

**Professional Knowledge of Child Support Staff:
Evidence from the New Jersey Child Support Training Program**

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Abstract

In the last decade, there have been dramatic changes in child support legislation and enforcement. However, the extent to which child support staff members are fully aware of these developments is not clear. If child support staff members do not keep up with the changes, they will not be able to maximize the benefits of improved legislation and enforcement. Using data from the training programs of the New Jersey Child Support Institute (NJCSI), this article aims to evaluate the professional knowledge of child support staff and assess whether the NJCSI's training program improves participants' knowledge of the Title IV-D Child Support Enforcement (CSE) Program. The results show that participants ($n = 530$) answered 55% of the questions on child support enforcement correctly in the pre-training assessment. After the training, the participants answered 77% of the questions correctly, and the knowledge difference between new and experienced staff disappeared. The findings reveal an urgent need for training for child support staff in a rapidly changing profession that has important impacts on the well-being of single parents and their children.

Introduction

In the final decades of the twentieth century, divorce and non-marital births became much more common. This contributed to a significant rise in single-mother families. Specifically, single mothers headed about 12% of families in 1970, 20% in 1980, and 25% in 1990, and the percentage has stayed about the same since (U.S. House of Representatives, 2004). This trend is of concern because single mothers are much more likely to struggle economically. For instance, in 2002, almost 34% of single mothers were living in poverty, and another 30% were living dangerously close to the poverty line (U.S. House of Representatives).

As the divorce rate continued to rise and an increasing number of never-married mothers entered the welfare system, government officials have attempted to motivate more non-custodial fathers to provide financial support for their children (Garfinkel, Meyer, & McLanahan 1998; Lerman & Sorenson, 2003; Pirog & Ziol-Guest, 2006). In 1975, Congress founded the Child Support Enforcement (CSE) Program to create state CSE offices and authorize federal matching funds to help states locate non-custodial parents, ascertain paternity, establish child support orders, and secure child support payments. From 1981 to 1999, Congress passed a new child support enforcement law almost every year (Lerman & Sorenson, 2003). One of the most notable of these was the Family Support Act of 1988, which developed guidelines for child support awards, establishment of paternity and disregard of child support. It also mandated that by 1990 the child support obligations of all public assistance recipients or custodial parents who had applied for child support services under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act be automatically withheld. This requirement was to be extended to all fathers with a child support order by 1994. Because several states were unable to implement this withholding system, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) required all states

to develop the bureaucratic capacity to monitor all child support payments and to administer universal withholding. In 1998, the Child Support Performance and Incentive Act (CSPIA) created new incentives and penalties for state child support enforcement systems. In particular, states are awarded financial incentives based on their performance in the areas of paternity establishment, establishment of child support orders, collection of current support orders, collection of arrearage payments, and the cost-effectiveness of their enforcement system. Under CSPIA, states also began to be subjected to penalties for failing to meet federal child support requirements.

Amidst all of this legislation, real spending on enforcement increased more than six-fold from 1978 to 2002 (from \$0.8 billion to \$5.2 billion) (U.S. House of Representatives, 2004). Also, because of these efforts, the child support enforcement system has improved significantly across the country over the past 30 years. Unfortunately, there are still many children who are eligible for child support but are not receiving it from their non-custodial parents (Hanson, Garfinkel, McLanahan, & Miller, 1996; Case, Lin, & McLanahan, 2003; Huang, Garfinkel, & Waldfogel, 2004; Sorensen & Hill, 2004; Cancian & Meyer, 2005). For instance, national data from 2003 revealed that 45% of custodial mothers who were due child support had only received partial payments, 23% had not received any payments at all, and 36% did not even have a child support order (Grall, 2006).

One factor relevant to poor child support outcomes is ineffective state child support enforcement. States have differed substantially in child support performance (Garfinkel, Miller, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998; Huang, Edwards, & Nolan, 2008), and research has shown that part of this variation has been due to ineffective child support enforcement systems in some states (Garfinkel & Robins, 1994; Freeman & Waldfogel, 2001; Case, Lin, & McLanahan, 2003;

Sorensen & Hill, 2004; Cassetty & Hutson, 2005; Cancian, Meyer, & Roff, 2007; Huang & Edwards, 2009). States with strict child support legislation, high child support expenditures, and an effective implementation system have been found to be associated with higher child support performance than their respective counterparts.

With the establishment of PRWORA in 1996 and CSPIA in 1998, virtually all states have created strict child support legislation and effective computing systems to perform all of the functional requirements currently specified in the federal child support enforcement regulations (Huang & Edwards, 2009). These requirements include case initiation, location of nonresident parents, establishment and enforcement of child support orders, case management, financial management, reporting, and security and privacy. The system must be able to electronically interface with the systems of other organizations, including federal, state, and private systems, to improve program management and operations.

However, the extent to which child support staff members are fully aware of the dramatic changes in child support legislation and the enforcement system in recent years is unclear. If child support staff members do not keep up with the changes, then they likely will not be able to maximize the benefits of the improved legislation and system. In 2005, in an attempt to address this issue, the New Jersey Child Support Institute (NJCSI) was created to enhance the knowledge base and technical skills of staff who work with and on behalf of children and/or families for child support. NJCSI is a joint venture between the New Jersey Department of Human Services, the New Jersey Judiciary, and the Institute for Families in the School of Social Work at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

The purpose of this article is to evaluate the efficacy of NJCSI's training program, particularly in terms of the participants' professional knowledge of child support enforcement

before and after the training. This analysis will provide important information on the extent to which the training program helps to improve child support staff members' abilities to work effectively in the child support enforcement system.

Methodology

Sample and Design

NJCSI provides coordinated and comprehensive training on all aspects of the child support process from case initiation to case closure to staff who work in New Jersey's Child Support Program. A unique aspect of the program is that it extends its training to child support staff outside of the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS), including the court system. Figure 1 lists the child support enforcement organizations in New Jersey. As shown in Figure 1, successful child support enforcement involves many organizations and agencies, including the welfare and court systems. In order to ensure that child support orders are processed effectively, all staff involved with child support enforcement need to have solid understanding of the child support enforcement system. Thus, the training programs are for state, county, and judiciary employees who are involved with child support enforcement. The courses are offered in three locations: Cherry Hill, Parsippany, and Princeton. Instructors include subject-matter experts and former child support professionals with experience in the New Jersey Office of Child Support Services, the Administrative Office of the Courts, the Judiciary, the Family Division, the Probation Child Support Enforcement Unit, and County Welfare Agencies.

The NJCSI training programs offer two foundation courses based on work experience. The New Hire Training (NHT) is a 10-day course required for new employees within their first year of employment. This course provides an overview of the foundation of the Title IV-D Child Support Enforcement Program in New Jersey, with a focus on statutes, regulations, and rules. An

overview of the Automated Child Support Enforcement System (ACSES) and simulation activities are also provided. The other foundation course is the Experienced Refresher Training (ERT), which is a 5-day course for child support staff members who have been employed for more than one year. The course provides an overview of New Jersey's Child Support Program, an update on federal and state regulations, enhancements to the state's Automated Case Management System, and recent developments in the child support enforcement system. ERT participants are referred to the training program by their supervisors.

Fourteen NHT and fifteen ERT sessions were conducted between May 2007 and July 2008. A total of 537 staff members were trained. The final sample for the present article includes 530 individuals (98.6% of all trained staff) who participated in NJCSI training programs and completed both pre- and post-assessments. The remaining cases were dropped because of incomplete data on either or both assessments. In short, a before-after quasi-experiment was conducted. Specifically, NJCSI uses the before and after assessments to gauge the efficacy of the NJCSI trainings for both NHT and ERT groups.

Measures

Both the NHT and ERT programs were divided into eight learning modules and used the same assessments before and after training. The modules included case initiation, the location service, order establishment, financial management, obligation enforcement, modification and transfer, interstate support, and case closure. The case initiation module is intended to help staff build a complete and accurate foundation for support cases so that all other support services are provided in a timely and efficient manner. The location service module focuses on actions taken to find or attempt to find the non-custodial parent (NCP) or custodial parent (CP), an NCP's or CP's employer, and the sources of income or assets for an NCP or CP. The order establishment

module provides a mechanism to support the establishment of paternity, medical insurance, and child support orders. The financial management module explains the collection, distribution accounting, and disbursement of support payments in accordance with practices mandated by the Title IV-D Child Support Enforcement Program services. The obligation enforcement module covers the process of securing compliance with court orders for child and/or alimony support. Conditions of the court order coupled with federal, state, and local statutes, regulations, and rules provide the framework for enforcing a support order. The modification and transfer module details the process of reviewing and/or adjusting an existing child support order, as well as the transfer of monitoring and enforcement responsibilities between the local PCSE Units. The interstate support module includes content on support cases in which the parties involved reside in different states. A child support case may begin as or develop into an interstate support case at any time during the support process, from case initiation through case closure. The case closure module explains the process of terminating a case's Title IV-D Child Support Enforcement services. A Title IV-D case remains open until it meets one or more of the 12 Federal case closure criteria and action is taken to close it.

The pre- and post-training assessments were completed through an online learning management system. Participants completed the assessments on laptops that were provided at the training. The pre-training assessment is completed at the beginning of the first instructional class, and the post-training assessment is completed on the final day of training. Participants are allotted 40 minutes for each assessment. The assessments include 50 multiple-choice questions that cover the eight learning modules. The pre- and post-training assessments used the same questions in an attempt to capture changes in participants' knowledge about the child support process in New Jersey. Examples of questions from each module are as follows.

1. Case initiation: “Which service is not directly provided by Family Division? (a) scheduling an appointment, (b) creating a child support case in ACSES, (c) scheduling a complaint for a hearing/consent conference, (d) conducting the locate process.”
2. Location service: “Appropriate location sources must be accessed within how many days of determining that location is necessary? (a) 30, (b) 75, (c) 90, (d) 365.”
3. Order establishment: “The two general methods used for paternity establishment are (a) administrative and judicial methods, (b) financial support and obligation payments, (c) administrative and arbitrary methods, (d) manual and automated methods.”
4. Financial management: “New Jersey’s centralized collection and disbursement unit is known by what acronym? (a) SDU, (b) NJFSPC, (c) CCIS, (d) PCSE.”
5. Obligation enforcement: “New Jersey law requires that the name of the obligor and the amount of arrears be provided periodically to ___ whenever the obligor owes more than \$1,000 in arrears. (a) credit bureau agencies, (b) mortgage companies, (c) the Motor Vehicle Commission, (d) the New Jersey Department of Labor.”
6. Modification and transfer: “In accordance with New Jersey Administrative Code (N.J.A.C.) 10:110-14.1, New Jersey has procedures in place to review support obligation amounts in cases: (a) every six months, (b) each year, (c) every three years, (d) every seven years.”
7. Interstate support: “The Probation Child Support Enforcement (PCSE) Unit in

Essex County, New Jersey, has sent a request to enforce a child support order to Noble County, Indiana. Which of the following statements best describes this situation? (a) This is a long-arm processing, and New Jersey is the initiating state, (b) This is a two-state process, and New Jersey is the initiating state, (c) This is a long-arm processing, and New Jersey is the responding state, (d) This is a two state process, and New Jersey is the responding state.”

8. Case closure: “Federal law requires that each state must establish paternity up to age: (a) 18, (b) 21, (c) 25, (d) there is no requirement.”

Analytic approach.

Descriptive statistics for the pre- and post-training assessments were run to assess participants’ knowledge of state child support enforcement. This was followed by a paired-sample *t*-test to investigate the changes in knowledge from pre- to post-training assessments. All of the analyses were examined by the percentage of questions answered correctly in each module as well as by the percentage answered correctly in the test as a whole.

Results

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the sample. About 46% of the sample was in the NHT program ($n = 246$), and the other 54% was in the RET program ($n = 284$). With respect to sending agencies, about 64% of the sample was from the court system ($n = 337$); specifically, 38% were from Probation Child Support Enforcement, 19% from the Family Division, 5% from the Vicinage Finance Division, and 2% from court administrative offices. The Department of Human Services occupied the remaining 36% of the sample ($n = 193$), with 31% coming from the Child Welfare Agency and 5% coming from the Division of Family Development.

The mean percentages of correct answers on the pre- and post-training knowledge

assessments are listed in Table 2. First, on average, participants answered 55% of the questions correctly, and the percentage of correct answers varied substantially by employment experience and agency type. On the pre-training assessment, participants who had been working for more than one year (58%) and who were employed in the court system (56%) had more knowledge of child support enforcement than participants who had been working less than one year (50%) and who were employed in the Department of Human Services system (52%). After the training, the overall percentage of correct answers increased by 22 percentage points, to 77%. The paired *t*-test for the pre- and post-training assessments indicated that the improvement was significant at the 0.001 level. Indeed, the significant improvement in knowledge after training was evident across employment and agency types as indicated by the paired *t*-test analyses among subgroups. As a result of the improvement, the significant difference between new and experienced staff in the pre-training was no longer significant by the post-training assessment. However, the difference between staff in the court and human services systems was still significant ($p < .01$) in the post-training assessment (78% vs. 75%, respectively).

With respect to specific modules, participants had a great deal of knowledge about case initiation in the pre-training assessment (with an average of 64% correct in this module). This was followed by financial management (62%), order establishment (60%), obligation enforcement (53%), modification and transfer (51%), case closure (50%) and location service and interstate support (both at 48%). Experienced staff scored significantly higher than new staff on all modules in the pre-training assessment. Compared to staff from the Department of Human Services, participants from the Court System knew more about order establishment, obligation enforcement, financial management, interstate support, and modification and transfer, whereas the human services staff had a better understanding of the location service and case initiation.

There was no difference between agency types for the case closure module.

After the training, participants had a solid grasp of order establishment (87%), financial management (81%), case closure (79%) and initiation (77%), obligation enforcement (75%), interstate support (74%), location service (72%), and modification and transfer (69%). The paired *t*-test on the pre- and post-training assessments indicated that the improvement was significant at the 0.001 level across all modules. In addition, none of the significant differences between new and experienced staff for specific modules from the pre-training assessment were significant in the post-training assessment. Participants in the court system still had more knowledge than those in the Department of Human Services on obligation enforcement, financial management, interstate support, and modification and transfer, while the latter still had a better understanding of case initiation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Given the rapid changes in child support legislation and enforcement in recent years, it is important to understand child support staff's knowledge of these trends. Using data from the New Jersey Child Support Institute's training programs, the present analyses found that most of the participants did not have a good understanding of the child support enforcement process before the training. New staff answered only about half of the questions correctly, and experienced staff answered only about 60% correctly. If child support staff do not understand the current legislation and system process, it is unlikely that they will be able to utilize the improvements in the enforcement system. The present findings reveal an urgent need for training for staff in a rapidly changing profession that has important impacts on the well-being of single-parent families.

The results from the post-training assessment indicate that the training effectively

improved the participants' knowledge of child support enforcement. Participants were able to answer three out of every four questions correctly. Additionally, the knowledge difference between new and experienced staff disappeared after the training. This highlights the beneficial effects of the training for new staff. However, the fact that participants were still answering 25% of the questions incorrectly even after the training indicates that there is a need to retrain staff on a constant basis. The participants' knowledge also varied by agency type, which suggests that different training programs may need to be developed for staff from different agencies to best address their specific weaknesses.

The findings of this article have implications for policy and research. On the policy level, strengthening child support legislation and enforcement are important, but policymakers also need to pay attention to the individuals who are actually implementing the policies—that is, child support enforcement staff. If the frontline staff members of the child support enforcement system are not aware of changes in the child support enforcement process, the benefits of those changes are unlikely to be realized. This issue is especially important given that New Jersey's child support enforcement performance was 0.6 standard deviations above the national mean over the 1999–2004 period, ranking 13th out of 50 states (Huang, Edwards, & Nolan, 2008). The fact that child support staff in New Jersey, a state with better-than-average child support performance, do not have a strong knowledge of the enforcement system, raises legitimate concerns about the knowledge of child support staff in states with below-average enforcement performance.

The training in New Jersey significantly improved the professional knowledge of child support staff across all modules and reduced the knowledge difference between new hires and experienced staff. This suggests that the training program in New Jersey is able to achieve its goal of enhancing the professional knowledge of all staff. Other states may consider adopting

similar training programs to improve their staff members' understanding of the child support enforcement process.

With respect to research implications, an extension of this article will be to examine whether the improvement of professional knowledge on child support staff increased their on-the-job performance in different areas of state child support enforcement (e.g., order establishment and child support collection).

In short, the findings of this article reveal an urgent need to train child support staff in the context of a rapidly changing profession and a society in which nearly a quarter of all children are living in single-mother families (this amounted to 17.2 million children in 2006) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). One way to improve the well-being of these families is to ensure that child support staff has a solid understanding of the recent changes in child support legislation so that they can better serve the custodial parents and the children in the system.

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Figure 1. Child Support Enforcement Organizations in New Jersey

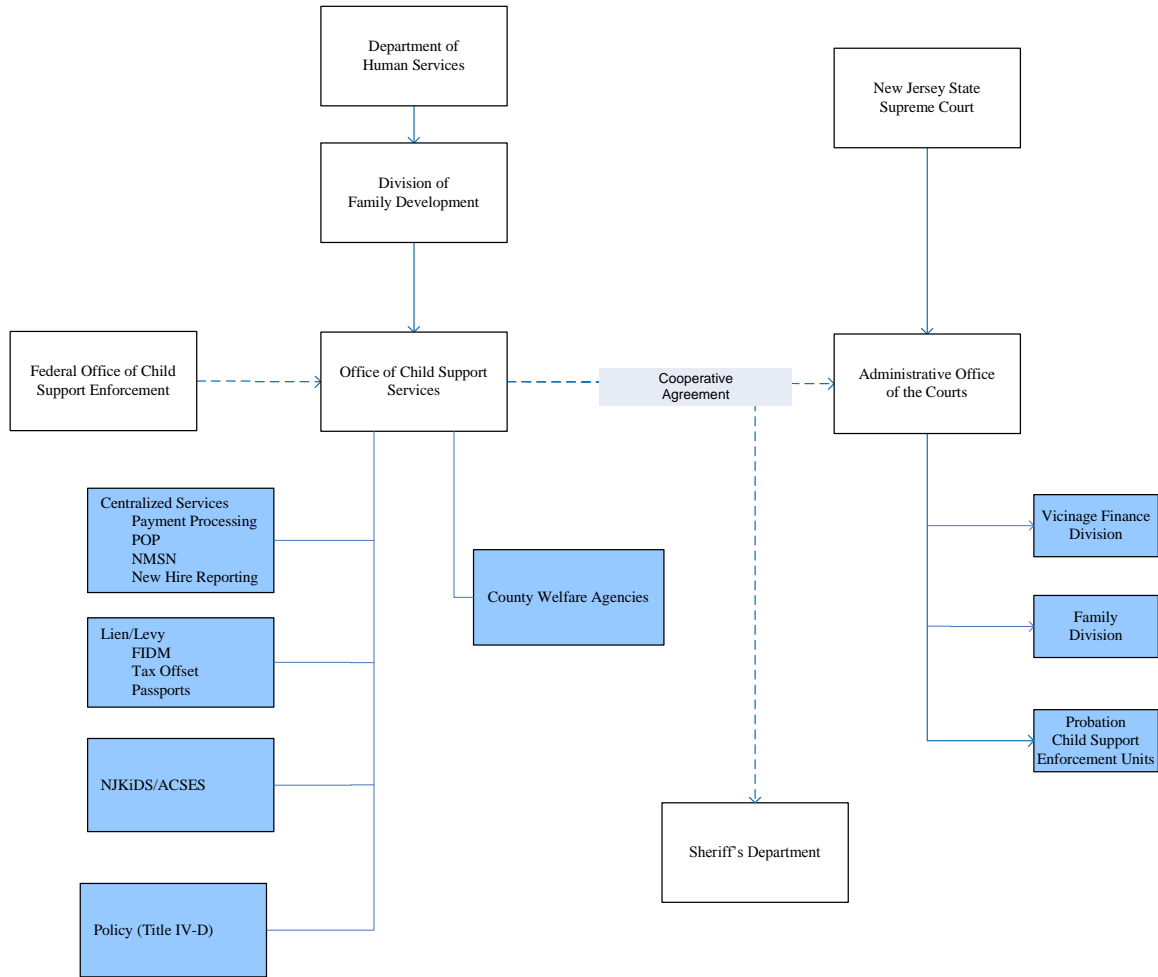


Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Sample

	<i>N</i>	%
Whole Sample	530	100
By course		
New Hire Training (NHT)	246	46.4
Experienced Refresher Training (ERT)	284	53.6
By agency		
Human Services	193	36.4
Court system	337	63.6

Table 2. Mean Percentages of Correct Answers on the Pre- and Post-Training Knowledge Assessments

	Total score				Case initiation				Location service			
	Pre	Post	Change	Paired T-test	Pre	Post	Change	Paired T-test	Pre	Post	Change	Paired T-test
Whole sample	55	77	22	49.5****	64	77	13	14.4****	48	72	24	24.1****
By course												
NHT	50	76	26	42.5****	60	77	17	11.8****	44	71	27	17.8****
ERT	58	77	19	33.3****	68	78	10	8.7****	51	73	22	16.5****
<i>t</i> -test	8.8****	0.5			4.7****	0.8			4.7****	1.8		
By agency												
Human Services	52	75	23	30.0****	66	80	14	9.6****	50	73	23	13.8****
Court system	56	78	22	39.5****	63	76	13	10.8****	46	72	26	19.8****
<i>t</i> -test	3.9****	2.7**			1.6	2.2*			2.4*	0.4		

	Order establishment				Financial management				Obligation enforcement			
	Pre	Post	Change	Paired T-test	Pre	Post	Change	Paired T-test	Pre	Post	Change	Paired T-test
Whole sample	60	87	27	29.8****	62	81	19	19.7****	53	75	22	23.3****
By course												
NHT	58	88	30	23.4****	56	80	24	16.2****	51	76	25	17.7****
ERT	62	86	24	19.5****	68	83	15	12.1****	54	73	19	15.5****
<i>t</i> -test	2.7**	1.7			6.2****	1.8			2.1*	1.68		
By agency												
Human Services	58	85	27	17.8****	57	78	21	12.7****	46	72	26	15.4****
Court system	62	88	26	24.0****	65	83	18	15.1****	56	77	21	17.7****
<i>t</i> -test	2.6*	1.9			4.1****	3.3**			6.0****	3.0**		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, **** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Mean Percentages of Correct Answers on the Pre- and Post-Training Knowledge Assessments (continued)

	Modification and transfer				Interstate support				Case closure			
	Pre	Post	Change	Paired <i>t</i> -test	Pre	Post	Change	Paired <i>t</i> -test	Pre	Post	Change	Paired <i>t</i> -test
Whole Sample	51	69	18	20.4***	48	74	26	24.1***	50	79	29	28.2***
By course												
NHT	47	70	23	17.7***	43	74	31	19.7***	43	79	36	24.6***
ERT	55	69	14	11.9***	53	75	22	15.2***	56	80	24	16.9***
<i>t</i> -test	5.2***	0.3			5.7***	0.4			7.6***	0.9		
By agency												
Human Services	45	65	20	12.4***	43	70	27	14.5***	49	79	30	18.4***
Court system	55	71	16	16.5***	51	77	26	19.3***	51	80	29	21.5***
<i>t</i> -test	6.0***	3.7***			4.0***	3.6***			1.0	0.3		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.