



PROCEDURAL JUSTICE-INFORMED
ALTERNATIVES TO CONTEMPT

PROJECT BRIEF
AUGUST 2024

Child Support Amidst the Pandemic

CHANGES TO SERVICE DELIVERY AT THREE SITES IN THE PROCEDURAL JUSTICE-INFORMED ALTERNATIVES TO CONTEMPT DEMONSTRATION

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The primary goal of child support programs is to improve children’s well-being by emphasizing the roles of both parents in providing for them. Some families receive child support from noncustodial parents regularly. For other families, payments may be sporadic, partial, or not received at all. Parents who do not make their child support payments can be subject to enforcement measures, including civil contempt actions requiring them to attend court hearings. Additionally, parents may face arrest if they fail to appear in court or fail to pay their share.

The Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) model aimed to increase noncustodial parents’ compliance with child support orders by providing an alternative to the civil contempt process that followed principles of procedural justice (see Box 1). These principles guided all aspects of PJAC service delivery. Figure 1 depicts the intended flow of PJAC services, including definitions of each type of service.

The PJAC demonstration project aimed to address noncustodial parents’ reasons for nonpayment of child support orders, promote their positive engagement with the child support program and custodial parents, and improve the consistency and completeness of their child support payments by testing a new approach to service delivery across six child support agencies (see Box 2 for an overview of the PJAC demonstration).¹

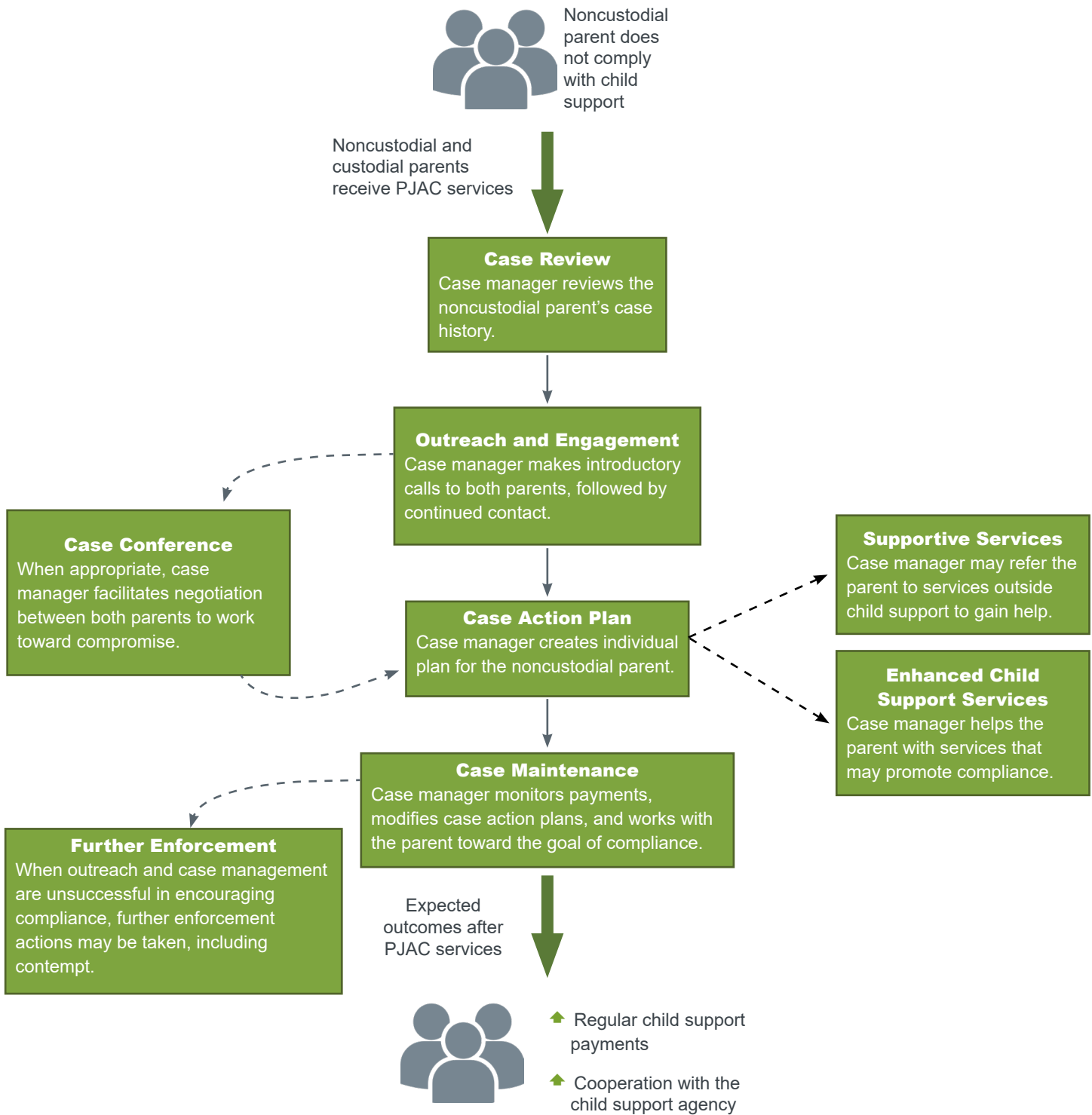
This demonstration included a research study wherein noncustodial parents who were about to enter the contempt process were assigned at random to a group offered PJAC services or to a

BOX 1

The Five Key Elements of Procedural Justice as Applied to the Child Support Context

- **Respect:** Parents should believe they were treated with dignity and respect and their concerns were taken seriously.
- **Understanding:** Parents should understand the child support process and have their questions answered.
- **Voice:** Parents should have a chance to be heard by sharing their perspectives and expressing their concerns.
- **Neutrality:** Parents should perceive the decision-making process to be impartial.
- **Helpfulness:** Parents should feel that the child support agency was helpful and interested in addressing their situations.

FIGURE 1. The PJAC Model



control group not eligible to receive PJAC services; instead, the control group proceeded with the standard contempt process. Parents assigned to the PJAC services group were given a trained PJAC case manager who worked with both parents. PJAC case managers offered a range of services to parents, focusing on building positive

relationships following the principles of procedural justice. The PJAC demonstration enrolled participants from February 2018 through September 2020, and served participants through September 2021—a period that included the onset and first 1.5 years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

BOX 2 PJAC DEMONSTRATION OVERVIEW

The Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration project integrated principles of procedural justice into enforcement practices in six child support agencies across the United States. The federal Office of Child Support Services developed the PJAC demonstration. In the demonstration, PJAC sites assigned parents to one of two research groups:

- PJAC services group: offered PJAC services
- Business-as-usual group: not eligible to receive PJAC services, proceeded with the standard contempt process

The research team compared the outcomes of these groups to assess the effects of PJAC on child support payments, civil contempt filings, and debt amounts. Because PJAC offered a new approach to child support service delivery, PJAC group members may have had different experiences with child support and the pandemic compared with business-as-usual group members. For more information on the PJAC demonstration, see Melanie Skemer, [*Testing a New Approach to Addressing Nonpayment of Child Support: Effects of the Procedural Justice Informed-Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration*](#) (New York: MDRC, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented social service agencies and their customers with unforeseen challenges. At its onset, child support agencies faced office and court closures, and staff members had to make the transition to remote work and virtual service delivery.² The PJAC demonstration offers an opportunity to examine how child support services, enforcement, and contempt changed at the onset of the pandemic, and to hear agency staff members' and parents' perspectives on those changes.

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEF

This brief focuses on child support agencies in three states participating in the PJAC demonstration—California, Michigan, and Virginia—hereafter called “sites.”³


The first section examines agencies' initial changes in services, rates of enforcement, and use of contempt after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, using child support administrative data and program records from the PJAC management information system from February 2018 through September 2021.⁴ This analysis provides quantitative context about how patterns of child support services may have shifted during the pandemic.

The second section discusses staff and parent perspectives on changes in child support services and

rates of enforcement and contempt for the PJAC and business-as-usual research groups. The research team collected these perspectives through virtual and in-person interviews with staff members and parents at the three PJAC sites between the fall of 2022 and winter of 2023. The research team conducted 35 staff interviews (with case managers, leaders, legal staff members, and attorneys) and 15 parent interviews (with 9 custodial and 6 noncustodial parents).

FINDINGS

This analysis found that aside from a brief period after the onset of the pandemic, service delivery, enforcement, and contempt generally returned to prepandemic levels for the remainder of the analysis period. However, some changes to service delivery, such as virtual services, persisted throughout the pandemic. Insights from staff members and parents about pandemic-era changes in services and enforcement reveal that neither experienced a difference in case manager-parent relationships with the switch to virtual service delivery. From agency staff members' perspectives, this switch offered some benefits, such as more flexible work schedules, more opportunities to serve parents outside of typical office hours, and fewer meetings and hearings for which parents had to request time off work, find transportation, and



arrange childcare. Given these minimal real or perceived changes in services and enforcement alongside these benefits, child support administrators may consider incorporating more remote work and virtual services to capitalize on the efficiency and customer orientation these changes allow.

PANDEMIC-RELATED CHANGES TO PJAC SERVICE DELIVERY AND STUDY SAMPLE OUTCOMES

The pandemic caused disruptions and shifts in child support service delivery and agency processes. This analysis examined rates of outreach and engagement, case action planning, and case conferences for members of the PJAC services group, comparing trends before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

Changes to the Delivery of Core PJAC Services

Overall, the frequency and intensity of PJAC service delivery decreased during the early months of the pandemic, but services generally rebounded to more typical rates by the summer and fall of 2020. This pattern suggests that PJAC case managers delivered services consistently in the face of major transitions in their work.

Table 1 defines each PJAC service and discusses how trends compared before and after COVID-19's onset. Case conferences showed the most notable change. Case conferences could occur in multiple formats: in person, over the phone, or asynchronously, where the case manager served as a liaison between the parents. As shown in the table, the percentage of noncustodial parents who completed case conferences plateaued for three months after COVID-19's onset, but case conference completion increased in the summer of 2020. Interestingly, phone case conferences increased, while asynchronous case conferences declined slightly compared with prepandemic levels (not shown). This combination of facts means that parents were talking directly to each other more during the pandemic.

Staff interviews suggest that three factors may have been in play here:

1. The increased use of videoconferencing helped case managers and parents overcome logistical barriers to in-person case conferences.

2. Families may have been working together better during the pandemic, at least in staff members' perceptions.
3. More flexible work hours and increased remote work may have made it easier for parents and case managers to find convenient times to meet.⁵

Changes to the Delivery of Enhanced Child Support Services

The child support program provides a range of services to parents to increase order compliance, including order modifications, license reinstatements, debt compromises, debt adjustments, and case closures. (See Table 2 for explanations of these services.) These services were called “enhanced child support services” in the PJAC demonstration project, and they were available to both the PJAC services and business-as-usual groups. However, the PJAC model encouraged PJAC case managers to make a priority of offering these services to parents and to increase the assistance they provided to parents in completing the paperwork necessary to receive them. Because of this focus, higher percentages of noncustodial parents in the PJAC services group than in the business-as-usual group received enhanced child support services throughout the demonstration.⁶

Table 2 defines each enhanced child support service and discusses how trends compared before and after the onset of COVID-19. Most enhanced child support services followed a similar trajectory to broader trends in PJAC services during the pandemic: a temporary decline in services during the early months of the pandemic, followed by a resumption of more typical service rates.

There was one notable exception: an increase in order modifications. Parents can request reviews of their child support orders if there has been a substantial change in their financial circumstances. So it is not surprising that order modifications increased for both research groups (PJAC services and business-as-usual) during a period of financial instability for many families—specifically, Quarter 3 of 2020 (the quarter after the onset of the pandemic). Order modifications can increase or decrease a child support order, and the analysis found that the percentage of noncustodial parents whose child support orders were reduced increased for both groups as well, though at a higher rate for the PJAC

TABLE 1. PJAC Service Definitions and COVID-19-Era Trends in Service Delivery

Service and Definition	COVID-19-Era Trends
<p>Outreach and engagement. PJAC case managers were intended to make introductory calls to both parents, followed by continued contact.</p>	<p>Custodial and noncustodial parent contact rates slowed slightly at the onset of the pandemic, but contact rates increased in the summer of 2020. In interviews, child support staff members said it was easier to get in touch with parents during the pandemic, perhaps due in part to job instability and increased remote work.</p>
<p>Case action planning. PJAC case managers were intended to create individual plans with noncustodial parents.</p>	<p>Case-action-plan completion rates declined at the onset of the pandemic and never returned to prepandemic levels. This decline is probably due in part to dwindling enrollment: PJAC enrollment ended in September 2020 and began tapering off in the preceding months. The PJAC model intended initial case action plans to be set in the early stages of PJAC services, so many PJAC participants may have completed case action planning before the onset of the pandemic.^a</p>
<p>Case conferences. When appropriate, PJAC case managers were expected to facilitate negotiations between parents to come to preliminary agreement about how to address reasons for nonpayment and develop a plan to achieve payment compliance.</p>	<p>The rate of case-conference completion plateaued for three months after COVID-19's onset, but rates increased in the summer of 2020.</p>

SOURCES: MDRC calculations based on child support administrative data.

NOTES: The term "rate" refers to the percentage of enrolled noncustodial parents who had ever experienced an enforcement action as of a given quarter. Due to rolling enrollment, the number of enrolled noncustodial parents increases each quarter through September 2021.

^aMelanie Skemer, Jennifer Hausler, Olivia Williams, Louisa Treskon, and Jacqueline Groskaufmanis, *A Comparison of Approaches Informed by Procedural Justice and Traditional Enforcement in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration* (New York: MDRC, 2022).

services group. This increase in order modifications may reflect the responsiveness of the child support agencies to the changing financial realities noncustodial parents faced.

Changes in the Use of Enforcement Actions and Contempt

Enforcement actions are tools case managers use to compel noncustodial parents who are behind on child support payments to pay. Some enforcement actions are automatically triggered by noncustodial parents reaching certain debt thresholds or a certain number of months without payment, while others are initiated at the discretion of a case manager. When case managers exhaust other enforcement actions, they may refer noncustodial parents to civil contempt. The frequency with which child support programs make such referrals varies dramatically across the country.

Table 3 defines each enforcement and contempt action included in the analysis and discusses how trends compared before and after COVID-19's onset. Like PJAC services and enhanced child support services, enforcement actions and contempt referrals generally slowed down early in the pandemic before picking back up in the summer of 2020. The most notable changes included:

- **An increase in state and federal tax intercepts**, which may be because (1) individuals filed federal income taxes to receive economic impact payments who otherwise might not have, (2) unemployment compensation increased and was counted as taxable income, and (3) child support agencies intercepted the first pandemic economic support (known as the first stimulus payment), but did not intercept the second and third rounds of stimulus payments.⁷

TABLE 2. Enhanced Child Support Service Definitions and COVID-19-Era Trends

Service and Definition	COVID-19-Era Trends
<p>Order modifications. Child support orders are determined by a standard, statewide formula that accounts for both parents' incomes, the number of children, and many other factors.^a Custodial and noncustodial parents can request an order review every three years or if there has been a substantial change in their financial circumstances.</p>	<p>Order-modification rates increased for both research groups (PJAC services and business-as-usual) in Quarter 3 of 2020 (the quarter after the onset of the pandemic). The downward order-modification rate, or the percentage of noncustodial parents whose child support orders decreased, also increased for both groups. However, it increased more for the PJAC services group.</p>
<p>Debt adjustments. When noncustodial parents do not pay their full order amounts, they accrue debt. However, sometimes there are errors in these calculations, and child support programs need to adjust debt amounts. These errors are often uncovered during the contempt process as an accurate calculation of the debt amount is a condition of bringing a case forward for contempt.</p>	<p>Business-as-usual group debt-adjustment rates were much lower after the onset of the pandemic than before. Because checking debt calculations is part of the contempt-referral process, this decline in debt adjustments is most likely to be related to a decline in pandemic-era contempt referrals. The debt-adjustment rate for the PJAC services group did not change during the pandemic.</p>
<p>Debt compromises. Parents with substantial child support debt owed to the state can seek compromises to reduce their debt amounts.^b Similarly, custodial parents can agree to partial or full debt forgiveness for support owed to them.</p>	<p>Debt compromises occurred at similar rates in the business-as-usual and PJAC services groups before the pandemic. During the pandemic, the rate of debt compromises did not change for business-as-usual group members, whereas the PJAC services group's debt-compromise rate increased. This increase may be due to the increased attention from PJAC case managers focused on connecting parents to state debt-compromise programs or negotiating between parents to forgive debt owed to custodial parents.</p>
<p>License reinstatements. States can revoke noncustodial parents' licenses (for example, driving or hunting licenses) for noncompliance with their child support orders. Agencies can reinstate these licenses if noncustodial parents meet certain conditions (for example, adhering to a payment plan or entering a job training program).</p>	<p>The rate of reinstatements was essentially unchanged during the pandemic, apart from a brief decline in new license reinstatements for several quarters after the start of the pandemic among the business-as-usual groups in Michigan and Virginia. Though it is impossible to identify the reason for this decline, it may be due to a decrease in parents' ability to meet the payment-plan terms as the early stages of the pandemic made more of them subject to employment instability.</p>
<p>Case closures. The end of a child support agency's enforcement of a child support order is called a case closure. Cases will close when there is no longer a current support order or debt remaining on a case. Further justifications for case closure include: custodial parents requesting the case be closed (as long as there is no debt owed to the state on the case), noncustodial parents having a significant change in circumstances that would not allow them to pay support (for example, permanent disability or incarceration without the option for parole), or noncustodial parents acting as primary caregivers of the children for whom they owe support.</p>	<p>No notable changes.</p>

(continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

SOURCES: MDRC calculations based on child support administrative data.

NOTES: The term “rate” refers to the percentage of enrolled noncustodial parents who had ever experienced an enforcement action as of a given quarter. Due to rolling enrollment, the number of enrolled noncustodial parents increases each quarter through September 2021.

^aThe exact approach to these calculations varies among states. For more details on the basics of the different approaches states have taken, see pages 6–7 of Jessica Tollestrup, “Child Support Enforcement: Program Basics” (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2023).

^bDebt owed to the state accrues in two ways: (1) While custodial parents and their children receive public assistance (for example, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), the custodial parents must assign their right to receive support to the state. If child support payments are not received while the custodial parents are on public assistance, the unpaid support accrues as debt owed to the state. (2) Most noncustodial parents incur fees associated with child support actions, such as processing fees for child support payments. If those fees go unpaid, they become a debt owed to the state. Additionally, in 34 states—including the 5 states in the PJAC demonstration—child support debt is subject to interest, increasing debt amounts further. See National Conference of State Legislatures, National Conference of State Legislatures, “Interest on Child Support Arrears” (website: <https://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/interest-on-child-support-arrears.aspx>, 2021).

- ▶ **A brief and subtle decrease in using license suspensions and asset seizures**, which may reflect child support agencies’ sensitivity to the job and financial insecurity noncustodial parents faced during the early months of the pandemic.
- ▶ **A temporary decrease in referrals to contempt**, which may reflect a combination of factors, including temporary court closures, a sensitivity to the sudden job and financial insecurity many noncustodial parents faced, efforts to reduce jail populations, or increased payments due to stimulus intercepts and unemployment insurance withholding.⁸

CHANGES IN CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES AS THE PANDEMIC EMERGENCY DREW TO A CLOSE

Many of the pandemic-era changes that child support agencies implemented were short-lived. These were mostly the changes made in direct response to stay-at-home orders and other attempts to reduce transmission of COVID-19.⁹

Other changes that occurred during the pandemic have persisted. These were often policy and programmatic adaptations that agencies realized increased efficiency and improved customer experience. Perhaps the most notable change is the degree to which virtual service delivery and remote work remained after stay-at-home orders were lifted.

Virtual Service Delivery

The pandemic increased the use of technology and virtual service delivery in child support offices; how-

ever, the degree to which virtual service delivery persisted varied across sites. While some staff members and parents appreciate certain aspects of virtual service delivery, they also shared frustrations.

While business-as-usual and PJAC workers both noted benefits from virtual service delivery, the groups reported different benefits. PJAC workers felt video case conferences provided a more comfortable way for parents to engage with one another. Court staff members noted that virtual meetings made it easier to manage conflict or talk to parents one-on-one by using tools such as virtual breakout or waiting rooms.

For business-as-usual workers, virtual service delivery meant fewer disruptions from in-person questions and interviews, both scheduled and walk-ins. One business-as-usual case manager shared, “It’s less frantic, it’s less stressful, which makes it seem like you have more time.” PJAC services staff members did not discuss a “less frantic” pace of work, and this difference in perception may be because business-as-usual staff members’ caseloads are significantly higher than those of PJAC staff members.

I’ve had a lot of people who are like.... “You know, I’m not [having to] sit next to him. I’m not [having to be] in the same room with him.” So they feel more comfortable [with virtual case conferences].

—Staff person, Michigan

Some staff members in California felt that email communication and using electronic signature options such as DocuSign made it easier to engage parents who might not have a fixed address, phone number, or reliable transportation. Additionally,

TABLE 3. Definitions and COVID-19-Era Trends in Enforcement and Contempt Actions

Enforcement Action and Definition	COVID-19-Era Trends
State and federal tax intercepts. When noncustodial parents have child support debts, the child support program automatically intercepts state and federal tax refunds and applies intercepted funds to their debt balances.	State and federal tax intercepts climbed for both research groups after the onset of the pandemic.
License suspensions. The child support program can suspend state-issued licenses (for example, driving, fishing, or hunting licenses) when noncustodial parents are behind on child support payments.	License suspensions declined slightly after the onset of the pandemic for both research groups. This decline aligns with broader efforts in child support programs to decrease the use of license suspensions, which can make it more difficult for noncustodial parents to get to work and, thus, meet their child support obligations. ^a
Asset seizures. The child support program can seize or place a lien on a noncustodial parent’s assets if the parent is behind on child support payments.	Asset seizures paused during the two quarters (one quarter for PJAC services group members) after the onset of the pandemic before resuming at higher rates than they were at before the pandemic. This increase may reflect that noncustodial parents may have had more money in their accounts from the stimulus checks and expanded unemployment insurance. ^b
Contempt referrals. When noncustodial parents are behind on child support payments and case managers have exhausted all enforcement actions to compel payment, case workers can refer them to civil contempt.	Contempt referrals stagnated after the onset of the pandemic. A few potential explanations are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Courts were closed for varying amounts of time before transitioning to remote hearings.^c ➤ Child support agencies were more hesitant to proceed with contempt referrals as many people had lost jobs.^d ➤ Jails were trying to reduce populations to decrease the possibility of a COVID-19 outbreak.^e ➤ Expanded unemployment insurance and intercepted stimulus payments may have reduced the need for contempt.

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on child support administrative data.

NOTES: The term “rate” refers to the percentage of enrolled noncustodial parents who had ever experienced an enforcement action as of a given quarter. Due to rolling enrollment, the number of enrolled noncustodial parents increases each quarter through September 2021.

^aSteven Capps, “Driver’s License Suspension for Support or Parenting Time Violations” (official memorandum, Lansing, MI: Michigan Supreme Court, 2021).

^bLouisa Treskon, with Danielle Fumia and Mary Farrell, *Comparing the Costs and Benefits of Two Approaches to Addressing Nonpayment of Child Support: Results from the Benefit-Cost Analysis in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration* (New York: MDRC, 2023).

^cBaird, Hayes, Henderson, and Johnson (2020).

^dLisa Klein Vogel, Alejandra Ros Pilarz, Laura Cuesta, and Genevieve Caffrey, “A Helping Hand over a Heavy Hand’: Child Support Enforcement in the Era of COVID-19,” *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership and Governance* 46, 5 (2022): 392-413.

^eAkanksha Jayanthi, Asaph Glosser, and Kimberly Foley, *Reducing a Jail Population in Response to COVID-19: The Experience of Kitsap County, Washington* (Seattle: MEF Associates, 2021).


staff members in Michigan and California noted that they believed not having to come into the office was less intimidating and stressful for parents.

People that you’re talking to, they’re in their own home, so they’re a little bit more comfortable. Also, they’re not coming into this frightening government agency that they

feel has wronged them for the entire life cycle of the case.

—Staff person, California

However, virtual service delivery also has implications for decreasing the accessibility of child support services for some families. In Michigan, child



support services remain primarily virtual. Parents in Michigan are encouraged to use an online portal or state call center when they have questions. Leaders in Michigan believe this is a more effective system as it reduces disruptions for case managers and ensures that parents can speak with someone, rather than getting a case manager's voicemail. However, Michigan parents shared frustration about being unable to reach case managers directly about their cases. Some staff members also agreed that it would be helpful for parents to reach them through direct phone lines and were disappointed that current policy discouraged this approach.

Like in the [PJAC] program, I had that one lady I could call. She was kind of like a caseworker ... but now it's like I have nobody. So, it's kind of irritating, because when's my stuff gonna get taken care of? Never.

—Custodial parent, Michigan

Remote Work

As was the case for other industries, the pandemic necessitated remote work for child support agencies. California, Michigan, and Virginia had varying telework options at the time of interviews. Generally, staff members reported that working remotely had benefits, while leaders reported some drawbacks.

Across the three sites, staff members noted that remote work gave them more flexible schedules, which they found helpful. This flexibility lent itself to better work-life balance as it allowed them to, for example, schedule doctors' appointments, assist their children with remote schooling, and, later in the pandemic, pick up their children from school when needed. Several noted that once their flexible schedules had them working past typical office hours, they found that parents were easier to reach in those after-hours times.

Leaders in Michigan and California shared that they find remote work makes it difficult to manage their staffs. They noted that it is challenging for them to have a good understanding of how staff members are doing, especially new staff members.

Court Operations

The local courts at the Michigan and Virginia sites still offer virtual options for some court services. In contrast, those at the California site have decreased their virtual offerings. A notable advantage of vir-

tual court hearings is that parents may not have to coordinate childcare or request time off work to attend. Conversely, attorneys in California said that in-person court hearings allow them to meet with parents more easily before and after the court calls their cases, as they are all present at the courthouse. These in-person meetings provide time to prepare parents for hearings, gather information, answer questions, or come to agreements in lieu of going before a judge.

Enforcement

Child support staff members have some discretion in how they work cases.¹⁰ Therefore, staff perspectives on enforcement actions were important to understanding changes in enforcement during the pandemic.


Leaders in California said that they believed they now file for contempt less often than they did than before the pandemic. They noted that this reduction is due to the ways the pandemic and PJAC principles changed their agency, perhaps because a core component of the PJAC approach was to understand parents' underlying reasons for nonpayment and explore alternatives to the standard contempt process.

Order Amounts

Some staff members shared that they looked to the economy in their local areas to inform order amounts. When local unemployment rates began to decline, legal staff members in both Michigan and California felt like parents should be able to find work at decent wages, which they said affected how order amounts were set.

Staffing Challenges

Like other industries, child support agencies faced staffing challenges during the pandemic. These staffing challenges continue to have implications for their operations. For example, staff turnover and hiring challenges have further increased case backlogs that were first created by court shutdowns at the start of the pandemic. California staff members noted that their agency's in-office work requirements, the emotional nature of the work, and the comparatively low salaries on offer make it difficult to hire and retain employees. Muskegon County, Michigan, is facing similar issues: Case managers in neighboring counties are offered substantially higher salaries, affecting the county's staffing. Califor-



nia staff members shared that their court backlog is twice as long as it was before the pandemic, partly due to legal staff turnover.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic was a temporary shock to child support services, but services generally returned to their prepandemic operational state. Some of these initial shifts—such as increases in order modifications and reductions in license suspensions—may reflect the sensitivity and responsiveness of child support staff members during a challenging and unpredictable period for families.¹¹ As has been the case in other social service programs and the private sector, the change that has persisted is that some level of virtual service remains. And as is the case with many system changes, there are benefits and barriers that arise from virtual service delivery.¹² Notably, the staffing shock that child support agencies felt from the pandemic remained a challenge at the point the research team was conducting interviews, around 2.5 years after the pandemic's onset.

Staff members reported that the pandemic allowed for more flexible working hours and made it easier to reach parents and help them engage with one another. Parents did not report a strong difference in services when case managers were working remotely, suggesting that some level of remote work may be a viable option for child support agencies indefinitely. As most staff members reported benefits from remote work, retaining it could be a way for agencies to boost staff satisfaction and retention. Additionally, offering remote work to prospective candidates may be a way agencies could increase hiring.

Notably, changes in discretionary actions (for example, decreases in license suspensions and referrals to contempt) may reflect child support agencies' responsiveness to the hardships that families faced during the pandemic. This sensitivity is an orientation that can be carried over into everyday child support operations, and one that aligns with the elements of procedural justice that informed the PJAC approach.



NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 The PJAC sample differs from the full child support population in important ways: Noncustodial parents who are eligible for PJAC are behind on their child support payments and are at the point of being referred to civil contempt. They typically have long histories with the child support program and tend to have low earnings.
- 2 For more information on the initial disruptions due to the pandemic, see Peter Baird, Michael Hayes, Sharon Henderson, and Tanya Johnson, "Procedural Justice Principles in the Midst of a Major Disruption: What Several Months of COVID-19 Revealed in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) Demonstration" (New York: MDRC, 2020).
- 3 The three project sites included in this analysis were Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, California; Muskegon County, Michigan; and Newport News and Richmond, Virginia. To collect qualitative data, interviewers spoke with staff members at three agencies: San Bernadino County, California; Muskegon County, Michigan; and Newport News, Virginia. For simplicity, this brief refers to the sites as California, Michigan, and Virginia.
- 4 A management information system is a computer-based system used to capture information about program participants and the activities they engage in with the program's staff.
- 5 Specifically, staff members reported that parents were easier to reach during this period, which may be in part because more parents were unemployed or working from home and thus were able to meet during normal working hours. Additionally, some staff members shared that their working hours were flexible during this time, allowing them to start later in the day and work later into the evening.
- 6 Despite the clear service contrast, overall rates of enhanced child support services were low for both groups. For more details, see Melanie Skemer, Jennifer Hausler, Olivia Williams, Louisa Treskon, and Jacqueline Groskaufmanis, *A Comparison of Approaches Informed by Procedural Justice and Traditional Enforcement in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration* (New York: MDRC, 2022).
- 7 For more information on child support agencies' interception policies regarding unemployment insurance and stimulus payments, see Semhar Gebrekristos and Danielle Cummings, *The Child Support Program's Response to the Pandemic and Economic Assistance: A Look at Three Sites in the Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt Demonstration* (New York: MDRC, forthcoming).
- 8 Baird, Hayes, Henderson, and Johnson (2020); Lisa Klein Vogel, Alejandra Ros Pilarz, Laura Cuesta, and Genevieve Caffrey, "A Helping Hand over a Heavy Hand": Child Support Enforcement in the Era of COVID-19," *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance* 46, 5 (2022): 392-413; Akanksha Jayanthi, Asaph Glosser, and Kimberly Foley, *Reducing a Jail Population in Response to COVID-19: The Experience of Kitsap County, Washington* (Seattle: MEF Associates, 2021).
- 9 For more information on the initial disruptions due to the pandemic, see Baird, Hayes, Henderson, and Johnson (2020).
- 10 Vogel, Pilarz, Cuesta, and Caffrey (2022).
- 11 Vogel, Pilarz, Cuesta, and Caffrey (2022).
- 12 Amanda Benton, Jennifer Tschantz, Alec Vandenberg, Annette Waters, and Pamela Winston, *Easy or Hard? Delivering Different Types of Human Services Virtually* (Washington, DC: Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2021).

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