

Date: September 26, 2025
To: Connie Chesnik, Phyllis Fuller, Alicia Breininger, and Nicole Price
From: Carly Holmes, Bureau of Analytics and Research (BAR)
Re: DCF 150 Guidelines Review – Institute for Research on Poverty, Task 2 Synopsis

Background

Federal regulations require states review their child support guidelines every four years to determine whether current guidelines result in appropriate child support orders. Of note: Courts have discretion to deviate from guidelines if in the best interest of children and families. This document summarizes findings of two recent research studies on guidelines from the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP).^{1,2}

Key Findings and Recommendations

Findings

IRP analyzed court record data in 21 counties from 2002–2019¹ and 2017–2020² and a survey of divorced parents in 2020.¹ IRP investigated guideline adherence related to case participants' income and custodial placement. Critically, these findings predate guidelines changes made in January 2024.

Overall, 37% of cases are consistent with guidelines, 36% are inconsistent, and 27% have unknown consistency.² Consistency with guidelines decreases as case participants' income increases. Adherence to guidelines remained stable since 2010, while lacking an order became more common and orders of unknown consistency to guidelines became less common. Cases with orders inconsistent with guidelines have the highest child support compliance rate (80%), which aligns with these case participants tending to have higher incomes. Cases with missing income information have the lowest compliance rate (52%), which could signal low incomes or orders higher than noncustodial parents' ability to pay. For low-income payers, 57% of the orders follow low-income guidelines.

Shared placement increased 20% in the last two decades and continues to increase, particularly in divorce cases.¹ Shared-placement cases adhere to guidelines less often than sole-placement cases. Specifically, equal shared-placement cases commonly have zero-dollar orders when guidelines suggest otherwise, while unequal shared-placement cases tend to have orders higher than guidelines suggest. However, compliance with child support orders is higher for shared-placement cases than sole-placement cases. Additionally, mothers with shared placement report higher rates of satisfaction and perceived fairness of cost-sharing than cases of sole placement with mothers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, no modifications to the guidelines are recommended at this time. However, IRP recommends agencies provide consultation to ensure expenses are fair to parties in a child support case, assessing individualized needs.

Future research will evaluate the effectiveness of guidelines implemented in January 2024.

¹ Bartfeld, J. (2025). Shared placement in Wisconsin: An overview of trends, child support guidelines, payments and cost-sharing, and economic implications. *Institute for Research on Poverty, 2024–2026 Child Support Policy Research Agreement: Task 2 (Deliverable 1)*.

² Bartfeld, J., Doherty Bea, M., & Koo, J (2025). The use of child support guidelines in Wisconsin: 2017–2020. *Institute for Research on Poverty, 2024–2026 Child Support Policy Research Agreement: Task 2 (Deliverable 2)*.