

Child support forgiveness programs can be effective in reducing debt

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Sometimes getting something is better than nothing. That's the aim of a pilot program that allows parents with large child support debts to reduce their overall debt if they pay back at least some of what they owe in child support.

Families and states are burdened with millions of dollars in unpaid child support, and the program may help ease some of the financial strain on both parents and the government.

As of 2009, there was more than \$100 billion in unpaid child support debt owed nationally. According to Brett Burkhardt, an assistant professor of [public policy](#) at Oregon State University and one of the study's authors, much of that debt is owed by low-income noncustodial parents who are unlikely to ever pay back the full amount.

"Custodial parents are not receiving much-needed income that they should be, and much of this debt is just uncollectable," he said. "In addition, [government agencies](#) are strained because they have to put a great deal of resources into trying to collect what is owed, and then enforce it and penalize those who do not pay."

Burkhardt conducted the study as part of a group of researchers at the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin. Led by lead author Carolyn Heinrich, now at the University of Texas at Austin, and joined by Hilary Shager, of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, the scientists were charged with studying the effectiveness

of a multi-year [pilot program](#) called Families Forward in Racine County, Wis.

The program targeted noncustodial parents with more than \$2,000 of debt. For every \$1 of child support paid, the program forgave 50 cents of debt toward the family and another 50 cents toward the state debt. Forgiveness of family debt required the permission of both custodial and noncustodial parents.

More than 120 people completed the program. The noncustodial parents in the Families Forward program contributed, on average, more than \$100 more per month than similar parents who did not participate. Overall, they also paid down their debt at a higher rate than those who did not participate and made more payments (8.5 percent increase) than non-participants.

"Implementation of the program was the most challenging part," Burkhardt said, citing bureaucratic problems and reluctance on the part of the custodial parent to agree as some of the key issues with the program. "Still, we did see the intended result, which was to get parents paying more on their child support [debt](#)."

Burkhardt said some states, including Wisconsin and Texas, are considering adopting similar child support forgiveness models on a larger scale.

The researchers published their findings in the current issue of the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.

Provided by Oregon State University

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