS Owed 12 Months	Total CS Owed 24 Months	Total CS Paid 12 Months	Total CS Paid 24 Months	Total CS Received 12 Months	Total CS Received 24 Months
Birth Cost Recovery Cessation in Dane County	**145.73*** **	**488.71*** **	**28.18**	**79.23**	**100.92*** **	**305.18*** **
Dane County	576.72***	1083.80**	855.39***	1323.65***	579.50***	877.08**
Post 2020	-572.56***	-981.62***	-659.77***	-1235.97***	-479.93***	-822.96***
Observations	59,045	50,307	59,045	50,307	59,045	50,307
R-squared	0.0854	0.0766	0.0845	0.0804	0.0771	.0735

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.10

The top row of Tables 5 and 6 show the changes in child support outcomes associated with eliminating birth cost recovery (i.e., the additional pre-2020 to post-2020 change seen in Dane County). We present the results for the first 12 and 24 months after birth, results for 6 months and 18 months are similar and available upon request. In Table 5, we see that there are statistically significant increases in whether child support was owed to either the state or the birthing parent (due to order establishment)—3.87 percentage points higher at 12 months and 1.88 percentage points higher at 24 months— and in whether the birthing parent received child support that was not retained by the State of Wisconsin—3.99 percentage points higher at 12

months and 3.18 percentage points higher at 24 months. Similarly the amount of child support owed and received (Table 6) are both significantly higher after the cessation of new birth cost recovery collection in Dane County. Specifically, fathers owed approximately $489 more in total child support on average and birthing parents received approximately $111 more at 12 months and $305 more at 24 months. There does not appear, however, to have been a significant impact on *whether* child support was paid, or the amount paid. Payment likelihood and amount increased, but this increase was relatively small compared to the changes seen in orders and receipts.

Table 7. Difference-in-Differences: Child Support Compliance, Paternity Establishment, and Father's Employment/Earnings

	CS Compliance 12 months	CS Compliance 24 months	Paternity Establishment 12 months	Paternity Establishment 24 months	Father Employed 12 months	Father's Earnings 12 months
Birth Cost Recovery Cessation in Dane County	**.0293*** **	**0.0062**	**0.0087**	**0.0323**	**-.0229*** **	**1102.55**
Dane County	-0.0334	-0.0989	-.3444***	-0.1033	.1446***	19345.64**
Post 2020	-.0958***	-0.0069	-.1369***	-0.0761	-.7867***	-38924.61***
Observations	18,629	19,260	56,698	48,233	40,879	40,879
R-squared	0.0823	0.0787	0.1135	0.0819	0.3198	0.1117

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.10

Table 7 provides evidence that birth cost recovery cessation in Dane County increased CS compliance by 2.9 percentage points compared to other counties that did not adopt such a policy; this change was statistically significant ($p<0.01$). However, by 24 months, the increase in compliance was much smaller and no longer statistically significant. Paternity establishment does not appear to have been affected by the policy change with little difference between the rate changes in Dane and other counties. Birth cost cessation appears to have led to a significant decline in father's employment. Importantly, however, employment declines did not correspond to lower earnings suggesting that those who were employed had increases in earnings associated with the policy change.

We also examined whether the descriptive findings in the prior section suggesting differential impacts of birth cost recovery cessation on child support outcomes across race and ethnicity would hold up to more rigorous empirical analyses. As before, we limit the child support outcomes shown to those recorded at 12 months after birth (results at other time points are similar), and only for White, Black and Hispanic birthing parents, due to inadequate sample sizes for other racial/ethnic groups.

Table 8 (Panel A) suggests that birth cost recovery cessation likely had differential impacts on most child support outcomes by race/ethnicity. First, while birthing parents were more likely to have a child support order established overall, only White and Hispanic birthing parents experienced statistically significant increases in the amount of child support owed to them. White birthing parents experienced increases in the likelihood of receiving any child support (approximately 2.0 percentage points, $p<0.01$), but the total amount declined by $67.01 ($p<0.01$). Both Black and Hispanic birthing parents experienced increases in receipt of any child support (5.7 and 2.7 percentage points respectively, $p<0.01$) and child support received ($126.53 and $134.61, respectively, $p<0.01$).

These differences in orders and payments combine to reveal similar differences across racial/ethnic groups in child support compliance, paternity establishment, and father's employment and earnings (Table 8 Panel B). For White birthing parents, birth cost recovery cessation led to decreases in child support compliance from fathers at 12 months (3.6 percentage points, $p>0.01$). In contrast, for Black birthing people, child support compliance from fathers increased by 7.7 percentage points. By the 24 month timepoint these effects on child support compliance were no longer significant for White and Black birthing parents but were negative and significant for Hispanic birthing parents (11.4 percentage points, $p<0.01$).

Paternity establishment shows similar disparate effects with the BCR policy change. The children of White birthing parents experienced a 3.6 percentage point decline in paternity establishment ($p<0.01$) relative to those not impacted by the policy change, but these differences were not statistically significant at 24 months. Black birthing parents, however, experienced increased paternity establishment at both 12 and 24 months (11.4 and 14.18 percentage points, respectively). We detected no statistically significant changes in paternity establishment at either time point for the children of Hispanic birthing people.

Finally, as in the descriptive results, we confirm that the change in fathers' earnings associated with the birth cost recovery cessation is linked to declines in employment for the fathers of White (3.9 percentage points, $p<0.01$) and Black children (2.3 percentage points, $p<0.10$), but not among their Hispanic counterparts. However, the decline among the fathers of Black children is only of modest statistical significance. Further, among the fathers of Black children alone, we find that average earnings significantly increased ($2,978, $p<0.01$), while earnings did not change among the fathers of White children and decreased among the fathers of Hispanic children (-$5,996).

Table 8: Difference in Differences: All Outcomes, by Birthing Parent's Race/Ethnicity

Panel A	Any CS Owed 12 months	Any CS Paid 12 months	Any CS Received 12 months	Total CS Owed 12 months	Total CS Paid 12 months	Total CS Received 12 months
Birth Cost Recovery Cessation in Dane County						
White	.0353***	-.0426***	.0198***	92.10***	-194.48***	-67.01**
Black	.05***	.0125	.0566***	59.67	104.87***	126.53***
Hispanic	.0244*	-.0095	.0271**	185.45***	83.55	134.61***
Panel B	**CS Compliance 12 months**	**CS Compliance 24 months**	**Paternity Establishment 12 months**	**Paternity Establishment 24 months**	**Father Employed 12 months**	**Father's Earnings 12 months**
Birth Cost Recovery Cessation in Dane County						
White	-.0355***	-.0058	-.0359***	-.0191	-.0391***	-543.15
Black	.0768***	.012	.1137***	.1418***	-.0229*	2978.48***
Hispanic	-.0233	-.1135***	.0036	.0215	0	-5996.85***

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.10

MODEL RESULTS – SYNTHETIC CONTROLS ROBUSTNESS CHECKS

Our secondary statistical approach to determine the impact of the BCR policy change involves synthetic control models, as explained earlier. These models employ statistical methods to evaluate other counties in Wisconsin and construct a "synthetic Dane County" that has comparable pre-treatment characteristics to the actual Dane County. By comparing the outcomes of the real Dane County and the synthetic Dane County after 2020, we can estimate the effect of the BCR policy change.

Figures 1 to 4 show the synthetic control model results. We utilize synthetic controls as a robustness check for the difference-in-differences models; therefore, we limit the synthetic control models to outcomes that have statistically significant difference-in-differences at both 12 and 24 months, and with no missing values in 2021. Specifically, we focus on four outcomes: whether child support was owed at 12 months, whether child support was received at 12 months, total child support owed at 12 months, and total child support received at 12 months.

The results of Figures 1 through 3 reveal that prior to 2020, Dane County's outcomes of whether CS was owed, whether CS was received, and the total CS owed were similar to those of the synthetic Dane County. However, starting from 2020, we observe a diverging pattern between the two. In 2020 and 2021, we note that the reductions in whether CS was owed, whether CS was received, and total CS owed are comparatively smaller in Dane County than in the synthetic Dane County. These findings are consistent with the difference-in-differences outcomes in Tables 5 and 6. Nonetheless, the results of Figure 4 do not match with the difference-in-differences findings, indicating that the total CS received declined more in Dane County than in the synthetic Dane County.

Figure 1. Synthetic Control: Any Child Support Owed 12 months

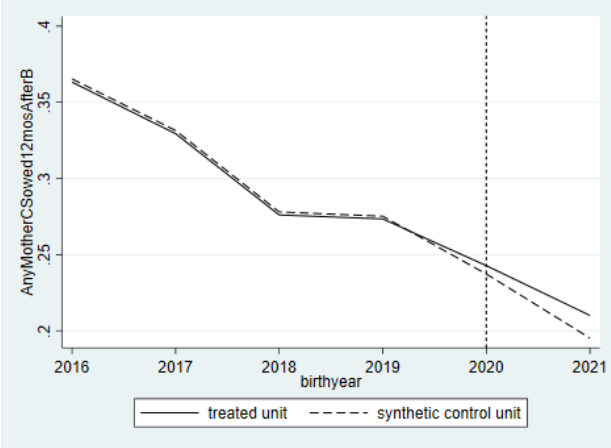


Figure 2. Synthetic Control: Any Child Support Received 12 months

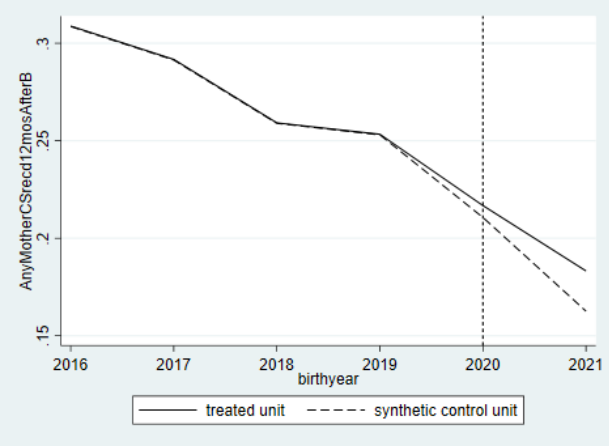


Figure 3. Synthetic Control: Total Child Support Owed 12 months

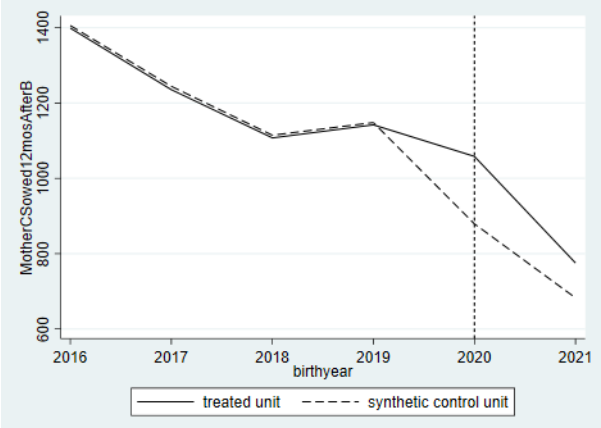
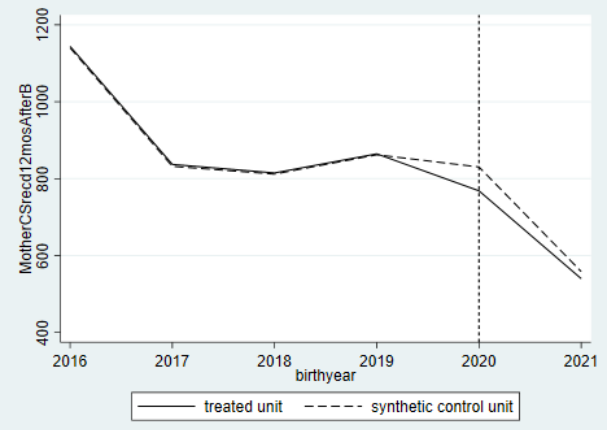


Figure 4. Synthetic Control: Total Child Support Received 12 months



DISCUSSION

The present report was an attempt to address a previously unanswered but important policy question: what was the impact of Dane County's cessation of new birth cost recovery collections on child support- and employment-related outcomes? We highlight four main findings here:

1. First, we find that overall, Dane County's birth cost recovery cessation was linked to increases in the probability that fathers owed any form of child support, the amount of child support that fathers owed, and compliance with child support orders. Importantly, however, fathers were also more likely to pay child support to the *birthing parent* after the policy change, and those payments significantly increased after the policy change. (We further discuss conflicting results from difference-in-difference and synthetic control models, below.)

2. Second, birth cost recovery cessation does not appear to be associated with changes in paternity establishment.

3. Third, while birth cost recovery cessation appeared to have significantly impacted the probability that a child's father was employed, there were no statistically significant changes in fathers' average earnings.

4. Fourth, we find that focusing on the overall population of Medicaid recipients obscures important racial differences in these child-support outcomes after the relevant policy change. Specifically, while the fathers of White children were less likely to pay child support and the total amount of child support decreased, the fathers of Black children were more likely to pay child support directly to the birthing parent and the overall amount increased. Taken together, these findings suggest that birth cost recovery cessation may have potentially narrowed racial inequities in child support related outcomes, albeit in part because of the worsening outcomes among a subset of White fathers in Dane County.

The finding that birth cost recovery cessation led to increases in compliance with child support orders and, ultimately, payments to birthing parents is consistent with evidence suggesting that alleviating barriers to child support payment can lead to increased compliance and payment amounts. This is particularly true for many low-income noncustodial parents, whose child support payments are often set higher than they can afford and leads to nonpayment (Pratt & Hahn, 2021). In one such example, the San Francisco Child Support Debt Relief pilot

project provided funding to pay off child support arrears for 32 fathers. (Note: The state of California retains child support funds as repayment for Medicaid, TANF, and other debt and any unpaid amounts are charged a 10 percent interest rate.) In turn, relative to fathers that did not have unpaid child support debts, the fathers in the pilot study were more consistent in their child support payments, were more likely to be employed, and had improved credit scores and housing arrangements (Hahn et al., 2019). This could explain why eliminating new birth cost recovery funds increased the likelihood that fathers paid child support, as well as the amount of child support. Birth cost recovery cessation also significantly improved child support compliance at 12 months, though this effect does not appear to persist at 24 months. Importantly, however, average child support payments were significantly higher at 24 months.

We highlight one important set of conflicting results. In robustness checks using Synthetic Control (SC) methods, our results were consistent for all outcomes except that of child support payments received. In contrast to our main set of findings, SC findings suggest that birth cost recovery resulted in declines in the amounts of child support that birthing parents ultimately received. One important reason could be differences in their choice of control groups and underlying modeling assumptions. DID models utilized all other counties in Wisconsin as a control group, whereas SC models used a group of other counties in Wisconsin that had comparable pre-treatment characteristics to Dane County as a control group. As a result, the control groups used in DID and SC models were not the same, which could explain the observed discrepancies in the results. We will continue to investigate these outcomes as more data become available.

Our analyses also found little evidence that birth cost recovery cessation had significant impacts on paternity establishment. In contrast, an experimental evaluation in Wisconsin found

that when birthing parents were allowed to keep all of the child support on their behalf, paternity was established more quickly relative to birthing parents who were not allowed to keep all of the child support paid (Cancian, Meyer, & Caspar, 2008). As an important reminder, birth cost recovery cessation began just before the onset of a worldwide pandemic (which is still ongoing). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted states' child support operations and reliability of paternity establishment data[8], which could have affected our findings. As additional data become available, it will be important to revisit these findings.

We also found that birth cost recovery was linked to decreases in paternal employment. This finding was somewhat surprising given that prior research demonstrates that birth cost recovery judgements are causally linked to lower employment and earnings among low-income Wisconsin fathers (Cancian, Meyer, & Caspar, 2008). Because of this, we expected that the removal of birth cost recovery obligations would have resulted in improved employment prospects for fathers. However, the COVID-19 pandemic presented renewed challenges for unemployment, particularly for low-income fathers. For reasons that our data cannot fully explain, low-income fathers who would have otherwise been subject to birth cost recovery were less likely to be employed during this period. A more in-depth examination of unemployment patterns and receipt of unemployment benefits is beyond the scope of this report but might provide fruitful grounds for future exploration. Importantly, there were no significant changes in child support received.

Finally, our analyses demonstrated how birth cost recovery resulted in very different outcomes among racial/ethnic groups. It is challenging to conduct direct comparisons of our findings to prior research. This is because to our knowledge, few recent studies of child support-

[8]See https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-45/subtitle-B/chapter-III/part-305

related interventions have explored whether these interventions have differential impacts by race/ethnicity (Pratt & Hahn, 2021). On one hand, it is not surprising that the fathers of Black children experienced improved outcomes, including higher rates of child support compliance and paternity establishment rates, as well as higher average payment levels to the birthing parent. As we note above, birth cost recovery has been linked to lower employment levels and earnings (Cancian, Meyer, & Caspar, 2008). These impacts are likely racialized: Low-income Black fathers[9] in Wisconsin possess more limited social networks for employment referrals and earn less income but owe higher child support debt than White fathers, an important consequence of structural racism (Pate, 2016; Yearby, 2018). Given that low-income Black birthing parents are disproportionately likely to be on Medicaid relative to other racial/ethnic groups (and thus fathers being subject to birth cost recovery collections), our findings that outcomes were disproportionately concentrated among this group is unsurprising.

Conversely, our findings that birth cost recovery cessation was associated with worse child support outcomes (i.e., compliance, amount paid, amount received by birthing parent) for the fathers of White children was somewhat unexpected. Birth cost recovery cessation is also negatively associated with employment for the fathers of White and Black children. (Note: the statistical significance for the effect on fathers of Black children is very modest.) However, birth cost cessation was associated with declines in average earnings for the fathers of White (but not Black) children, which would likely have made it more challenging for the fathers of White children to meet their child support obligations. The significantly greater levels of child support debt that the fathers of White children owed could have also had negative impacts on paternity

[9] While the number of multiracial individuals has increased over time, data suggest high levels of racial concordance between fathers and the birthing parent. See, for example, Borrell, L. N., Rodriguez-Alvarez, E., Savitz, D. A., & Baquero, M. C. (2016). Parental race/ethnicity and adverse birth outcomes in New York City: 2000–2010. *American Journal of Public Health*, *106*(8), 1491–1497.

establishment (Cancian, Meyer, & Caspar, 2008). We also found that birth cost recovery cessation had mixed impacts on Hispanic children's fathers' child-support related outcomes. The policy appears to be associated with large declines in earnings and child support compliance. Yet, birthing parents received increased child support payments as a result of the policy. Given the relatively smaller sample sizes for Hispanic births, future analyses with more years of data will be illuminating.

Limitations and Strengths

The present study has important limitations. First, although we were able to examine the universe of Medicaid births, there are a relatively limited number of individuals affected by birth cost recovery cessation. The ongoing administrative and social challenges of the pandemic have also made it challenging to draw strong conclusions about the policy impacts. We were able to create an enlarged sample by adding 2021 births, and our results are suggestive that there were some effects of the policy change. We hope to revisit these analyses as more data become available. A related point is that although we used causal inference methods such as difference-in-differences and synthetic control methods, these statistical approaches are subject to their own sets of biases (e.g., the parallel trends assumption in the methods section is being violated). However, we point to the fact that most of our findings were similar across methods (with the exception noted above). Finally, an important challenge of administrative data is that while we can identify the effects of policies, the process through which these changes occur are not clear. We strongly recommend further data collection and elaborate more on this below. Finally, while Dane County ceased *new* birth cost recovery collections, a recent report provides evidence that Dane County escalated birth cost recovery collections in 2020 by "intercept[ing] COVID-19

stimulus checks and unemployment bonuses." In turn, this could have muted any beneficial effects of birth cost recovery cessation.

Importantly, the study had important strengths, including using administrative data on the universe of Medicaid claims and the ability to link these data with high levels of confidence to child support-related outcomes.

Research and Policy Implications

To our knowledge, the present study is the first to assess the links between birth cost recovery and child support outcomes, using the 'natural experiment' created when Dane County eliminated new birth cost recovery collections in 2020. Although there is some evidence suggesting that the policy change has had beneficial impacts—and the extent of these impacts appears to vary among different race and ethnic groups—it is premature to make policy recommendations based solely on this evidence. Further research is needed to more fully understand the effects of the policy change and its potential implications for different populations. We provide a set of research recommendations for consideration and exploration below.

1. **Collect qualitative data**. Relying solely on quantitative methods and data overlooks the crucial community contexts and experiences that help identify why and how BCR impacts low-income families. This lack of data and context hinders efforts to comprehensively evaluate the impacts of BCR and inform ongoing debates on whether to strengthen or eliminate this policy. Understanding the disparate effects of the policy by race/ethnicity among fathers is important for future research.

2. **Engage affected communities**. Community engagement can be an important tool for assessing the benefits (and pitfalls) of policy changes. While a robust evaluation of this policy change must involve community voices, important barriers include time and resource constraints and an earned distrust of research and government. This indicates a clear need to partner with communities to develop recruitment strategies and evaluation metrics, aiming to earn trust and build long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships. We also recommend interviews with the relevant stakeholders from child support and BadgerCare to further illuminate these processes.

3. **Encourage pilot studies of birth cost recovery cessation.** It is important to emphasize that our findings are from a policy change in Dane County, which differs substantially from other Wisconsin counties. To understand whether this policy change would have similar effects elsewhere, we require further data. Counties have been reluctant to eliminate the policy, but time-limited pilot studies could provide important data and evidence for other counties considering these consequential changes.

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