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The Child Support Enforcement (CSE) Program

Introduction

The Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program was enacted into law on January 4, 1975 (P.L. 93-647). When the program was first established, its goals were to reimburse the states and the federal government for the cash assistance payments they provided families, and to help other families remain off cash assistance by obtaining consistent and ongoing child support payments from the noncustodial parent. Over time, the program has evolved from a *cash assistance cost-recovery* program to a *family-first* program that seeks to enhance the well-being of families by making child support a more reliable income source.

This federal-state program has the potential to impact more children and for longer periods of time than most other federal programs. It may interact with mothers, fathers, and children for 18 years and in some cases longer, such as if the noncustodial parent owes past-due child support. In recent years, it served about 17% of children in the United States. (CSE program data are published by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement [OCSE] in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS]). All FY2025 figures in this report are drawn from HHS's *FY2025 Preliminary Data Report* released on August 3, 2026.)

Scope of CSE Program

Families who are required to enroll in the CSE program are those receiving cash assistance under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, Medicaid coverage, or, at state option, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food assistance. The program is also available to families that do not receive these benefits (i.e., "nonassistance families") if they choose to enroll. Families who are not required to enroll in the CSE program must pay a one-time $25 fee when they apply for services, and an annual $35 user fee if the CSE agency collects at least $550 per year for them.

The program is available in all 50 states; the District of Columbia; the territories of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands; and 63 tribal nations. Program services are generally provided locally within states, usually by county.

The CSE program is administered at the federal level by OCSE, which helps CSE agencies develop, manage, and operate their programs effectively and according to federal law. Specifically, OCSE administers federal matching funds and awards grants to states, provides policy guidance and technical assistance, conducts program audits, and supports research through demonstration grants. OCSE is also responsible for the Federal Parent Locator Service, which includes the National Directory of New Hires.

Program Components

The CSE program increases the reliability of child support paid by noncustodial parents by

- locating noncustodial parents,
- establishing paternity,
- establishing child support orders,
- reviewing and modifying child support orders,
- collecting child support payments from noncustodial parents,
- establishing and enforcing medical child support, and
- distributing child support payments to custodial parents.

CSE Collections and Methods

In FY2025, the CSE program collected $26.6 billion on behalf of families. More than two-thirds of CSE collections were for families that had never received cash payments from the TANF program (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. CSE Collections by Family Type, FY2025

Family Type	Collections (billions)	Percentage
TANF Families	$0.6	2%
Former TANF	$6.4	24%
Never TANF	$19.5	73%

Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS), based on data from the *FY2025 Preliminary Data Report* (HHS). Amounts and percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The majority of the collected payments in FY2025 (97%) went to families and the remainder went to the states and federal government, primarily as reimbursement for public assistance dollars that went to families.

Most child support payments are collected from noncustodial parents through income withholding. In FY2025, 70% of collections were obtained through income withholding. Other methods of enforcement include

- intercepting federal and state income tax refunds;
- intercepting unemployment compensation;
- filing liens against property;
- sending insurance settlement information to CSE agencies;
- intercepting gaming or lottery winnings;
- seizing debtor parent assets held by public or private retirement funds and financial institutions;

- withholding, suspending, or restricting driver's licenses, professional or occupational licenses, and recreational or sporting licenses; and
- denying, revoking, or restricting passports.

In addition, all jurisdictions have civil or criminal contempt-of-court procedures and criminal nonsupport laws that may be used when noncustodial parents fall behind in their payments and accumulate arrears. (These procedures and laws are in addition to the enforcement methods listed above.) Federal criminal penalties may be imposed in certain cases.

Federal law also provides for international enforcement of child support.

CSE Caseload and Composition

In FY2025, the CSE system handled 11.3 million cases and served 12.0 million children (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. CSE Cases by Family Type, FY2025

Family Type	Number (millions)	Percentage
TANF Families	0.8	7%
Former TANF	4.2	37%
Never TANF	6.3	56%

Source: CRS, based on data from the *FY2025 Preliminary Data Report*. Percentages and amounts may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

According to the most recent demographic data available (from 2022), among all custodial parents who are eligible for child support (not just those enrolled in the CSE program), 83% are women. Of women custodial parents with child support agreements, 52% have one eligible child, 54% are non-Hispanic White, 17% are Black, and 25% are Hispanic (of any race).

Among all custodial families eligible for child support, 16% have income below the federal poverty level. Of poor families who were supposed to receive child support, 47% reported receiving the full amount that was due.

CSE Expenditures and Financing Structure

In FY2025, combined federal and state administrative expenditures for CSE amounted to $7.0 billion. Federal funding for CSE requires that states must spend money in order to receive federal funding. The federal government reimburses each state 66% of all allowable expenditures on CSE activities. This requirement is open-ended in that there is no upper limit or ceiling on the federal government's match for those expenditures.

There are five funding streams associated with the CSE program. The first two streams (mentioned above) are state and federal matching funds. Third, states collect child support on behalf of families receiving TANF assistance to reimburse themselves (and the federal government) for the cost of TANF cash payments to the families. Fourth, the federal government provides states with an incentive payment (no FY2025 estimate available; $544 million estimated for FY2024) to encourage them to operate effective programs. Federal law requires states to reinvest CSE incentive payments back into the CSE program or related activities. Fifth, fees and costs recovered from non-TANF families may help finance the CSE program.

Visitation Grants and Parenting Time

A noncustodial parent's right to visit with their children is commonly referred to as visitation or child access (and more recently as voluntary parenting time agreements). OCSE administers an Access and Visitation grant program, which is funded at a total of $10 million each fiscal year. These funds are awarded to the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The general focus of this program is to increase noncustodial parents' access to and time with their children. Eligible activities include mediation, counseling, education, development of parenting plans, visitation enforcement, and development of guidelines for visitation and alternative custody arrangements. In addition, certain CSE programs are to some degree involved with establishing voluntary parenting time agreements (PTAs) between custodial and noncustodial parents.

Program Effectiveness

In FY2025, the CSE program collected $4.01 for every $1 it spent, and made collections for 59.5% of its caseload. Those cases with collections were 64.5% of the never-TANF caseload, 57.5% of the former-TANF caseload, and 32.8% of the current-TANF caseload.

Issues

CSE issues that have been raised include the following:

- Should cooperation with the CSE program continue to be mandated for TANF and Medicaid families? Should federal cooperation requirements be expanded to other public assistance programs?
- Should the federal and state governments continue to retain collections to reimburse TANF costs? If so, should states have the ability to reduce or forgive state- and federal-owed child support arrearages to incentivize parents to make regular and on-time payments?
- Should federal CSE funding otherwise be restructured (e.g., alterations to incentive payments)?
- Should the requirements for state and federal systems be altered or expanded (e.g., FPLS and NDNH)?
- Should existing state-led CSE enforcement methods be strengthened (e.g., sending insurance settlement information to CSE agencies, intercepting gaming or lottery winnings)? Should existing federal CSE enforcement methods (e.g., passport denial) be strengthened?
- Should federal funding be available for additional CSE-led services and supports (e.g., work-oriented programs for parents, PTAs)?

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