



Executive Summary

A Blueprint for Economic Security

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America has been remade. Workforce changes have reached all major demographics but some have been particularly disadvantaged—high on the list is men with limited education and skills. Over the last couple decades, their labor outcomes have been impacted by a toxic mixture of social challenges. They include widening economic inequality, disappearing manufacturing jobs, expanding incarceration rates, failing schools, and ongoing structural racism. Ultimately, the employment rates and salaries of low-skilled men have been noticeably trending downward.

These labor market changes coincided with the 1974 birth and later expansions of Child Support Enforcement (CSE). Congress created the program to ensure that non-resident parents share in the costs of childrearing. Poverty reduction and reduced reliance on government benefits were clear goals. Unfortunately, Congress did not anticipate workforce trends that would later make it difficult for fathers with limited education and skills to provide for their children.

Although CSE has provided valuable services to many families, it doesn't work well for the lowest income parents. The percentages of poor women obtaining both orders and payments have largely remained static. Meanwhile the amount of arrears has been skyrocketing. Most of the debt is concentrated within a small group of parents, 75 percent of whom earn less than \$10,000 a year.

Fathers who are too poor to pay child support suffer a host of negative consequences that include jail time, loss of drivers' and professional licenses, and negative marks on their credit reports. Some CSE punishments actually make it harder for fathers to get and maintain work. Meanwhile, children and mothers do not receive desperately needed payments.

Various existing sections of the CSE legislation contribute to the problems. And certain areas, such as employment services and parenting time, are worthy of greater attention.

CSE reform is long overdue. The well-being of children and families requires the following:

- 1) **Stop-Out Option.** Fathers who are too poor to pay (the long-term unemployed or institutionalized) should be able to stop-out of CSE. During these periods, fathers should be voluntarily participating in non-CSE employment programs and other services designed to get them on their feet. Simultaneously, custodial parents and

children should receive child support payments that are guaranteed by a pot of resources managed by CSE programs.

- 2) **New Reporting Requirements.** The federal government must establish new reporting requirements. State and regional workforce data should be considered when evaluating program success. New rules should also mandate states to report on their use of penalties such as jail time or suspensions of drivers' or professional licenses.
- 3) **Quick and Efficient Modifications.** Systems must be more responsive to the income fluctuations of non-custodial parents. New resources would help states to improve existing systems to allow for quicker and more efficient modifications. Experimentation and innovation should be encouraged. The Bradley Amendment should be eliminated, allowing for retroactive modifications of orders that were established incorrectly.
- 4) **Employment.** Forced work programs (accomplished through court orders and threats of jail time) should end. All aspects of employment services should be managed by agencies that have relevant expertise (labor departments and fatherhood programs). Securing voluntary participation will require investments in highly effective services that actually help non-custodial parents secure living wage jobs.
- 5) **Parenting Time.** States should establish "Family First Commissions" supported by new federal resources. Bringing together relevant experts, the commissions would pursue a mission of expanding access to parenting time arrangements and family dispute resolution services.
- 6) **Resident Fathers.** States should reevaluate how their policies impact resident fathers. Agencies should ensure that children living with CSE-involved fathers do not suffer undue hardship as a byproduct of collection activities.