

How does the payment of child support impact time to permanency for children in foster care?

HOWARD, L., VOGEL, L. K., CANCIAN, M., & NOYES, J. L. (2019). BUILDING CONNECTIONS: USING INTEGRATED ADMINISTRATIVE DATA TO IDENTIFY ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS SPANNING THE CHILD WELFARE AND CHILD SUPPORT SYSTEMS. *RSF: THE RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION JOURNAL OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES*, 5(2), 70-85.

What can we learn from this study?

To recover some of the costs of foster care, federal policies permit states to divert existing child support payments from biological parents to child protection agencies, or initiate new child support payment orders if none exist. This study examines how requiring biological parents to pay child support to child protection agencies impacts time to permanency, and how integrated data informed a policy proposal to revamp how decisions are made about whether to pursue child support orders to partially offset the costs of out-of-home care.

Study details:

- **Population:** Staff and families served by Wisconsin's Department of Children and Families
- **Data source:** Wisconsin Data Core (includes individuals' data linked across public assistance, child welfare, child support, unemployment insurance, and incarceration systems); child welfare staff surveys and interviews; interviews with policy implementation workgroup members
- **Methodology:** Quantitative descriptive, causal, and cost-benefit analyses; qualitative analysis using interview data
- **Dates:** 2017

What are the critical findings?

- **Study estimates that collecting \$100 in child support monthly to offset the costs of foster care is associated with a 6.6-month delay in reunification or another type of permanency.**
- In some cases, parents may not be able to maintain employment while participating in activities required for reunification. Most surveyed child welfare workers (85%) believe **families' economic resources affect risk of maltreatment and involvement in the child welfare system.**
- **On average, counties recoup less than 3% of child welfare costs through child support payments**, which is far less than the cost of additional time in out-of-home care.
- **Supported by findings from this study, Wisconsin developed a new framework for child support referrals.** Rather than determining whether to make a child support referral at intake, the process is now delayed until six months after initial placement to allow staff time to get to know families and better understand the potential impact of child support payments.

Why is this important for our work?

Policies requiring parents to contribute to the cost of out-of-home care through child support orders may do more harm than good, resulting in children staying in care longer and net increases in public costs. States should ensure their procedures for child support referrals are being conducted in the best interest of children and in the most cost-effective ways possible.

This summary synthesizes the findings of a single research study. To learn more, please review additional resources on child welfare financing, including: [What are some effective strategies for achieving permanency?](#) and [How can pre-petition legal representation help strengthen families and keep them together?](#)

For additional information, [see the abstract](#) or email KMResources@casey.org.