

# **Non-Custodial Parent Choices**

## **Establishment Pilot: Impact Report**

Daniel Schroeder  
Amna Khan

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Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs  
The University of Texas at Austin  
3001 Lake Austin Blvd., Suite 3.200  
Austin, TX 78703 (512) 471-7891

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## KEY FINDINGS

Two new pilot programs represent efforts by the Texas Office of the Attorney General to extend and expand upon the original, highly successful Non-Custodial Parent Choices (NCP Choices) program. The Non-Custodial Parent Choices Establishment Pilot (NCP Choices-EP) is the focus of this report, while the PEER curriculum enhancement pilot is discussed in a parallel report. In contrast to the original program, NCP Choices-EP assists low-income NCPs *earlier in their case histories*, before they have a chance to get behind on their child support payments and accumulate significant child support debt. This report describes the impacts of this pilot, which has shown early success in increasing child support collections.

The NCP Choices Establishment Pilot (EP) extends the successful NCP Choices program to NCPs earlier in their case histories, with the goal being to avoid the accumulation of child support debt. The pilot began in four offices in San Antonio in early 2010, and although there are differences in targeting and recruitment, NCPs who are enrolled receive the same workforce development services as those in the original NCP Choices program. Findings to date suggest that the establishment pilot has clearly led to increased child support collections, including increased frequency, amount, and consistency of payments made by NCPs. In fact, those ordered into EP are nearly twice as likely as members of the comparison group to make a child support payment within six months of their referral. These child support impacts are even more impressive considering that child support collection is one of the most accurate measures cited here.

Interestingly, these child support collection impacts were achieved despite a lower rate of participation in workforce services: 69% of those in this EP pilot participated, as compared to an 82% participation rate in the original NCP Choices program. We had expected a lower participation rate when extending Choices services to those in the establishment phase, due to the reduced possibility of jailing participants for non-compliance. However, 69% participation seems acceptable, particularly in light of the impressive child support impacts. Due primarily to low statistical power at this early phase in the study, no impact of EP on employment or unemployment claims have been detected. A negative impact on earnings is a little puzzling, though in line with findings from the original program. Finally, a reduction in TANF receipt among associated custodial parents was also

observed, and confirms similar findings from the original program.

Two new approaches to recruiting establishment cases were tried in several OAG offices with some success. Both approaches attempt to solve the problem of providing workforce services, which are centrally located at the courthouse, to clients who may be more remote. One approach, the 'Rocket Docket,' which is described in detail here, brings potential establishment referrals to court en masse simply by asking them. Once at court, many are convinced by the judicial setting and peer pressure to enroll and comply with program requirements. The Rocket Docket's main weaknesses are logistical -- sometimes resulting in too many referrals at one time -- and possibly its reliance on the generous support of the judge who holds the Rocket Docket. The other new approach to recruitment, known as the CSRP process, shows some promise as well, but its drawback, for many referrals during the week, is the loss of immediacy of the visit with the workforce representative. Allowing some flexibility in the way these clients are served could help to improve referrals from this source as well.

Although these are still early results from a new program, the Establishment Pilot shows enough promise that it should continue to be studied, with participants tracked over longer intervals of time to more accurately estimate longer term impacts. We support efforts to expand the Establishment Pilot to other areas to allow NCPs access to the workforce development services they need so they can provide for their children and help to avoid the accrual of child support debt.



## INTRODUCTION

The Non-Custodial Parent Choices Establishment Pilot (NCP Choices-EP) represents an effort to extend the highly successful NCP Choices program to a new population of non-custodial parents (NCPs). Whereas the original NCP Choices program serves some of the most difficult child support cases – those involving unemployed and low-income NCPs who are already well behind on their child support obligations – NCP Choices-EP attempts to assist individuals earlier in their case histories, before they fall behind on their child support payments. This report examines the effectiveness of this novel variation on a proven successful program.

The original Non-Custodial Parent Choices initiative (NCP Choices) began in 2005 as a partnership between the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC). These two agencies joined forces to implement a model employment project for unemployed and underemployed non-custodial parents (NCPs) who had fallen behind on their child support payments, and whose children were current or recent recipients of public assistance. The project, currently ongoing at full scale in eighteen locations, establishes links among IV-D courts responsible for child support issues, OAG child support staff, and local workforce development boards to provide employment services and child support compliance monitoring to NCPs who need them. Because it serves NCPs in the *enforcement* phase of their child support cases, during which collections are monitored and enforced by the OAG, this original program will be referred to as the *enforcement* version of NCP Choices.

The NCP Choices *enforcement program* has been found to be highly successful in improving payment of child support, in terms of both increased frequency and consistency of payment, as well as increasing NCP rates of employment, reducing unemployment claims, and even reducing TANF receipt among the associated custodial parents (for latest program evaluation see Schroeder & Doughty, 2009). It is fair to ask, however, whether the program is serving all the NCPs who could potentially benefit from the package of services offered. Under the original NCP Choices program design, only child support cases that are part of enforcement actions are eligible for the program. As a result, the typical NCPs ordered to participate in the program have by that time already built up significant levels of child

support debt, also known as arrears, to an astonishing level of \$36,000 on average at program entry (Schroeder & Doughty, 2009).

Program administrators believe that the provision of employment services and enhanced payment monitoring to unemployed or underemployed NCPs much earlier in their case histories, as a part of their *establishment* proceeding, might help to prevent the accumulation of arrears. This is the basic idea behind the creation of the NCP Choices Establishment Pilot program.

In order to obtain an objective outside assessment of this program, 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 study the implementation of NCP Choices and its program variations at various stages, and to conduct an analysis of the program impacts on key outcome measures. This report estimates preliminary program impacts on important outcomes for early participants in the NCP Choices Establishment Pilot.

Following this introductory section, the report contains a background section including literature review and other context, followed by sections briefly describing Choices services, and the program design of the establishment pilot (EP) in comparison to the original NCP Choices program. After that is a section summarizing findings from the preliminary implementation assessment of the EP program, as reported in late 2010 (Schroeder & Khan, 2010), followed by observations from updated interviews with program staff conducted in summer 2011. The impact analysis research design is then described in a subsequent section, followed by a section with preliminary program impacts for this program in its first year or more of implementation. Finally, a discussion section explores any conclusions that can be drawn thus far from the experience of this pilot program.

## **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 years of age lived with a single parent in 1960 (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002; Garfinkel, Miller, McLanahan & Hanson, 1998), by 2008 this rate had increased to nearly 26.3 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). As a result, about half of children living in the United States today will spend some part of their childhood in a single-parent household (Legler, 2003).

Coupled to this is an increase in the number of never-married mothers, who tend to have lower rates of support than previously married mothers (Grail, 2007; Roff, 2008). By 2006, nearly one third of custodial mothers had never been married (Grail, 2007). Single-mother families are about five times as likely to be poor as married-parent families (Cancian and Reed, 2009).

Policymakers view the improvement of child support collection 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. Research indicates that 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). Among custodial parents below the poverty line who received full payments, the average amount of child support received (\$4,700) represented over 60% of their annual income (Grail, 2007). Furthermore, families that can combine earnings and child support received from NCPs are better able to make ends meet, sustain employment, and remain off of TANF cash assistance, as compared to single-parent families that do not receive support (Miller et al., 2005). Since so many single-head-of-household families continue to subsist on poverty-level wages (36.5 percent), increasing child support compliance will remain a key strategy for lifting these families out of poverty.

To the chagrin of many, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA) substantially reduced federal financing of state child support enforcement. Although this incentive funding reduction was projected to reduce child support enforcement performance, particularly in higher-performing states like Texas (Lewin Group, 2007), the expected

reductions largely failed to materialize. Others noted that some provisions of the DRA made it easier for states to pass through child support collections to TANF recipients by (1) waiving the federal share of child support collected on behalf of current or former TANF recipients if states elect to pass through collections, and (2) denying the ability of States to require families to sign over their rights to past-due child support that accrued prior to their TANF application (Parrott, Schott, & Sweeney, 2007). Of course, greater pass-through policies directly place more of the funds collected into the hands of needy families. Moreover, there is research evidence suggesting that increasing pass-through while also disregarding some or all of this income for benefit determination purposes leads to both greater paternity establishment and greater child support collections (Cassetty, Meyer, & Cancian, 2002).

The child support program has made incredible strides in demonstrated effectiveness over the years. After a slight decline in total nationwide collections in 2009 for the first time in the program's history, child support enforcement collected \$26.6 billion in 2010. Despite the brief decline in 2009, which is widely attributed to the downturn in the U.S. economy on a scale not seen since the Great Depression, total collections still grew 7% percent in the interval from 2007 to 2010. Texas had the highest collections in the country in 2010, with \$2.83 billion in collections, an increase of 5.8% from 2009. In fact, Texas went against the national trend in 2009, when its total collections increased by 4.6% from the prior year. Texas has led the nation in collections distributed since 2007 (DHHS, 2010).

Nationally in 2010, 13.8 percent of child support cases included families currently receiving public assistance, a slight increase from prior years, and 42.7 percent included families who had previously received assistance (DHHS, 2010). In Texas, the child support caseload is less dominated by TANF and former TANF recipients, and becomes less so with each passing year. Only 5.9 percent of Texas FY 2010 child support cases included families currently receiving public assistance and 34.2 percent included families who previously received assistance. Nationwide in 2010, child support enforcement (CSE) collected just over \$1 billion for families currently receiving public assistance and just under \$9 billion for families who had previously received assistance (DHHS, 2010). In Texas in 2010, the current/former TANF disparity was greater, with CSE collecting only \$10.3 million for families currently receiving assistance and \$766 million for families who had previously received assistance (DHHS, 2010).

Many NCPs want to be responsible parents but fall behind in making payments on time and end up accumulating significant arrears. If the amount of arrearage is large, it can create disincentives to continue contributing to child support or to finding employment in the mainstream economy (Cancian, Heinrich, & Chung, 2009). By fiscal year 2010, the total child support caseload had increased to 15.9 million cases.. In any given year, about 40% of all child support due goes unpaid. As a result, the nationwide arrears balance is in excess of \$110 billion (USHHS OCSE, 2011). At the same time, many states are hesitant to address the issue of child support arrears. Some see arrears as rightfully owed to the state or to the family of the children the noncustodial parent was ordered to support. These states do not want to be perceived as rewarding noncustodial parents for nonpayment, particularly when many other noncustodial parents are working hard and making sacrifices to remain current on their child support. In addition, states want to ensure that any policies to help noncustodial parents manage arrears benefit only those parents who have been unable rather than unwilling to pay child support.

## **CHOICES PROGRAM SERVICES OVERVIEW**

NCPs in the original, enforcement version of the NCP Choices program as well as those in the EP pilot receive essentially the same Choices services as are available to clients in the regular, or TANF Choices program. This program is described briefly here, followed by a description of the program services as extended to NCPs.

### **TANF Choices Program**

TANF Choices (formerly the JOBS program) is the employment and training program for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) families, operated under TWC's primarily work-first oriented service model which emphasizes personal responsibility, time-limited cash assistance, and the goal of work instead of welfare. The Choices program provides workforce development services to both single- and two-parent families. Although the program emphasizes work-first strategies such as job search, it has features of a mixed model, in that it provides training to some of those who may not be work-ready.

Participation in Choices begins with a workforce orientation for applicants 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 are required to participate in community service. Participants who are actively pursuing employment are eligible for support services, including child care, transportation assistance, work-related expenses, and other support services to help in employment efforts. Some training opportunities may be made available as well. Those public assistance recipients who are required to participate but fail to do so without "good cause" suffer sanctions and discontinuation of benefits. Finally, Choices participants are granted post-employment services to assist in job retention and to document wage gains, career progression, and progression to self-sufficiency.

### **NCP Choices Workforce Service Design**

The Choices program described earlier looks very similar when extended to Non-custodial Parents, regardless of whether they are in the establishment or enforcement phases

of their cases. The NCP Choices program was developed to provide non-custodial parents with similar services to enable them to work and pay their child support obligations. Workforce staff provides employment services to noncustodial parents to assist the unemployed or underemployed NCP in obtaining and retaining employment. Employment services include:

- Assessment,
- Registration in Work in Texas (WIT),
- Case management,
- Job referrals,
- Support services, and
- Retention services.

Workforce staff attends court dockets to meet with NCPs, in order to establish a relationship with them and schedule an appointment to begin employment assessment. An assessment is completed for each NCP at the beginning of their participation with the NCP Choices program. An employment plan is also developed for each NCP based on the information gathered in the assessment.

All unemployed NCP Choices participants are required to participate in workforce services at a minimum of 30 hours per week, which is considered full time engagement. Workforce staff maintains weekly contact with NCPs who are involved in job search activities. NCPs are provided with job referrals and are expected to report the results of their job search activities on a weekly basis to the workforce staff.

Workforce staff maintains communication regarding the NCPs' compliance status and activities with OAG staff via the Choices On-Line Tracking System (COLTS). Workforce first documents compliance status at the 14<sup>th</sup> day after the order effective date, and potentially again at 30, 90, and 180 days.

Every NCP Choices client has a workforce specialist assigned to him or her to assist in the job search. In some locations, a resource room with computers and other resources is also available on site to facilitate the NCP job search. The workforce personnel provide supportive services such as resume writing, interview and basic communication skills. Once successfully employed, NCP Choices participants are tracked for 6 months to determine whether employment is retained. During this retention tracking period, NCPs may continue

to receive supportive services so long as they are still participating in NCP Choices.

Another useful tool for assisting NCPs is that the workforce operators have partnered with local private businesses to provide subsidized employment (SE) to a small number of NCPs who can benefit from it. In the typical arrangement, workforce subsidizes the employment by 90 percent for up to six months. To be eligible, the employer has to agree to retain the NCP as a full time employee afterwards, or else get him or her another job involving transferable skills. Although this arrangement may not be strictly enforceable, employers who do not follow through can be eliminated from consideration for future subsidized employment placements.



## **ESTABLISHMENT PILOT PROGRAM DESIGN**

The idea behind the NCP Choices Establishment Pilot (NCP Choices EP) is to incorporate major elements of the existing NCP Choices program into the establishment proceedings to serve as a useful tool in early intervention and monitoring (EIM) efforts on the part of child support division (CSD) field staff. The establishment pilot version of NCP Choices is intended to reduce litigation time and increase the efficiency of the courts with fewer NCPs needing enforcement action. The pilot began in February 2010, and is being conducted in San Antonio (Bexar County) in four child support field offices: 202, 203, 205 and 211. As in the enforcement version, the NCP Choices EP program targets unemployed NCPs whose children currently or previously had received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits or Medicaid.

### **Program Overview**

The NCP Choices Establishment Pilot is a straightforward extension of the NCP Choices enforcement program, except that workforce services are now offered to unemployed or underemployed NCPs when their child support case is being established, before significant arrears are allowed to accrue. This shift in when the program is delivered also means that the services cannot be required as part of a contempt action as is the case in the original model. Consequences for non-participation are linked to child support early intervention and monitoring – delaying the timeframes for sanctioning by a minimum of 60 days. The key question is whether the impacts of the enforcement version of the NCP Choices program can be maintained, despite the absence of swift and certain consequences for non-participation that proved to be important to the original, enforcement program's success.

Key elements of the NCP Choices Establishment Pilot are the following:

- The OAG identifies NCPs on its caseload who are currently unemployed, who are associated with a family who either is or has been on TANF or Medicaid, and who also reside in the designated workforce service areas
- The IV-D Court includes the eligible NCPs on a regularly scheduled docket.
- NCPs agree to have participation in NCP Choices included in the child support order established by the court.

- The Contractor staff for the local workforce board attends the establishment docket, enrolls NCPs at the IV-D court, and explains the contract outlining NCP rights and responsibilities and the consequences of non-participation. Workforce staff members are present in the courtroom to meet immediately with NCPs and can then set future appointments.
- Early Intervention and Monitoring (EIM) Child Support Officer (CSO), or the staff person each office has assigned, makes a 10 day reminder call to the NCP.
- Workforce staff checks the 30-day compliance button on the program's web-based database, the Choices On-Line Tracking System (or COLTS), to communicate to OAG whether the NCP has complied with the initial NCP-Choices order language
- COLTS allows both OAG and workforce staff to track the progress of identified NCPs and securely exchange relevant information
- The EIM Child Support Officer reviews COLTS for compliance with NCP Choices and payment status at 30 days. If the NCP is neither paying support nor complying with NCP Choices, the CSO documents noncompliance with the support order on COLTS, and immediately refers the case for a motion for contempt of court, even if only a single child support payment has been missed.

### **Eligibility and Targeting**

Under the NCP Choices Establishment pilot model, NCPs who are in the establishment phase of their case histories are offered an opportunity to participate in NCP Choices as an early intervention and monitoring tool. The key elements to the success of NCP Choices enforcement program are that 1) The Workforce staff is present in the courtroom to meet immediately with NCPs, and 2) non-compliance with the support obligation brings about consequences. These two elements remain central to establishment pilot operations. This means that the existing structure for identifying eligible NCPs , as well as the eligibility criteria remain essentially the same for the NCPs in the establishment pilot program.

Non-custodial parents are eligible for NCP Choices if they:

- Have a IV-D case that is current or former TANF or Medicaid,
- Are unemployed or under-employed, with underemployed defined as an NCP who is:
  - Working in an unstable job (e.g. seasonal, temporary jobs);
  - Capable of finding a higher wage job but is working at a low-wage job

- that requires less skill, training, or education than what the NCP has; or
- Employed only part-time when the NCP could work full-time.
- Reside in the participating local workforce development board’s service area and has a court order within the participating court’s jurisdiction,
- Are not medically unable to work, as documented by the Social Security Administration,
- Are not currently incarcerated or otherwise unable to participate, and
- Have a Social Security Number.

To be eligible for the NCP Choices establishment pilot, cases must have agreed orders at court. As initially designed, cases whose agreements are handled in the child support field office by the Child Support Review Process (known as CSRP cases), are not eligible. Furthermore, cases that merely involve motions to set support (MTSS) are excluded, nor are the following types of cases eligible for the establishment pilot:

- default orders
- foster care cases
- initiating interstate cases

**Intake Procedure**

After identification of eligible NCPs in the establishment phase of their cases, workforce representatives are available at court specifically to work with NCP Choices EP clients. The initial program description is given to the CP and NCP to explain the program, obtain agreement and provide direct hand-off to the Workforce Liaison present in the courtroom. It is emphasized to the NCP and the CP that this agreement will become part of the order of the court.

OAG staff has developed a legal order to be used specifically for the pilot that includes language about participation in the program. As is the case with enforcement NCP Choices procedures, workforce staff receives a copy of the order, so they know how to correctly create the case tracking record in the Choices On-Line Tracking System (COLTS).

The NCP meets immediately with the Workforce Liaison, who gives the NCP an information packet that explains the services offered by the program. An initial appointment is set to meet at the career center, preferably by the next day, and the NCP signs documents

including a Workforce Participation Agreement (requiring 30 hours per week of job search and weekly check-ins) and an OAG Authorization to Release Information to the Local Workforce Development Board.

One difference between the establishment pilot and the enforcement program is how workforce communicates with OAG staff about the NCP's participation in the program. Workforce staff uses the 14-day compliance button in COLTS to notify OAG about NCP compliance. This initial information will be used as part of the OAG's compliance determination at 14 days

### **Workforce Services**

NCPs in both the enforcement and establishment Choices programs receive essentially the same Choices services as are available to clients in the TANF Choices program, as described previously.

### **Monitoring**

The pilot program assists in early intervention and monitoring of the NCPs in the establishment phase to avoid large arrears accumulation. The following guidelines provide for effective monitoring of the NCPs in the establishment phase:

- The Early Intervention and Monitoring (EIM) Child Support Officer (CSO), or the staff person each office has assigned, makes a 10 day reminder call to the NCP.
- Workforce staff checks the 14-day compliance button on COLTS to communicate to OAG whether the NCP has complied with the initial NCP-C order language.
- The Early Intervention and Monitoring Child Support Officer reviews COLTS for compliance with NCP Choices and payment status at 14 days. If the NCP is neither paying child support nor complying with NCP Choices, the CSO documents noncompliance with the support order on COLTS, and immediately refers the case for a motion for contempt of court, even if only a single child support payment has been missed.

This process suggests that communication between the collaborating agencies is integral to the success of the pilot program.

## IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

This section presents a summary of findings from an analysis of the planning and early implementation experiences with the NCP Choices establishment pilot (EP), as reported in Schroeder & Khan (2010), followed by additional observations including program improvements made in response to the prior implementation report. The analysis was based upon discussions with staff in the agencies collaborating on the project and on interviews conducted during site visits to San Antonio (Bexar County) in July 2010 and again in May 2011.

### Summary of Early Implementation Findings

Most of the earlier observations of the program process revolved around the idea that providing workforce development services to NCPs in earlier stages of their case histories is a fairly substantial *paradigm shift* for the NCP Choices program. Although many of the staff members believe that establishment cases are 'easier-to-serve,' it is important to recognize that the program does not merely serve the same NCPs earlier in their case histories. Instead, by intervening earlier in the 'lifecycle' of low-income NCPs' cases, it is hoped that many of these NCPs will keep up with their child support obligations, and will not become the more difficult enforcement cases that comprise the bulk of the original NCP Choices caseload. Staff opinion confirms that establishment NCPs are on average more agreeable, and their cases are less contentious, at this early stage of their case histories.

Recommendations for improving the NCP Choices EP program were geared toward serving a broader, more representative cohort of low-income NCPs, and toward greater recruitment of eligible NCPs. The first recommendation was that NCP Choices EP services be extended to those who are in the Child Support Review Process (CSRP). NCP members of CSRP cases are widely believed to be the most agreeable, most likely to be compliant with child support orders, and have the least potential for conflict with the custodial parents. CSRP cases were originally excluded due primarily to logistical reasons, particularly the fact that their cases are handled in the child support office instead of the courtroom. It was suggested that changing the program to be more flexible in terms of where services are provided could open up the program to a broader base of NCPs who are more likely to benefit from workforce services.

The second major recommendation included suggestions for increasing the referral rate of NCPs into the EP program. Few of the local child support offices were meeting the target number of 10 NCPs served per office per month, and as a result there was potential for under-utilization of workforce services resources. In contrast to the enforcement program, it seems that the burden of referral of NCPs to EP falls more heavily on the managing attorneys who already have substantial responsibilities. Thus, it was suggested that more emphasis be placed on training the OAG staff to increase awareness about the program, as well as increased emphasis on outreach, information, and education efforts within the courtroom to increase the program's visibility to families, managing attorneys, and judges alike. And for the longer term, it was suggested that the target group for EP might be expanded to other low-income families who may not have experience with the TANF or Medicaid programs, but may be at risk of needing welfare or Medicaid benefits in the near future. Taken together, these recommendations could bring enough clients into the NCP Choices establishment pilot program to make more efficient use of program resources, as well as make the workforce services available to a broader base of establishment cases whose members could potentially reap greater benefits.

### **Implementation Update**

In response to issues discussed earlier, and in efforts to expand the target group of NCPs, the San Antonio offices experimented with two new approaches to help with recruiting Establishment cases. These new approaches were called the Rocket Docket and Child Support Review process (CSRP). This section discusses these two approaches.

#### ***Rocket Docket***

The rocket docket is an innovative approach to target the establishment NCPs in a low cost way and to increase referrals for the establishment pilot. The rocket docket targets those individuals who are most likely to otherwise become administrative CSRP cases. However, instead of bringing these clients into an administrative setting, they are brought into the judicial setting with potential immediate referrals to the workforce specialists. In most ways it works in the same manner as a regular docket with the primary exception being that appearance by the client is voluntary.

Key elements of the rocket docket are the following:

- The OAG identifies NCPs on its caseload ahead of time who are currently unemployed, who have an SSN, are not medically unable to work, and who live in Bexar County.
- A letter is issued, signed by the Judge, for participation in the rocket docket.
- If clients choose not to participate in the rocket docket, then the case is processed in the regular way.
- Referrals to the Establishment program are done for those who choose to participate and are Choices eligible.
- Monitoring for compliance proceeds as with the regular EP program.

The rocket docket was initiated in the East office, and the South office later joined in the effort. Both offices' cases are handled by the same judge, and the judge is willing to take an occasional day out from his administrative duties (one non-court day per week is dedicated to paperwork) and have a morning docket instead. The purpose was to get the establishment NCPs involved in a low effort way. The rocket docket targets people who would otherwise be candidates for CSRP cases, who might prefer a friendly order to potential jail time later. Participants in the docket can be affected by the group dynamics, as all participants are perceived to be in the same boat.

The NCPs who attend the rocket docket and are identified to be eligible for Choices-EP are referred to the workforce staff. Since the rocket docket is held at the courtroom, the workforce representatives are available to meet the NCP Choices EP clients. The initial program description is communicated with the CP and NCP to explain the program, obtain agreement, and provide direct hand-off to the Workforce Liaison present in the courtroom. The representative emphasizes that the acceptance of the agreement is voluntary but once accepted, it will become part of the court order. After the acceptance of the agreement the clients follow the same procedure as in the NCP Choices EP program.

The formal, judicial setting of the rocket docket and the immediate referrals make it easy for NCPs to commit to NCP Choices EP. However, the disadvantage of this approach is that clients get referred quickly at the rocket docket which may make it hard for the workforce office to manage a large number of referrals at once.

The number of referrals to EP that the rocket docket has been generating is significant. In three rocket dockets held between December, 2010 and May 2011, the number

of cases showing up ranged from 28 to 39, and the number of EP referrals resulting from each ranged from 5 to 9. These figures, indicating a referral rate around 25 percent, suggest that the rocket docket was quite successful in increasing the number of referrals into the Establishment program. The primary drawbacks of this approach are that the judge must be willing to sacrifice some of his or her administrative time, and that workforce staff may sometimes be overloaded. Sufficient advance planning, and making extra staff available on rocket docket days, may help with the workload issue. Overall, the rocket docket method seems to be working well to increase referrals to EP.

### ***Child Support Review Process (CSRP)***

As recommended previously, the NCP Choices EP should also target those NCPs who are not delinquent on their payments and are cooperative, but may need help finding better employment. A large number of these establishment parents do not go through the judicial child support process but rather participate in CSRP at the local OAG office. It was thought that many of these clients would be able to benefit from the Establishment program, and thus a plan was made to offer NCP Choices services to these clients as well, with this new program starting in the West office.

Key elements of this CSRP process are as follows:

- The OAG identifies the Choices eligible clients who come in for CSRP. The eligibility criteria are the same as for the regular NCP Choices program.
- Those who qualify for NCP Choices EP are referred to the workforce representative.
- The workforce representative is present at the West office on certain dates on Fridays (initially twice a month, but later this was done weekly).
- The Contractor staff for the local workforce board enrolls NCPs at the office, and explains the contract outlining NCP rights and responsibilities and the consequences of non-participation. Workforce staff members are present in the office on Friday to meet with NCPs and can then set future appointments. Referrals are accepted throughout the week.
- Monitoring for compliance proceeds as with the regular EP program, with enforcement actions conducted at court.

The Establishment Pilot CSRP process takes place at the OAG office, where the OAG personnel determines if a potential CSRP case is Choices EP eligible, and if so refers them to



the workforce representative. The workforce representative comes to the OAG office weekly, for a half-day on Friday mornings, to meet with referred clients and enroll them in the program. The clients are registered on Friday, then required to show up again the following week for services and initial assessments. This scheduled weekly visit is meant to ensure a more efficient use of workforce resources, however, for those NCPs referred during the week and asked to return on Fridays, the immediacy of service is lost. This lack of immediacy, together with the lack of the threat from the judge, arguably makes it less likely that the NCPs referred in this way will follow through with the program.

The West office that started this program serves a generally low income area, with many residents of this area being on public assistance or working in the underground economy. In designing this CSRP process, it was thought that bringing the workforce services to these clients would help avoid the transportation difficulties many might experience in trying to get to the courtroom downtown, not to mention the high cost of parking for those who do have access to a vehicle. However, in retrospect, the decision to serve CSRP clients remotely only on Fridays may be too limiting. OAG staff managing the program would like to see greater flexibility to serve CSRP cases. For example, giving CSRP cases the option to meet with workforce staff *at the courtroom* when referrals are made on days other than Fridays would help to preserve the immediacy of service that is so important to the success of NCP Choices. OAG staff would also like the flexibility to refer CSRP cases to Choices when they are modifying the child support order downward due to lost employment. Many of these clients could benefit from Choices services in their search for employment, so some way should be found to serve them before they become the more difficult enforcement cases. Given the high potential of NCPs on CSRP cases to benefit from Choices services, we believe these are reasonable modifications to increase their rates of enrollment into the EP program.

## **IMPACT ANALYSIS RESEARCH DESIGN**

The goal of providing Choices program services to unemployed and underemployed non-custodial parents (NCPs) is to assist them in becoming responsible parents who can meet their financial and other obligations to their children. The establishment pilot tries to achieve this by extending workforce development services to low-income non-custodial parents (NCPs) earlier in their histories, before they accumulate large child support arrears balances. The impact analysis was designed to determine the extent to which those ordered into this program and their families benefit from the services received, relative to a comparison group whose members do not receive Choices services.

The impact analysis is presented in three chapters. This Research Design chapter presents the research questions, the expected program effects, and a description of the comparison group design utilized to determine program impacts. The next chapter presents estimated program impacts, and a final chapter presents a discussion of the findings and their implications.

### **Research Questions**

The impact evaluation addresses six research questions that aim to discover the effects of being ordered into EP on unemployed and low-income non-custodial parents whose families are currently or formerly receiving TANF, by comparing treatment group clients' outcomes to those of a comparison group. This comparison group is used to estimate the counterfactual, or in other words, what would have happened in the absence of the program. In using what is known as a quasi-experimental design, the comparison group is chosen to consist of similarly situated NCPs in the same geographical areas who are not ordered into the NCP Choices EP program.

The original NCP Choices program model included 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. As an extension of this program, the research questions were designed to examine the effects of the NCP Choices EP program on child support collections and other forms of support, workforce development participation, employment and earnings, unemployment claims, and TANF and other benefit receipt by associated custodial parents. Detailed

research questions on these outcomes of interest are as follows:

1. Does the program lead to increased child support payments by non-custodial parents?
2. Does the program lead to more consistent payment of child support over time?
3. Does the program lead to increased workforce development participation by non-custodial parents? Or, does it lead to increased incarceration rates for non-payment of child support?
4. Does the program lead to increased employment rates and earnings levels by non-custodial parents?
5. Does the program lead to reduced unemployment claims by non-custodial parents?
6. Does the program for non-custodial parents lead to decreased TANF participation, or participation in other public assistance programs such as Food Stamps, for the associated custodial parents (CPs) and their children?

These questions and the expected effects of the program, if any, are summarized in Table 1. Based on recent studies of Texas low-income NCP populations (Schroeder, Looney, and Schexnayder, 2004; Schroeder, King, and Hill, 2005), including evaluations focusing on the enforcement version of NCP Choices (Schroeder & Doughty, 2009), the EP program is expected to lead to increased and more consistent child support collections, increased employment, reduced unemployment claims, and reduced reliance on TANF or other benefits by the associated custodial parents.

**Table 1. Research Questions and Expected NCP Choices EP Effects**

Research Question	Expected NCP Choices EP 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. Unemployment claims by NCP.	-
Q6. Use of TANF or other benefits by CP.	-

## **Quasi-Experimental Comparison Group Design**

Ideally, from the perspective of valid estimation of program impacts, the NCP Choices establishment pilot would have been conducted as a true experiment by randomly assigning potential participants to experimental and control groups. Randomization ensures that, on average, no differences exist between the two groups at the point of random assignment, and thus any differences that emerge later can be confidently attributed as program impacts. However, because a random assignment design was not feasible for the EP 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 establishment pilot treatment group in all measurable respects involves selection of multivariate ‘nearest neighbors.’ This involves systematically comparing each treatment 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 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 next.

### **Comparison Group Selection Procedure**

The following procedures and variables were used in the selection of nearest neighbors to comprise the quasi-experimental comparison group for the EP pilot. The selection of nearest neighbors 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 the program, the

database of NCPs with active child support cases in the same county (Bexar) 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 here.

### ***Matching Procedure***

Nearest-neighbor matching is an iterative computational process done for one NCP Choices EP 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, time, and others, for which ‘distance’ is difficult or 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 consideration<sup>1</sup>, and the process was repeated for the remaining NCP Choices EP participants until the selection of the comparison group was complete.

In some circumstances, particularly when the quality of matches produced in this manner suffers, it may be necessary to utilize a technique called ‘caliper matching,’ in which both members of the most poorly matched pairs are removed from further analysis.

### ***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:

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

- Demographics at program entry, including age, gender and race/ethnicity;
- Employment and earnings histories, as measured from the UI earnings database;
- Child support case features, including number and ages of children, collections history (including the current arrears balance), and number of other cases with which the NCP is associated;
- 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 (only those residing in the same counties are selected);
- 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.

Not all of the dimensions identified here were included in the match procedure. However, the subset of measures used (see Table 2 and Table 3) includes all the most important ones to ensure adequately matched comparison group members.

### ***Comparison Group Selection***

Comparison group selection for NCP Choices EP was done based on a preliminary analysis of child support and other administrative data sources, the results of which are documented here. Table 2 compares relevant characteristics of those ordered into NCP Choices EP against the entire pool of similar NCPs with active child support cases in the same county as those served by NCP Choices EP (Bexar County, San Antonio). This comparison illustrates the ways in which NCPs ordered into the NCP Choices EP program differed systematically from those NCPs not ordered into the program. Later, after the comparison group selection is completed, Table 3 compares those ordered into NCP Choices EP against members of the comparison group, who were selected from among the broader pool of NCPs to be as similar as possible to NCP Choices EP clients on these measured dimensions. A brief discussion follows.

Table 2 shows a comparison of pre-program characteristics of those ordered into NCP

Choices EP<sup>2</sup> against the entire pool of NCPs from which a comparison group was to be chosen. The comparison group pool consists of all other NCPs who have active child support cases in Bexar County, but who have not been served by the original NCP Choices program. Results of this comparison indicate that NCP Choices EP clients differed substantially from other NCPs in Bexar County. NCP Choices EP clients tend to be substantially younger, are more likely to be Hispanic, and have much younger dependents than other NCPs. NCP Choices EP clients tended to have worse employment histories in many respects, but due to the small sample size, the differences were statistically significant for only a few measures. NCP Choices EP clients had shorter earnings histories, earned over \$2300 per quarter less than other NCPs, and of those experiencing recent earnings dips of 20% or greater, the dips were more recent, and represented a greater percentage of income lost among NCP Choices EP clients. In terms of their interactions with the formal child support system, and consistent with the intentional targeting of NCPs earlier in the process, NCP Choices EP clients tended to have child support cases open for far less time, averaging approximately two years since their cases opened, as opposed to over eight years for other NCPs<sup>3</sup>. Also consistent with this, they have been paying child support for a far shorter time, and paid 40 percent less frequently in the prior year, as compared to other NCPs in the county.

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<sup>2</sup> Although intake continues, this comparison, and the reported impacts that follow, include only those ordered into NCP Choices EP between February and September of 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Note that these measures sum across all NCPs' open cases, not just the one case for which they may have been referred to NCP Choices EP, which may be opening around the time of the referral.

**Table 2. Comparison of NCP Choices EP Clients with Other NCPs in Same County**

	<b>NCP Choices EP</b>	<b>All Other NCPs in Target County</b>	
<b>All NCPs</b>	N=106	N=95,239	
NCP age (years)	27.0	38.0	**
NCP male	88.7%	96.6%	
NCP Hispanic	72.6%	61.5%	*
NCP black	15.1%	14.8%	
NCP number of active CS cases	1.3	1.2	
NCP number of dependents	3.3	3.3	
Age of youngest dependent, years	2.4	8.7	**
Age of oldest dependent, years	4.9	11.3	**
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	27.5	32.0	**
NCP employed at program entry	44.3%	47.1%	
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	51.9%	52.0%	
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program	\$2,316	\$4,724	**
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	54.7%	32.2%	
Any Unemployment Insurance claims filed in year prior to program	13.2%	7.6%	
Any Unemployment Insurance benefits received in year prior to program	8.5%	5.7%	
Time since first CS case opened (days)	682	3094	**
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	13.5	58.2	**
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	3.8	6.7	*
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	10.6%	50.9%	**
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	2.8%	5.7%	
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior 2 years	2.4%	1.5%	
Percent of time Food Stamps (SNAP) received by associated CP(s) in prior 2 years	62.2%	40.2%	**
Percent of time NCP responsible for carrying health insurance, prior year	7.5%	45.4%	**
Percent of time NCP responsible for medical support payments, prior year	1.9%	4.2%	
Any low-intensity workforce development participation in year prior to program	2.8%	2.6%	
Any high-intensity workforce development participation in year prior to program	.0%	.3%	**
Capias issued for arrest of NCP in 6 months prior to program	.9%	2.5%	
Approximate arrears balance at program entry	\$11,179	\$17,538	
Total current support obligation (PP1) at program entry	\$162	\$436	**
Total arrears obligation (PP2) at program entry	\$48	\$106	**
<b>Those experiencing an earnings dip</b>	N=58	N=28,748	
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	4.84	5.14	**
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	85.1%	75.7%	**



Continuing this comparison, NCP Choices EP clients tend to owe far less in ongoing child support obligations, both current and for arrears, but their arrears balances, averaging around \$11,000, were not significantly different from those of other NCPs. Also consistent with the design intent of NCP Choices EP to serve clients earlier in the process, these arrears balances are roughly a third of those seen for clients of the original NCP Choices program. The custodial parents (CPs) associated with NCP Choices EP clients were more likely to have been receiving Food Stamps (now Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, or SNAP) benefits in the prior two years. Those ordered into NCP Choices EP had been far less likely to be responsible for carrying health insurance for the children associated with their cases, according to their child support orders. Finally, both groups of NCPs were unlikely to have recently participated in workforce development programs available to them at the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC).

The selection of a comparison group was done using the weighted multivariate nearest-neighbor matching procedure, but the result of this process was unsatisfactory. It was determined that for a small percentage of EP clients, the nearest-neighbor selected was not as similar as is required to form a valid comparison group. Accordingly, utilizing the caliper method described earlier, the thirteen EP clients with the worst matches, along with their selected matches, were dropped from further analysis.

Table 3 presents a comparison of the 93 remaining NCP Choices EP clients against the quasi-experimental comparison group that was selected from the much larger pool of NCPs in Bexar County. Comparison of the second and third columns of Table 3 indicates that, subsequent to the comparison group selection and application of a caliper, the aggregate-level characteristics of these two groups were quite similar at the point of entry into the program. T-tests comparing the two groups on all listed characteristics, as illustrated in the final column, confirmed that there were no statistically significant differences between them on thirty-one observed dimensions.

In total, the selection procedure combined with the caliper screen successfully created a comparison group with observable characteristics at the point of entry into the program that were quite similar to those of NCP Choices EP clients. It is interesting to note some changes in the group that occurred due to the application of the caliper. In particular, the arrears balances are far lower than they were before 13 treatment group members and their counterparts were dropped. This suggests that those NCP Choices EP clients who had high

arrears balances were particularly difficult to find matches for. As a consequence of dropping these clients from the impact analysis, the results are less likely to generalize to clients with large arrears balances.

On the whole, results of the matching procedure suggest that the quasi-experimental design implemented here is likely to have good internal validity for estimating the impacts of the NCP Choices EP program. Note, however, that this does not mean that the groups are necessarily as similar as possible on dimensions that were not measurable through the available administrative data sources.

**Table 3. Comparison of NCP Choices EP Clients with Selected Comparison Group**

	<b>NCP Choices EP</b>	<b>Comparison Group</b>
<b>All NCPs</b>	N=93	N=93
NCP age (years)	25.9	24.9
NCP male	88.2%	88.2%
NCP Hispanic	75.3%	74.2%
NCP black	15.1%	11.8%
NCP number of active CS cases	1.12	1.12
NCP number of dependents	2.19	2.01
Age of youngest dependent, years	2.27	2.30
Age of oldest dependent, years	3.92	3.88
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	26.7	24.2
NCP employed at program entry	43.0%	41.9%
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	50.8%	50.0%
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program	\$2,184	\$2,157
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	53.8%	53.8%
Time since first CS case <sup>4</sup> opened (days)	514	485
Any Unemployment Insurance claims filed in year prior to program	9.7%	9.7%
Any Unemployment Insurance benefits received in year prior to program	4.3%	5.4%
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	7.7	6.5
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	2.7	1.3
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	7.7%	7.3%
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	1.1%	1.1%
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior 2 years	2.0%	1.6%
Percent of time Food Stamps (SNAP) received by associated CP(s) in prior 2 years	60.8%	59.3%
Percent of time NCP responsible for carrying health insurance, prior year	2.2%	.0%
Percent of time NCP responsible for medical support payments, prior year	1.1%	1.1%
Any low-intensity workforce development participation in year prior to program	3.2%	3.2%
Any high-intensity workforce development participation in year prior to program	.0%	.0%
Capias issued for arrest of NCP in 6 months prior to program	.0%	.0%
Approximate arrears balance at program entry	\$1,727	\$1,360
Total current support obligation (PP1) at program entry	\$74	\$80
Total arrears obligation (PP2) at program entry	\$5	\$10
<b>Those experiencing an earnings dip</b>	N=50	N=50
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	4.8	4.9
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	84.3%	85.5%

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<sup>4</sup> This does not necessarily represent the case for which the order into EP was made.

## **PROGRAM IMPACTS**

As discussed earlier, the quasi-experimental comparison group selection procedure, modified to select the best matches using a caliper, produced a comparison group of matched NCPs who were quite similar in all measured ways to the EP participants just before their entry into the program. The impact estimates cited in this report were further adjusted for the minor differences that remained between the groups. We can thus be confident that the impacts of the establishment pilot were mostly if not all due to NCP Choices participation.

Impacts of the NCP Choices establishment pilot are discussed in this section. Impacts presented here are computed for participants entering the program between February, 2010 and September, 2010. Post-program outcomes are estimated through the fourth quarter of 2010 for UI earnings, through the first quarter of 2011 for UI claims, through April 2011 for TANF, through June 2011 for child support measures, and through July of 2011 for SNAP (Food Stamps) and workforce measures.

### **Workforce Development Participation by Non-custodial Parents**

The first goal of the NCP Choices EP program was to get eligible NCPs into workforce development services that they may need in order to improve their employment prospects. Thus, the first set of outcome analyses was designed to examine two research questions related to the extent to which those ordered into NCP Choices EP were engaged in the program and received services:

- Does NCP Choices EP lead to increased workforce development participation by non-custodial parents?
- Does NCP Choices EP lead to increased incarceration rates of NCPs?

The first question was included as a check on the extent to which NCP Choices EP clients actually followed through with workforce development services. The second question was designed as an attempt to measure the flip side of this outcome: the extent to which NCPs were potentially subjected to greater rates of incarceration for either a failure to cooperate with Choices requirements, or for non-payment of child support.

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 EP captures the effect of *being ordered into* the program, together with the corresponding threat of jail time for noncompliance. Thus, it was expected that not all NCPs ordered into the program would participate in NCP Choices EP, and in fact, some portion would likely end up being ordered to serve time in jail.

As expected, Table 4 shows that being ordered into the EP program was associated with significantly greater levels of NCP participation in NCP Choices services subsequent to program entry. The first measure, capturing the percent of time NCPs participated in the Choices program, reveals that those ordered into EP participated for a far greater proportion of their time subsequent to program entry, as compared to near zero participation by comparison group members. The second measure of workforce development participation gives a better idea of the total share of NCPs participating in NCP Choices. This measure shows that 69 percent of those ordered into the program participated at some point within six months of this order, as compared to essentially zero participation among comparison group members. These findings confirm a high degree of compliance with the order, although the rate is slightly below the 82% participation within one year that was seen in the enforcement NCP Choices program (Schroeder & Doughty, 2009).

**Table 4. NCP Choices EP Impact on NCPs’ Workforce Development Participation**

	<b>NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>Comparison Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>NCP Choices EP Impact</b>
Percent of time NCP participating in Choices program	26.1%	1.1%	25.0%**
Any Choices participation by NCP within 6 months of program entry	68.8%	1.1%	67.7%**
Percent of months in which NCP ordered to jail for non-payment of child support	1.3%	.4%	.9%*

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

The final measure shown in Table 4 reveals very low rates of NCPs being ordered to jail for non-payment of child support or non-participation in Choices. Interestingly, this jailing rate was slightly higher for NCP Choices EP clients as compared to members of the comparison group. Thus, in addition to greater compliance with workforce services, NCPs ordered into EP were also slightly more likely to be ordered to jail for non-payment of child

support. It is not clear the extent to which this finding results from lesser compliance or simply to greater monitoring of EP relative to comparison group clients.

### **Payment of Child Support**

The next set of analyses addresses the question whether the NCP Choices EP program leads to increased child support payments. One measure gauges the frequency of any child support collections and another examines the average dollar amount of collections<sup>5</sup>. These measures are computed on a monthly basis. Since the post-program follow-up period is still relatively short, at just over a year for most clients, these should be regarded as short-term impacts. Related measures in the next section quantify the *consistency* with which such payments were made over time.

As shown in Table 5, NCP Choices EP participation was associated with a 15 percentage-point increase in the frequency of any child support collections subsequent to being ordered into the program. Though the absolute frequency of collections is not very high, occurring in less than half of the months following program entry, it is a substantial improvement relative to their recent payment histories. Furthermore, the increased frequency of collections for NCP Choices EP participants represents an impressive 61 percent gain in collections rate relative to the comparison group.

Beyond the increased frequency of collections, the NCP Choices EP program was also associated with a large increase in the average monthly dollar amount of child support collections. Overall, NCP Choices EP participants paid approximately \$34 per month more in child support than their counterparts in the comparison group, a 42 percent increase in total collections<sup>6</sup>.

A final child support collections measure indicates the percentage of participants from whom any collection was made within six months of program entry. This measure shows the extent to which child support collections impacts were concentrated among a small number of individuals, or were observed among a broad range of participants. A significant

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<sup>5</sup> Note that because of data limitations, child support payments that were collected via federal offset (income-tax refunds, for example) were not included in these collections figures. Because they were equally excluded for NCP Choices EP and comparison group members, this should not substantially bias the net impacts reported.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

positive impact of 31 percent suggests that the increases in child support collections among EP participants were broadly dispersed.

**Table 5. NCP Choices EP Impact on Child Support Collections**

	<b>NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>Comparison Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>NCP Choices EP Impact</b>
Percent of time any child support collections made	38.8%	24.1%	14.7%**
Monthly average child support collections	\$115	\$81	\$34**
Any child support collection made within 6 months of program entry	62.7%	32.0%	30.7%**

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

### **Consistent Payment of Child Support**

Making larger child support payments more often is certainly important, but for families to rely on this as a steady source of income, they need the payments to be made consistently over time. To gauge the *consistency* of child support collections, two measures were constructed that tabulated, for every three month period subsequent to program entry, the proportion of time any collections were made in at least two out of three months, and in all three out of three months<sup>7</sup>. Results of these child support consistency comparisons, shown in Table 6, indicate that the NCP Choices EP impact on consistency of child support payment was positive and statistically significant for both measures. NCP Choices EP participants were 14 percentage points more likely to pay child support in at least two out of every three months, and 4 percentage points more likely to pay in three out of three months, relative to their comparison group counterparts. This impact represents a 57 and a 21 percent increase, respectively, in the frequency of consistent payment of child support.

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<sup>7</sup> Child support payment consistency measures were introduced in Schroeder, Looney, & Schexnayder, 2004.

**Table 6. NCP Choices EP Impact on Consistency of Child Support Collections**

	<b>NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>Comparison Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>NCP Choices EP Impact</b>
Consistent payment of child support, at least 2 out of 3 months	37.9%	24.1%	13.8%**
Consistent payment of child support, 3 out of 3 months	23.1%	19.1%	4.0% *

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

### **Employment and Earnings of Non-custodial Parents**

The next set of analyses attempts to determine whether NCP Choices EP leads to increased employment rates and earnings levels of non-custodial parents. Three measures address this topic, including one that gauges the percent of time NCPs were employed subsequent to program entry, another that measures the quarterly earnings levels of those who were employed in any given calendar quarter, and an unconditional earnings measure that is calculated including both the employed and unemployed.

**Table 7. NCP Choices EP Impact on Employment and Earnings**

	<b>NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>Comparison Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>NCP Choices EP Impact</b>
Percent of time NCP employed	47.9%	47.0%	.9%
Average quarterly earnings, among employed NCPs	\$2568	\$3627	-\$1059**
Unconditional earnings, including those employed and unemployed	\$1255	\$1789	-\$534 *

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

As shown in Table 7, the NCP Choices EP program to this point has had no significant association with NCP employment rates, but negative impacts on earnings levels. Interestingly, this pattern is similar to findings on the regular NCP Choices program impacts, except in that case the positive employment impact was statistically significant. We interpreted that finding as evidence that those NCPs newly gaining employment were more likely to earn entry-level wages, thus explaining their reduced average earnings among the employed. For the present study, it should be noted that due to the lag in reporting of



Unemployment Insurance earnings, these outcomes currently address three fewer months of follow-up than do the monthly child support measures cited earlier. Therefore, these earnings outcomes represent only a fraction of the early clients entering the program, and consisting of a short post-program follow-up for this subset of clients. Because of this, it is too early to say with much certainty whether the NCP Choices EP program will ultimately have significant employment or earnings impacts.

### **Unemployment Insurance Claims by Non-custodial Parents**

The next set of questions to be addressed includes whether NCP Choices EP leads to reduced rates of filing unemployment claims or receiving unemployment benefits, and whether the program leads to more stable earnings trends, making NCPs more likely to be eligible for the unemployment insurance (UI) program if they were to lose their jobs. The first question was answered by gauging the percent of months in which NCPs filed unemployment claims subsequent to program entry, and the percent of months in which NCPs received unemployment benefits. It was also addressed by calculating the impact on the dollar amount of unemployment benefits received.

As shown in the first three rows of Table 8, to date there have been no significant impacts of the NCP Choices EP program on filing of unemployment claims or receipt of unemployment benefits. This should not be surprising, as this is the kind of measure that is likely to show effects of an employment program only after several quarters have elapsed since the services were provided, thus allowing the services to affect the employment histories on which unemployment benefits are largely based.

**Table 8. NCP Choices EP Impact on Unemployment Insurance Measures**

	<b>NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>Comparison Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>NCP Choices EP Impact</b>
Percent of months in which NCPs filed unemployment claims	1.2%	.4%	.8%
Percent of months in which NCP received unemployment benefits	.8%	.4%	.4%
Average monthly unemployment benefits received by NCP	\$13.23	\$25.91	-\$12.68
Percent of time monetarily eligible for UI based on earnings	40.7%	36.9%	3.8%

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

The second question regarding unemployment was answered based on NCP earnings histories subsequent to the program, by calculating the percent of time in which NCP earnings were sufficient to qualify him/her monetarily for the UI program (if he or she were to lose his/her job). Unemployment Insurance eligibility after a job loss depends in part on earnings levels over the previous five quarters, but actual receipt of unemployment benefits depends on other factors as well as monetary eligibility, such as the reason for leaving the job. Getting fired for cause would typically disqualify one for this benefit. Thus, any program impacts that lead to stabilized earnings trends for NCPs could have the added benefit of making them eligible for this important safety net.

Thus far, as shown in the last row of Table 8, NCP Choices EP has had no significant impact on monetarily eligibility for unemployment benefits. As this measure is based on UI employment records, it suffers from the same reduced follow-up interval discussed earlier in regards to employment and earnings. Therefore, it is likely too soon to expect significant impacts on this measure.

### **Receipt of TANF and other Public Assistance by Custodial Parents**

The final set of analyses addresses the question whether NCP Choices EP for non-custodial parents has led to decreased TANF participation for the associated custodial parents (CPs) and their children. A similar question asks whether NCP Choices EP was associated with reduced participation in SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program),

formerly known as the Food Stamps program. Both measures count the percent of post-program months in which the custodial parent(s) received TANF or SNAP benefits, with receipt of benefits for any part of the month considered as receipt for the entire month. Related measures also look at the average dollar amounts of benefits received under such programs, on a monthly basis.

Table 9 illustrates findings showing that thus far, NCP Choices EP was associated with a significant reduction in receipt of TANF benefits by custodial parents associated with those NCPs ordered into the program. Interestingly, however, those participating in EP were associated with custodial parents who were slightly *more* likely to receive SNAP. There were no significant impacts of EP on the dollar amount of TANF or SNAP benefits.

**Table 9. NCP Choices EP Impact on Receipt of TANF and SNAP by Custodial Parent**

	<b>NCP Choices EP Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>Comparison Adjusted Mean</b>	<b>NCP Choices EP Impact</b>
Percent of time CP(s) receiving TANF benefits	3.2%	6.7%	-3.5% **
Average monthly TANF benefits, CP(s)	\$10	\$14	-\$4
Percent of time CP(s) receiving Food Stamp (SNAP) benefits	72.2%	68.2%	4.0% *
Average monthly Food Stamp (SNAP) benefits, CP(s)	\$389	\$377	\$12

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

## DISCUSSION

The NCP Choices establishment pilot (EP) has shown significant positive impacts on all measures of child support collections. Those ordered into EP are more likely to pay child support in any given month, they pay more on average, and they pay more consistently over time. In fact, those ordered to participate in EP are nearly twice as likely to make any child support payment within the first six months after their referral, relative to members of the comparison group. Furthermore, for various reasons related to common identifiers and careful data collection, child support measures tend to be the most accurate of all the administrative data sources utilized here, and thus great confidence in these findings is warranted. These impressive child support impacts clearly suggest that the establishment pilot, like the enforcement version of NCP Choices from which it was derived, is likely to have its strongest effects on child support collections.

On the other measures, fewer significant impacts of EP have been found. The EP program has thus far had no statistically significant impacts on employment nor unemployment claims, and a puzzling negative impact on earnings levels that closely resembles findings from the regular NCP Choices program. We interpreted that prior finding as evidence that NCPs entering new employment were more likely to earn entry-level wages, thus explaining the reduced average earnings among the employed. However, in the present case, there is no detectable positive employment impact to cushion this earnings decline. On the other hand, a significant negative impact on TANF receipt among custodial parents associated with EP clients falls in line with predictions, and confirms a similar dynamic to that observed for the regular NCP Choices program. A slight increase in the use of SNAP (Food Stamps) benefits among the custodial parents presents a bit of a puzzle, as it goes opposite the direction of the remaining findings. Utilization of the SNAP program among the low income and working poor of Texas has been at or near historic high levels during the period of this study, so the participation rate near 70% in this population is not surprising. It is not entirely clear why EP cases should be receiving more Food Stamps, but one factor could be that reduced TANF benefits can lead to greater eligibility for Food Stamps.

Interestingly, the child support collection impacts cited earlier were achieved despite the fact of only 69% participation in workforce services within 6 months of entry into the EP program, as compared to the 82% participation rate, within one year, reported for the

enforcement NCP Choices program (Schroeder & Doughty, 2009). We had earlier warned that one possible risk with extending Choices services to NCPs earlier in their case histories is that, without the easy possibility of jailing NCPs for non-participation in Choices, there may not be enough leverage to encourage the high rate of compliance seen in the enforcement program. The expected slightly lower participation rate seems to have been confirmed, along with a slight increase in the jailing rate. Although one would like to see a higher participation rate, these findings make the significant increases in child support collections all the more impressive.

Two new approaches to recruiting establishment cases were tried in several OAG offices in order to increase referrals to EP: the Rocket Docket and the CSR process. These initiatives, both of which are attempts to serve cases perceived to be more agreeable, show some potential for being effective referral techniques, but at present the rocket docket seems more promising. Both of these approaches attempt to solve the problem of providing workforce services, which are centrally located at the courthouse, to clients who may be more remote and may not otherwise have a reason to attend court. The rocket docket actually gets potential referrals to attend court en masse simply by asking them, and once they are there it takes advantage of the judicial setting and peer pressure to encourage enrollment and compliance. The Rocket Docket's main weaknesses are logistical -- sometimes resulting in too many referrals at one time -- and possibly its reliance on the generous support of the judge who holds the rocket docket on what would otherwise be his one day off from court. The other new approach to recruitment, known as the CSR process, shows some promise as well, but its drawback, for most referrals occurring on days other than Fridays, is the loss of immediacy of the visit with the workforce representative. Allowing some flexibility in the way these clients are served could help to improve referrals from this source as well.

### **Caveats and Limitations of Analysis**

The NCP Choices establishment pilot (EP) has only been operating a relatively short time, about a year and a half as of this writing. The follow-up interval that has accrued to this point for the majority of EP clients is simply too short to estimate impacts on most measures other than child support collections with a high degree of reliability. Statistically, what this means is that the impact study has less statistical power than is desirable in order to

reliably estimate impacts. Under conditions of low statistical power, one can only detect strong effects; weaker effects need greater statistical power to be detectable. This low power condition is particularly true with respect to UI earnings outcomes, which due to a reporting lag have the shortest follow-up interval. Thus, we can speculate that those impacts reported here that are statistically significant may be early indicators of relatively strong effects. On the other hand, there may be weaker effects of the programs on other measures that will only emerge with additional follow-up, including both additional participants and additional follow-up time.

Another issue concerns the generalizability of the Establishment Pilot impacts, or the applicability of these findings to other populations and settings. As described earlier, because of the use of a caliper to refine and improve the matched comparison group, some members of the EP group that received Choices services had to be omitted from the impact analysis. Interestingly, the 13 NCPs omitted (representing 12 percent of the treatment group), apparently included virtually all of those with higher arrears balances, since the average arrears of the groups after the caliper was applied dropped to around \$1300 to \$1700. Thus, we can firmly state that EP has an impact for those with low arrears balances, but we do not have good evidence of what impact the program might have on those with higher arrears balances. Of course, the EP program was not really designed to serve those with high arrears balances, but rather to serve low-income NCPs before they had a chance to accumulate arrears. And since the enforcement version of NCP Choices is known to work well for those with high arrears, this point may be moot.

## **Next Steps**

The next steps for this project include continuing to follow participants in the establishment pilot to allow longer-term impacts to accrue. The addition of new clients, from this site as well as potential expansion sites, will also help to boost the statistical power of this impact study. But even if enrollment were to be discontinued, having an extended follow-up interval for existing clients would increase the chances of detecting program impacts if they exist.

We support the efforts of the OAG to expand the Establishment Pilot to serve NCPs in other areas besides San Antonio. Doing so will allow NCPs elsewhere in Texas access to the workforce development services they need so they can provide for their children and help to avoid the accrual of child support debt. From what we have heard talking to staff in other areas of the state, many of whom have had positive experiences with NCP Choices over the years, they cannot wait to be able to serve NCPs in the establishment phases of their cases.

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