

Texas Non-Custodial Parent Choices:

Preliminary Program Impact Analysis

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Executive Summary

The Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) partnered with the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) on a demonstration project referred to as the Non-Custodial Parent Choices Initiative (or NCP Choices). The project links IV-D courts responsible for child support issues, OAG child support staff, and local workforce development boards to encourage workforce development of unemployed and/or underemployed non-custodial parents (NCPs) with unpaid child support orders, and whose child either currently or previously received public assistance.

The Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin has been contracted to estimate preliminary impacts of NCP Choices on various outcomes of interest, including child support collections, workforce development participation, employment and earnings levels of NCPs, and TANF receipt by the custodial parents (CPs).

The existing literature on child support enforcement indicates that, for those who receive it, child support can be one of the most important sources of income in assisting single parent households to escape from poverty. Unfortunately, despite significant gains over the last decade or so, receipt of child support among public assistance families still remains low. Chief among the reasons for this are that many NCPs are unable to meet their financial obligations due to unemployment or underemployment. Evaluations of previous programs designed to engage low-income NCPs in workforce programs often suffered from low enrollment as well as implementation and service coordination challenges. Evidence suggests, however, that mandatory programs with “swift and certain consequences” for non-participation can help to alleviate enrollment problems, and that low-income NCPs, if successfully engaged in workforce services, are better positioned to meet their child support obligations.

Results of the early implementation study, which was reported on in late 2005, were incorporated into this report in abbreviated form. The NCP Choices service model is straightforward: noncompliant NCPs are given the choice of paying their child support, participating in workforce services, or going to jail. The primary distinguishing features of

NCP Choices are mandatory participation and clear choices—pay, play or pay the consequences.

As of the time of early implementation, there was general agreement among the key players that the OAG was driving and facilitating the initiative, but the active participation of the IV-D courts was critical. There was also agreement that noncompliant NCPs, who were expected to have barriers to participation and employment, would present a challenge to the agencies. Choices services were to emphasize job search and related services, but could also include some training. Both sites expected transportation to be an issue for some NCPs, as well as mental health issues. There were also concerns that NCP skills might not match those needed in the local labor markets, or that some of their criminal histories might present a barrier to employment, although TWC does provide bonding.

The initial program assessment in Galveston/Brazoria counties indicated concern over potential communication difficulties, as well as problems serving NCPs from all over the Gulf Coast area. El Paso dealt with significant challenges in its first six weeks of operation, including concerns about reporting and multi-agency coordination, barriers to employment of NCPs, timing issues, and the feasibility of partial payments by NCPs.

Since it had been determined that random assignment of NCPs to participate in the program would be infeasible, the research design included the selection of a quasi-experimental comparison group for estimating the impact of NCP Choices. Tests indicated that the selection procedure successfully created a comparison group that was nearly indistinguishable from NCP Choices clients in their observable characteristics just before program entry. This suggests that the quasi-experimental design is likely to have high internal validity for determining the impacts of the NCP Choices program, resulting in a high level of confidence that any differences observed subsequent to program participation were likely due to the program itself.

Results from the preliminary impact analysis indicate that those who were ordered into the NCP Choices program paid significantly more child support, in terms of both increased frequency and amount of child support payments. Monthly collection rates from NCP Choices participants were almost fifty percent higher than from the comparison group, and the amounts collected averaged \$60 per month higher. Furthermore, although the monthly collection rate was still not high in an absolute sense, nearly seven out of every eight

NCP Choices clients made at least one payment within nine months of program entry. Finally, of great importance to the economic self-sufficiency of the custodial parents, those ordered into NCP Choices were significantly more *consistent* in making child support payments over time.

As planned, and likely a key to program success, those ordered into NCP Choices displayed far greater levels of participation in workforce development than did their comparison group counterparts. About 95 percent of those ordered into NCP Choices participated in workforce development within 9 months of program entry, as compared to only about six percent for controls. These levels of workforce development participation by NCPs were well above the range of what has been reported in the literature for other programs serving low income NCPs, including other ‘mandatory’ programs.

Those ordered into NCP Choices were subsequently employed at significantly higher rates than were their comparison group counterparts, an increase in quarterly employment of almost five percentage points. However, as is sometimes observed in programs that successfully move significant numbers of people into employment, NCP Choices participants who were employed subsequent to program entry had lesser total earnings than those in the control group who were employed. Finally, in a sign that the benefits of NCP Choices were to some extent transmitted to the custodial parents, those CPs associated with NCP Choices participants showed about a ten percent reduction in the rate of TANF receipt subsequent to program entry.

Thus, the NCP Choices program appears to have successfully achieved almost all of its program goals. Furthermore, the high rate of participation by NCP Choices clients in workforce development strongly suggests that this played a role in their success (but see caveats below). In any case, the combination of increased frequency and amount of child support payments made by those ordered into NCP Choices, increased consistency of child support payment, increased employment rates of NCPs, and reduced TANF receipt by associated CPs all point to generally greater economic self-sufficiency on the part of CPs and NCPs.

Several caveats to the results were noted. First, it is important to recognize that the effects reported do not measure the impact of the Choices program on NCPs, but the *impact of being ordered into the NCP Choices program*. There is no doubt that a portion of the

measured effects was due to Choices or other workforce development participation, but a portion was also due to the motivating properties of the court order, and there is no reliable way to separate the two. Also, the use of a quasi-experimental comparison group design has somewhat limited our ability to conclude that the effects observed were *caused* by the NCP Choices program. On the other hand, the results of the matching procedure strongly suggest that the design has successfully controlled for most observable differences between NCP Choices participants and the comparison group. Further refining the comparison group selection for the final report should add to our confidence that the NCP Choices program itself was responsible for the positive impacts.

A final caveat is related to the reliance on an out-of-date implementation study (soon to be updated) to inform the impacts. Since the NCP Choices process could have changed as the program matured, it is difficult to know what components of the program were responsible for the largely positive program impacts. On the other hand, the inclusion of NCP Choices clients from the early implementation period in the impact estimates might have had the effect of making these preliminary impact estimates more conservative. It is possible that the NCPs who entered the program later, and thus experienced a more mature NCP Choices program, could have shown even greater benefits. This possibility will be explored in detail in the final report, when the expected sample sizes will better support such analysis.

Next steps will involve an update to the preliminary implementation and process study as a check on the current functioning of the NCP Choices program. Updated impacts with more clients and greater follow-up intervals will also be reported, including refinements to the comparison group selection, in additional reports to be completed in late summer, 2007, and again in summer 2008.

I. Introduction

Beginning in 2005, the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) partnered with the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) on a four-site demonstration project linking IV-D courts responsible for child support issues, OAG child support staff, and local workforce development boards to implement a model employment project for unemployed and/or underemployed non-custodial parents (NCPs) whose child is either currently receiving public assistance or has previously received public assistance. The project is referred to as the Non-Custodial Parent Choices initiative (or NCP Choices), though in some sites, local partners have given their project a distinctive name of its own, such as El Paso's Project *Trabajo Andale*.

The OAG contracted with the Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources (RMC) at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin to analyze the early implementation of NCP Choices in 2005. The OAG subsequently contracted with RMC in late 2006 to analyze and report on preliminary impacts of this program. This report, a product of both of these contracts, presents an updated literature review and summary of the early implementation study findings, followed by preliminary estimates of NCP Choices impacts on child support, TANF, and employment and earnings outcomes. A subsequent report, to be released in late summer, 2007, will provide an update to the implementation study, focusing in particular on the processes of a more mature NCP Choices program, as well as updated program impacts with greater follow-up intervals.

Choices Program Overview

An understanding of the NCP Choices program begins with an examination of the original "Choices" program, established by the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) to address the employment and training needs of families and custodial parents. The Choices program is the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Employment and Training program (formerly the JOBS program) operated under TWC's primarily Work-First oriented service model. The TWC website provides the following rationale for the Choices program: "both State and federal welfare reform legislation emphasizes personal responsibility, time-limited cash assistance benefits, and the goal of work instead of welfare." The Choices program addresses the State's initiative to provide workforce development services to both single- and

two-parent families. Although the program places emphasis on work-first strategies such as job search, it has features of a mixed model, in that it provides some training to those who are not work ready. One or both adults in these households must fulfill “the family’s mandatory work requirement.”

In the absence of the NCP Choices program demonstration, only custodial parents would be served by Choices. Participation in Choices begins with a workforce orientation for applicants (WOA) as their introduction to workforce center services. The initial activities provided to the Choices participants include both job readiness and job search. Those participants who do not find immediate employment participate in community service requirements. Participants who are actively pursuing employment are also eligible for support services, including child care, transportation assistance, work-related expenses, and other support services to help in employment efforts. Some training opportunities are made available as well. Those failing to participate without “good cause” suffer sanctions and discontinuation of benefits. Finally, Choices participants are granted post-employment services to assist in “job retention, wage gains, career progression and progression to self-sufficiency.” Given this model, the NCP Choices program was developed as a complementary pilot project to provide non-custodial parents with similar services.

NCP Choices in Brief

The NCP Choices program is a model employment program for unemployed or low-income NCPs whose child was either currently receiving or had previously received public assistance, that involves links between the IV-D courts, OAG’s child support enforcement efforts, and TWC’s local workforce boards. This particular approach and model grew out of research and experience with serving this target population over at least a decade, as in the Choices program for TANF custodial parents.

In previous efforts, workforce providers, child support agencies, and non-profit community based organizations had attempted to connect unemployed non-custodial parents with employment services so those individuals could better support their children financially. The outcomes or impacts from these projects were typically modest, generally resulting in only slight increases in earnings among participants and some gains in child support paid. Programs with the best outcomes—that is, higher and more consistent child support payments—“were

those that linked a strong judicial order to participate in employment services, close monitoring of NCP program participation by workforce staff, reports of non-participation back to the courts, and ‘swift and certain consequences’ for non-participation (in other words, jail time!)” (OAG, 2005).

The NCP Choices program targets unemployed NCPs with unpaid child support orders in cases managed by the OAG’s Child Support Division that involved custodial parents who currently or previously had received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, or Food Stamps benefits. The NCPs also had to reside in the geographical area served by the participating local workforce boards.

NCP Choices Program Model

The NCP Choices model is straightforward: noncompliant NCPs are given the choice of paying their child support, participating in workforce services, or going to jail. The primary distinguishing features of NCP Choices are mandatory participation and clear choices—pay, play or pay the consequences.

Key elements of the NCP Choices model include the following (see Texas OAG, 2005):

- First, the OAG identifies NCPs on its caseload that are currently noncompliant with their child support payments, whose children either are or have been on welfare, and who also reside in the designated pilot workforce service areas.
- The IV-D Court sets an enforcement docket for the identified NCPs.
- OAG staff prepares consent orders, or modified probation orders.
- NCPs either sign the consent order to participate and complete the Choices program, make payment, or go to jail.
- Contractor staff for the local workforce board attends the enforcement docket, enrolls NCPs at the IV-D court, and explains the contract outlining NCP rights and responsibilities and the consequences of non-participation. They then set appointments for NCPs to come to one-stop centers to receive workforce services.
- A 30-day compliance report regarding NCP program participation and/or reported employment is sent to OAG and the IV-D courts from the boards’ contractor staff. This evidence on NCP participation and employment is entered at a scheduled compliance hearing.

- Capias—court orders to take custody of the NCPs—are issued for noncompliant NCPs. In some sites, NCPs are offered one chance to participate in the NCP Choices program; in El Paso and the Gulf Coast sites, a second chance to participate is offered, but not a third.

A more complete description of the NCP Choices model is provided in Chapter III.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are concerned with outcomes related to child support collections, which represent potential cost savings to the child support enforcement system; participation by NCPs in workforce development, to gauge the effectiveness of mandatory program participation; as well employment and earnings of NCPs, and TANF receipt by CPs, as measures of economic self-sufficiency.

Research questions on these outcomes of interest are as follows:

1. Does the NCP Choices program, which includes mandatory, court-ordered participation in workforce development services with the threat of jail time for non-participation for non-custodial parents of children who were or are receiving welfare benefits, lead to increased child support payments?
2. Does NCP Choices lead to more *consistent* payment of child support by non-custodial parents over time?
3. Does NCP Choices lead to increased workforce development participation by non-custodial parents? Alternatively, does it lead to increased incarceration rates for non-payment of child support?
4. Does NCP Choices lead to increased employment rates and earnings levels by non-custodial parents?
5. Does NCP Choices for non-custodial parents lead to decreased TANF participation for the associated custodial parents and their children?

Organization of the Report

This report is organized into five chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter II reviews the relevant research literature on non-custodial parents and distills what is known about the effects of programs referring and serving them through workforce development

services. This review, in part, emphasizes programs designed for non-custodial parents in Texas and earlier research and evaluation projects conducted by the Ray Marshall Center. Chapter III provides a summary description of the NCP Choices program and the early implementation challenges and opportunities encountered by the program based on site visits conducted in August 2005. It also presents preliminary observations of the NCP Choices initiative for consideration by state policymakers and program administrators, providers and other key actors at both the state and local level. Chapter IV details the research questions and hypotheses, describes the research design for the impact analysis, and presents results of the comparison group selection. Finally, Chapter V provides preliminary estimated program impacts and a discussion of their implications, including limitations of the analysis and next steps.

II. Review of Literature on Non-Custodial Parents

Background

The number of children living in single-parent households in the United States has increased dramatically since the 1960s. While an estimated 9 percent of children under 18 lived with a single parent in 1960 (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002), by 2005 this rate had increased to nearly 31 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). As a result, most children living in the United States today will spend some part of their childhood in a single-parent household (Legler, 2003).

Policymakers are especially concerned with the disproportionate number of single-parent households living in poverty. According to the 2005 American Community Survey, while 10.2 percent of all U.S. families had incomes below the poverty level, 37.7 percent of families with a female head of household and no husband present fell below the poverty level in 2005. In Texas the picture is even worse, with 14.2 percent of all families below the poverty level in 2005, and 42.7 percent of families comprised of a female head of household with no husband present existed below the poverty level.

The Significance of Child Support

Policymakers view child support as a key strategy for reducing high poverty rates among single-parent families and reducing the public costs associated with supporting these families. Child support can be an important source of income for single-parent households, especially for poor families:

- Twenty-two percent of poor women who received child support in 1995 were lifted above the poverty line by child support receipts (Miller et al., 2005).
- In 2001, child support payments accounted for 30 percent of income (\$2,550) in families with incomes below 100 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. Child support accounted for 15.5 percent of income (\$3,980) for families between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty guidelines (Sorensen, 2003).
- In 2005, 15 percent of child support cases included families currently receiving public assistance and 40 percent included families who had previously received assistance (DHHS, 2005). Likewise in Texas, 10 percent of FY 2005 child

support cases included families currently receiving public assistance and 42 percent included families who previously received assistance.

- Last year, child support enforcement (CSE) collected over \$1 billion nationally for families currently receiving public assistance and \$9.3 billion for families who had previously received assistance. In Texas, CSE collected \$20.5 million for families currently receiving assistance and \$689.1 million for families who had previously received assistance.

Compliance with child support orders has improved substantially in recent years, in part because of changes implemented under welfare reform. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) enacted in 1996 made nearly 50 changes to the child support enforcement system including streamlined paternity establishment procedures, the establishment of a National Directory of New Hires to track NCPs with child support arrears, and uniform interstate child support laws (DHHS, 2004). As a result of these and other changes:

- The proportion of families in the child support program receiving payments more than doubled from 1996 (20 percent) to 2003 (50 percent) (Turetsky, 2005). In Texas, Schexnayder et al. (1998) found that “paternity establishments, established orders and collections have all increased as a result of Texas’ efforts to strengthen enforcement procedures.”
- The number of parents receiving the full amount due has increased from 37 percent in 1994 to 45 percent in 2005 (Miller et al., 2005).
- In 2005, child support enforcement collected \$23 billion nationally, a 5.2% percent increase from 2004. Texas was second in the country behind California in 2005 with \$1.8 billion in collections, up 18.6% from 2004 (DHHS, 2005).

Despite these gains, the system continues to have its shortcomings:

- The proportion of custodial mothers receiving support has remained fairly constant (75 percent) over the past decade.
- Child support receipt rates for welfare parents have increased over time but they continue to have lower rates of receipt than their counterparts.
- Fewer TANF parents (53 percent) have child support awards than their counterparts (63 percent).

Because so many (37.7 percent) single-head-of-household families continue to subsist on poverty wages, increasing child support compliance remains a key strategy for lifting these families out of poverty.

Reasons for Noncompliance

Non-custodial parents who fail to comply with child support orders are often stereotyped as “deadbeats,” or mean-spirited individuals who are indifferent to their children’s needs. However, research demonstrates that parents’ actual reasons for noncompliance are far more complex. In fact, there is strong evidence that most NCPs care about the well-being of their children and want to be involved in their lives (Sylvester and O’Connell, 2002). The complex reasons NCPs fail to meet their child support obligations are discussed below.

Mistrust and Suspicion

NCPs may view the child support enforcement system as unfair, insensitive, and punitive. Non-custodial parents:

- Often assume that orders are pre-set and allow no room for negotiation, creating a “resentment of the insensitivity of the system towards their precarious and shifting circumstances” (Furstenberg et al., 1992).
- Complain that the system is more diligent in enforcing child support orders than enforcing their visitation rights (Baron and Sylvester, 2002).
- Perceive the child support system as equivalent with the criminal justice system, and assume that the primary goal of the program is punitive action towards them (Reichert, 1999; Doolittle and Lynn, 1998).
- Have “a general feeling that the courts should not interfere in their families” (Furstenberg et al., 1992).

Informal Supports

For a variety of reasons, many NCPs provide their children with an “informal” version of child support such as gifts of cash, clothing, diapers, formula, or toys (Sander and Rosen, 1987). Possible explanations for a tendency towards provision of informal support include distrust of government, a personal preference for tangible gifts, potential for increased contact with the children, concerns that income earned illegally will draw

unwanted attention to the NCP's finances, and avoidance of TANF pass-through policies, which in some states (Texas included) retain a portion of child support payments for the state as a reimbursement for public assistance funds paid to the family.

Disputes with the Custodial Parent

NCPs sometimes withhold child support due to disagreements with the custodial parent (Baron and Sylvester, 2002). Common sources of tension between the parents include disputes over custody, visitation rights, or child support; hostile relations with custodial parent's extended family; jealousy over competing romantic relationships; disputes over child-rearing practices; and poor personal relationships between the parents as a result of immaturity and limited exposure to positive relationship role models.

Lack of Financial Resources

Many NCPs face a variety of complex barriers to paying regular child support. For example:

- Boyd (1999) found that 41 percent of low-income, non-custodial fathers had been unemployed for at least one year.
- Sorensen and Zibman (2001) found that 2.5 million non-custodial fathers lived in poverty and had a limited to nonexistent ability to pay child support.

The reasons for NCP financial challenges are complex. Economic trends over the past thirty years – including the decline in the manufacturing sector and emigration of jobs out of the inner city – have left unskilled men especially with fewer opportunities for meaningful employment (Knox and Miller, 2001). Other barriers to gainful employment faced by NCPs include:

- **Limited Education** – Sorensen (1997) finds that an estimated 40 percent of low-income NCPs have not completed high school or earned a GED.
- **Limited Work History** – Many NCPs have little or no work experience, making it difficult for them to obtain well-paying jobs (Sylvester and O'Connell, 2003).
- **Mental Health & Behavioral Issues** – NCPs may experience feelings of depression, anxiety, and hopelessness (Weinman, Smith and Buzi, 2002).
- **Substance Abuse** – Some NCPs have drug or alcohol addictions that affect their employability (Baron and Sylvester, 2002).

- **Insufficient access to transportation** – The lack of reliable transportation makes it difficult for NCPs to secure and retain good jobs.
- **Transience** – Many low-income NCPs move frequently, have no stable home setting, and are difficult to contact (Doolittle and Lynn, 1998).
- **Criminal Backgrounds** – Reichert (1999) indicates that up to 70 percent of all low-income NCPs have had contact with the criminal justice system. Criminal backgrounds create serious obstacles to securing employment.

If research demonstrating that NCPs want to be responsible parents is correct, addressing the complex array of issues facing this population may be the most promising route to improving child support enforcement and, subsequently, improving the lives of children in single-parent families. The following section discusses some of the strategies programs are trying in order to address these issues.

Enhanced Child Support Enforcement

Given the continuing challenge of improving child support compliance, there is considerable interest in “enhanced child support enforcement,” programs which go beyond traditional child support enforcement activities in order to test innovative approaches to increasing compliance. These programs typically focus on efforts to connect unemployed and underemployed non-custodial parents with employment services so they can better support their children financially. Common services include job training and/or job placement assistance; group and individual counseling; mediation and/or legal assistance with custody or visitation issues; parenting education; mentoring; case management; and assorted supportive services such as basic needs assistance, substance abuse counseling, etc.

To date, the effects of the majority of NCP programs have been modest and, at times, equivocal. A recent literature review (Looney and Schexnayder, 2004) found that programs for non-custodial parents:

- Encourage participation in workforce activities;
- Increase employment, at least in the short term;
- May increase earnings; and
- Sometimes increase the frequency of child support payments.

Because of data collection issues and the difficult task of comparing programs with greatly varying approaches, quality of services, and intensity of services, the reasons for these relatively weak impacts are not entirely clear. However, research does suggest that - excluding circumstances beyond programs' control (e.g., an economic downturn) - there are two fundamental challenges facing enhanced child support enforcement programs for NCPs: difficulty implementing services as designed, and difficulty recruiting, enrolling, and retaining participants.

Implementation Challenges

Difficulties in implementing services as designed are certainly not unique to programs that serve NCPs. The most commonly cited problems relate to the timeframe for a program: longer-than-expected startup periods and overall program evaluation durations that are too short for the interventions to have their desired effect (Looney and Schexnayder, 2004; Schroeder, Looney, and Schexnayder, 2004). Research suggests that these problems could be resolved if 1) program designers will allow sufficient time for a pilot phase to test and refine interventions prior to full implementation and 2) funders will adapt their schedules to provide programs with ample time to implement a program and sustain it long enough for effects to take hold.

There are also noteworthy challenges associated with coordinating services across multiple organizations. Substantial time should be reserved for planning, coalition building, and testing prior to full-scale implementation. Looney and Schexnayder (2004) recommend that staff have a demonstrated ability to “build referral networks with local organizations, effectively communicate priorities to staff members, and be open to considering feedback and suggestions, and approach programmatic challenges with creative solutions.”

Participation Challenges

Participation issues are even more complex. A disconcertingly large share of programs serving NCPs in the past decade found it difficult to recruit the targeted number of parents. Some of the challenges associated with participation rates can be mitigated through thoughtful planning, more effective program management, and changes in program design. But some of the challenges are so persistent they suggest a paradigm shift may be necessary.

Addressing these implementation challenges so that programs are able to provide significant numbers of NCPs with the services they advertise is the first and most important step. This not only helps with retention but can also help with recruiting since word of mouth is known to affect NCP program participation (Looney and Schexnayder, 2004). Program designers must also pay attention to eligibility rules: casting a wider net is likely to engage a larger number of NCPs. It is important to keep eligibility issues in mind when selecting a funder; many grants – especially those provided by the federal government – have stipulations that may result in eligibility issues for potential participants.

Once these two underlying issues are addressed, program directors must next choose whether they wish to run a voluntary program or a program that compels participation through a judicial mandate (or a mix of both). Voluntary programs typically need to engage in creative, aggressive outreach campaigns to attract participants. Strategies include media campaigns, posting fliers, canvassing, and house visits. Referrals from partner agencies may also be helpful. If a program is able to gain the trust and approval of its participants, they may also be a good source of recruits. One site of the Bootstrap project had 14 “peer referrals” in which fathers referred friends and family members to the program (Looney and Schexnayder, 2004).

While some NCPs will *voluntarily participate* in enhanced child support enforcement programs out of concern for their child’s well being, these parents are, in fact, rare. As discussed previously, many NCPs fear and distrust the formal child support system, and are reluctant to get involved in any program associated with it. Furthermore, because most government and social service programs have historically targeted women and children, there may be a stigma associated with men’s participation (Looney, 2004). Given the fact that the overwhelming majority of NCPs are male, this stigma could act as a major deterrent to participation.

To overcome these challenges, most voluntary programs employ some sort of incentive to encourage participation. Past incentives include adjustments to child support orders, arrears forgiveness, the opportunity to access legal counsel, and cash stipends. The efficacy of this approach is unclear. While programs like Bootstrap (which provided cash stipends) have had modest success with incentives, they nevertheless struggled to reach their enrollment goals.

An alternate strategy for improving participation rates is *mandating participation* through judicial orders reinforced by “swift and certain consequences” for non-participation. Experience suggests that these strategies may have some promise. The Shawnee County Non-custodial Project began as a voluntary Welfare to Work project. After multiple outreach attempts, only 2 NCPs enrolled in the program, both of which dropped out the same day. However, when the program shifted to a model in which a judge mandated participation or jail, 65-80 percent who agreed to participate did so and 65-90 percent of the participating NCPs made monthly payments (Hayes, 2004). The Parents’ Fair Share demonstration also found that the likelihood of sanctions for nonappearance reportedly made a difference in appearance rates (Doolittle and Lynn, 1998).

Nevertheless, sanctions also have their limitations. Getting NCPs to appear at a meeting to review or set their child support orders—the first step to establishing a participation mandate—can be very challenging. The Parent’s Fair Share initiative had appearance rates ranging from 5 percent to 70 percent. Furthermore, cost issues present a challenge, as it sometimes costs taxpayers more to support the parent in jail for a few days than the parent’s total monthly child support obligation (NASWA, 2002). Imposing sanctions for nonappearance proved to be more difficult than anticipated under the Parent’s Fair Share program (Doolittle and Lynn, 1998). Most importantly, sanctions alone fail to address the root causes of noncompliance for poor NCPs who have difficulty paying due to low or nonexistent earnings and problems with mental illness or substance abuse, among others.

Further research is needed to clarify whether sanctions programs 1) improve program participation rates and 2) result in positive outcomes for NCPs and their offspring. By further exploring this topic, this project will bolster our understanding of the efficacy of sanctions.

III. Early Implementation Analysis

This chapter presents abbreviated findings from a prior analysis of the planning and early implementation experiences with the NCP Choices project (see Schroeder et al, 2005). The analysis was based upon discussions with staff in the agencies collaborating in the project and on interviews conducted during visits to two of the early implementation sites, El Paso County on the U.S./Mexico border in west Texas and Galveston and Brazoria Counties in southeast Texas.

Ray Marshall Center researchers conducted this preliminary process and implementation study of the NCP Choices projects in El Paso and Galveston/Brazoria Counties in late summer, 2005. The purpose of this study was to develop a clear understanding of planning, policies and program procedures as well as the operational contexts for the project in the two study sites. The study described the NCP Choices program model, its target population, service delivery configurations, activities and services available to the NCPs, participant flow, and data collection and tracking procedures in the initiatives. It noted divergences between the service delivery design and actual practices, as well as similarities and differences between study sites. The process study results helped to guide the impact analysis described in Chapter IV. Lastly, the process and implementation analysis provided a basis for immediate feedback to the responsible state and local agencies regarding program policies and practices and their expected effects in order to support mid-course corrections if needed and continuous program improvement.

Early Implementation Findings

Key early implementation findings reflected different phases of implementation for each of the sites. The El Paso site marked four weeks of activity at the time of the field visits, while Galveston and Brazoria Counties were still very much in the planning stage for NCP Choices and had not actually begun ordering clients to participate. This study offers early planning and implementation findings based on a review of program background, planning efforts, NCP Choices service delivery, community partnerships developed, labor market context, and initial program assessment for both sites, but from somewhat different bases. While El Paso was ahead of Brazoria and Galveston Counties in terms of starting up

its NCP Choices Program, in fact it was only slightly ahead. El Paso began implementing the program in mid-July; Galveston County did so at the end of August, and Brazoria County was scheduled to begin in October. By early 2006, both sites should have been deep into project implementation with NCPs enrolled in various workforce services and tracking and reporting well underway among the partners in the program.

The design and implementation of the two ongoing projects varied in part due to differences in their implementation dates. Another significant difference between the sites was in the number of actors involved in the program. Actors in the El Paso program included the OAG staff, the IV-D court master, the El Paso Domestic Relations Office and the Upper Rio Grande at Work board and contractor (SERCO); however, the Galveston/Brazoria program only included the Office of Attorney General staff, the IV-D court master, and the WorkSource workforce board and its contractor (Interfaith). There was no Domestic Relations Office in Brazoria/Galveston Counties. The primary similarity between El Paso and Galveston/Brazoria Counties was that both IV-D court masters considered non-compliance an enforceable act, and clearly would send noncompliant NCPs to jail: the threat of “swift and certain” consequences was quite real in the two sites. Both considered the mandatory nature of the program with the sanction of jail time to be the key to success for the NCP Choices initiative. To better understand the significance of these differences and similarities, a brief description of each of the sites is presented.

Program Background and Design

The players from the Galveston/Brazoria Counties came to the NCP Choices Initiative with similar backgrounds and experiences with Choices populations from work in programs and studies like Fragile Families, Welfare-to-Work, Bootstrap, and Choices, the work program for TANF recipients in Texas. The OAG was identified by all of the players involved in NCP Choices as the primary driver and facilitator for this initiative. There was also agreement that the key components in the program design included the involvement of the IV-D Courts and the sanctions for non-compliance. Most are concerned as well with problems associated with serving the population of NCP participants outside Galveston/Brazoria Counties and the outreach criteria for selecting them. Noncompliant NCPs tend to have multiple, often substantial barriers to participation and employment that were expected to challenge every agency and program involved in NCP Choices. Many of

them are minorities and have low education levels, records as offenders, problems with substance abuse, and even other families whom they are expected to care for as well. These issues, which these programs certainly have addressed before in other efforts, surfaced during the planning phase for Galveston/Brazoria Counties and were being faced directly in El Paso, which also encountered basic challenges involved with instituting their communication and tracking/reporting plans across multiple agencies after 42 days of program activity.

In addition, one of the more critical features of the NCP Choices design is the active participation of the IV-D Courts, especially the judges. It is important to the success of the design and continuing NCP participation for there to be consequences when appropriate. The IV-D judges mete out such consequences for NCPs under this design. It was noteworthy that every individual interviewed as part of the field visits felt that Judge Henderson in Galveston/Brazoria and Judge Minton in El Paso were not only dedicated judges, but also the “right individuals for the job.”

NCP Choices Service Delivery

The programs involved in the Galveston/Brazoria Counties all seemed to have a common understanding of the NCP Choices participant flow process and expected to serve between 30 to 60 cases (NCPs) per month, depending on the actor’s perspective. They expected the Courts to offer possible participants the option of participating in the NCP Choices program. WorkSource staff were to serve as on-site liaison in responsibility commitment and refer participants to WorkSource’s One-Stop Center in Texas City for actual job search services. WorkSource staff was then to track NCP Choices participants via the management information system, some details of which were being worked on to gain accessibility for all players. Judge Henderson was to determine outcomes at the end of the 45-day period. Galveston/Brazoria Counties anticipated providing NCP Choices participants with the very same services provided to regular customers of the Texas City One-stop system.

El Paso adopted a service delivery approach somewhat unique to their efforts under *Trabajo Andale* and the fact that DRO staff was involved as well. The actual participant flow was quite similar in any event.

Resources

The resources available to each site depended very much on the multi-agency coordination aspect of the NCP Choices approach. Galveston/Brazoria Counties were to have a WorkSource/court liaison or two in each of the counties. WorkSource staff anticipated using TANF funds, as well as WIA, Project RIO, tax credits, and other resources as well. El Paso's Upper Rio Grande at Work staff also plans to rely on TANF funds and possibly WIA, as appropriate, for serving NCP Choices participants; El Paso has one Upper Rio Grande at Work court liaison on site.

Services Provided

The barriers that NCPs bring to this initiative have implications for service provision. NCPs frequently have poor education and work histories, are often ex-offenders, and may have problems with substance abuse and even mental illness. This array of barriers poses real challenges for serving them under NCP Choices, just as it has with other workforce and related programs. NCP Choices stresses job search and work supports over longer-term education and training. In part, this reflects the Texas primary "work-first" orientation. Although Texas' Choices program does make training available to those who want it, only a small fraction takes advantage of the opportunity. Thus, in part the emphasis on job search and related activities for NCPs reflects an equity concern. There is a clear sense among the designers of the NCP Choices initiative that services made available to NCPs should be on a par with those offered to their counterparts, the custodial parents. This should help to avoid the concern raised by some that NCPs might avail themselves of longer-term training, deferring payment of child support while the children's mother waited with limited prospects for access to such training for herself.

Education levels were expected to be a problem in both sites.

Both sites were basically taking the approach that NCPs referred to their respective workforce systems would be served like any other individual who enters their doors. For most in Texas' one-stop system this means an emphasis on *job search and related services*. NCPs would, however, be subject to greater scrutiny than other one-stop participants.

Both Galveston/Brazoria and El Paso anticipated that *transportation* would be a major problem that would need to be addressed. Few NCPs have reliable transportation and

the area labor markets are spread out geographically. Galveston and Brazoria lack public transportation systems, while El Paso's bus system is reasonably functional.

El Paso indicated that job availability for the general skill set that NCPs tend to have was going to be a serious challenge, as were mental health concerns. While El Paso could offer a referral to mental health counseling, many participants seemed resistant, according to the Upper Rio Grande at Work staff. And in both sites, mental health/illness and substance abuse treatment resources were severely limited.

Community Partnerships

The workforce staffs—both WorkSource in Galveston/Brazoria Counties and Upper Rio Grande at Work in El Paso—expected to rely on linkages with community partners like Salvation Army, area food banks, and others, while other players did not anticipate such linkages.

Labor Market

The labor markets in these sites are quite different. At the time of the site visits, Galveston/Brazoria WorkSource staff anticipated job opportunities expanding in chemical and oil and gas plant construction and medical fields. They felt that NCP participants would be eligible for these jobs and thought they had a good program in place to get those individuals who had been incarcerated into these positions. Concerns were raised about NCPs who were offenders or had mental health issues being able to get bonded to work in health care, although TWC provides bonding for ex-offenders working in such positions.

Upper Rio Grande at Work staff was beginning to find that their NCP population was not a match to the areas of job growth in the area. The Upper Rio Grande at Work staff reported job growth in medical, education and (security clearance required) defense-related construction, but believed that the NCP participants, who on the whole were more manually inclined and with previous prison records, needed a different mix of employers and jobs in order to succeed.

Initial Program Assessment

The players from the Galveston/Brazoria Counties were limited to their opinions on the initial program assessment. The workforce board (the WorkSource) anticipated

communications concerns for this multi-agency effort and foresaw problems with the location and number of NCP Choices participants. While custodial parents tended to reside primarily in Harris County, NCPs lived all over the Gulf Coast area, not just in Galveston or Brazoria Counties; initially, Gulf Coast planned to serve only those NCPs living in Galveston and Brazoria Counties, but would track them when they move. WorkSource staff had concerns about the staff numbers required to manage the expected workload as well. The OAG field office was concerned about the employability of the NCP Choices target population.

El Paso had encountered real challenges during their first 42 days of implementation. The Upper Rio Grande at Work staff had concerns about the reporting and communication process and with the significant barriers to job placement and retention for the NCP Choices participants. The OAG field office was concerned about multi-agency coordination, timing elements for revoking NCP Choices participants, staff workloads, and feasibility of partial payments by the NCP Choices participants given the low wages they were likely to earn.

Preliminary Observations

The following general observations were offered based on the initial review of planning and early implementation experiences in Galveston/Brazoria and El Paso Counties, as well as the literature on serving NCPs in such programs.

First, the NCP Choices model—with its emphasis on limited but clear choices, mandatory participation, and “swift and certain” consequences (i.e., jail) for NCPs failing to participate—appeared consistent with the evaluation literature on such efforts and had definite “buy-in” from the key players at the state level and in each of the local sites visited. This is critical for successful implementation of the model.

Second, it was premature to judge whether the NCP Choices program would be a success. El Paso was the only site that had actually implemented the NCP Choices model at the time of the field visits in August. Galveston County was in the process of implementing it in August and Brazoria County was to follow suit in October. But, all of the players seemed fully engaged in and committed to project implementation.

Third, it was apparent from the field visits that there was still considerable work to be done fleshing out multi-agency coordination and communications, defining criteria about

who is eligible for the program, identifying those individuals, and especially tracking and reporting NCP participation and compliance. Many of the plans were still being worked out during the visits. There is a significant information technology aspect in relation to multi-agency work that is likely to require stronger planning, training and support.

Fourth, NCPs have significant barriers to participation, employment and career advancement that may be difficult to fully address in the NCP Choices program. Helping individuals with substantial barriers—including poor education, uneven work history, substance abuse, mental health/illness, and transportation—to become economically self-sufficient and make consistent child support payments may take more than is envisioned in this initiative. There was a real mismatch between the job skills and qualifications that NCPs embodied and the areas of growth in these local labor markets. On the other hand, as noted, addressing these issues through long-term training would in fact pose equity concerns with the custodial parents who were in need of child support. These are challenges that workforce development programs in these and other sites have addressed before.

Finally, as the literature has suggested, it will take time to fully implement the NCP Choices model as a pilot and to fully work out all the problems that will invariably surface. This is especially the case with a program that is based on a multi-agency coordination model.

IV. Research Design

The goal of providing Choices program services to unemployed and underemployed non-custodial parents (NCPs) was to assist them in becoming responsible parents who can meet their financial and other obligations to their children. The impact analysis was designed to determine the extent to which those ordered into NCP Choices and their families benefit from the services received, in terms of increased payment of child support and other measures, as compared to similarly situated unemployed and low-income NCPs who are not offered such services.

The NCP Choices impact analysis is presented in two chapters. This Research Design chapter presents the research questions, the expected effects of the NCP Choices program, a description of the quasi-experimental comparison group selection, and the results of this procedure. The next chapter, Program Impacts and Discussion, presents estimated program impacts and a discussion of their implications, including limitations of the analysis and next steps.

Research Questions

The impact evaluation addresses five research questions. The questions aim to discover the effects of being ordered into the NCP Choices program on unemployed and low-income non-custodial parents whose children are currently or formerly receiving TANF by comparing NCP Choices clients' outcomes to those of a comparison group. The comparison group will consist of similarly situated non-custodial parents who are not ordered into Choices services. As described in the following section, this comparison group will be formed through quasi-experimental selection procedures.

The research questions are designed to elucidate effects of the NCP Choices program on child support collections, workforce development participation, employment and earnings, and TANF receipt by associated custodial parents. Detailed research questions on these outcomes of interest are as follows:

1. Does the NCP Choices program, which includes mandatory, court-ordered participation in workforce development services with the threat of jail time for

non-participation for non-custodial parents of children who were or are receiving welfare benefits, lead to increased child support payments?

2. Does NCP Choices lead to more *consistent* payment of child support by non-custodial parents over time?
3. Does NCP Choices lead to increased workforce development participation by non-custodial parents? Alternatively, does it lead to increased incarceration rates for non-payment of child support?
4. Does NCP Choices lead to increased employment rates and earnings levels by non-custodial parents?
5. Does NCP Choices for non-custodial parents lead to decreased TANF participation for the associated custodial parents (CPs) and their children?

These questions and the expected effects of the NCP Choices program, as informed by the literature reviewed earlier, are summarized in Table 1. In particular, based on recent studies of Texas low-income NCP populations (Schroeder, Looney, and Schexnayder, 2004; Schroeder, King, and Hill, 2005), the NCP Choices program is expected to lead to increased and more consistent child support collections, increased employment, and reduced reliance on TANF by the associated custodial parents.

TABLE 1: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND EXPECTED NCP CHOICES EFFECTS

Research Question	Expected NCP Choices Effect
Q1. Payment of child support.	+
Q2. Consistent payment of child support.	+
Q3. Workforce development participation by NCP.	+
Q4. Employment and earnings of NCP.	+
Q5. Use of TANF by CP.	—

Quasi Experimental Comparison Group Design

Ideally, for purposes of the impact evaluation, the NCP Choices demonstration would have been conducted as a true experiment by randomly assigning potential participants to experimental and control groups. However, because a random assignment design was not feasible for the NCP Choices demonstration, an alternative approach to comparison group selection was utilized. Over the years, researchers have developed a number of ‘quasi-experimental’ approaches for creating counter-factual comparison groups when random assignment is not possible for whatever reason (NRC, 2001). Although the methods are not perfect, they represent the best approach available, short of random assignment, for selecting near-equivalent comparison groups.

One approach to creating a ‘quasi-experimental’ comparison group that is as similar as possible to the experimental group in all measurable respects involves selection of multivariate ‘nearest neighbors.’ This involves systematically comparing each experimental group member to all potential comparison group members on a number of characteristics using a formula to compute multivariate distance. The dimensions on which they are compared typically consist of demographic, economic, program participation and other geographic characteristics. The potential comparator with the closest matching characteristics, known as the ‘nearest neighbor,’ is then selected to be in the comparison group. This process is continued until all members of the experimental group have had their own nearest neighbors chosen. Outcomes are then compared for the two groups in order to compute net impacts (e.g., Heckman, 1992; Heckman & Hotz, 1984). A detailed discussion of comparison group selection is provided below.

Comparison Group Selection Procedure

The following procedures and variables were used in the selection of nearest neighbors to comprise the quasi-experimental comparison group. The selection of nearest neighbors for the NCP Choices project began with the identification of an appropriate pool of clients from which to choose the comparison group. Because it was desirable to have members of the comparison group be as similar as possible to those ordered into NCP

Choices, the statewide database of NCPs with active child support cases was utilized as a starting point. From this, the matching procedure considered detailed geographic, demographic and historical information on their child support collections, earnings, and other relevant information to select similarly situated NCPs, as described below.

Matching Procedure

Nearest-neighbor matching is an iterative computational process, done for one NCP Choices participant (or target) at a time, as follows. First, the initial pool of potential neighbors for the target participant was restricted to those with an exact match on important categorical dimensions, including county of residence, gender, and others, for which ‘distance’ is impossible to quantify. Next, the target participant was compared against every remaining potential neighbor on all important near-continuous dimensions that could be measured through our administrative data sources. To objectively measure the degree of similarity between a target and potential comparator, standardized absolute distances between each pair on relevant dimensions were summed to arrive at a measure of total multivariate distance (Mahalanobis, 1936). When all potential neighbors had been compared to the target, the one with the shortest distance, or the person most similar to the target in multivariate space, was selected as the nearest neighbor. This neighbor was retained for the comparison group, then removed from further matching consideration¹, and the process was repeated for the remaining NCP Choices participants until the selection of the comparison group was complete.

Basic dimensions for matching

The basic dimensions for selecting a comparison group of non-custodial parents not ordered into the NCP Choices program would typically consist of variables from the following categories:

- Demographics at program entry, including age, marital status, and race/ethnicity;

¹ This is known as sampling without replacement, and it prevents the same comparator being selected for the comparison group multiple times. While it is possible to sample *with* replacement and get slightly better matches, this requires a complex adjustment to the standard errors, and can lead to the undesirable situation of having one person serve as comparator for a large number of treatment group members.

- Employment and earnings histories, as measured from the UI earnings database;
- Child support case features, including number and ages of children, paternity establishment history, collections history (including the current delinquency that makes the client eligible), and number of other cases on which the NCP is listed;
- Features of the custodial parent (CP) on the case to which the NCP is linked, including demographics, employment, earnings, and assistance histories, and number of other child support cases on which the CP is listed;
- Geography, as measured by county of residence (exact match required);
- History of NCP participation in workforce development services; and
- Date of entry into the NCP Choices program was controlled for implicitly by selecting comparison group members based on their characteristics as of each NCP Choices group member's program entry date.

Due to the short timeline for producing this preliminary impact analysis report, not all of the dimensions identified above were included in the match procedure. The subset of measures used (see Table 2 and Table 3 below) includes all the most important ones, and should ensure adequately matched comparison group members until additional dimensions can be added for the final impact estimation.

Results of Comparison Group Selection

This section describes the results of the selection of a comparison group for evaluating the impacts of NCP Choices. First, Table 2 presents a comparison of NCP Choices clients against the entire pool of available, comparable NCPs with active child support cases in the same counties as those served by NCP Choices. This comparison illustrates the ways in which the NCPs selected for participation in the NCP Choices program differed systematically from those not selected. Second, Table 3 compares NCP Choices clients against members of the comparison group, who were selected to be as similar as possible to NCP Choices clients on these measured dimensions.

NCP Choices clients compared to all NCPs

Table 2 illustrates a comparison between relevant pre-program characteristics of NCP Choices clients and the pool of NCPs from which a comparison group can be chosen. The comparison group pool consists of all other similarly situated NCPs with child support cases in one of the five target counties served by the four sites (including Bexar, Brazoria, El Paso, Galveston, and Hidalgo counties). Results of this comparison indicate that, on average, NCP Choices clients differ considerably from other NCPs on the OAG caseload in the same geographic areas. NCP Choices clients tend to be younger, are slightly more likely to be female, have more active child support cases, and have longer earnings histories than other NCPs in the area. NCP Choices clients also are less likely to have been employed in the quarter of entry, earn less than half as much as other NCPs, and are twice as likely to have experienced a recent dip in their earnings levels. Among those experiencing a dip in earnings, the dip was greater, as a percentage of income, as compared to the experience of other NCPs in the area. NCP Choices clients are also much less likely to have made a payment recently, and made payments only about half as often in the prior year, both of which could be related to their chances of selection into the program. They are also slightly more likely to have made a payment through a federal offset in the prior year, as compared to other NCPs in the target areas, another sign of their reduced cooperation levels.

**TABLE 2: COMPARISON OF NCP CHOICES CLIENTS
WITH OTHER NCPs IN SAME COUNTIES**

	NCP Choices	All Other NCPs in Target Counties
All Participants	N=494	N=156,423
NCP age (years)	34.0	37.5
NCP male	96.0%	98.7%
NCP number of active CS cases	1.6	1.2
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	19.2	17.4
NCP employed at program entry	37.7%	49.6%
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	40.2%	51.4%
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program	\$1824	\$3904
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	49.2%	25.5%
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	32.3	31.7
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	8.2	4.1
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	22.3%	51.4%
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	14.8%	14.1%
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior year	17.7%	5.0%
Any Choices participation in year prior to program	2.0%	.7%
Any ES participation in year prior to program	3.2%	1.9%
Any FSE&T participation in year prior to program	1.8%	.4%
Any WIA participation in year prior to program	2.0%	.8%
Those experiencing an earnings dip	N=243	N=43,236
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	4.7	4.9
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	84.5%	76.9%

Balancing Tests

For research that utilizes quasi-experimental evaluation techniques, the results hinge critically on differences in outcomes for NCP Choices participants and those of the comparison group. Thus, it is vitally important to ensure that the groups are as equivalent as possible before any services are received. Researchers could expect to observe, if the comparison group selection were done well, that the measurable characteristics of the groups

at program entry should differ only by chance. In order to test whether the characteristics of the groups differ at a level that could be explained by chance alone, balancing tests were performed on the means of the continuous matching variables that describe the two groups. It was expected that few or no significant differences would be found.²

NCP Choices clients and selected comparison group

Table 3 presents a comparison of these same NCP Choices clients against the quasi-experimental comparison group that was selected from the larger pool of NCPs in the same counties identified above. A comparison of the last two columns of Table 3 indicates that the aggregate-level characteristics of these two groups were nearly identical at the point of entry into the program. T-tests comparing the two groups on all listed characteristics confirmed that there were no significant differences between them on any of the observed dimensions (all $t_s < 1.65$, $p_s > .09$). In fact, only one comparison came close to revealing a difference subsequent to the matching procedure: percent of NCPs with any Employment Service (ES) participation in the prior year. Although very small percentages of NCPs (less than 2% overall) had such a participation history, NCP Choices clients were slightly more likely, but not statistically significantly so, to have utilized ES in the prior year. Despite the fact that the differences were not statistically significant from zero, the slight differences remaining between the groups are to a large extent controlled for statistically, as described in the results chapter.

² Due to the nature of statistical inference, when using a 95 percent confidence level one can expect to find approximately one spurious difference for every twenty comparisons made. This is because the probability of a type I error (concluding there is a difference when in fact no difference exists) is 0.05, or one in twenty. Due to the large number of comparisons involved in these tests, researchers should only be concerned if the number of statistically significant differences exceeds that which could be expected due to chance alone.

**TABLE 3: COMPARISON OF NCP CHOICES CLIENTS
WITH SELECTED COMPARISON GROUP**

	NCP Choices	Comparison Group
All Participants	N=494	N=494
NCP age (years)	34.0	33.9
NCP male	96.0%	96.0%
NCP number of active CS cases	1.6	1.6
Time since first observed NCP earnings (qtrs)	19.2	19.7
NCP employed at program entry	37.7%	37.4%
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	40.2%	41.7%
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program	\$1824	\$1881
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	49.2%	49.2%
Time since CS first collected on this case (mths)	32.3	32.7
Time since CS last collected on this case (mths)	8.2	8.2
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	22.3%	21.8%
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	14.8%	11.7%
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior year	17.7%	16.0%
Any Choices participation in year prior to program	2.0%	1.0%
Any ES participation in year prior to program	3.2%	1.6%
Any FSE&T participation in year prior to program	1.8%	1.8%
Any WIA participation in year prior to program	2.0%	1.4%
Those experiencing an earnings dip	N=243	N=243
Time since earnings dip occurred (qtrs)	4.7	4.8
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	84.5%	84.6%

In summary, the selection procedure appears to have created a comparison group that is quite similar to NCP Choices clients in their observable characteristics just before program entry. This suggests that the quasi-experimental design is likely to have high internal validity for determining the impacts of the NCP Choices program, meaning that we can have confidence that any differences observed subsequent to program participation were likely due to the program itself. Note, however, that this does not mean that the groups are necessarily as similar as possible on dimensions that were not measured. Further refinement of the comparison group selection procedure will be done prior to computing program impacts for the final report, in order to include more potentially relevant measures (e.g., child support arrears, or amounts owed; custodial parent work history; other case characteristics; etc), and thus increase further our confidence in the pre-program equivalence of the NCP Choices and comparison groups.

V. Program Impacts and Discussion

As indicated in the previous chapter, the quasi-experimental comparison group selection procedure succeeded in producing a comparison group of matched NCPs who were virtually identical in all measured ways to the NCP Choices participants before their entry into the program. The impact estimates reported below were further adjusted for the very slight differences that remained between the two groups.

Because of the degree of success in the match procedure, the impacts reported in this section can be taken as *strongly suggestive* that NCP Choices participation *caused* the observed outcomes. Although only a true experiment with random assignment can unambiguously determine that NCP Choices services *caused* these outcomes, we are far more certain about the true cause of the observed differences than if we had simply observed pre-post changes in outcomes or a comparison group selected unscientifically from a convenience sample.

Payment of Child Support

The first set of analyses attempts to answer the following: Does the NCP Choices program lead to increased child support payments? Three measures address this question, with the first gauging the frequency of child support collections, and the second examining the average dollar amount of the collections made, both computed on a monthly basis. The third measure expands the time interval to ask what share of NCPs made *any* payment within nine months of program entry. Related measures in the subsequent section attempt to quantify the *consistency* with which such payments were made over time.

As illustrated in Table 4, NCP Choices participation was associated with a substantial and statistically significant sixteen percentage-point increase in the frequency of child support collections. Although this increased rate of collections is still somewhat infrequent in an absolute sense, occurring in less than half of the months following program entry, the increased frequency for NCP Choices participants represents more than a fifty percent gain in collections rate relative to the comparison group, and may be regarded as quite impressive for this population.

The NCP Choices program was also found to be associated with a significant increase in the average monthly dollar amount of child support collections. NCP Choices participants paid approximately \$60 per month more than their comparison group counterparts, almost a 50% increase in total collections.³

TABLE 4: NCP CHOICES IMPACT ON CHILD SUPPORT COLLECTIONS

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time child support collections made	44.8%	28.5%	16.3% **
Monthly average child support collections	\$186	\$127	\$60 **
Any child support payment made within 9 months of program entry	86.5%	61.4%	25.1% **

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

The third measure was created to provide a contrast to the relatively low monthly collections rates reported above. When the time interval is expanded to nine months subsequent to program entry, one finds that 86.5 percent made payments, or nearly twice as many NCP Choices clients, as compared to the share making payments in any given month. The estimated impact of NCP Choices on this measure was a statistically significant and substantial 25 percentage point increase in the collections rate.

Consistent Payment of Child Support

To gauge the *consistency* of child support collections over time, measures were constructed that tabulated, for every three month period subsequent to program entry, the proportion of time collections were made in 1) at least two out of the three months, and 2) in all three out of three months.⁴ Results of this comparison, shown in Table 5, indicate that the

³ Although a statistical test on the average collections across all months, including months with zero collections, can be misleading due to the non-normal nature of the underlying distributions, research suggests that this concern is unwarranted with sufficiently large sample sizes, as in the present study.

⁴ These child support payment consistency measures were first introduced in Schroeder, Looney, & Schexnayder, 2004.

NCP Choices impact on consistency of child support payment was positive and statistically significant for both measures. NCP Choices participants were eighteen percentage points more likely to pay some child support in at least two out of every three months than were their comparison group counterparts. This relative increase in consistent payment is quite substantial, representing about a 67 percent increase in the frequency of consistent payment.

The second measure of payment consistency sets the bar higher, requiring NCPs to make child support payments in all 3 months out of every 3 month period. The significant NCP Choices impact on this measure, at about 9 percentage points, was more than 50 percent greater than that achieved by the comparison group. However, the low absolute level of payment consistency, at about half the time for the first measure or about a quarter of the time for the second measure, shows there is still more work to be done before these payments can represent a reliable source of income for many of these custodial parents.

TABLE 5: NCP CHOICES IMPACT ON CONSISTENCY OF CHILD SUPPORT COLLECTIONS

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Consistent payment of child support, at least 2 out of 3 months	45.7%	27.3%	18.4% **
Consistent payment of child support, 3 out of 3 months	26.8%	17.8%	9.0% **

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

Workforce Development Participation by Non-custodial Parents

The next set of outcome analyses examines this question: Does NCP Choices lead to increased workforce development participation by non-custodial parents? This question is addressed below; however, data are currently unavailable to answer the second portion of research question three: Alternatively, does it [NCP Choices] lead to increased incarceration rates for non-payment of child support? Attempts will be made to gather administrative data addressing this “incarceration” question for the final report.

Since one of the major purposes of the NCP Choices program was to get NCPs into workforce development services that they may need in order to improve their employment prospects, this question was included as a “manipulation check,” to see whether and to what

extent NCP Choices clients actually followed through with workforce development services. It is important to recognize, as discussed elsewhere in this report, that this impact evaluation does not measure the impact of workforce development participation per se. Instead, the impact of NCP Choices captures the effect of *being ordered into* the program, together with the corresponding threat of jail time for noncompliance. It was expected that not all NCPs ordered into the program would participate in Choices.

Table 6 reveals that, as expected, the NCP Choices program was significantly associated with greater levels of NCP participation in the Choices program subsequent to program entry. The first measure, capturing the percent of time NCPs participated in the Choices program in particular⁵, reveals that those ordered into NCP Choices participated a substantial 44 percent of the time, as compared to almost zero participation by comparison group members. The second measure, which gives a better idea of the total share of NCPs participating in Choices, shows that almost 95 percent of those ordered into the program participated within 9 months of this order, as compared to about one percent of comparison group members. These findings confirm a high degree of compliance with the order.

TABLE 6: NCP CHOICES IMPACT ON NCP’S WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PARTICIPATION

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time NCPs participating in Choices program	44.1%	.3%	43.8% **
Any Choices participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	94.6%	.8%	93.8% **
Percent of time NCPs participating in any workforce development program(s)	44.7%	1.1%	43.6% **
Any workforce development participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	94.6%	5.8%	88.8% **

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

⁵ This measure captures NCP participation in Choices, whether that participation was recorded under regular Choices codes, or under a special code created specifically to track participation in this program.

The third and fourth measures of NCP workforce development participation, shown in Table 6, capture NCP involvement in *any* program, including Choices, Employment Services (ES), Workforce Investment Act (WIA), or Food Stamps Employment and Training (FSE&T)⁶. These measures also revealed significantly increased participation by NCP Choices clients, relative to that of the comparison group. About nineteen out of every twenty clients ordered into NCP Choices participated in some form of workforce development within nine months of program entry, while only about one out of every twenty of their comparison group counterparts participated. Again, this indicates that the program was highly successful in getting NCPs into workforce development services.

Employment and Earnings of Non-custodial Parents

The next set of analyses answers the question: Does NCP Choices lead to increased employment rates and earnings levels by non-custodial parents? This question was answered with two measures, one that gauges the percent of time NCPs were employed subsequent to program entry, and another that measures the quarterly earnings levels of those who were employed in any given calendar quarter.⁷

TABLE 7: NCP CHOICES IMPACT ON FATHER’S EMPLOYMENT AND EARNINGS

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time NCP employed	46.0%	41.4%	4.6% *
Average quarterly earnings, among employed NCPs	\$2112	\$2662	-\$551 **

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

As shown in Table 7, the NCP Choices program appeared to have significant impacts on both NCP employment rates and earnings levels, but interestingly these two effects went in opposite directions. Although almost five percent more NCP Choices participants were

⁶ Note that these ‘any workforce development’ measures are not strictly independent of the ‘any Choices’ measures above. They are presented as additional descriptive information only.

⁷ Note that due to the time lag in UI reporting, post-referral earnings information was only available for the roughly half of participants entering NCP Choices by March, 2006. Balancing tests like those reported in the previous chapter confirmed the adequacy of this smaller comparison group.

employed at any given time after program entry, those who were employed earned about \$550 less per quarter than did employed comparison group members. The increased employment effect is consistent with program goals, but the reduced earnings level is somewhat troublesome. It is quite possible that the reduced earnings levels of those employed is a direct result of a greater share of NCP Choices participants gaining employment, albeit in low-wage entry-level jobs. If this is the case, then the negative earnings effect might be expected to diminish over time, as those recently entering jobs gain more experience. On the whole, these two opposing impacts nearly cancel each other, so that the net NCP Choices impact on average earnings across all participants, whether employed or not, is close to zero.

Receipt of TANF by Custodial Parents

The remaining analysis addresses this question: Does NCP Choices for non-custodial parents lead to decreased TANF participation for the associated custodial parents (CPs) and their children? This measure counts the percent of post-program-entry months in which the custodial parent(s) received TANF benefits, with receipt of benefits for any part of the month considered as receipt for the entire month.

Table 8 illustrates that, as expected, and consistent with program goals, custodial parents associated with NCP Choices program participants were significantly less likely than those associated with comparison group members to be receiving TANF at any given point in time following program entry. This 1.2 percentage point decrease in TANF receipt, although seemingly small in absolute terms, represents about a ten percent decrease in TANF receipt relative to that of CPs associated with the comparison group. This suggests that the NCP Choices program successfully led to decreased reliance on TANF benefits among custodial parents associated with NCP Choices participants.

TABLE 8: NCP CHOICES IMPACT ON RECEIPT OF TANF BY CUSTODIAL PARENT

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time CP(s) receiving TANF benefits	10.3%	11.5%	-1.2% *

Note: ** indicates statistically significant difference at the .01 level, * at the .05 level

Discussion

In summary, the results suggest that being ordered into the NCP Choices program was associated with both increased frequency and amount of child support collections, as well as more consistent collections over time. Those ordered into NCP Choices also displayed greater participation in workforce development, as compared to controls, whether measured as participation in Choices itself, or in any major workforce development program. Those ordered into NCP Choices were subsequently employed at higher rates, but among those who were employed, they had lesser average earnings. Finally, the custodial parents associated with NCP Choices participants showed lesser rates of TANF receipt subsequent to program entry.

In short, the NCP Choices program appears to have successfully achieved most of its program goals, with significant and dramatic positive impacts on all outcomes except for earnings levels of those employed. The combination of increased child support payment frequency and amount, increased consistency of payment, increased employment by NCPs, and reduced TANF receipt by CPs all point to greater economic self-sufficiency on the part of CPs and NCPs. The finding of reduced earnings levels is not a surprise in a program that aims to get large numbers of low-income individuals into jobs, and in fact the same pattern was observed in the Bootstrap Project (Schroeder et al, 2004). The theory behind the work-first approach to workforce development is that many of these NCPs should learn valuable work skills, and hopefully either advance within their organizations or move on to better-paying jobs. It is not yet clear whether the local job markets can provide such advancement opportunities for these NCPs, but a longer-term follow-up interval should help to sort this out in later versions of this report.

Caveats and Limitations of Analysis

It is important to note that, to the extent that not everyone ordered into the program participates in Choices, the design does *not* test for effects of the Choices program itself. This is because some who are ordered into the program will almost certainly prefer to find a job on their own, or may already have found one, while some will find the money to make a child support payment to avoid going to jail. Thus, instead of measuring the effects of the Choices program, this impact evaluation measures effects of a mandatory order to participate

in the NCP Choices program, with the threat of jail time for non-compliance. While this is arguably one of the best inducements to participation in workforce development that we have seen in the literature, and the results bear this out with almost 95 percent participation, it is still not quite perfect. As a result, a portion of the measured effect is due to Choices participation, and a portion is due to the motivating properties of the court order.

Furthermore, the utilization of a quasi-experimental comparison group design has to some extent limited our ability to conclude that the effects observed were caused by the NCP Choices program. The results of a well done quasi-experiment can suggest but not prove a causal connection between the NCP Choices program and the outcomes observed. The strength of this conclusion depends on the ability of researchers to identify a comparison group that is as equivalent as possible to the NCP Choices group just before being ordered into the program. In this case, the NCP Choices and comparison groups appeared nearly identical on all measured dimensions. However, the possibility still exists that the two groups differed on some *unmeasured* dimensions that could at least partially account for the impacts. Refining the comparison group selection for subsequent versions of this report by adding important dimensions should help to ensure the equivalence of the two groups before program entry, and thus add to our confidence that the NCP Choices program itself was solely responsible for the positive impacts.

Another major caveat to this study concerns the fact that the process and early implementation studies were conducted when the program was still largely under development. Many problems can arise early in the implementation process, regardless of how well-planned a program might have been. These could be kinks in the process that are soon worked-out, or other problems that simply could not have been foreseen. Until the process study can be updated to account for the operation of a mature NCP Choices program, it is difficult to know what components of the program were responsible for the largely positive program impacts. On the other hand, the inclusion of NCP Choices clients from the early implementation period in the impact estimates might have had the effect of making these preliminary impact estimates more conservative than they otherwise would have been. It is possible that the NCPs who entered the program later, and thus experienced a more mature NCP Choices program, could have shown even greater benefits. This possibility will

be explored in detail in the final report, when the expected sample sizes and longer follow-up intervals will better support such analysis.

Next Steps

Since the NCP Choices program was just getting underway when the preliminary process evaluation was conducted, it is quite likely that new issues have emerged with the maturation of the NCP Choices program. An update to the preliminary implementation study, to be completed in spring/summer 2007, should serve as a check on the current functioning of this program. Also, as described above, the comparison group selection will be further refined to enhance the confidence in the internal validity of this study, and outcomes will be reported with additional clients and at greater follow-up intervals in additional reports to be completed in late summer, 2007, and again in summer 2008.

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