



SOUTH CAROLINA CENTER
FOR FATHERS AND FAMILIES

Owning Up: Responsible Fatherhood and Child Support

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As Child Support Awareness Month in South Carolina comes to a close, it's time to step back and reflect on the key issues facing non-custodial parents here in South Carolina.

More and more children in the United States are growing up without both parents living in the home. Nationally, nearly 34% of children are being raised in single parent homes – most headed by women. According to data from the US Census Bureau (2021), out of 11 million single parent families with children under 18, nearly 80% were headed by women¹.

With national divorce rates at 40%, and a substantial portion of nonmarital couples splitting after having children, child support (CS) has become a permanent fixture in today's society. CS payments flow primarily--although not exclusively--from the noncustodial father to the custodial mother. The expectation that divorced and unwed fathers not living in the home with their children pay child support is a reasonable and necessary one. Most fathers care deeply for their children and want to support them to the best of their ability by providing clothing, food and shelter sufficient to meet their needs. Moreover, timely and sufficient CS payments can help prevent children in low income single-parent families from descending deeper into poverty, as CS payments make up to 40% of family income for female headed households living in poverty. However, 80% of unpaid child support is owed by parents with less than \$15,000 of annual net income. Most adults (custodial and noncustodial) in the CS system are poor, often having incomes below the poverty level and with combined income well below the national median. This places noncustodial parents in a recurring situation of facing child support debt they may never be able to pay.

What happens when fathers lack the means to make their child support payments? When CS payments fall behind, we must distinguish between those unwilling to pay and those unable to pay. Often, low-income fathers have the motivation but often not the means to meet their

child support obligation. Criminal consequences of delinquent payment vary by state². All 50 states including SC have civil or criminal nonsupport statutes; some states consider it a misdemeanor, some a felony; all have fines and/or prison sentences. In SC, nonpayment is a misdemeanor offense with a fine anywhere from \$300 to \$1500 dollars and a maximum of one year in jail³. And with local jails costing \$128 per inmate per day⁴ and 130,800 child support cases in SC⁵, incarceration is a very expensive option with questionable results. To our knowledge, no father has been able to make CS payments from a jail cell.

Low-income noncustodial parents face unique barriers to the development of assets and financial security that impact their ability to pay CS. Navigating the CS system and addressing their multiple barriers is not easy for fathers. They need assistance in understanding how the child support system works, increasing their job readiness, applying for employment, improving relationships with co-parents and children, and addressing their health issues. Where do fathers go for help and support to strengthen themselves and support their families?

Fortunately there is an alternative to incarceration, one that has saved South Carolinians almost \$22 million in incarceration costs over the last 20 years and has helped fathers pay close to \$20 million in child support⁶. The South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families' (SCCFF) mission is to provide the means for fathers to be great dads. Through our statewide network of Fatherhood organizations, we serve both voluntary participants who may be struggling with various issues including CS and court-ordered participants who clearly need help meeting their CS payments. The "Jobs not Jails" diversion program is an alternative to incarceration that gives family court judges the option to enroll unemployed or underemployed noncustodial parents in our comprehensive Fatherhood program. Our typical participant earns just \$761/month, over one-half report no monthly income, and almost one-third have no high school diploma or GED. This program helps fathers provide the emotional and financial support their children need by offering classes in parenting, healthy relationships, economic mobility, and men's health. Caseworkers also help participants design a One-Man-Plan to address deficiencies in skills, education, or abilities that prevent them from earning a living wage that includes making CS payments. And one does not need to be court-ordered in order to benefit from our services. Almost 60% of our participants enter our Fatherhood programs voluntarily, and over one-half have a child support order they too are struggling to make their child support payments. Similar assistance is available to these fathers to help them keep "on track" with their child support payments and prevent an appearance in family court. By the end of their involvement in the program, 71% have made CS payments, averaging \$2,238 per participant. And the impact ripples extend far beyond the immediate custodial family. One economics researcher calculated that every successful Fatherhood participant represents a potential return of \$177,000 in lifelong benefits and savings to society⁷.

SCCFF offers a holistic father-centered non-punitive approach to becoming a great dad a that considers the *individual within context*, knowing full well that programs must address all issues a father presents to reach successful outcomes including those related to CS. Noncustodial fathers, despite the sometimes negative stereotypes, want to be an active and engaged father who is not only connected financially to his child but also is connected emotionally to his children. Stressing the importance of responsible and lifelong fatherhood is equally important to the financial contributions he makes because once a father grasps the fact that he is emotionally connected and important to his child, it makes the rationale for financially providing for his child through gainful employment make sense and stick.

Sources

¹ U.S Census Bureau. Table FG10. Retrieved from:

<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2021/demo/families/cps-2021.html>

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³ South Carolina Code of Laws. Title 63 – South Carolina Children’s Code. Retrieved from:

<https://www.scstatehouse.gov/code/t63c005.php>

⁴Vera. The price of jails. Retrieved from: <https://www.vera.org/publications/the-price-of-jails-measuring-the-taxpayer-cost-of-local-incarceration>.

⁵ Office of Child Support Enforcement. FY 2021 Preliminary Data Report. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/policy-guidance/fy-2021-preliminary-data-report-and-tables>

⁶ 20 Years of Impact. SC Center for Father and Families, 2022 Impact Report.

⁷ Potential Monetary Value of Responsible Fatherhood Program Outcomes for Fathers and Children. Chase, R. A 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.frpn.org/asset/potential-monetary-value-responsible-fatherhood-program-outcomes-fathers-and-children>

