

The Child Support Media Guide

Introduction

The child support program provides a significant source of income for families. In federal fiscal year (FY) 2017, child support programs across the nation served **15.1 million** children and their parents by collecting **\$32.4 billion** in child support. The program operates through a strong collaboration between the federal government and state and tribal governments.

The child support program in every state provides assistance in locating parents, establishing parentage, and obtaining child support for children. Many states go beyond collecting child support to include these services:

- Helping parents find a job so they can pay support
- Helping parents find resources to remove barriers to getting a job, such as homelessness or a prior criminal conviction
- Funding programs that help parents negotiate and create parenting plans

Our customers

We serve parents and children from all kinds of families – not just those on public assistance. And the majority of parents who have a child support case pay their child support. Nationally, the program collected 65% of current support owed in FY 2017. Most collections came through employers who regularly withhold and send child support payments from parents' paychecks to the appropriate child support agency for disbursement.

Confidentiality

We are vigilant in protecting the privacy of the families we serve and are bound by federal and state laws regarding what we can disclose. If you want to talk to someone about a specific case, you must get a release from the parent(s) involved in the case. Contact the child support office that's handling the case for the appropriate release form.

Helpful statistics

- In FY 2017, the child support program **distributed \$27.4 billion directly to families**¹
- Child support provides **as much as 41%** of income to poor families who receive it²
- The national child support program is cost effective, **returning \$5.15 for every dollar** invested.³

History of child support

Congress established the child support enforcement program in 1975 to reimburse benefits paid by the government's welfare programs. In FY 1977, the child support program served less than 1 million cases and collected less than \$1 billion. Congress changed the program in 1996 as part of welfare reform to expand the role of technology and ensure children receive more of the support paid by their parents.

The child support program does not transfer public funds to families. Instead, the program enforces the private transfer of income from parents who do not live with their children to the household where the children live, thereby increasing the financial well-being of children and strengthening the ties between children and parents who live apart.

Child support terminology

Child Support – Financial support paid by parents for their child. Parents can provide child support voluntarily or pay support under an order of a court or an administrative agency, depending on state or tribal laws. Child support may also include health insurance coverage for the child.

Child Support Order – Decision that determines the specific financial responsibilities of a parent in order to meet a child's needs. In addition to basic subsistence (such as food, shelter, and clothing), the court or administrative agency may consider health care, educational, day care, and extraordinary needs of the child. Each state has guidelines that the court or administrative agency uses when calculating the child support order.

Custodial Parent (CP) – Parent who is owed or receives child support. The preferable term is “parent receiving support.”

Custody – Legally binding determination that establishes with whom a child shall live. The meaning of different types of custody terms varies from state to state and tribe to tribe.

Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) – Federal agency responsible for administration of the Child Support Enforcement Program. Created by Title IV-D of the Social Security Act in 1975, OCSE is responsible for developing child support policy; overseeing, evaluating, and auditing state and tribal child support programs; and providing technical assistance and training to those programs.

Income Withholding Order (IWO) and Electronic Income Withholding Order (E-IWO) – Order that requires an employer to withhold support from a parent's wages and transfer that withholding to the appropriate agency.

Intergovernmental case – Typically, a case where the parent paying support lives in a different state or territory, country, or tribal jurisdiction than the parent and child receiving support.

International case – A type of intergovernmental case involving one parent in the U.S. and the other in a foreign country.

Interstate case – A type of intergovernmental case involving parents in different states.

New Hire reporting – Program under which employers submit data on a new or rehired employee within 20 days of hire to the appropriate State Directory of New Hires where they do business.

Noncustodial Parent (NCP) – Parent who owes or pays child support. The preferable term is “parent paying support.”

Obligee – Person who is owed or receives child support. An obligee may be a parent, guardian, or other individual with physical custody of the child. When a parent is owed or receives child support, the preferable term is “Parent receiving support.”

Obligor – Parent who owes or pays child support. The preferable term is “parent paying support.”

Parent Paying Support – Parent who pays child support to the other parent. Usually, the parent paying support does not have primary care, custody, or control of the child. Other terms include noncustodial parent, obligor, and payor.

Parent Receiving Support – Parent who receives child support from the other parent. Usually, the parent receiving support has the primary care, custody and responsibility of the child. Other terms include custodial parent, obligee, and payee.

Payor – Parent who owes or pays child support. The preferable term is “parent paying support.”

Payee – Person who is owed or receives child support. A payee may be a parent, guardian, or other individual with physical custody of the child. When a parent is owed or receives child support, the preferable term is “parent receiving support.”

Parentage – A parent-child relationship under state or tribal law. Parentage may be established by court or administrative order, marriage to the child’s mother, voluntary acknowledgment, or tribal custom.

State Disbursement Unit (SDU) – Payment processing center required by federal law for child support payments. In most cases child support payments are not made directly to a parent or local court. Instead, the SDU receives and processes child support money from employers and

parents and forwards the funds via check, direct deposit, or debit card to families. The SDU must process payments within two days of receipt.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) – Block grant that provides grants to states, Indian tribes, and territories for a wide range of benefits, services, and activities that address economic disadvantage. TANF is best known for funding state cash welfare programs for low-income families with children. In FY 2015, states reported that cash welfare represented only 25% of state and federal spending in the TANF program. States now use TANF funds for a wide range of activities that seek to reduce the effects and address the root causes of child poverty.

Title IV-D (pronounced four-dee) – Refers to the part of the Social Security Act that created the child support program and set the rules that all state child support programs must follow. Often, the child support program is referred to as the “Title IV-D program” or the “IV-D program.” Parents and custodians can receive help in establishing and enforcing child support and medical support through the IV-D program. These services are available to parties for little to no cost.

United States Administration for Children and Families (ACF) – U.S. government agency that houses the Office of Child Support Enforcement within the Department of Health and Human Services.

United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) – U.S. Government’s principal agency for protecting the health of all Americans and providing essential human services, especially for those who are least able to help themselves.

Voluntary Acknowledgment – Simple civil process available in every state where the child’s birth mother and an individual voluntarily establish the individual’s legal parentage to the child.

Helpful sources

[Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement \(OCSE\)](#)

[National Child Support Enforcement Association \(NCSEA\)](#)

[National Tribal Child Support Association \(NTCSA\)](#)

[Eastern Regional Interstate Child Support Association \(ERICSA\)](#)

[Western Intergovernmental Child Support Engagement Council \(WICSEC\)](#)

¹ OCSE DCL-18-02, FY 2017 Preliminary Data Report, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/resource/fy-2017-preliminary-data-report>.

² OCSE The Story Behind the Numbers, December 2016, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/sbtn_csp_is_a_good_investment.pdf

³ OCSE DCL-18-02, FY 2017 Preliminary Data Report, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/resource/fy-2017-preliminary-data-report>.