Institute for Research on Poverty
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

Child Support and Child Welfare System Interactions: Child Support Order Compliance

2024–2026 Child Support Policy Research Agreement: Task 5, Deliverable 3

Lawrence M. Berger
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Maria Cancian
Georgetown University

Anna Ko
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Jessica Pac
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Submitted September 2026
Revised November 2026

The research reported in this paper was supported by the 2024–2026 Child Support Policy Research Agreement between the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families and the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP). We are grateful to the Wisconsin Departments of Children and Families, Health Services, and Workforce Development for access to the administrative data used in our analyses; the IRP data science team for assistance with these data; Molly Costanzo for expert technical assistance, Judith Bartfeld for helpful feedback, and James Spartz and Dawn Duren for editorial and production assistance. The views expressed here are those of the authors alone and not necessarily the sponsoring institutions.

INTRODUCTION

This report is the third of three deliverables associated with Task 5 of the 2024–2026 Child Support Policy Research Agreement (CSRA): "Child support and child welfare system interactions." In this report, we examine the relation of out-of-home care (OHC)-related cost recovery child support order (CRO) assignment with non-custodial father compliance, and the relation of compliance with the stability of reunification.

Non-custodial parents may be more or less likely to pay support depending on whether child support is directed to the government under a CRO or to the custodial parent (with or without children present). Our first aim is to describe non-custodial parent compliance rates before, during, and after a child's first placement into OHC. Our second aim is to describe the association between CROs and compliance during and after children's OHC placements. Our third aim is to determine the extent to which non-custodial parent compliance is related to the stability of reunification.

We discuss the policy context in detail in our prior reports. As such, we only briefly summarize the core issues here:

- Children living in low-income households, particularly those in low-income Black and Native American families, are disproportionately likely to become involved with child protective services (CPS);
- Removal and placement into OHC is a relatively rare occurrence, and the majority of removed children eventually reunify with their family of origin;
- Federal, state, and local (i.e., county, city) governments share the costs of OHC, with Title IV-E of the Social Security Act forming the foundation of the OHC program;
- Federal policy allows state and local governments to recover some costs associated with OHC by establishing CROs;
- CROs may consist of establishing a new order for either or both parents (regardless of coresidential or marital status prior to the child's removal) to reimburse the state for OHC

costs and/or re-assigning an existing order for a noncustodial parent (hereafter, father) to provide support to a custodial parent (hereafter, mother) such that the father is ordered to pay support to the state rather than to the mother;

- Parents with children in OHC commonly experience multiple types of child support orders (e.g., father-to-mother, father CROs, mother CROs) simultaneously and/or sequentially;
- Arrears from CROs, like conventional orders, can accumulate after OHC has ended, even if the child has been reunified;
- There is wide county- and jurisdiction-level variation in the use of CROs, however, such orders are no longer issued in Milwaukee County and Dane County;
- CROs likely increase rather than decrease net government expenditures because they are expensive to enforce, result in limited collections, and lead to substantially longer durations in OHC;
- For these reasons, federal guidance now discourages CRO assignment except in rare circumstances.

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

Our sample consists of the universe of Wisconsin families with at least one resident child (under age 18) first placed in OHC between July 2008 and June 2020 and followed through June 2023, drawn from the Wisconsin Administrative Data Core (WADC). The WADC consists of linked administrative data from Wisconsin's child welfare system (WiSACWIS), Child Support Enforcement system (KIDS), Client Assistance for Re-employment and Economic Support system (CARES), Unemployment Insurance system (UI), and other systems. Our data captures, in the periods before, during, and after removal, information on child support orders and payments, CPS reports and OHC placements, reunifications and other permanency outcomes, employment and earnings, child and family demographics, and participation in the W2/TANF, SNAP, UI, SSI, and SSDI programs.

Our primary unit of analysis is the mothers of children who have been placed into OHC. We define an OHC episode as beginning in the first month in which one or more of a mother's children enters OHC and ending when her last child exits OHC, treating a mother with children removed or returned at different times as a single continuous episode. Episodes that have not ended by June 2023 are right-censored.

From an initial pool of mothers with valid identifiers and birthdates (28,406 mothers), we restrict to those with a first OHC episode in the July 2008 to June 2020 window (24,849 mothers). We then exclude those whose first episode ended in an administrative closure inconsistent with a permanency outcome (child death, runaway, or missing from care; 68 mothers); those with no removed child linked to a father through a valid WADC identifier (1,157 mothers); those with no removed child under 18 at first removal (16 mothers); those without an identified removal county (2,659 mothers); and those whose first OHC spell had a non-positive duration (1,878 mothers). Moreover, we further restrict the sample to families with at least one child support order of any type during the OHC spell (an order with owed amounts observed during the spell; 7,229 mothers excluded). Applying these conditions yields a final analytic sample of 11,842 mothers.

Measures

Our primary measures of child support compliance consist of, for mothers and fathers, (1) child support payment, operationalized as a binary indicator for any child support payment in a given month (averaged across months during the OHC spell); (2) child support compliance, operationalized as a binary indicator for paying the order in full (at or above the amount owed) in the month (average month during the OHC spell); and (3) share of the order paid, operationalized as the ratio of the month's (average month's during the OHC spell) payment to the order amount,

for mother-months in which an order of $20 or more is in place. We cap the share paid at 100% of the order amount, such that payments above the order amount are coded as full payment on the order. Because payment schedules do not always line up with calendar months, we adjust for payments that are slightly early or late. For example, biweekly wage withholding can result in more payments in some months than others. If a payment exceeds the amount owed in one month, we apply the extra amount to a neighboring month that had a shortfall. The extra payment is applied first to the subsequent month and then, if any remains, to the previous month. These adjustments are made only for contiguous months and are never made across the pre-OHC, OHC, and post-OHC periods. A month is therefore considered fully compliant if the amount owed is paid either directly in that month or after this adjustment. Owed amounts reflect orders for current child and family support. Payments are drawn from disbursement records, which distinguish current support from other obligation types. As such, amounts paid reflect current child support and family support received, excluding payments toward arrears, medical support, and other obligation types.

Our primary child welfare outcome is an indicator for whether a child who was initially reunified later re-entered OHC within 12, 24, or 36 months of their reunification.

Our key predictors are binary indicators for whether, during OHC, the mother had a mother CRO and whether any of her childrens' father had a father CRO in place for the mother's child(ren). An order is counted only if it was active, with a positive amount owed, in at least one month of the OHC spell. These non-mutually exclusive indicators do not differentiate whether multiple orders were in place simultaneously or during different months of the episode, nor do they reflect orders held only before removal or only after the case closed.

All models control for the mother's and highest-earning father's earnings (as reported to the UI system) in the year prior to removal, entered as categorical variables, and binary indicators for whether the mother received SSI, SSDI, UI benefits, W2/TANF, and SNAP in the 12 months prior to removal, as well as race and ethnicity, the mother's age, the oldest father's age (for the oldest father of any of the mother's children), the oldest child's age, the number of distinct fathers, and the total number of removed children. Implausible or missing parental and sibling's ages are imputed with the analytic sample mean with missing-value indicators included in the models; we also include indicators for the mother and father having no reported earnings and for the unavailability of a valid Social Security number (SSN). Finally, we control for the county-level CPS report substantiation rate (i.e., the rate of substantiation among referrals screened in for investigation) and the county-level unemployment rate in the year prior to OHC placement to account for county-level differences in agency practices and economic factors, as well as county- and year-of-removal fixed effects, to account for unobserved county- and year-specific factors. The reentry models additionally control for whether the family held a father-to-mother order in the 12 months before removal. All dollar amounts are adjusted for inflation using the CPI-U (2023).

Analyses

Our first aim is to describe compliance rates by non-custodial parents before, during, and after a mother's child was placed into OHC. We show variation in mothers' and fathers' compliance for mother CROs, father CROs, and father-to-mother orders in each period (pre-OHC, during OHC, and post-OHC), across the placement timeline. For each window, we summarize compliance as a per-mother average of the monthly measures over the months the mother holds an order; we additionally plot the monthly series before and after OHC. We also

describe how compliance during-OHC varies across family characteristics (the number and ages of removed children, number of fathers, mothers' and fathers' prior-year earnings, race and ethnicity, and pre-removal public assistance receipt). We present group means with bivariate tests of whether compliance differs across the levels of each characteristic, separately for each order type held during OHC.

Our second aim is to describe the association between CROs and compliance, both during OHC and over the 12 months following reunification. We measure the descriptive relation between compliance and CRO assignment by estimating an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model for each compliance outcome. In addition to the CRO indicator, we control for the mother's and the highest-earning father's UI-covered earnings in the year before removal, with indicators for no reported earnings and for no valid SSN; the mother's receipt of SSI, SSDI, UI, W2/TANF, and SNAP in the 12 months before removal; the mother's race and ethnicity; the mother's, oldest father's, and oldest child's ages (with missing ages mean-imputed and flagged); the number of distinct fathers; the number of removed children; the county-level CPS substantiation rate; and prior-year unemployment rate and in the during-OHC models, the duration of the first OHC spell, together with county and year-of-removal fixed effects. We estimate these models for compliance during two separate time windows: (1) compliance measured during the OHC spell, and (2) compliance measured over the 12 months after reunification for the subset of families that reunified within 36 months. In both windows, the predictor of interest is the CRO assigned during OHC. We estimate robust standard errors in all models. We tested instrumental variable models to estimate causal effects, however, we find that the leave-one-out CRO instrument fails to fulfill basic assumptions required for causal interpretation.

Our third aim is to describe the extent to which non-custodial parent compliance is associated with the stability of reunification. Using the smaller sample of families that achieved reunification within 36 months, we regress reentry into OHC—measured within 12, 24, and 36 months of reunification—on parental compliance over the 12 months following reunification, net of pre-placement family characteristics, macroeconomic conditions, and an indicator for whether the family held a father-to-mother order in the 12 months before removal, using OLS. As with Aim 2, instrumental variable specifications failed to fulfill the basic assumptions of the method.

RESULTS

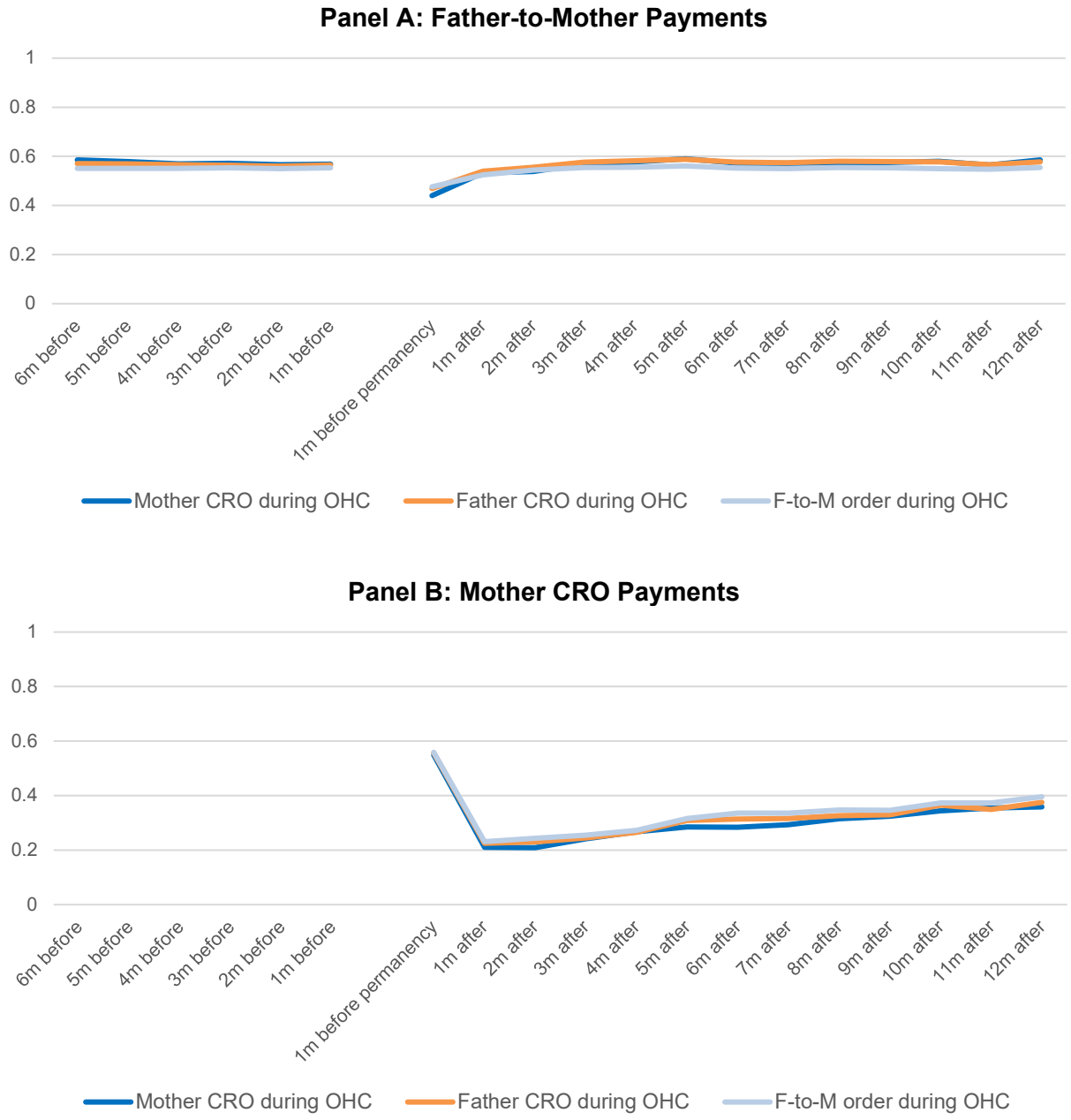
How Do Compliance Rates Vary Before, During, and After OHC?

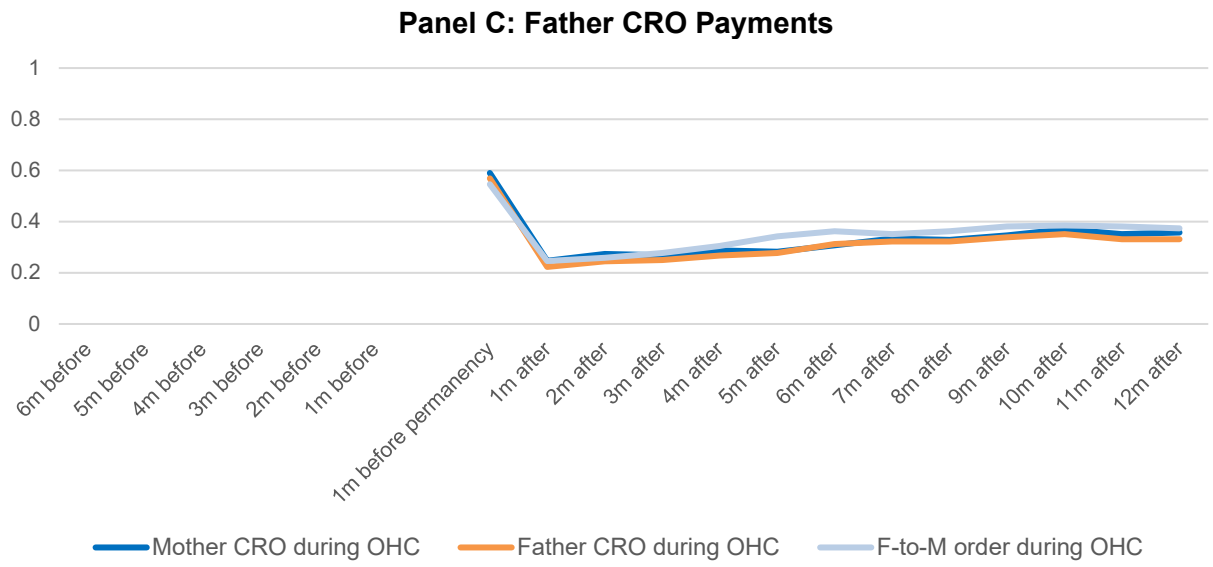
Figures 1 through 3 (corresponding with Appendix Tables A2 through A4) describe the three compliance measures in the months surrounding OHC placement.[1] All three compliance measures—the payment rate shown in Figure 1, the full compliance rate shown in Figure 2, and the share of the order paid shown in Figure 3—are presented by the type of order held during OHC, including only orders for at least $20 in the given month. Months in which a mother held no such order are excluded. Measure construction, including the adjacent-month reallocation of excess payments, is described in the Measures section. These results reflect compliance only among mothers who held an order of the relevant type both during OHC and in the month of observation. Because CROs prior to OHC are rare, these estimates are not included in the tables and figures for the CRO groups.[2]

[1] Rather than include payments during the OHC period, that vary in terms of episode length across mothers, the OHC period is summarized as a single per-mother average in Tables A2 through A4.

[2] For example, as shown in Appendix Figure A1 and Appendix Table A1, only about 3% of mothers with mother-to-father CROs during OHC had those orders in place six months before OHC, whereas 85% of mothers with father-to-mother orders during OHC had father-to-mother orders in place six months before OHC.

Figure 1. Child Support Payments Before, During and After OHC



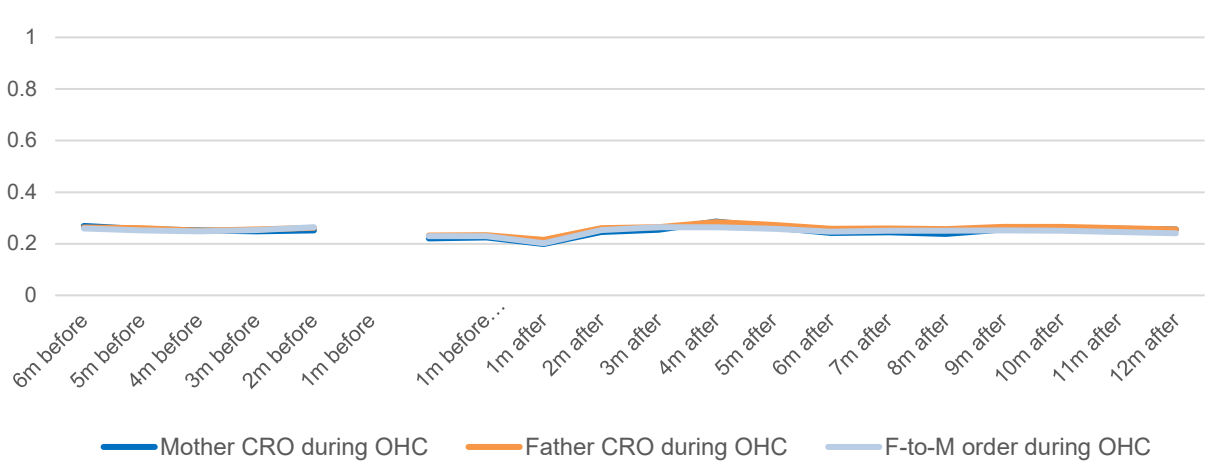


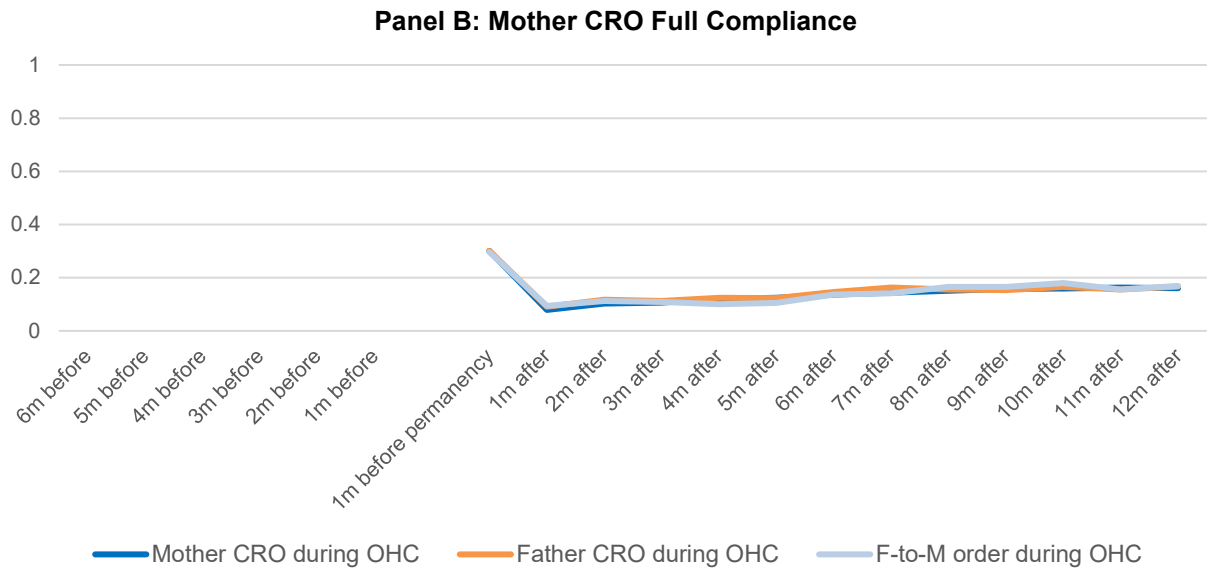
Notes: Lines show the share of mothers making any payment on the panel order type in each month relative to removal (before OHC) and to permanency (after OHC), among mothers holding an order of that type of at least $20 in the given month; lines are shown separately by the order type held during OHC. A month with no payment counts as paid if an adjacent month in the same period paid more than its own order and part of that excess is applied to it (applied once, one month at most, never across the pre-OHC, during-OHC, and post-OHC boundaries). The break in each line marks the OHC spell, which varies in length across mothers and is summarized as a single per-mother average in Table A2. For mothers with a reentry, part of the post-reunification window falls after the child returned to care. In Panels B and C, the months-after series is relevant to very few mothers: about 14 percent of mothers who held a CRO during OHC have a CRO charge of the same type in any of the 12 months after reunification (Table A1) The months-after series is computed among reunified mothers. Pre-OHC series are not shown in Panels B and C because fewer than 4% of mothers hold a CRO before OHC (Table A1). Payments toward arrears, medical support, and other obligation types are excluded.

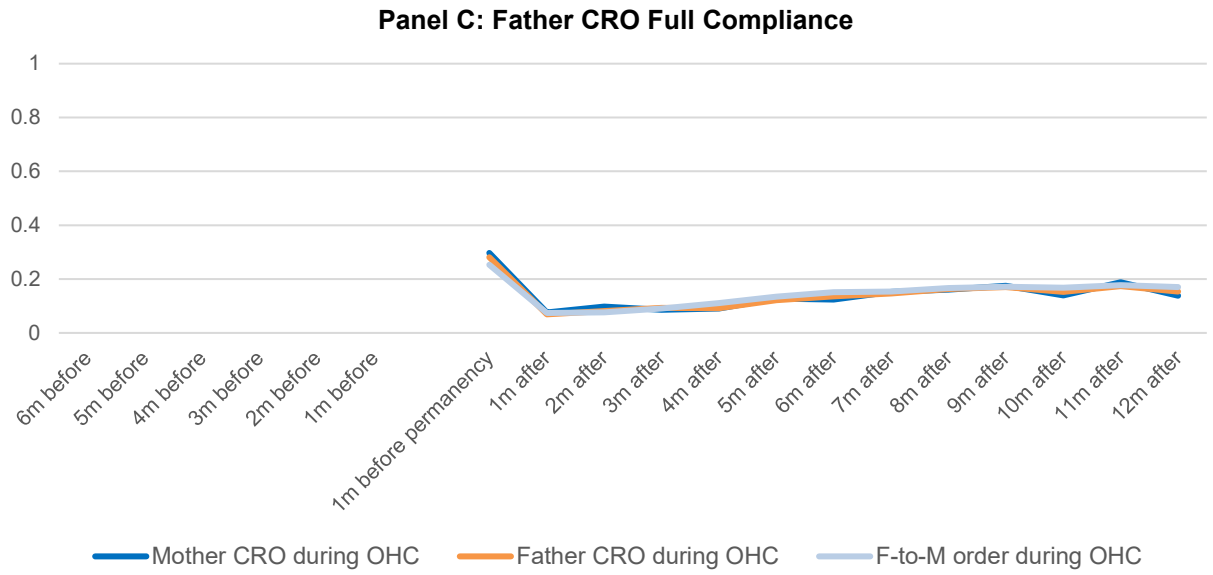
Results shown in Panel A of Figure 1 depict the father-to-mother payments among mothers with a mother CRO during OHC (dark blue line), among mothers whose child's father has a CRO during OHC (orange line), and among mothers with a father-to-mother order during OHC (light blue line). Panel B depicts the same trends for mother CRO payments, and Panel C for father CRO payments. Overall, we find that the pattern in compliance for each order type (mother CRO, father CRO, and father-to-mother order) over time (before, during, and after OHC), is generally consistent. Compliance with all order types among those with father-to-mother orders during OHC (Panel A) is flat over the six months before removal, dips slightly in the month before permanency and the first month or two after reunification, and recovers within about three months. In the CRO panels (Panels B and C), the gradual rise over the post-

reunification months partly reflects case composition rather than changing payment behavior: CROs close quickly after reunification (see also Figure A1 and Table A1). Among mothers who held a CRO during OHC, about 14 percent have at least one month with a CRO charge of the same type in the 12 months after reunification. This 14 percent consists of about 8 percent whose CRO continued to be charged after the children went home and about 6 percent with a reentry, for whom part of the post-reunification window falls after the child returned to care. By the twelfth month after reunification, more than half of the months with a CRO charge belong to mothers with a child back in care.

Figure 2. Child Support Full Compliance Before, During, and After OHC





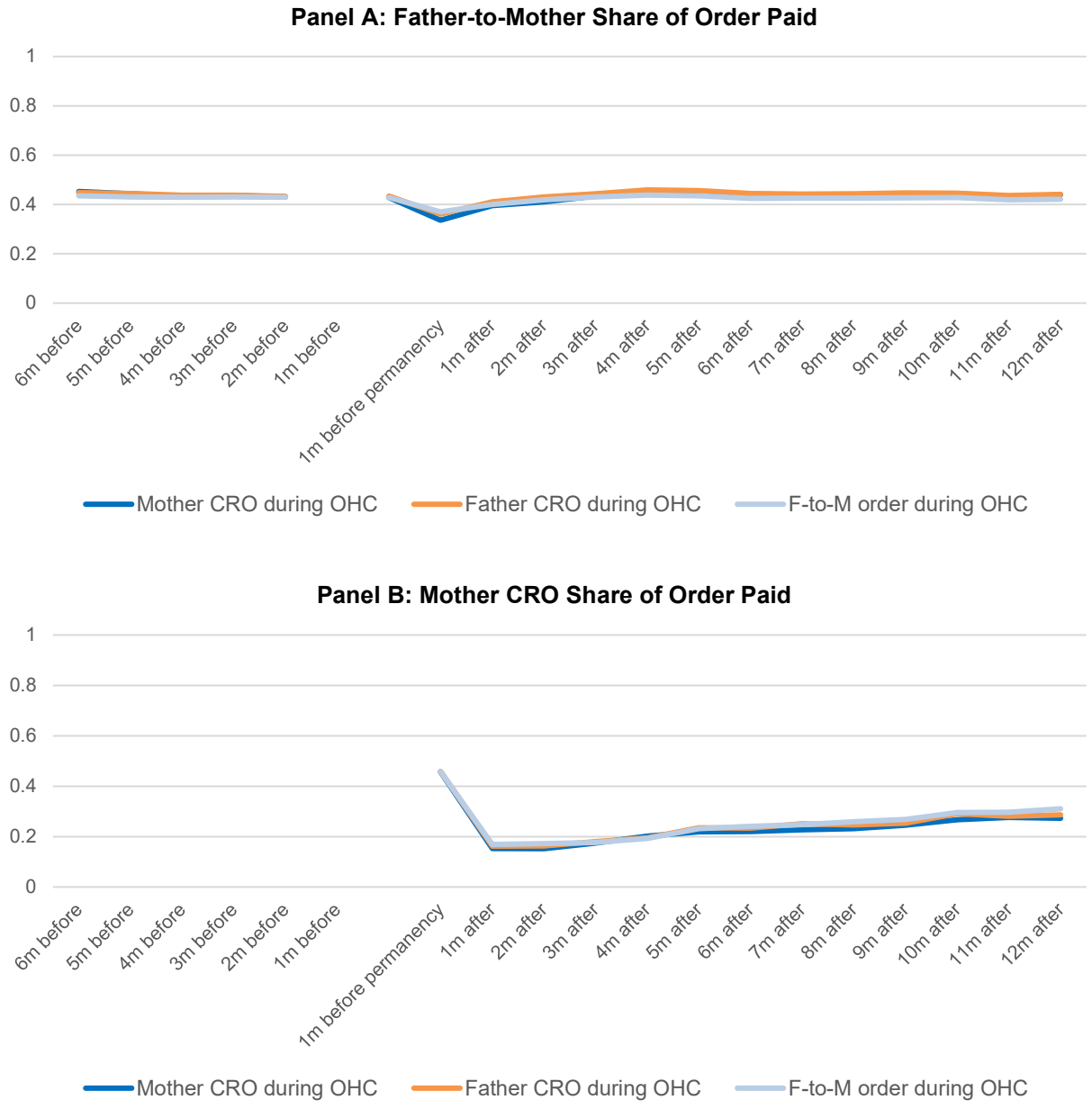


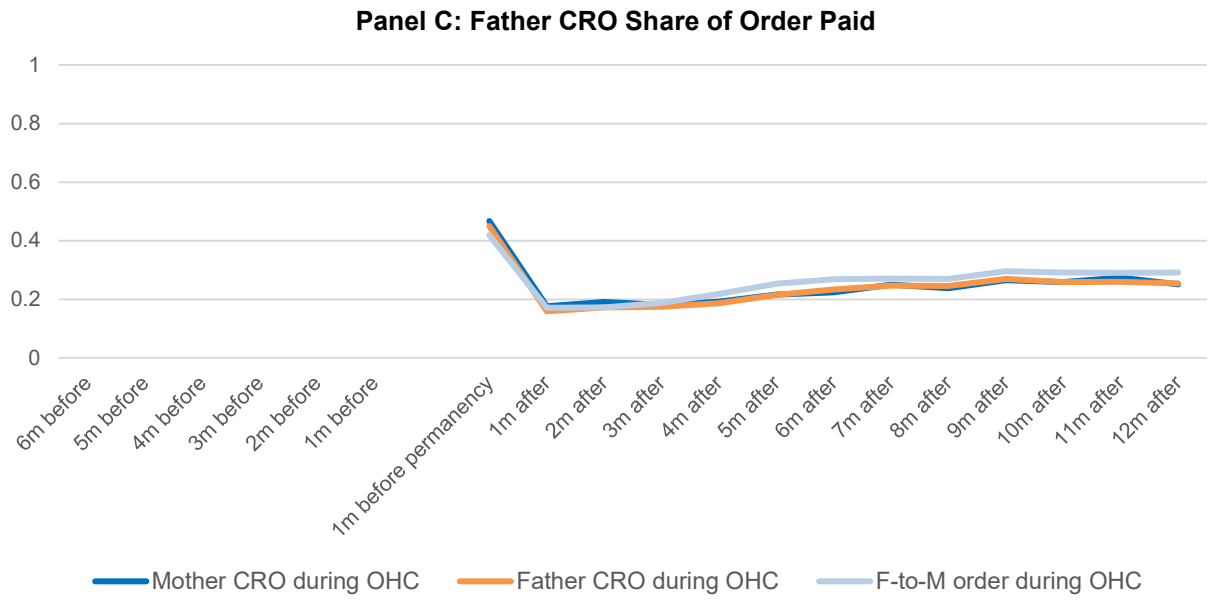
Notes: Lines show the share of mothers fully compliant on the panel order type in each month relative to removal (before OHC) and to permanency (after OHC), among mothers holding an order of that type of at least $20 in the given month; lines are shown separately by the order type held during OHC. A month is fully compliant if payment meets that month's order on its own or after receiving excess from an adjacent month's payment above its own order (excess applied once, one month at most, never across the pre-OHC, during-OHC, and post-OHC boundaries). The break in each line marks the OHC spell, which varies in length across mothers and is summarized as a single per-mother average in Table A3. For mothers with a reentry, part of the post-reunification window falls after the child returned to care. In Panels B and C, the months-after series is relevant to very few mothers: about 14 percent of mothers who held a CRO during OHC have a CRO charge of the same type in any of the 12 months after reunification (Table A1) The months-after series is computed among reunified mothers. Pre-OHC series are not shown in Panels B and C because fewer than 4% of mothers hold a CRO before OHC (Table A1). . Payments toward arrears, medical support, and other obligation types are excluded.

Payments during the OHC period are presented in Appendix Tables A2 through A4. For father-to-mother orders, payment rates during OHC are somewhat lower during OHC than in the 6 months before the removal. In the CRO panels, both the probability of any payment and full compliance rise in the month before reunification, indicating greater payment activity as cases approach closure.

Appendix Tables A5 through A7 describe how compliance varies across family characteristics, separately for each order type held, during OHC. These are descriptive group means and should not be interpreted as causal. Significance tests for differences by each characteristic were conducted within each column (order type); no comparisons were made across different order types (columns). Across the three columns, the role of these characteristics is broadly similar: the same characteristics are associated with each measure of compliance, in the same direction, regardless of order type. Compliance rises steeply with fathers' prior-year earnings through the $10,000 to $25,000 category before falling in the highest earnings range, is higher among White mothers and lower among Black mothers, and is modestly lower among mothers who received W2/TANF before removal. These gradients appear in the father-to-mother, mother CRO, and father CRO columns alike. That said, a few characteristics are relevant for only specific order types. For example, SSDI and UI benefit receipt are associated with compliance only in the mother CRO column, such that mothers receiving these benefits exhibit higher compliance with their own orders.

Figure 3. Child Support Share of Order Paid Before, During, and After OHC





Notes: Lines show the mean share of the monthly order paid, capped at 100%, on the panel order type in each month relative to removal (before OHC) and to permanency (after OHC), among mothers holding an order of that type of at least $20 in the given month; lines are shown separately by the order type held during OHC. A month short of its order is topped up from an adjacent month's payment in excess of that month's own order before capping (excess applied once, one month at most, never across the pre-OHC, during-OHC, and post-OHC boundaries). The break in each line marks the OHC spell, which varies in length across mothers and is summarized as a single per-mother average in Table A4. For mothers with a reentry, part of the post-reunification window falls after the child returned to care. In Panels B and C, the months-after series is relevant to very few mothers: about 14 percent of mothers who held a CRO during OHC have a CRO charge of the same type in any of the 12 months after reunification (Table A1). The months-after series is computed among reunified mothers. Pre-OHC series are not shown in Panels B and C because fewer than 4% of mothers hold a CRO before OHC (Table A1). Payments toward arrears, medical support, and other obligation types are excluded.

Do CROs and Compliance Predict Re-Entry into OHC?

CROs and Compliance (Aim 2)

Tables 1 and 2 present regression results of the associations of CRO assignment during OHC with non-custodial father compliance on any type of child support order—father-to-mother or father CRO—first during the spell (Table 1) and then over the 12 months following reunification (Table 2), estimated by OLS. Panel A presents results on fathers' overall compliance (father CRO and father-to-mother payments) and Panel B presents results on compliance with the father-to-mother order.

Table 1. Cost Recovery Orders and Father's Compliance During OHC

	(1) Any Payment	(2) Full Compliance	(3) Share of Order Paid
Panel A: Father's Overall Compliance			
Any father CRO	0.052***	0.021**	0.032***
	(0.010)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Mean	0.525	0.238	0.403
N	9,902	9,902	9,902
Panel B: Father's Compliance of Father-to-Mother Orders			
Any father CRO	-0.001	0.022**	0.006
	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Mean	0.479	0.226	0.373
N	7,197	7,197	7,197

Notes: Father model only. Father-to-government orders are father cost recovery orders (CROs). Order amounts include current child support and family support obligations, matching the payment measure, which includes distributions to current child and family support only. Outcomes are measured monthly over the OHC spell and averaged within mother: (1) the share of during-OHC order months with any payment, (2) the share at full compliance, and (3) the mean monthly share of the order paid, capped at 100%. Months with orders under $20 are excluded. A month short of its order is topped up from an adjacent month's payment in excess of that month's own order; the excess is applied once (first to the following month, then any remainder to the prior month), moves only one month, and never crosses the pre-OHC, during-OHC, and post-OHC boundaries. A month is fully compliant if payment meets the order on its own or after receiving adjacent excess. Treatment is any father cost recovery order with a positive amount owed during OHC. Panel A (father's overall compliance) combines father-to-government and father-to-mother orders; Panel B is compliance on the father-to-mother order only. OLS. Controls: mother's and the highest-earning father's prior-year UI earnings (bands); mother's receipt of SSI, SSDI, UI, W2/TANF, and SNAP in the 12 months pre-removal; race/ethnicity; mother's, oldest father's, and oldest child's ages (missing or implausible ages mean-imputed with flags); number of fathers; number of removed children; no-UI-earnings and no-valid-SSN indicators; county CPS substantiation rate and prior-year unemployment rate; and the duration of the first OHC spell (in months, measured to the June 2023 censoring date for episodes still open at the end of the panel). County and year-of-removal fixed effects included; robust standard errors in parentheses. Sample: analytic sample; columns use only those holding an active order of the relevant type. * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

Results in Table 1 indicate that, during OHC, CRO assignment is associated with modestly higher compliance overall (Panel A) and with higher full compliance on father-to-mother payments (Panel B). Relative to fathers with only a father-to-mother order during OHC, father CRO assignment during OHC is associated with a 5.2 percentage point greater probability of a father making any payments (Table 1, Panel A), or about 10 percent relative to the subsample mean of 53 percent. Full compliance is about 2.1 percentage points greater, about 9 percent relative to the mean of 24 percent (column 2), and the share of the order paid is 3.2 percentage points greater, about 8 percent relative to the mean of 40 percent (column 3). Considering only compliance with the father-to-mother order (Panel B), the association of a

father CRO with making any father-to-mother payments is small and indistinguishable from zero, but the full compliance rate is 2.2 percentage points greater, about 10 percent relative to baseline mean of 23 percent; the share of the order paid is also small and indistinguishable from zero (Table 1, Panel B). These estimates control for the duration of the first OHC spell. Without this control, the any-payment association is larger, likely because longer spells are associated with both a higher likelihood of CRO assignment and a greater probability that of a father making any payments and, thereby, having greater compliance.

Over the 12 months after reunification (Table 2), having a father CRO is not associated with compliance. The estimates are uniformly small and statistically indistinguishable from zero in both panels.

Table 2. Cost Recovery Orders and Father's Compliance 12 Months Post-Reunification

	(1) Any Payment	(2) Full Compliance	(3) Share of Order Paid
Panel A: Father's Overall Compliance			
Any father CRO	0.000	-0.006	-0.008
	(0.013)	(0.009)	(0.011)
Mean	0.522	0.228	0.400
N	4,406	4,406	4,406
Panel B: Father's Compliance of Father-to-Mother Orders			
Any father CRO	0.024	0.014	0.017
	(0.013)	(0.010)	(0.012)
Mean	0.537	0.241	0.416
N	4,013	4,013	4,013

Notes: Father model only, measured over the 12 months after reunification. Father-to-government orders are father cost recovery orders (CROs). Order amounts include current child support and family support obligations, matching the payment measure. Outcomes are measured monthly over the 12 months after reunification and averaged within mother: the share of order months with any payment, the share at full compliance, and the mean monthly share of the order paid, capped at 100%. For families with a reentry within 12 months of reunification, part of this 12-month window falls after the child returned to care. Months with orders under $20 are excluded. A month short of its order is topped up from an adjacent month's payment in excess of that month's own order; the excess is applied once (first to the following month, then any remainder to the prior month), moves only one month, and never crosses the pre-OHC, during-OHC, and post-OHC boundaries. A month is fully compliant if payment meets the order on its own or after receiving adjacent excess. Treatment is any father cost recovery order with a positive amount owed during OHC. Panel A (father's overall compliance) combines father-to-government and father-to-mother orders; Panel B is compliance on the father-to-mother order only. OLS. Controls: as in Table 1. County and year-of-removal fixed effects included; robust standard errors in parentheses. Sample: Reunified-within-36-months subset; columns use only those holding an active order of the relevant type. * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

In sum, we find some evidence that father CROs are associated with modestly higher compliance during OHC, but not following reunification. While our regressions control for a range of mothers' and fathers' characteristics, this relation may be due to unobserved differences between the cases with and without CROs, which may explain both the CRO and higher compliance (e.g., factors related to father's ability to pay, or enforcement actions).

Compliance and Reentry after Reunification (Aim 3)

Table 3 presents associations of fathers' overall post-reunification compliance (on father-to-mother and father-to-government CROs) with the probability that a reunified child re-enters OHC within 12, 24, and 36 months, estimated by OLS for the subset of families who reunified within 36 months. Fathers' post-reunification compliance is not associated with reentry at any time horizon. As shown in Table 3, all compliance measures exhibit point estimates that are small and uniformly indistinguishable from zero.

Table 3. Father's Post-Reunification Compliance and Foster Care Reentry

	(1) Any Payment	(2) Full Compliance	(3) Share of Order Paid
Panel A: Reentry within 12 Months			
F any payment	-0.011		
	(0.014)		
F full compliance		-0.005	
		(0.020)	
F share of order paid			-0.015
			(0.016)
Mean	0.177	0.177	0.177
N	4,405	4,405	4,405
Panel B: Reentry within 24 Months			
F any payment	-0.011		
	(0.016)		
F full compliance		0.004	
		(0.022)	
F share of order paid			-0.013
			(0.017)
Mean	0.230	0.230	0.230
N	4,405	4,405	4,405
Panel C: Reentry within 36 Months			
F any payment	-0.006		
	(0.016)		
F full compliance		-0.000	
		(0.022)	
F share of order paid			-0.014
			(0.018)
Mean	0.259	0.259	0.259
N	4,405	4,405	4,405

Notes: Father model only, OLS. Outcomes are reentry into out-of-home care within 12, 24, and 36 months of reunification. The compliance measures on the right-hand side are per-mother averages of the monthly measures over the 12 months after reunification (minimum order $20; adjacent-excess reallocation as described in Tables 1 and 2; share of order paid capped at 100%). Each panel enters one compliance measure at a time. For families with a reentry within 12 months of reunification, part of the 12-month compliance window falls after the child returned to care; for these families, compliance is not measured entirely before reentry. Controls: as in Table 1. County and year-of-removal fixed effects included; robust standard errors in parentheses. Sample: Reunified-within-36-months subset. * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

CONCLUSIONS

This report extends prior work, asking whether CROs are related to non-custodial parent compliance, and whether post-reunification compliance is associated with the stability of reunification. Three descriptive findings emerge.

First, we find that father-to-mother child support compliance—in terms of any payments, full compliance, and the share of the order paid—is relatively consistent across time (before, during, and after OHC) and that both mother CRO and father CRO compliance declines between the month before permanency and the first months of reunification and then rises gradually, which partly reflects which cases still have a CRO in place. Relatively few families (~14 percent of those who held mother and/or father CRO during OHC; Table A1) have a CRO in the post-reunification period, with about 8 percent having a CRO that continued to be charged after the children went home, and about 6 percent having a reentry, such that part of the post-reunification window falls after the child returned to care.

Second, we find that CRO assignment is associated with modestly higher father compliance during the OHC spell but not afterward. Having a father CRO during OHC is associated with a higher overall payment rate (to the mother and to government) among fathers, a higher overall full compliance rate, and a higher share of the order paid while the case is open, but these associations are small in magnitude and do not persist after reunification. The during-OHC increase in payment that accompanies CRO thus appears tied to the period of active child welfare involvement rather than to any durable change in payment behavior once the child returns home.

Third, we find that post-reunification compliance is not associated with the stability of reunification. While our regressions control for a range of mothers' and fathers' characteristics, the relation between CROs and compliance may be due to unobserved differences between cases with and without CROs, which may explain both CRO assignment and higher compliance (e.g., factors related to father's ability to pay, or enforcement actions). To identify the causal impact of

CROs, we also attempted to instrument CRO and compliance with a leave-one-out county CRO propensity. This strategy failed to meet the key assumptions needed for causal inference.

Our results should be considered in the context of three primary study limitations: (1) our analyses are descriptive, rather than causal in nature; (2) the WADC does not include the full range of earnings (only earnings reported to the UI system are included) and benefits that parents may receive; and (3) we cannot observe informal payments toward other expenses, such as housing, that might augment our conclusions, if observed. With these caveats in mind, our results highlight the importance of additional research and policy initiatives focusing on alternative pathways (other than the direct economic impact of child support paid and received) through which CROs may affect children's OHC trajectories. For example, CROs may influence families' engagement with the child support and child welfare systems, in addition to increasing parents' stress. The potential for CROs to be counterproductive contributes to growing calls to phase out the practice (Cancian & Doar, 2024; Chesnik, 2026).

REFERENCES

Cancian, M, and Doar, R. (2024). Child Support Policy: Areas of Emerging Agreement and Ongoing Debate. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, Policy Insights, 43*(3): 938–942. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22590

Chesnik, C. (2026). Testimony to Work & Welfare Subcommittee Hearing on Strengthening the Child Support Enforcement Program: Status, Challenges, and Opportunities for Modernization. January 21, 2026. Available at: https://waysandmeans.house.gov/event/work-welfare-subcommittee-hearing-on-strengthening-the-child-support-enforcement-program-status-challenges-and-opportunities-for-modernization/

APPENDIX

Table A1. Child Support Order, by Order Type Held During OHC

	Mother CRO during OHC	Father CRO during OHC	F-to-M Order during OHC
N	5,291	7,315	7,271
Percent of sample	44.7%	61.8%	61.4%
Panel A: Father-to-Mother Orders			
6 months before	0.40	0.56	0.85
During OHC	0.45	0.63	0.99
1 month before permanency	0.13	0.19	0.47
12 months after	0.25	0.33	0.50
Panel B: Mother CRO (Mother-to-Government)			
6 months before	0.03	0.02	0.01
During OHC	1.00	0.55	0.33
1 month before permanency	0.79	0.43	0.26
12 months after	0.14	0.08	0.07
Panel C: Father CRO (Father-to-Government)			
6 months before	0.03	0.03	0.02
During OHC	0.75	1.00	0.64
1 month before permanency	0.60	0.77	0.49
12 months after	0.11	0.14	0.12

Notes: Cells are the proportion of all column mothers with at least one month in the window with an order of the panel type of at least $20; each cell therefore gives the share of the column sample contributing to the corresponding cell of Tables A2 through A4. In the 12-months-after cells, mothers must also have reunified; non-reunified mothers remain in the denominator. During-OHC cells in which the panel order type matches the column subsample fall slightly below 1 because a small share of mothers (0.3–1.2%) hold only orders under $20 during OHC. Columns are subsamples defined by the order type held during OHC (charges of any positive amount).

Table A2. Child Support Payment Rates Before, During, and After OHC

	Mother CRO during OHC	Father CRO during OHC	F-to-M order during OHC
N	5,291	7,315	7,271
Percent of sample	44.7%	61.8%	61.4%
Panel A: Father-to-Mother Payments			
6 months before	0.57	0.56	0.55
During OHC	0.48	0.48	0.48
1 month before permanency	0.44	0.47	0.48
12 months after	0.55	0.56	0.54
Panel B: Mother CRO (Mother-to-Government) Payments			
During OHC	0.46	0.47	0.47
1 month before permanency	0.55	0.56	0.56
12 months after	0.28	0.30	0.31
Panel C: Father CRO (Father-to-Government) Payments			
During OHC	0.54	0.52	0.51
1 month before permanency	0.59	0.57	0.55
12 months after	0.30	0.29	0.35

Notes: Cells are per-mother averages of the monthly probability of any payment, computed over the months in the window in which the mother holds an order of the panel type of at least $20; mothers with no such months in a window are excluded from that cell. The share of column mothers contributing to each cell is shown in Table A1. A month with no payment counts as paid if an adjacent month in the same period paid more than its own order and part of that excess is applied to it; the excess is applied once (first to the following month, then any remainder to the prior month), moves only one month, and never crosses the pre-OHC, during-OHC, and post-OHC boundaries. The 12-months-after cells are computed among reunified mothers with an order in that window. Columns are subsamples defined by the order type held during OHC.

Table A3. Child Support Full Compliance Before, During, and After OHC

	Mother CRO during OHC	Father CRO during OHC	F-to-M order during OHC
N	5,291	7,315	7,271
Percent of sample	44.7%	61.8%	61.4%
Panel A: Father-to-Mother Full Compliance			
6 months before (per-mother monthly avg)	0.244	0.244	0.242
During OHC (per-mother monthly avg)	0.224	0.234	0.226
1 month before permanency	0.225	0.233	0.23
12 months after (per-mother monthly avg)	0.24	0.25	0.243
Panel B: Mother CRO Compliance			
During OHC (per-mother monthly avg)	0.226	0.226	0.225
1 month before permanency	0.301	0.301	0.297
12 months after (per-mother monthly avg)	0.126	0.136	0.144
Panel C: Father CRO Compliance			
During OHC (per-mother monthly avg)	0.244	0.235	0.217
1 month before permanency	0.297	0.281	0.253
12 months after (per-mother monthly avg)	0.124	0.128	0.144

Notes: Cells are per-mother averages of the monthly probability of full compliance, computed over the months in the window in which the mother holds an order of the panel type of at least $20; mothers are weighted equally, and mothers with no such months in a window are excluded from that cell. The share of column mothers contributing to each cell is shown in Table A1. A month is fully compliant if payment meets the order on its own or after receiving excess from an adjacent month's payment above its own order; the excess is applied once (first to the following month, then any remainder to the prior month), moves only one month, and never crosses the pre-OHC, during-OHC, and post-OHC boundaries. The 12-months-after cells are computed among reunified mothers with an order in that window. Columns are subsamples defined by the order type held during OHC.

Table A4. Child Support Share of Order Paid Before, During, and After OHC

	Mother CRO during OHC	Father CRO during OHC	F-to-M order during OHC
N	5,291	7,315	7,271
Percent of sample	44.7%	61.8%	61.4%
Panel A: Father-to-Mother Share of Order Paid			
6 months before (per-mother monthly avg)	0.43	0.429	0.423
During OHC (per-mother monthly avg)	0.368	0.376	0.373
1 month before permanency	0.336	0.361	0.37
12 months after (per-mother monthly avg)	0.42	0.428	0.416
Panel B: Mother CRO Share of Order Paid			
During OHC (per-mother monthly avg)	0.377	0.38	0.381
1 month before permanency	0.457	0.459	0.458
12 months after (per-mother monthly avg)	0.208	0.226	0.242
Panel C: Father CRO Share of Order Paid			
During OHC (per-mother monthly avg)	0.412	0.4	0.382
1 month before permanency	0.467	0.45	0.419
12 months after (per-mother monthly avg)	0.218	0.223	0.258

Notes: Cells are per-mother averages of the monthly share of the order paid, capped at 100%, computed over the months in the window in which the mother holds an order of the panel type of at least $20; mothers are weighted equally, and mothers with no such months in a window are excluded from that cell. The share of column mothers contributing to each cell is shown in Table A1. A month short of its order is topped up from an adjacent month's payment in excess of that month's own order before capping; the excess is applied once (first to the following month, then any remainder to the prior month), moves only one month, and never crosses the pre-OHC, during-OHC, and post-OHC boundaries. The 12-months-after cells are computed among reunified mothers with an order in that window. Columns are subsamples defined by the order type held during OHC.

Table A5. Child Support Payments During-OHC, by Mother Characteristics

Subgroup / Level	Mother-to-Government (CRO)	Father-to-Government (CRO)	Father-to-Mother Order
Number of Removed Children			
1 child	0.499***	0.536***	0.487*
2 children	0.394***	0.502***	0.475*
3+ children	0.367***	0.463***	0.444*
Number of Fathers			
1 father	0.500***	0.532**	0.475
2 fathers	0.394***	0.492**	0.475
3+ fathers	0.337***	0.506**	0.514
Oldest Child Age			
0–5	0.380***	0.458***	0.420***
6–12	0.431***	0.505***	0.474***
13–17	0.568***	0.583***	0.520***
Father Earnings (12 months prior removal)			
<=$5k	0.446***	0.558***	0.530***
$5–10k	0.577***	0.821***	0.793***
$10–25k	0.618***	0.842***	0.909***
>$25k	0.486***	0.392***	0.346***
Mother Earnings (12 months prior removal)			
<=$3k	0.496***	0.516***	0.478**
$3–10k	0.802***	0.636***	0.543**
>$10k	0.319***	0.511***	0.464**
Mother Race/Ethnicity			
White	0.486***	0.562***	0.532***
Black	0.363***	0.378***	0.361***
Hispanic	0.431***	0.462***	0.431***
Other	0.425***	0.557***	0.433***
SSI Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.467**	0.526***	0.484**
Yes	0.392**	0.475***	0.438**
SSDI Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.457***	0.519	0.477
Yes	0.595***	0.538	0.494
UI Benefits Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.441***	0.517	0.476
Yes	0.590***	0.537	0.496
W2/TANF Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.489***	0.541***	0.504***
Yes	0.368***	0.451***	0.409***
SNAP Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.625***	0.639***	0.541***
Yes	0.428***	0.497***	0.470***

Notes: Cells are subsample means of the during-OHC per-mother average of the monthly probability of any payment (orders under $20 excluded; adjacent-excess reallocation applied as in Table A2). Stars are from bivariate tests of differences across subgroup levels (t-test for two levels, one-way ANOVA for three or more): * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

Table A6. Child Support Full Compliance During-OHC, by Mother Characteristics

Subgroup / Level	Mother-to-Government (CRO)	Father-to-Government (CRO)	Father-to-Mother Order
Number of Removed Children			
1 child	0.251***	0.259***	0.243***
2 children	0.183***	0.196***	0.202***
3+ children	0.148***	0.162***	0.172***
Number of Fathers			
1 father	0.255***	0.264***	0.244***
2 fathers	0.171***	0.182***	0.199***
3+ fathers	0.120***	0.156***	0.185***
Oldest Child Age			
0–5	0.162***	0.195***	0.198***
6–12	0.206***	0.203***	0.211***
13–17	0.302***	0.294***	0.256***
Father Earnings (12 months prior removal)			
<=$5k	0.206***	0.240***	0.239***
$5–10k	0.295***	0.419***	0.408***
$10–25k	0.309***	0.522***	0.582***
>$25k	0.261***	0.198***	0.179***
Mother Earnings (12 months prior removal)			
<=$3k	0.232***	0.226***	0.225**
$3–10k	0.406***	0.322***	0.272**
>$10k	0.186***	0.239***	0.215**
Mother Race/Ethnicity			
White	0.241***	0.263***	0.259***
Black	0.158***	0.137***	0.148***
Hispanic	0.180***	0.197***	0.200***
Other	0.242***	0.268***	0.208***
SSI Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.226	0.238*	0.229
Yes	0.24	0.215*	0.205
SSDI Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.216***	0.233*	0.224
Yes	0.434***	0.260*	0.246
UI Benefits Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.217***	0.236	0.224
Yes	0.280***	0.231	0.236
W2/TANF Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.247***	0.256***	0.248***
Yes	0.147***	0.162***	0.164***
SNAP Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.349***	0.357***	0.304***
Yes	0.199***	0.211***	0.215***

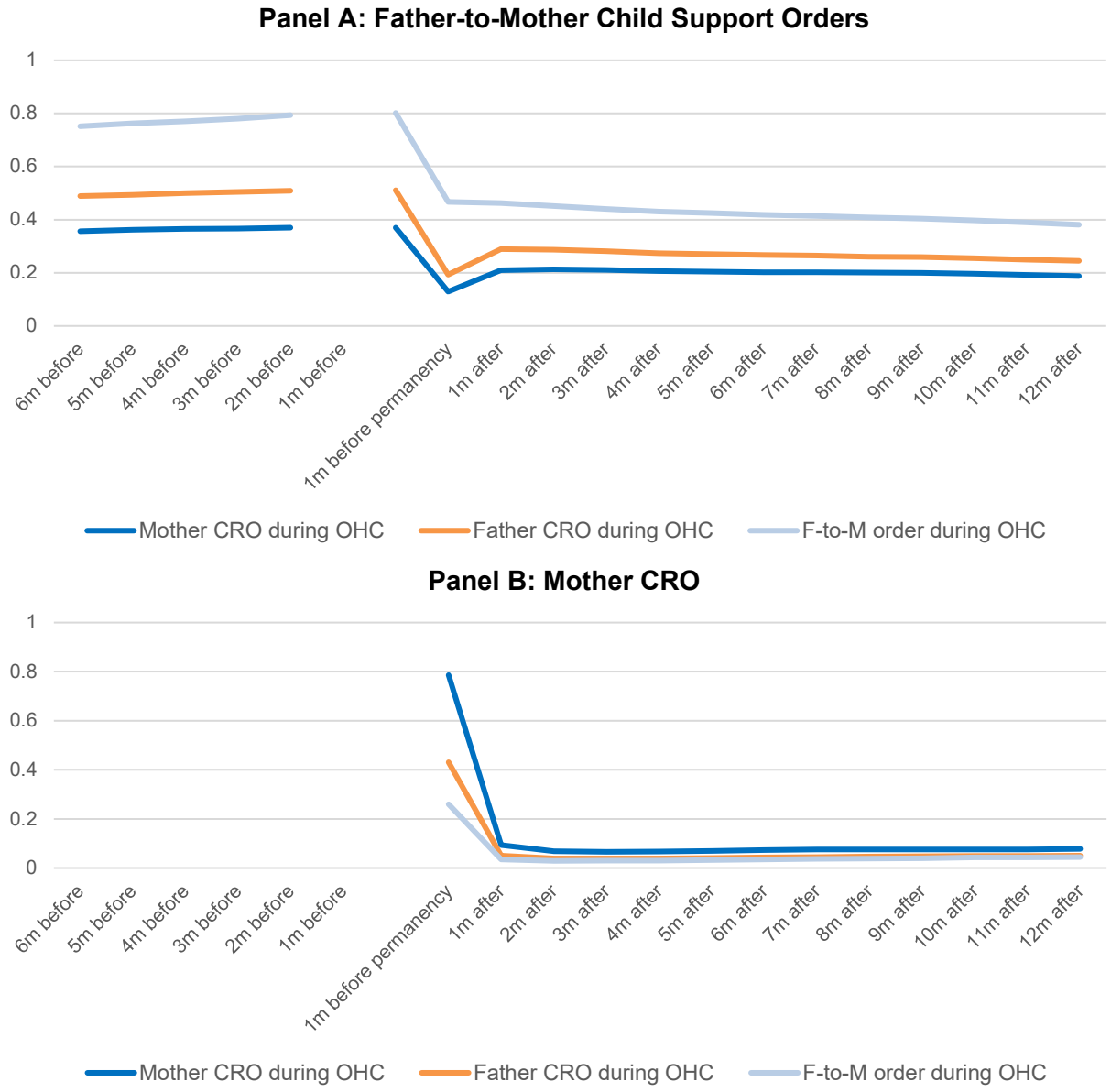
Notes: Cells are subsample means of the during-OHC per-mother average of the monthly probability of full compliance (orders under $20 excluded; a month is fully compliant on its own or after receiving adjacent excess, as in Table A3). Stars are from bivariate tests of differences across subgroup levels (t-test for two levels, one-way ANOVA for three or more): * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

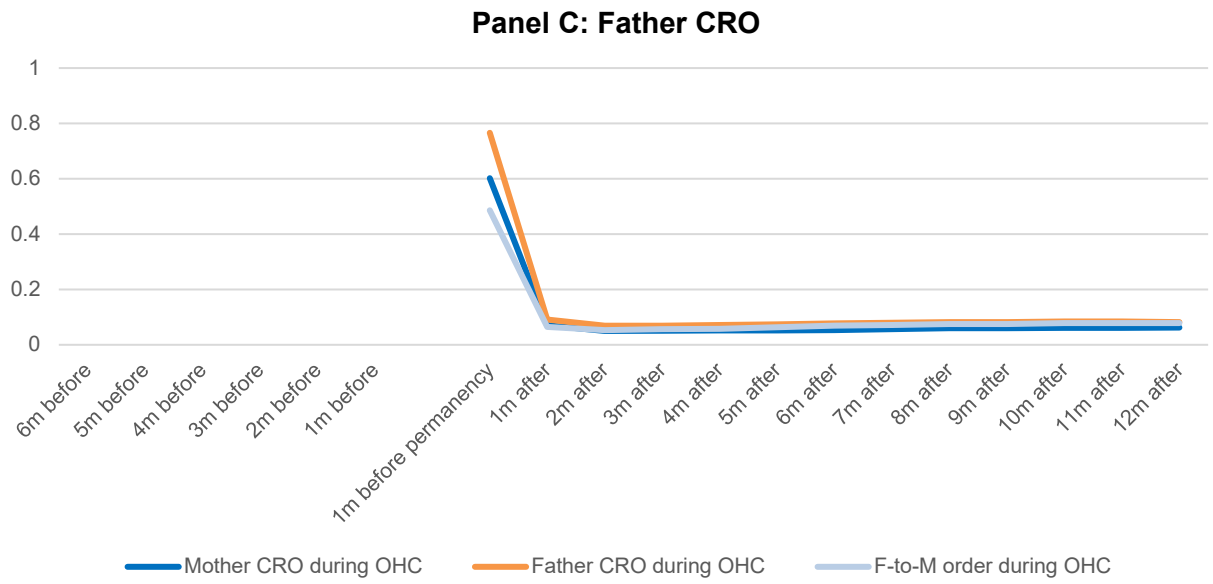
Table A7. Child Support Share of Order aid During-OHC, by Mother's Characteristics

Subgroup / Level	Mother-to-Government (CRO)	Father-to-Government (CRO)	Father-to-Mother Order
Number of Removed Children			
1 child	0.412***	0.424***	0.390***
2 children	0.311***	0.366***	0.351***
3+ children	0.272***	0.321***	0.316***
Number of Fathers			
1 father	0.416***	0.427***	0.385**
2 fathers	0.302***	0.348***	0.351**
3+ fathers	0.238***	0.335***	0.354**
Oldest Child Age			
0–5	0.291***	0.342***	0.323***
6–12	0.345***	0.369***	0.358***
13–17	0.483***	0.473***	0.416***
Father Earnings (12 months prior removal)			
<=$5k	0.356***	0.427***	0.410***
$5–10k	0.489***	0.700***	0.691***
$10–25k	0.538***	0.716***	0.777***
>$25k	0.407***	0.299***	0.267***
Mother Earnings (12 months prior removal)			
<=$3k	0.400***	0.392***	0.370***
$3–10k	0.698***	0.531***	0.445***
>$10k	0.264***	0.397***	0.360***
Mother Eace/Ethnicity			
White	0.399***	0.441***	0.425***
Black	0.279***	0.263***	0.256***
Hispanic	0.334***	0.341***	0.327***
Other	0.357***	0.436***	0.330***
SSI Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.380*	0.405**	0.377**
Yes	0.329*	0.367**	0.338**
SSDI receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.370***	0.398	0.371
Yes	0.529***	0.422	0.391
UI benefits Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.358***	0.398	0.371
Yes	0.487***	0.413	0.384
W2/TANF Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.404***	0.425***	0.401***
Yes	0.273***	0.315***	0.294***
SNAP Receipt (12 months prior removal)			
No	0.545***	0.546***	0.462***
Yes	0.340***	0.372***	0.361***

Notes: Cells are subsample means of the during-OHC per-mother average of the monthly share of the order paid, capped at 100% (orders under $20 excluded; adjacent-excess reallocation applied as in Table A4). Stars are from bivariate tests of differences across subgroup levels (t-test for two levels, one-way ANOVA for three or more): * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

Figure A1. Child Support Orders Before, During, and After OHC





Notes: Lines show the share of all column mothers holding an order of the panel type of at least $20 in each month relative to removal (before OHC) and to permanency (after OHC); lines are shown separately by the order type held during OHC. These proportions are computed over all mothers in the column subsample, so each point gives the share of the sample contributing to the corresponding month in Figures 1 through 3. Months after the OHC reunification, mothers must also have reunified; non-reunified mothers remain in the denominator. The break in each line marks the OHC spell; the share holding each order type during OHC appears in Table A1. Pre-OHC series are not shown in Panels B and C because fewer than 4% of mothers hold a CRO before OHC (Table A1). Columns are subsamples defined by the order type held during OHC (charges of any positive amount).