



CENTER FOR FAMILY POLICY AND PRACTICE

POLICY BRIEFING

OCTOBER 2017 — Vol. 17 — No. 8

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Child Support Debt, Employment, and Wages Pre- and Post-Incarceration
- Incomes Improving, but Income Inequality Remains Striking
- Survey Reveals Striking Gaps Among Americans in Beliefs and Levels of Empathy
- Earned Income Tax Credit Can Increase Income and Encourage Work
- Estimates of Progress Toward Racial Economic Equality Depend on Race
- Child Care Deserts Affect the Ability of Rural, Minority, and Low-Income Families to Work
- State Policy and Practice News
- Also of Note

Child Support Debt, Employment, and Wages Pre- and Post-Incarceration

A recent [research brief](#) funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services presents findings on

pre- and post-incarceration wages and child support participation in sites selected from the Multi-Site Family Study on Incarceration, Parenting and Partnering (MFS-IP). The brief used study data from five states—Indiana, Ohio, New York, New Jersey, and Minnesota. Additional administrative data on child support payments and arrears were obtained from the two largest study sites, Indiana and Ohio. The results presented in the brief are not findings on the impact of the MFS-IP program, but are based on data collected from the study. The study itself will evaluate participants in treatment and comparison groups to analyze information on the experiences of the participating families before, during, and after a male partner's incarceration. The brief's data analysis found that:

- Among the 1,548 incarcerated and reentering men in the research sample, the majority (85%) had at least one child support case for one or more of their children. In New York and New Jersey, this proportion was 100 percent. The brief suggests that this might be because New York served men with longer sentences and New Jersey served individuals who stayed in prison longer to avoid being on supervision when they returned to the community. Both circumstances might have increased the likelihood of custodial parent involvement with state social services, such as Temporary Assistance for

Needy Families (TANF), child welfare, or Medicaid, which could result in a child support case being opened as a condition of receiving government assistance.

- Men’s median annual wages ranged from \$2,311 in New York to \$4,658 in New Jersey in the year before their incarceration, and from \$1,179 in New York to \$9,082 in Indiana for the year after their incarceration. Median yearly earnings for both male and female participants were at or below the federal poverty level (\$11,880 for a single person in 2016) in all five states, both before and after the male partner’s incarceration.
- Although there were missing data on employment rates and earnings, the available data showed that a portion of the sample succeeded in obtaining employment after release from prison, but their very low median earnings (below the poverty level of \$11,880 for a single person) mean that their ability to support themselves and their children through work in the formal economy is questionable. Most women’s earnings were also insufficient to raise their families out of poverty, either before the male partner’s incarceration or after his release.
- Child support arrears were high relative to men’s earnings, and among fathers with arrears data from both time points, arrears rose from pre-incarceration to post-release. Among men with any child support arrears, the median owed for all children after release from prison was \$6,070 in Indiana and reached \$11,758 in Ohio. Arrears often increased substantially during men’s incarceration.
- Across sites, one-third of men in the MFS-IP study reported that they had a child support order for one or more of their children before they were incarcerated. However, administrative data from child support agencies show that in fact, 60 percent had orders for one or more of their children, suggesting that some men may be unaware of child support judgments against them upon release from prison.

The authors suggest that child support systems add units of analysis to the case-level analysis they keep in order to better understand individual and family experiences. According to the authors, “State child support agencies maintain their data at the case level for enforcement purposes. To generate policy-relevant insights, however, these data need to be summed and consolidated so that they represent an externally meaningful unit of analysis, such as a person, couple, or family.” Although the brief does not address an absence of data on race, presumably this would be one category for states to track in order to generate policy-relevant insights.

**Incomes Improving, but
Income Inequality Remains Striking**

A [U.S. Census Bureau report](#) on income and poverty in the United States in 2016 finds that generally, incomes are up and

poverty rates have declined, but income inequality remains significant. Among the report’s findings:

- Median overall household income was \$59,039 in 2016, an increase in real terms of 3.2 percent from the 2015 median of \$57,230. However, there are dramatic differences in income by race. In 2016, white households had a median income of \$65,041; Hispanic household median income was \$47,675, and black median income was \$39,490.
- Between 2015 and 2016, married-couple households experienced an increase in income of 1.6 percent, while households maintained by women with no husband present experienced an increase in income of 7.2 percent.
- Women earned 80.5 cents for every dollar earned by men. Median income for men in 2016 was \$51,640; for women, it was \$41,544.
- The official poverty rate in 2016 was 12.7 percent, down 2.1 percentage points from 14.8 percent in 2014.
- In 2016, 8.8 percent of white, non-Hispanic people had income that was below poverty; 22 percent of black people were below poverty, and 19.4 percent of Hispanic people were below poverty.

Survey Reveals Striking Gaps Among Americans in Beliefs and Levels of Empathy

The [Public Religion Research Institute \(PRRI\)](#), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization,

recently completed a survey of American attitudes toward other racial groups and economic classes. The survey made the following findings:

- A person's race plays an important role in how they view the country's future. Across education levels, majorities of white (54%) and Hispanic (52%) Americans say the country's best days are still to come, while fewer than four in ten (39%) black Americans feel the same.
- White college-educated Americans express less concern about the lack of opportunity than those without a college degree (56% vs. 63%, respectively). Men are less likely than women to say that not giving everyone an equal opportunity is a major problem in the country (59% vs. 73%, respectively).
- Nearly half (46%) of black Americans, but just 33% of Hispanics, and 25% of whites, believe that racial and ethnic background matters a great deal in determining an individual's success.
- White Americans are significantly less likely than other racial and ethnic groups to think that assisting parents is critical to helping low-income children succeed. Just 48% of whites, but 78% of black and 73% of Hispanic Americans say parental assistance is critical.
- Fifty-nine percent of black Americans say they feel like strangers in their own country, while 43% of white and 38% of Hispanic Americans feel this way. In 2016, fewer than half (48%) of black Americans reported feeling like a stranger in their own country; over the same time period, the views of whites did not change, with roughly the same proportion, 40%, in agreement with the statement last year.

- Nearly half (48%) of all Americans, and a majority (54%) of white Americans, believe that discrimination against whites has become as big of a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities. Only about one-third (36%) of Hispanic Americans and 28% of black Americans agree. Attitudes about “reverse discrimination” are even more tied to partisanship than to race. Seventy percent of Republicans agree that discrimination against whites is as big a problem as discrimination against minorities. This view is shared by 46% of independents and 31% of Democrats. White Christians are also much more likely to think that discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities. Approximately 66% of white evangelical Protestants, 56% of white Catholics, and 53% of white mainline Protestants held this view, compared to just 36% of religiously unaffiliated individuals, 34% of Hispanic Catholics, and 28% of black Protestants.
- A majority of every racial and ethnic group rejects the idea that the driving force behind racial inequality is effort. Sixty-eight percent of black, 57% of Hispanic, and 53% of white Americans disagree that blacks could be as well off as whites if they only put forth more effort. Of note, however, is that among whites who responded to a scale that estimated their level of affinity toward other racial groups, 68% of low-affinity whites responded that blacks would be as well off as whites if they would try harder; only 26% of high-affinity whites agreed.
- White Americans are about evenly divided over whether the police treat minority communities the same as whites: 49% agree, while 51% disagree. Eighty-three percent of black Americans and 65% of Hispanic Americans do not believe blacks and other minorities are treated the same by police as whites. Whites without a college degree are only slightly more likely than those with a four-year degree to believe police officers are equitable in their treatment of minority communities (50% vs. 44%, respectively). Sixty-six percent of Republicans say whites and minorities are treated the same by police, while only 42% of independents and 26% of Democrats say the same. Differences across presidential vote choice are even larger. Seventy-one percent of Trump supporters think police treat people of all races equally, compared to just 23% of Clinton supporters.
- Half (50%) of white Americans say people receiving welfare need the assistance, while roughly as many (48%) say they are taking advantage of the system. Six in ten black (60%) and Hispanic Americans (60%) say people who receive welfare are genuinely in need of help.
- Views of welfare recipients differ drastically by political affiliation. Only 32% of Republicans believe welfare recipients are genuinely in need of help, while a majority of independents (53%) and Democrats (69%) say that they are in genuine need.
- On a list of issues, some of the starkest differences in whether a respondent felt that an issue was personally critical to them included:
 - “Children living in poverty” was personally critical to 79% of black respondents, but just 49% of whites with a college degree.

- Crime was personally critical to 63% of blacks, but just 39% of whites with a college degree.
- “Ensuring all children have equal opportunities to succeed” was personally critical to 74% of black respondents, 60% of Hispanic respondents, and 48% of white respondents.
- “People living in poverty” was critical to 70% of black respondents, but just 45% of white respondents.
- Domestic violence was a critical issue for 59% of black respondents, but just 27% of white respondents with a college degree.
- The cost of higher education was important to 57% of black respondents, but just 28% of white respondents with a college degree.
- The cost of child care was important to 53% of black respondents, but just 14% of whites with a college degree.
- In a response that was rare for being unified across races, 63% of Americans agreed that people convicted of nonviolent crimes should not be held in jail between their arrest and trial date simply because they cannot afford bail; 35% disagreed. Sixty-nine percent of blacks, 62% of whites, and 59% of Hispanics do not believe nonviolent offenders who cannot afford bail should remain imprisoned until their trial.

In a press release for the survey, Robert P. Jones, CEO of PRRI, stated, “A central takeaway of the survey is that support for issues affecting disadvantaged kids is limited among whites at both ends of the educational spectrum. But this manifests in different ways: By negative racial attitudes among the white working class and by a striking lack of concern about equal opportunity among college-educated whites.”

Earned Income Tax Credit Can Increase Income and Encourage Work

The research organization MDRC has released an [interim report](#) on its study to determine the effectiveness of the

Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) when it is increased to low-wage workers with no dependent children. The EITC provides a tax refund to low-wage workers, and has been found to be extremely effective at increasing incomes and encouraging work for parents with dependent children. Custodial parents receive up to \$5,000 as a refund through the program. For parents without dependent children, however, the maximum EITC is \$506. In order to test the effectiveness of a more generous EITC for this group, MDRC created the Paycheck Plus program, which increases the maximum EITC to \$2,000 and expands eligibility. The program recruited 6,000 eligible adults and then assigned half to an experimental group, which received the higher benefit, and half to a control group, which did not. Among the findings:

- Paycheck Plus increased income by \$654 in the first year and by \$645 in the second year of the study among parents who received the higher EITC.
- The program also modestly increased employment in the second year by 2.5 percentage points over the control group employment rate.

- The program group paid on average \$191 per month in child support, an increase of \$54 over the control group.
- Paycheck Plus increased tax filing and the use of free tax preparation services over the two years of the study.

Estimates of Progress Toward Racial Economic Equality Depend on Race

A [recent report](#) by researchers at Yale University had similar results to the PRRI report summarized above. This

study assessed black and white Americans’ estimates of current and past racial economic equality and found that they differ as a function of a person’s race and status. For the study, participants were asked to consider an average white individual or family earning \$100 and were then asked to estimate how much an average black individual or family would earn using a scale that ranged from \$0–\$200. Regarding health care, the question was framed in terms of families with health coverage, and participants indicated how many black families would be covered if 100 similarly employed white families had coverage. An answer of 100 meant equality between whites and blacks. Among the findings:

- Americans, on average, misperceive the extent to which society has made progress toward racial economic equality.
- High-income white Americans’ overestimates of current racial economic equality were larger than those generated by low-income white Americans and by black Americans across the income distribution.
- White respondents tended to overestimate the extent of racial economic equality in the past. Black respondents, in contrast, underestimated the degree of past racial economic equality.
- When made aware of societal racial discrimination, the accuracy of whites’ estimates of black–white economic equality increased, while encouraging whites to make their estimates based on their own circumstances increased their tendency to overestimate current racial economic equality.

The authors suggest that there is a profound misperception of and unfounded optimism regarding societal race-based economic equality and that this misperception is likely to have many important policy implications.

Child Care Deserts Affect the Ability of Rural, Minority, and Low-Income Families to Work

New reports from [the Center for American Progress \(CAP\)](#) identify shortages in child care

options that prevent people from successfully engaging in the workforce.

CAP reports that nationwide, 65% of young children have all of their available parents in the workforce. For these families, high-quality child care is a necessity, but its high cost is a significant burden. Millions of parents must either pay more than they can afford for child care, settle for cheaper, lower quality care, or leave their jobs. When parents leave the workforce to become full-time caregivers, they

can lose much more than just their salaries, earning less in benefits and retirement savings over the long run. In 2016, nearly 2 million parents of children age 5 and younger had to quit a job, not take a job, or change their job because of problems with child care.

Despite a significant increase in the percentage of families in which all parents work outside the home, in many neighborhoods, small towns, and rural communities across the country there are inadequate child care options. Where there is a shortage of child care slots and child care waiting lists, there is an effect on parents' employment decisions and options. In addition, research has increasingly established the importance of early child care and education in shaping children's educational, health, and social outcomes. CAP analyzed the locations of licensed child care providers in 22 states and found that [approximately half of Americans live in "child care deserts,"](#) or areas with little or no access to quality child care. Other key findings from this analysis include:

- Fifty-eight percent of rural tracts, but just 44% of suburban neighborhoods, qualify as child care deserts. Urban areas where the median family income is below average also have high rates of child care deserts.
- Hispanic/Latino and American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) communities are disproportionately represented in child care deserts, with roughly 60 percent of their combined populations living in areas with a low supply of child care. More than 75 percent of the rural AIAN population lives in a child care desert.
- Maternal labor force participation rates are 3 percentage points lower on average in child care deserts than in communities where there is adequate child care supply. In communities where median family incomes are below the national average, this maternal employment gap is even wider.

The report concludes that until families have the resources to afford child care, the market will be driven by parents' ability to pay, leaving communities of color and those living in rural areas behind, and recommends that the federal government should specifically invest in child care and early education infrastructure just as it invests in public safety, public parks, and public schools.

State Policy and Practice

- In **Illinois**, the [Cook County Parentage and Child Support Court \(known as the parentage court\) was abolished](#) in response to a new round of possible legal action over its constitutionality. The county was the only large court jurisdiction in the country that had separate courtrooms for divorcing parents with custody issues and unmarried parents. Illinois law treated unmarried parents differently from married parents for more than a century as a result of an outdated state law that referred to the children of unwed parents as "bastards." For years, unmarried parents were sent to police station courtrooms and other buildings

separate from divorce court in downtown Chicago. In 1993, the parentage court was moved to the same building as the divorce court, but was still held in the basement of the court complex, while divorce cases were heard in larger, better-appointed courtrooms upstairs. In addition, just 7 of the 37 domestic relations judges at the Daley Center heard unwed-parent cases.

“I believe that Chicago is extremely conservative and the court system historically views unwed parents as lesser,” said Jeffrey Leving, an attorney for an unmarried father. “When you have unwed parents being treated like cattle in the basement of the courthouse where the future of their children is being balanced, that hurts their children.”

- The **Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS)** has announced that, beginning October 1, it will begin collecting a fee from many custodial parents in the state who receive child support payments. The DHS Division of Child Support Services will charge a 3 percent fee, up to a maximum of \$10 per month, on child support payments it collects. The fee is expected to generate approximately \$1 million this year and the department states that it is needed to help balance the agency's fiscal year 2018 budget. DHS recently had to close 40 child support offices and eliminate its court liaison program. Parents who receive child support payments and also receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, and those receiving SoonerCare (Oklahoma Medicaid) will not be charged the new fee.

Rep. Jason Lowe, D-Oklahoma City, said he plans to introduce legislation in February to prevent the fee from going into effect.

- A **New Hampshire bill** that originally would have tightened eligibility requirements for food stamp applicants in a number of ways, was revised in committee to remove all provisions except one, which would have required parents or guardians of children under 18 to cooperate with Department of Health and Human Services child support enforcement rules in order for the family to be eligible to participate in the food stamp program. After considering what was left of the bill, the committee voted unanimously against it.

The provision would have meant that parents applying for food stamps would have had to file an application with child support services before the family could receive benefits. Noncompliance would have eliminated the parent's share of food stamps. The noncustodial parent, meanwhile, would receive no food stamp assistance until the payments were made. Opponents raised concerns that families would be unfairly punished if the noncustodial parent did not comply, arguing that child support payments should be enforced through the court system, not through threats of withholding benefits. Concerns were also raised about the administrative costs of the new requirements.

- The **Mississippi** Attorney General’s office is using its Child Desertion Unit in a [stepped up effort to find and prosecute parents who fail to pay child support](#). In its first few weeks, several people have been arrested for failing to pay child support, and one man has been convicted and will spend the next four years in prison. According to the unit’s standards for prosecuting cases, the priorities, in order, are:
 - Most egregious cases
 - At least \$10,000 in arrears OR years without voluntary payment
 - Exhausted all chancery court remedies
 - Multiple orders for contempt
 - Incarceration
 - License suspension
 - IRS intercepts
 - Suspect has the ability to pay but simply refuses
 - Employment verified
 - History of quitting jobs to avoid withholding of support
 - No SSI or SSA cases absent extenuating circumstances

Note that the 8th of 10 standards is the ability to pay.

- [The Marshall Project](#) reports that it is a common practice across the country, particularly in rural areas, for people in the middle of a mental health crisis to be sent to jail rather than admitted to a hospital when a bed or transportation to a hospital is not immediately available. In these cases, patients are transported like inmates, handcuffed in the back of police vehicles.

The state legislature in **Colorado** has recently outlawed such practices that detain people in a psychiatric crisis who have not committed a crime. The state delegated more than \$9 million, with \$6 million coming from marijuana tax revenue, to pay for local crisis centers, training for law enforcement and transportation programs.

Laws in five states—New Mexico, North and South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming—explicitly provide that correctional facilities may be used for a “mental health hold.” The practice is also common in states even when they do not have such laws, although no national figures are kept to track it. It is, however, known that since 2011, at least 22 hospitals in 16 states have been cited by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) for failing to stabilize patients in need of mental health help, instead using law enforcement to hold them while waiting for a psychiatric evaluation or a bed. The hospitals cited are spread throughout the country, from Alabama and South Dakota to New York and Ohio, and the problem is exacerbated by a decreasing number of mental health facilities. There is currently a nationwide scarcity of available doctors and inpatient beds for people in a mental health crisis, particularly the

poor. The number of psychiatric beds decreased by 96% across the country over the past 50 years.

- **Tennessee** [Governor Bill Haslam is making several proposals](#) that would affect recipients of government assistance in the state. First, he plans to raise the monthly benefit level for TANF recipients, for example from \$185 to \$277 for a family of three. The increase, funded by the federal government, would affect 45,000 children and 13,000 adults and represents the first increase in benefits in 20 years. Along with this change, the governor would continue the state's 60-month lifetime cap on TANF benefits. Haslam also plans to prioritize fraud prevention, saying he will "put some programs in place that prevent fraud and crack down on abuse."

At the same time, the governor plans to re-establish work requirements that were waived nearly 10 years ago during the economic recession for the state's food stamp (SNAP) program for most able-bodied adults who do not have dependent children. The work requirements would apply to 58,000 adults in the state and would require 20 hours weekly on a job, in training or education, or in an approved volunteer program.

Of Note

- The U.S. Office of Child Support Enforcement OCSE blog, [Analyze This](#), recently analyzed data on child support debt to determine who owes unpaid child support. The analysis found that:
 - As of April 2017, 5.5 million noncustodial parents owed over \$114 billion in past-due child support.
 - Approximately 20 percent of this total amount of arrears is owed to the government as repayment for the costs of government assistance to the family.
 - More than 50 percent of parents who owe child support owe less than \$10,000, and the amount of their debt represents less than 10 percent of the total arrearage.
 - Just 15 percent of parents who owe child support owe more than \$40,000, but the debt from these parents accounts for over 55 percent of the total debt.
 - Parents with arrearages between \$40,000 and \$100,000 account for 35 percent of the total debt, but make up just 12 percent of the population.
 - Parents with arrearages over \$100,000 account for 22 percent of the total debt, but just 3 percent of the population.
- An amendment being proposed in Florida, [the Voting Restoration Amendment](#), would restore voting rights to all ex-felons throughout Florida not convicted of murder or sexual offenses. Florida has the highest disenfranchisement rate in the country, with more than 1.6 million Floridians, including more than one in

five African-Americans, barred from voting, according to [the Brennan Center for Justice](#).

The campaign to restore voting rights to Florida felons has gained national media attention and financing. The campaign will attempt to get the proposed constitutional amendment on the 2018 ballot by gathering 1 million signatures before the end of the year. [The ACLU](#) has recently pledged a minimum of \$5 million to the 2018 ballot initiative, which the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition is leading. The ACLU is starting to organize to assist the effort, running petition drives across the state.

- [More than 1 million applicants for federal social security disability benefits are on a wait list](#) for a hearing before an administrative judge after being initially denied benefits, a 31 percent increase from 2012. The average wait for a hearing is 602 days. In 2012, it was less than a year. Last year, 7,400 people who were on waitlists died while waiting.

Approximately 10.5 million people get disability benefits from the Social Security Administration. An additional 8 million get disability benefits from Supplemental Security Income, the disability program for poor people who don't qualify for Social Security. The average benefit is \$1,037 per month.

Frustrating efforts to address the backlog by hiring additional staff is that the agency has been subject to budget cuts over the past five years. Its budget last year of \$12.6 billion was roughly the same as it was in 2011, even as an additional 6 million people received either retirement or disability benefits from Social Security.

- A driver and his passenger in Mason City, Iowa, died after [a police chase that ensued because of a warrant for his arrest for unpaid child support](#). Jerrick Rinnels faced 30 days in jail for the child support nonpayment. According to the state patrol crash report, a county deputy initiated the pursuit of the vehicle because of the warrant. The crash occurred after a brief pursuit.
- A prank generator with the purpose of enabling users to generate and share fake “news” content on social media was the source of a [viral story that claimed that President Trump and Congress were going to end all child support payments as of 2018](#). The two headlines shared on social media read, “CHILD SUPPORT SAID TO END BY BEGINNING OF 2018” and “No more child support after 2017!!!!!!” Despite grammar and language that should have tipped readers that one of the news items was fake, it was shared more than 335,000 times on Facebook within the week.

The fake news story read, “Donald trump and congress members held a meeting to pass a law stating that in 2018 all fathers that's on child support will be taken

off and women will no longer be able to put men on child support no matter if he doing for his child or not. Trump also stated "we have men that's paying child support and they still can't see their kids or they paying child support and the female parent is not using that money for a good need or doesn't spend a dime on that child/kids. So my goal is to have this law passed before we enter into 2018. I am your president of the united states may we make America great again."