

Texas Non-Custodial Parent Choices:

Program Impact Analysis

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Executive Summary

The Non-Custodial Parent Choices initiative began in 2005, when the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) partnered with the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) to implement a model employment project for unemployed and underemployed non-custodial parents (NCPs) of children who are current or recent recipients of public assistance, and who are behind on their child support payments. This four-site demonstration project establishes links among IV-D courts responsible for child support issues, OAG child support staff, and local workforce development boards to provide employment services to these NCPs.

To provide an objective outside perspective on the program, the Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin (RMC) was contracted to evaluate NCP Choices. The present evaluation briefly examines the processes of a mature NCP Choices program, and estimates program impacts on various outcomes of interest, including child support collections, workforce development participation, potential incarceration, employment and earnings levels of NCPs, and TANF receipt by the custodial parents (CPs).

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

The NCP Choices service model is straightforward: noncompliant NCPs are given the choice of paying their child support, participating in workforce services, or going to jail. The

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

The detailed process study included field visits to the four study sites and discussions with all major players. It found the NCP Choices model—with its emphasis on limited but clear choices, mandatory participation, and “swift and certain” consequences (i.e., jail) for NCPs failing to participate—had definite “buy-in” from the key players at the state level and in each of the local sites visited. The program is perceived to be a success at all four sites, and the keys to this success include collaboration and communication among all actors, having dedicated and capable staff in various key positions, and resources in place to promote efficient enrollment of NCPs, preferably on-site at the courthouse, as well as to efficiently deliver workforce services.

Helping NCPs with substantial barriers to participation, employment, and career advancement to become economically self-sufficient while also making consistent child support payments is quite a challenge for a program with limited resources. NCP Choices is recognized as making a great deal of progress with targeted NCPs who have significant barriers that are typically difficult to fully address. The occasional mismatch between the job skills and qualifications of the NCPs and the areas of growth in these local labor markets might be better addressed through long-term training, but this would pose equity concerns with the custodial parents who are in need of child support *now*. Providing both long-term training to NCPs and contemporaneous monetary support to the associated CPs could solve both of these problems, but would be an expensive proposition.

On the whole, NCP Choices is viewed as largely successful, both in terms of staff perceptions and as evidenced by the impact results (below). In comparison to other programs for low-income NCPs that have been carefully evaluated, NCP Choices has the rare combination of generally greater positive impacts and typically lesser costs per NCP. Virtually all concerned parties would like to see the program become permanent and self-sustaining.

The research design for the impact analysis included the selection of a quasi-experimental comparison group of non-participating NCPs. Tests indicated that the selected comparison group was nearly indistinguishable from NCP Choices clients in their observable characteristics just before program entry. This suggests that the design has high internal

validity for determining the impacts of the NCP Choices program, resulting in a high level of confidence that any differences observed subsequent to program participation were likely due to NCP Choices itself.

Impact analysis results indicate that those who were ordered into NCP Choices subsequently paid significantly more child support, whether measured in terms of increased frequency or total amount of child support payments. Monthly collection rates from NCP Choices participants were almost sixty percent higher than from the comparison group, and the amounts collected averaged \$63 per month higher. Furthermore, although the monthly collection rate was still not high in an absolute sense, nearly seven out of every eight NCP Choices clients made at least one payment within nine months of program entry. Finally, of great importance to the economic self-sufficiency of the custodial parents, those ordered into NCP Choices were significantly more *consistent* in making child support payments over time, and were much more likely to pay the full amount of their child support due.

As planned, and likely one of the keys to program success, those ordered into NCP Choices displayed far greater levels of participation in workforce development than did their comparison group counterparts. Over 90 percent of those ordered into NCP Choices participated in workforce development within 9 months of program entry, as compared to only about six percent for the comparison group. These levels of workforce development participation by NCPs were well above the range of what has been reported in the literature for other programs serving low income NCPs, including other ‘mandatory’ programs. Not all NCPs complied with the order, however, as NCP Choices clients were potentially subjected to greater rates of incarceration through the issuance of capiases. Because this measure is imperfect, we are currently seeking a better measure of actual incarceration for the final report.

Those ordered into NCP Choices were subsequently employed at significantly higher rates than were their comparison group counterparts, a substantial increase in quarterly employment of six percentage points. However, as is sometimes observed in programs that successfully move significant numbers of people into employment, NCP Choices participants who were employed subsequent to program entry had lesser total earnings than those in the control group who were employed. Finally, in a sign that the benefits of NCP Choices were also transmitted to the custodial parents, CPs associated with NCP Choices participants

showed about a ten percent reduction in the rate of TANF receipt subsequent to program entry.

These impacts were also found to vary by site. For example, while NCP Choices significantly increased child support payments at all sites, Hidalgo County showed the greatest increases. Interestingly, Hidalgo County showed the least impact of NCP Choices on workforce development participation, although still a substantial effect, and no impact on the rate of capias issuance. Furthermore, although the employment and earnings impacts of NCP Choices did not vary by site, the Hidalgo County program was once again found to produce the greatest reductions in TANF receipt of associated custodial parents.

In summary, the NCP Choices program appears to have successfully achieved almost all of its program goals. Furthermore, the high rate of participation by NCP Choices clients in workforce development suggests that this played a role in their success (but see caveat below). In any case, the combination of increased frequency and amount of child support payments made by those ordered into NCP Choices, increased consistency of child support payment, increased employment rates of NCPs, and reduced TANF receipt by associated CPs all point to generally greater economic self-sufficiency on the part of CPs and NCPs. Furthermore, the fact that positive impacts were reported in all sites on virtually all the outcome measures suggests that NCP Choices is a robust program design, and it should fare well in any planned expansion beyond the pilot sites. Unfortunately, the process study was not successful at uncovering compelling reasons why the Hidalgo site produced generally stronger impacts than the other sites. This will be examined in greater detail in the next study.

It is important to recognize that the effects reported do not measure the impact of the Choices program on NCPs, but the *impact of being given the choice*: to participate in Choices, make a payment, or go to jail. There is no doubt that a portion of the measured effects was due to Choices or other workforce development participation, but a portion was also due to the motivating properties of the choice presented to NCPs, and there is no reliable way to separate the two.

Next steps will involve continuing to refine the comparison group selection procedure, and seeking to include a better measure of offender status, both as a control and as an outcome to replace the capias issuance measure. Updated impacts with more clients and

greater follow-up intervals will be reported in Summer 2008, including additional site visits to attempt to uncover reasons behind the differential site impacts.

I. Introduction

The Non-Custodial Parent Choices initiative began in 2005, when the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) partnered with the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) to implement a model employment project for unemployed and underemployed non-custodial parents (NCPs) of children who are current or recent recipients of public assistance. This four-site demonstration project establishes links among IV-D courts responsible for child support issues, OAG child support staff, and local workforce development boards to provide employment services to NCPs who need them. The project is referred to here as the Non-Custodial Parent Choices initiative, or NCP Choices, although local partners in some sites prefer the more colorful name *Trabajo Andale*, a name which, roughly translated as “work now,” succinctly captures the essence of the program.

In order to obtain an objective outside assessment of the 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 analyze the early implementation of NCP Choices in 2005, and to develop a plan for an impact analysis (see Schroeder et al, 2005). The OAG again contracted with RMC in late 2006 to analyze and report upon impacts of the NCP Choices program on key outcome measures, utilizing scientifically valid methodology involving a pre-post comparison group design. The present report presents these estimated program impacts, with greater follow-up intervals than those reported upon in an intermediate report (Schroeder et al, 2007), placed within the context of an update to the earlier implementation study, now focusing on the processes of a more mature NCP Choices program.

Choices Program Overview

An understanding of the NCP Choices program begins with an examination of the original Choices program, established by the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) to address the employment and training needs of families and custodial parents. The Choices program is the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Employment and Training program (formerly the JOBS program) operated under TWC’s primarily work-first oriented service model. The TWC website provides the following rationale for the Choices program:

“both State and federal welfare reform legislation emphasizes personal responsibility, time-limited cash assistance benefits, and the goal of work instead of welfare.” The Choices program 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 some training to those who are not work-ready.

In the absence of the NCP Choices program demonstration, only custodial parents would be served by Choices. Participation in Choices begins with a workforce orientation for applicants (WOA) as their introduction to workforce center services. The initial activities provided to the Choices participants include both job readiness and job search. Those participants who do not find immediate employment participate in community service requirements. Participants who are actively pursuing employment are eligible for support services, including child care, transportation assistance, work-related expenses, and other support services to help in employment efforts. Some training opportunities are made available as well. Those 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, wage gains, career progression and progression to self-sufficiency.” Given this model, the NCP Choices program was developed to provide non-custodial parents with similar services.

NCP Choices in Brief

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

In previous efforts involving NCPs, workforce providers, child support agencies, and non-profit community based organizations had attempted to connect unemployed non-custodial parents with employment services so those individuals could better support their children financially. The outcomes or impacts from these projects were typically modest,

generally resulting in only slight increases in earnings among participants and some gains in child support paid. Programs with the best outcomes—that is, higher and more consistent child support payments—“were those that linked a strong judicial order to participate in employment services, close monitoring of NCP program participation by workforce staff, reports of non-participation back to the courts, and ‘swift and certain consequences’ for non-participation (in other words, jail time!)” (OAG, 2005).

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

NCP Choices Program Model

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

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

- First, the OAG identifies NCPs on its caseload that are currently noncompliant with their child support payments, whose children either are or have been on welfare, and who also reside in the designated workforce service areas.
- The IV-D Court either sets an enforcement docket for the identified NCPs, or includes eligible NCPs on a regularly scheduled docket.
- OAG staff prepares court orders or modified probation orders.
- NCPs have the choice of either signing the consent order to participate in workforce services, making a payment, or going to jail.
- Contractor staff for the local workforce board attends the enforcement docket, enrolls NCPs at the IV-D court, and explains the contract outlining NCP rights and responsibilities and the consequences of non-participation. Depending on the site, they then either set appointments for NCPs to come to one-stop

centers to receive workforce services or the local workforce representative offers assistance immediately at the courthouse in a designated office.

- A 14-day or 30-day compliance report regarding NCP program participation and/or reported employment is sent to OAG and the IV-D courts from the boards' contractor staff. This evidence on NCP participation and employment is entered at a scheduled compliance hearing.
- Capias—court orders to take custody—can be issued for noncompliant NCPs. The individual Judges have discretion to evaluate the reason for noncompliance and decide whether to give these NCPs another chance with the program.

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

Impact Analysis Overview

The impact analysis is primarily concerned with assessing the impact of the NCP Choices Program on several outcomes of interest. These outcomes fall into categories of child support collections, which affect both potential cost savings to the child support enforcement system and self-sufficiency of families; participation by NCPs in workforce development, to gauge the effectiveness of mandatory program participation; and employment/earnings of NCPs, as well as TANF receipt by custodial parents (CPs), as measures of economic self-sufficiency. Specific outcomes of interest include:

- Frequency of child support payments,
- Consistency of child support payments over time,
- Workforce development participation by NCPs,
- Incarceration rates of NCPs,
- Employment rates and earnings levels for NCPs, and
- TANF participation among associated CPs and their children.

Organization of the Report

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

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

II. Non-Custodial Parents in the Literature

Background

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

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

The Significance of Child Support

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

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

assistance and 42 percent included families who previously received assistance.

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

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

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

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

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

And perhaps most disturbingly, recent federal legislation, in the form of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA), substantially reduces federal financing of state child support

enforcement. Effects of this incentive funding reduction are projected to reduce child support enforcement performance, particularly in higher-performing states like Texas (Lewin Group, 2007). In the absence of state replacement of these funds, expected effects include:

- Reduced establishment of orders,
- Reduced current collections, and
- Increasing effects over time, as current order establishment declines affect future collections.

The full effects of the DRA on child support collections for poor families have yet to unfold. Even if the projected child support declines fail to materialize, because so many (37.7 percent) single-head-of-household families continue to subsist on poverty-level wages, increasing child support compliance remains a key strategy for lifting these families out of poverty.

Reasons for Noncompliance

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

Mistrust and Suspicion

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

- Often assume that orders are pre-set and allow no room for negotiation, creating a “resentment of the insensitivity of the system towards their precarious and shifting circumstances” (Furstenberg et al., 1992).
- Complain that the system is more diligent in enforcing child support orders than enforcing their visitation rights (Baron and Sylvester, 2002).

- Perceive the child support system as equivalent with the criminal justice system, and assume that the primary goal of the program is punitive action towards them (Reichert, 1999; Doolittle and Lynn, 1998).
- Have “a general feeling that the courts should not interfere in their families” (Furstenberg et al., 1992).

Informal Supports

For a variety of reasons, many NCPs provide their children with an “informal” version of child support such as gifts of cash, clothing, diapers, formula, or toys (Sander and Rosen, 1987). Possible explanations for a tendency towards provision of informal support include distrust of government, a personal preference for tangible gifts, potential for increased contact with the children, concerns that income earned illegally will draw unwanted attention to the NCP’s finances, and avoidance of TANF pass-through policies, which in some states (Texas included) retain a portion of child support payments for the state as a reimbursement for public assistance funds paid to the family.

Disputes with the Custodial Parent

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

Lack of Financial Resources

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

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

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

- **Limited Education** – Sorensen (1997) found that an estimated 40 percent of low-income NCPs had not completed high school or earned a GED.
- **Limited Work History** – Many NCPs have little or no work experience, making it difficult for them to obtain well-paying jobs (Sylvester and O’Connell, 2003).
- **Mental Health & Behavioral Issues** – NCPs may experience feelings of depression, anxiety, and hopelessness (Weinman, Smith and Buzi, 2002).
- **Substance Abuse** – Some NCPs have drug or alcohol addictions that affect their employability (Baron and Sylvester, 2002).
- **Insufficient access to transportation** – The lack of reliable transportation makes it difficult for NCPs to secure and retain good jobs.
- **Transience** – Many low-income NCPs move frequently, have no stable home setting, and are difficult to contact (Doolittle and Lynn, 1998).
- **Criminal Backgrounds** – Reichert (1999) indicates that up to 70 percent of all low-income NCPs have had contact with the criminal justice system. Criminal backgrounds create serious obstacles to securing employment.

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

Enhanced Child Support Enforcement

Given the continuing challenge of improving child support compliance, there is considerable interest in “enhanced child support enforcement” programs which go beyond traditional child support enforcement activities in order to test innovative approaches to increasing compliance. These programs typically focus on efforts to connect unemployed and underemployed non-custodial parents with employment services so they can better

support their children financially. Common services include job training and/or job placement assistance; group and individual counseling; mediation and/or legal assistance with custody or visitation issues; parenting education; mentoring; case management; and assorted supportive services such as basic needs assistance and substance abuse counseling.

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

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

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

Implementation Challenges

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

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

Participation Challenges

Participation issues are even more complex. A disconcertingly large share of programs serving NCPs in the past decade found it difficult to recruit the targeted number of parents. Some of the challenges associated with participation rates can be mitigated through thoughtful planning, more effective program management, and changes in program design. But some of the challenges are so persistent they suggest a paradigm shift may be necessary. The first and most important step is to address these implementation challenges so that programs are able to provide significant numbers of NCPs with the services the programs advertise. This not only helps with retention but can also help with organic recruiting because NCPs alerting other NCPs about the program is known to affect NCP program participation (Looney and Schexnayder, 2004). Program designers must also pay attention to eligibility rules: casting a wider net is likely to engage a larger number of NCPs. It is important to keep eligibility issues in mind when selecting a funder; many grants – especially those provided by the federal government – have stipulations that may result in eligibility issues for potential participants.

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

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

To overcome these challenges, most voluntary programs employ some sort of incentive to encourage participation. Past incentives include adjustments to child support orders, arrears forgiveness, the opportunity to access legal counsel, and cash stipends. The efficacy of this approach is unclear. While programs that provided cash stipends have had modest success with incentives, they nevertheless struggled to reach their enrollment goals (Schroeder, Looney, and Schexnayder, 2004; Looney and Schexnayder, 2004).

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

Nevertheless, sanctions also have their limitations. Getting NCPs to appear at a meeting to review or set their child support orders—the first step to establishing a participation mandate—can be very challenging. The Parent's Fair Share initiative had appearance rates ranging from 5 percent to 70 percent. Furthermore, cost issues present a challenge, as it sometimes costs taxpayers more to support the parent in jail for a few days than the parent's total monthly child support obligation (NASWA, 2002). Imposing

sanctions for nonappearance proved to be more difficult than anticipated under the Parent's Fair Share program (Doolittle and Lynn, 1998). Most importantly, sanctions alone fail to address the root causes of noncompliance for poor NCPs who have difficulty paying due to low or nonexistent earnings and problems with mental illness or substance abuse, among others.

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

III. Process Analysis

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of the processes involved in the NCP Choices initiative. The analysis was based upon discussions with collaborating agencies' staff and on interviews conducted during visits in July 2007 to four study sites: Bexar County, El Paso County, Galveston and Brazoria Counties, and Hidalgo County. Although Tarrant County conducts a similar program under the NCP Choices name, it was not included as a study site in either the process or impact analysis because its program differed in several key respects from the other four study sites.

This present process study offers findings based on a review of the project background, project evolution since its implementation, NCP Choices service delivery, resources used, services provided, community partnerships, best management practices developed, and future goals as described by the NCP Choices actors. The purpose of this process study was to develop a clear understanding of policies and project procedures as well as the operational contexts for the project in the four study sites. The process study describes the NCP Choices program model, its target population, service delivery configurations, activities and services available to the NCPs, participant flow, and data collection and tracking procedures in the initiatives. It notes similarities and differences between the project sites. The process study findings guide the interpretation of impact analysis results described in Chapter IV. Lastly, the process and implementation analysis provide empirical evidence that will help NCP Choices decision makers shape the initiative's future.

Early Implementation Study

A study was conducted in 2005 to report upon the early implementation process for the two sites that started first, El Paso County and the Galveston/Brazoria County site. Both sites were in the beginning stages of project delivery during the site visits in 2005, with El Paso County only active for four weeks and Galveston and Brazoria Counties still largely in the planning phase. Significant observations at the two project sites noted that each had different stakeholders (actors) involved in the process, but that both IV-D court masters considered non-compliance an enforceable act, and clearly would send noncompliant NCPs to jail: the threat of "swift and certain" consequences was quite real in the two sites. Major

points from that study are incorporated throughout this chapter, with updates where appropriate. For full details of the early implementation study findings, see Schroeder et al (2005).

Program Background, Design and Evolution

The players from all four study sites came to the NCP Choices Initiative with similar backgrounds and experiences with Choices populations from work in programs and studies like Fragile Families, Welfare-to-Work, Bootstrap, and Choices, the work program for TANF recipients in Texas. Many workforce board members and contractors had extensive backgrounds with workforce populations, including youth programs. There was agreement that the key components in the program design included the collaborative relationship of the OAG, IV-D Courts, and workforce personnel and the sanctions for non-compliance.

The NCP Choices program was designed with knowledge that its recipients would be the more challenging population to serve. NCPs who are noncompliant with their child support order(s) tend to have multiple, often substantial barriers to participation and employment that challenge every agency and program involved in NCP Choices. Many of these NCPs have low education levels, records as offenders, problems with substance abuse, and even other families for whom they are expected to care. However, agency partners have been creative in addressing the overwhelming majority of known barriers. Thus, non-compliant NCPs are responsible for their failures to comply with the program.

Initial challenges were expected with instituting communication and tracking/reporting procedures. These challenges were initially addressed by exchanging a spreadsheet among partners, and later remedied with the development of a convenient web-interface database tracking system: the Choices On-Line Tracking System (COLTS).

The dedication of the IV-D (child support) Judges toward the goals of NCP Choices was believed to be a critical component of its success. Nearly every individual interviewed as part of the field visits felt that Judge Henderson in Galveston/Brazoria, Judge Minton in El Paso, Judge Carian, the current Judge in Bexar, Judge Chavira, the previous Judge in Bexar (now retired), and Judges Leos and Ramirez in Hidalgo County were dedicated judges who believed strongly in the NCP Choices program. RMC researchers' observations of the IV-D

courts and conversations with the judges support that claim. Most of those interviewed noted that all players serve as an integral part of the process to ensure NCP Choices' success. Some suggested that each link in the chain was critical, and thus when any particular individual proved to be a weak link in the process by failing to meet their responsibilities, the NCP Choices project suffered. Ultimately, most felt that the success of the program was directly correlated with the quality and dedication of the individuals providing the services.

The program's evolution since its implementation included communication, tracking, scheduling, and personnel changes. In general, evolution occurred when there were inaccuracies in the data or a process was running inefficiently. For example, Judge Minton in El Paso now schedules his own court dates, so there is no longer a dedicated "NCP Choices" docket there. El Paso workforce also had difficulty finding dedicated personnel for a period of time, and when they struggled with tracking NCPs, prior to the development of the COLTS database, they developed an interim tracking tool in Microsoft Excel.

NCP Choices Service Delivery

All four study sites have a common NCP Choices Service Delivery Participant Flow process and typically serve between 7 to 17 new NCP Choices cases per month. The interviewees were shown Figure 1, NCP Choices Program Participant Flow (see Appendix), and agreed that in general, this figure accurately represents the participant flow process at their sites. Some sites have extra steps in process, such as giving the NCP a second or third chance to comply with NCP Choices before going to jail. The OAG process varies as well, as indicated below, depending on the OAG's initial order for the NCP.

In general, the eligible NCP is given the choice to participate in NCP Choices, make a lump-sum payment on their child support arrears, or go to jail. Workforce representatives are in the courtroom to serve as on-site liaison in responsibility commitment. In El Paso and Bexar County, workforce representatives have an office in or near the courthouse and the NCP is typically offered at least preliminary services immediately. In Bexar County, the NCP continues to come to the courthouse workforce office for services; he/she is not referred to an off-site workforce center unless that is necessary for transportation reasons. In El Paso, a new, recently opened workforce site is located approximately three blocks from the

courthouse so the NCP can go there immediately after meeting with the courthouse liaison. In Brazoria/Galveston Counties, the workforce representative has a laptop computer with internet access and can enroll the NCP immediately into the workforce system and set them up with an appointment at an off-site workforce site immediately. Although the Hidalgo County workforce personnel are in the courtroom, they do not have a laptop computer or internet access and do not have an office on or near the courthouse. Workforce personnel meet with the NCP and fill out hard-copy enrollment forms at the courthouse, but they have to schedule the NCP for an appointment at an off-site facility for later. Hidalgo workforce representatives believe their inability to enroll the NCP immediately into the NCP Choices program at the courthouse decreases the chance of the NCP actually participating in the program because the NCP must report somewhere else on a different date. Virtually all concerned parties at all sites concur that reaching the NCP immediately after they are ordered into the program is a key component to high NCP participation rates, and ultimately the success of the program. All sites currently have access to the COLTS system, so initial NCP Choices participant tracking problems have generally been alleviated. COLTS has had a handful of start-up problems that are typical of any reasonably complex database system, but these are being continually addressed through revisions to COLTS as they are identified.

The NCP must comply with the program within a certain period of time that varies depending on the NCPs geographic location and the IV-D court ordering his/her participation. In general, the NCP's compliance with NCP Choices is updated at 15 days, 30 days, and 90-days post referral. The NCP will appear before the judge at the two-to-three week post-referral date and 90-day compliance hearings to prove compliance or non-compliance. If the NCP is non-compliant, the judge will weigh his or her reasons before determining the next step, which is typically either jail time or a second or third chance with NCP Choices.

There is some disagreement among sites as to how important the threat of jail time is for ensuring compliance. Although jail space for child support offenders is a challenge in all sites, several Bexar County respondents believe their jail bed shortage in particular reduces the effectiveness of the threat of jail time. Bexar County has only 125 jail beds dedicated for all child support cases in the County, including the private bar as well as the OAG cases, and they stay at or near this capacity. Thus, it was argued that the more savvy NCPs at this site

know that even if they are ordered to jail for non-compliance, they will likely be out in a few days because of the space shortage. Bexar County respondents thus downplay the importance of the threat of jail time, and believe instead that the link between the OAG, NCP and the workforce entity is the major component to the program's success, and that immediately linking NCPs with workforce at the courthouse is critical. A better source of incarceration data, if it can be obtained for the final report, may help clarify this issue.

Resources

The resources dedicated to the NCP Choices project varied at each site. No local-level OAG staff is specifically dedicated in terms of a full-time employee (FTE). Current OAG employees at the sites add the NCP Choices project to their responsibilities. OAG field staff at many sites suggested that an FTE dedicated to the program would make the program run smoother.

There is at least one workforce representative in every courtroom. Bexar County, El Paso County, and Galveston/Brazoria Counties all have one person in the courtroom, while Hidalgo County has three people. El Paso County and Galveston/Brazoria Counties have laptops with internet connections with them in the courtroom, but Hidalgo County and Bexar County do not yet have these tools. El Paso and Bexar Counties have rooms in the courthouse they can use to enroll and serve the NCPs, but Brazoria County and Hidalgo County do not have access to a room at the courthouse.

Workforce representatives fund the NCP Choices program using dedicated NCP Choices contract funding. They typically treat NCPs similarly to, but not exactly like, any other Choices client who presents themselves to workforce. They also co-enroll the NCP into other programs with different funding streams to offer as many services to the NCP as he or she is qualified to receive.

Services Provided

The multiple barriers to sustained employment that NCPs typically bring to this initiative have important implications for service provision. NCPs frequently have poor education and work histories, are often ex-offenders, and may have problems with substance

abuse and even mental illness. This array of barriers poses real challenges for serving them under NCP Choices, just as it has with other workforce programs. NCP Choices stresses job search and work support over longer-term education and training. In part, this reflects the Texas “work-first” orientation. Although Texas’ Choices program does make training available to those who want it, only a small fraction takes advantage of the opportunity. Additionally, long-term training is frequently frowned upon under the NCP Choices model because the goal is to immediately get the NCP a job so he or she can start paying child support. The workforce and NCP can then focus future efforts on getting the NCP a better job. Resources offered to NCPs are limited by the NCP Choices contract criteria, but workforce personnel will offer NCPs any service that workforce offers independent of the NCPs’ enrollment in NCP Choices; the NCP is treated as if they are like any other person requesting services from workforce. NCPs are, however, subject to greater scrutiny than most other one-stop participants.

The extent and diversity of services provided to NCPs are ultimately determined by the creativity and motivation of workforce personnel. Services include job search assistance, transportation assistance, education and training assistance, work-related expenses and other support services to help with employment efforts. Job search services include providing a current job list, access to computerized job banks, workshops on resume writing, interviewing techniques and strategies for conducting a successful job search. Transportation assistance includes gas cards and bus passes that are given out in small increments and redistributed depending on the success of the participant (i.e., if the NCP is complying, they will get more transportation assistance up to a certain maximum benefit level). Education assistance includes GED preparation. Additional training is available such as low-intensity fork-lift operator training or occupational licenses training. More intense training, such as for a commercial driver’s license (to become a truck driver), is also available to some, but rarely provided because of the time investment necessary for the training. Many work source resource facilities also provide self-service resource rooms that have computers with internet access, copiers, printers, telephones, etc. and other hardware and software to make job searching easier¹. Workforce representatives can also assist clients once they become employed with tools or clothes they need for their job, such as welding equipment, steel-toed

¹ See, for example, <http://www.urgwdb.org/jseek/>

boots or fire-retardant protection clothing. In some rare cases, workforce representatives can even assist with eye glasses or rent depending on the clients' needs and resources' funding source.

During the early implementation study, the emphasis on job search and related activities for NCPs reflected a potential equity concern amongst the NCP and the CP. There was a clear sense among the designers of the NCP Choices initiative that services made available to NCPs should be on a par with those offered to their counterparts, the custodial parents. This would help avoid the concern raised by some that NCPs might avail themselves of longer-term training, deferring payment of child support while the children's custodial parent waited with limited prospects for access to such training for him/herself. This equity concern was no longer a prevalently raised concern during the recent interviews, although the point was raised at some of the study sites. Technically, the CP could get the same services offered to the NCP if the CP were to go to the workforce center as an independent client, and some judges have ordered the CP to workforce even though the CP would not normally be a mandated participant in the Choices program.

Education levels, transportation needs, physical and mental disabilities and substance abuse problems are real barriers faced by the NCP population. However, workforce personnel at each study location seem to embrace these barriers and find creative ways to employ the difficult to serve NCP population. All sites note that this population needs a lot of attention and that being unemployed is only one among multiple quality of life barriers this population must overcome on a daily basis.

Matching NCPs with jobs in the area does pose a problem. Many employers in the workintexas.com job database system² will not hire the typical NCP from NCP Choices because of their various barriers to traditional employment that may be discovered during background checks, such as felony records. Many workforce personnel noted they were doing their own marketing efforts, trying to get employers other than those in the workintexas.com job database to buy-in to the NCP Choices program. In El Paso, Juanita McCray, the workforce representative, is designing a marketing pamphlet to take to non-traditional employers such as local mom-and-pop employers to market the program. In

² See <http://www.twc.state.tx.us/jobs/job.html>

Bexar County, the recently retired Judge Chavira was sometimes known to go to area employers to try to get them to buy into the program and employ NCPs; he also wrote an article entitled “Your Choice: A Lifeline or Jail” about the NCP Choices Program that appeared in the local newspaper³.

Community Partnerships

In general, community partnerships for the NCP Choices program have been limited. Workforce tends to co-enroll participants in other services they have to offer, but workforce does not have extensive partnerships with community partners like the Salvation Army.

Program Assessment

Those interviewed and observed as part of the field visits to the four study sites had some similar general observations and opinions related to the mature program assessment. Note that although most of the sites had achieved nearly two years of implementation, the program had been expanded to new judges and new populations in both Hidalgo County and Bexar County. The following are the major observations based on site visits and interviews from the four study sites:

- The NCP Choices program works well. All players want to see the program continue and expand to reach more people.
- Collaboration and communication among the players are integral to the program’s success.
- Having dedicated, capable, creative, detail-oriented people as the program’s liaisons at the OAG, the courts, and the workforce sites is a major factor in the program’s success.
- Resources, both in physical capital form such as laptop computers and an office at the courthouse as well as human capital, such as dedicated personnel at the OAG and workforce are required for program success and growth.
- Most concerned parties would like to see the program become permanent and self-sustaining.
- Communicating with the NCP immediately after he or she is ordered into the program is a key component of the program’s success. If the NCP leaves the

³ La Prensa, July 8, 2007, page 4-A.

courtroom and is told to report to workforce later, there is a much better chance the NCP will not comply with the program.

Concluding Observations

The following general observations are offered based on the detailed review of implementation and evolution experiences in El Paso County, Bexar County, Galveston/Brazoria Counties and the Rio Grande Valley, as well as the literature on serving NCPs in such programs.

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

Second, the program is widely believed to be a success at all four sites. This belief is confirmed by empirical evidence presented in chapter V, although the degree of success was found to vary by site. All respondents seemed fully engaged in and committed to project implementation and anxious to continue and expand the project.

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

problems, but would be an expensive proposition. These are challenges that workforce development programs in these and other sites have attempted to address before.

Fourth, as indicated in interviews and confirmed by analyses presented in the subsequent chapter, NCPs enrolled in NCP Choices tend to have very high child support arrears balances – on the order of \$33,000 or more. Such debt balances tend to be about three times higher than for the typical NCP on the OAG caseload in these counties. This observation not only provides further evidence that these are in fact some of the harder-to-serve NCPs, but also raises the stakes in terms of potential for program success for arrears reduction. By concentrating limited program resources on those with the greatest arrears balances, NCP Choices provides an unprecedented opportunity to make substantial progress in collecting these debts.

Finally, as the literature has suggested, it will take time to fully implement the NCP Choices model and to fully work out all the problems that will invariably surface, including those related to expansion. This is especially the case with a program that is based on a multi-agency coordination model. It appears this program is well on its way to full implementation and certainly has buy-in from all interested parties. A review of the program from an NCP and CP perspective through interviews with the NCP and CP could add a valuable perspective that may help shape the future course of the NCP Choices program.

IV. Impact Research Design

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

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

Research Questions

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1: Research Questions and Expected NCP Choices Effects

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

Quasi-Experimental Comparison Group Design

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

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

Comparison Group Selection Procedure

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

starting point. From this, the matching procedure considered detailed geographic, demographic and historical information on their child support collections, earnings, and other relevant information to select similarly situated NCPs, as described below.

Matching Procedure

Nearest-neighbor matching is an iterative computational process done for one NCP Choices participant (or target) at a time, as follows. First, the initial pool of potential neighbors for the target participant was restricted to those with an exact match on important categorical dimensions, including county of residence, gender, and others, for which ‘distance’ is 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 consideration⁴, and the process was repeated for the remaining NCP Choices participants until the selection of the comparison group was complete.

Basic dimensions for matching

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

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

⁴ This is known as sampling without replacement, and it prevents the same comparator being selected for the comparison group multiple times. While it is possible to sample with replacement and get slightly better matches, this requires a complex adjustment to the standard errors, and can lead to the undesirable situation of having one person serve as comparator for a large number of treatment group members.

- Employment and earnings histories, as measured from the UI earnings database;
- Child support case features, including number and ages of children, collections history (including the current arrears balance that makes the NCP a target), 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 (exact match required);
- History of NCP participation in workforce development services; and
- Date of entry into the NCP Choices program was controlled for implicitly by selecting comparison group members based on their characteristics as of each NCP Choices group member's program entry date.

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

Results of Comparison Group Selection

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

NCP Choices clients compared to all NCPs

Table 2 compares relevant pre-program characteristics of NCP Choices clients and the pool of NCPs from which a comparison group can be chosen. The comparison group pool consists of all other similarly situated NCPs with child support cases in one of the five target counties served by the four sites (including Bexar, Brazoria, El Paso, Galveston, and

Hidalgo counties). Results of this comparison indicate that, on average, NCP Choices clients differ considerably from other NCPs on the OAG caseload in the same geographic areas. NCP Choices clients tend to be younger, are slightly more likely to be female, have more active child support cases, and have longer earnings histories than other NCPs in the area. NCP Choices clients also are less likely to have been employed in the quarter of entry, earn less than half as much as other NCPs, and are twice as likely to have experienced a recent dip in their earnings levels. Among those experiencing a dip in earnings, the dip was greater, as a percentage of income, as compared to the experience of other NCPs in the area. NCP Choices clients have greater ongoing child support obligations. NCP Choices clients are also much less likely to have made a payment recently, made payments only about half as often in the prior year, and have greater child support arrears balances⁵, all of which could be related to their chances of selection into the program. They are also slightly more likely to have made a payment through a federal offset in the prior year, and were more likely to have a recent capias issues for noncompliance, as compared to other NCPs in the target areas, both signs of their reduced cooperation levels. They are also more likely to have been recent offenders, as evidenced by participation in Project RIO.⁶

⁵ Note that arrears balances for various points in the past, such as when an NCP was ordered into the program, were projected using an estimation procedure with known flaws. For example, the presence of collections via federal offsets can be inferred, but the exact dollar amount is unknown due to data restrictions. This concern is somewhat mitigated, however, because there is no reason to believe that the estimated arrears are any less accurate for NCP Choices clients than for other NCPs.

⁶ Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders), a program jointly administered by TWC and local workforce boards, is designed to aid former criminal offenders in avoiding a return to prison through education, training, and employment.

Table 2: Comparison of NCP Choices Clients with Other NCPs in Same Counties

	NCP Choices	All Other NCPs in Target Counties	
All NCPs	N=751	N=2,753,722	
NCP age (years)	34.1	37.5	**
NCP male	96.5%	99.0%	**
NCP number of active CS cases	1.6	1.2	**
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	20.5	18.7	**
NCP employed at program entry	40.1%	49.2%	**
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	40.6%	50.8%	**
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program ⁷	\$1,912	\$3,919	**
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	50.5%	24.8%	**
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	33.3	32.9	**
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	8.1	4.3	**
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	21.4%	50.8%	**
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	14.4%	13.7%	**
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior year	17.5%	4.7%	**
Any Choices participation in year prior to program	1.7%	.7%	**
Any ES participation in year prior to program	4.5%	1.8%	**
Any FSE&T participation in year prior to program	1.7%	.4%	**
Any WIA participation in year prior to program	2.8%	.8%	**
Any Project RIO participation in year prior to program	2.4%	.6%	**
Capias issued for arrest of NCP in 6 months prior to program	21.7%	1.6%	**
Approximate arrears balance at program entry	\$33,256	\$11,887	**
Total current support obligation (PP1) at program entry	\$510	\$332	**
Total arrears obligation (PP2) at program entry	\$123	\$74	**
Those experiencing an earnings dip	N=243	N=43,236	
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	4.6	4.8	**
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	85.3%	76.8%	**

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

⁷ Note that this earnings figure is not strictly comparable to the quarterly earnings figures cited in the results section, due to the fact that the figures above include quarters of no employment, while the figures in the results include only quarters in which the NCP is employed.

NCP Choices clients and the selected comparison group

For research that utilizes quasi-experimental evaluation techniques, the results hinge critically on differences in outcomes for NCP Choices participants and those of the comparison group. Thus, it is vitally important to ensure that the groups are as equivalent as possible before any services are received. Researchers could expect to observe, if the comparison group selection were done well, that the measurable characteristics of the groups at program entry should differ only by chance. In order to test whether the characteristics of the groups differ at a level that could be explained by chance alone, tests were performed on the means of the continuous matching variables that describe the two groups. It was expected that few or no significant differences would be found.⁸

Table 3 presents a comparison of these same NCP Choices clients against the quasi-experimental comparison group that was selected from the larger pool of NCPs in the same five counties identified above. A comparison of the second and third columns of Table 3 indicates that the aggregate-level characteristics of these two groups were nearly identical at the point of entry into the program. T-tests comparing the two groups on all listed characteristics confirmed that there were almost no significant differences between them on any of the observed dimensions. Only one comparison revealed a difference subsequent to the matching procedure: percent of NCPs with recent Project RIO participation, indicating they were more likely to be former offenders.⁹ Although very small percentages of NCPs had such a history, NCP Choices clients were several times more likely to have participated in RIO in the prior year. This comparison of NCP Choices versus comparison group members was also done separately by site, in order to support site-level impact estimation. Detailed results by site, which essentially replicated the overall findings of few or no differences, are listed in the Appendix. Despite the fact that most differences were not statistically significant, the slight differences remaining between the groups are to a large extent controlled for statistically when estimating impacts, as described in the next chapter.

⁸ Due to the nature of statistical inference, when using a 95 percent confidence level one can expect to find approximately one spurious difference for every twenty comparisons made. This is because the probability of a type I error (concluding there is a difference when in fact no difference exists) is 0.05, or one in twenty. Due to the large number of comparisons involved in these tests, researchers should only be concerned if the number of statistically significant differences exceeds that which could be expected due to chance alone.

⁹ RMC researchers are exploring better sources of offender status for inclusion in a subsequent report.

**Table 3: Comparison of NCP Choices Clients
with Selected Comparison Group**

	NCP Choices	Overall Comparison Group	
All NCPs	N=751	N=751	
NCP age (years)	34.1	33.6	
NCP male	96.5%	96.5%	
NCP number of active CS cases	1.6	1.6	
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	20.5	21.2	
NCP employed at program entry	40.1%	39.8%	
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	40.6%	42.3%	
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program ¹⁰	\$1,912	\$1,947	
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	50.5%	50.5%	
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	33.3	33.8	
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	8.1	7.9	
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	21.4%	21.5%	
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	14.4%	12.1%	
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior year	17.5%	14.6%	
Any Choices participation in year prior to program	1.7%	2.4%	
Any ES participation in year prior to program	4.5%	2.7%	
Any FSE&T participation in year prior to program	1.7%	.7%	
Any WIA participation in year prior to program	2.8%	2.5%	
Any Project RIO participation in year prior to program	2.4%	.8%	*
Capias issued for arrest of NCP in 6 months prior to program	21.7%	21.7%	
Approximate arrears balance at program entry	\$33,256	\$28,562	
Total current support obligation (PP1) at program entry	\$510	\$452	
Total arrears obligation (PP2) at program entry	\$123	\$111	
Those experiencing an earnings dip	N=379	N=379	
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	4.6	4.7	
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	85.3%	84.9%	

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

¹⁰ Note that this earnings figure is not strictly comparable to the quarterly earnings figures cited in the results section, due to the fact that the figures above include quarters of no employment, while the figures in the results include only quarters in which the NCP is employed.

In summary, the selection procedure appears to have created a comparison group that is quite similar to NCP Choices clients in their observable characteristics just before program entry. This suggests that the quasi-experimental design is likely to have high internal validity for determining the impacts of the NCP Choices program, meaning that we can have confidence that any differences observed subsequent to program participation were likely due to the program itself. Note, however, that this does not mean that the groups are necessarily as similar as possible on dimensions that were not measured. The limitations of a quasi-experimental approach are such that it can only ensure comparability on aspects that can be measured with the available data.

V. Program Impacts and Discussion

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

Because of the success of the matching procedure, we can be fairly confident that the impacts reported in this section were at least partially, if not completely due to NCP Choices participation. Although only a true experiment with random assignment can unambiguously determine that NCP Choices services *caused* these outcomes, we are far more certain about the true cause of the observed differences than if we had simply observed pre-post changes in outcomes or a comparison group selected unscientifically from a convenience sample.

Payment of Child Support

The first set of analyses attempts to answer the following: Does the NCP Choices program lead to increased child support payments? Four measures address this question¹¹, with the first gauging the frequency of any child support collections and the second estimating the frequency of collections that meet or exceed the full current child support obligation (also known as the PP1 amount, referred to here as “current child support” to distinguish it from the PP2 amount, which represents payments due on arrears). The third measure examines the average dollar amount of the collections made. All three of these measures are computed on a monthly basis, as opposed to the final measure that expands the time interval to ask what share of NCPs made *any* payment within nine months of program entry. Related measures in the subsequent section attempt to quantify the *consistency* with which such payments were made over time.

¹¹ Note that because of data limitations, child support payments that were collected via federal offset (i.e., income-tax refund intercept) were not included in these collections figures. Because they were equally excluded for NCP Choices and comparison group members, this should not substantially bias the net impacts reported.

Overall

As illustrated in Table 4, NCP Choices participation was associated with a substantial and statistically significant 16 percentage-point increase in the frequency of any child support collections. Although this increased rate of collections is still somewhat infrequent in an absolute sense, occurring in less than half of the months following program entry, the increased frequency for NCP Choices participants represents more than a 57 percent gain in collections rate relative to the comparison group, and may be regarded as quite impressive for this population. NCP Choices was also found to be associated with gains in the percent of time the full dollar amount of the current support obligation was met, but in this case the estimated impact was smaller, at a 3.7 percentage-point increase.

In addition to increased frequency of collections, the NCP Choices program was found to be associated with a significant increase in the average monthly dollar amount of child support collections. Overall, NCP Choices participants paid approximately \$63 per month more than their comparison group counterparts, a substantial 62 percent increase in total collections.¹²

Table 4: NCP Choices Impact on Child Support Collections

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time any child support collections made	44.4%	28.2%	16.2% **
Percent of time full current child support amount collected	33.9%	30.2%	3.7% **
Monthly average child support collections	\$165	\$102	\$63 **
Any child support collection made within 9 months of program entry	86.7%	63.9%	22.8% **

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

¹² 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.

The final measure was created to provide a contrast to the relatively low monthly collections rates reported above. When the time interval is expanded to nine months subsequent to program entry, one finds that 87 percent of NCP Choices clients made payments, or nearly twice as high as the share making payments in any given month. The estimated impact of NCP Choices on this measure was a statistically significant 23 percentage-point increase in the collections rate.

Impacts by Site

Additional statistical analyses were done to test whether the estimated impact of NCP Choices varied across the four pilot sites, and the results indicated that the impacts varied significantly on three of the four child support collections measures. Table 5 shows the estimated impacts of NCP Choices participation by site for these three measures. For ease of comparison, only the impact column is shown (see Appendix for complete results by site). Generally, the Hidalgo County site was found to have the greatest impacts of NCP Choices on child support collections. Note, however, that all sites were to some extent successful at increasing child support collections.

Table 5: NCP Choices Impacts on Child Support Collections by Site

	Bexar	Galveston/ Brazoria	El Paso	Hidalgo
Percent of time any child support collections made	12.6% **	19.7% **	13.6% **	27.8% **
Percent of time full current child support amount collected	5.4% **	2.0%	1.7%	11.6% **
Monthly average child support collections	\$46 **	\$77 **	\$39 **	\$156 **

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

Consistent Payment of Child Support

To gauge the *consistency* of child support collections over time, measures were constructed that tabulated, for every three month period subsequent to program entry, the

proportion of time any non-zero collections were made in 1) at least two out of the three months, and 2) in all three out of three months.¹³ Furthermore, as above, these two measures were computed both for any child support collections and for collections whose monetary value met or exceeded the existing current child support obligation (the PP1 amount).

Overall

Results of these child support consistency comparisons, shown in Table 6 indicate that the NCP Choices impact on consistency of child support payment was positive and statistically significant for all four measures. NCP Choices participants were 17 percentage points more likely to pay any non-zero amount of child support in at least two out of every three months than were their comparison group counterparts. This relative increase in consistent payment is quite substantial, representing more than a 62 percent increase in the frequency of consistent payment.

The second measure of payment consistency sets the bar higher, requiring NCPs to make child support payments in all 3 months of every 3 month period. The significant NCP Choices impact on this measure, at about 9 percentage points, was approximately 50 percent greater than the payment consistency achieved by the comparison group.

Table 6: NCP Choices Impact on Consistency of Child Support Collections

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Consistent payment of child support, at least 2 out of 3 months	44.7%	27.5%	17.2%**
Consistent payment of child support, 3 out of 3 months	27.1%	18.1%	9.0%**
Consistently meet current child support obligation, at least 2 out of 3 months	26.6%	16.4%	10.2%**
Consistently meet current child support obligation, 3 out of 3 months	13.9%	9.7%	4.2%**

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

¹³ These child support payment consistency measures were first introduced in Schroeder, Looney, & Schexnayder, 2004.

Although the overall percentages were lower, the NCP Choices program was also found to be associated with increased consistency of payments at a level that met the NCPs' full current support obligations. For all four of these measures, however, the low *absolute* level of payment consistency shows there is still more work to be done before these payments can represent a reliable source of income for many of the custodial parents who depend upon them.

Impacts by Site

Further tests indicated that the estimated impact of NCP Choices on consistent payment of child support varied significantly by site for each of the four measures. Table 7 lists these impacts by site. Once again, all four sites were to be successful to varying degrees at increasing the consistent payment of child support. However, the Hidalgo County NCP Choices program once again showed the greatest impacts on consistency of child support payment. Interestingly, the Hidalgo County impacts also showed the least differences between the 'any payment' and the 'met current support' payment measures. This suggests that not only was the Hidalgo County NCP Choices program successful at eliciting consistent payment of child support, but it was also quite successful at securing payments that were high enough to meet current support obligations.

Table 7: NCP Choices Impacts on Consistency of Child Support Collections by Site

	Bexar	Galveston/ Brazoria	El Paso	Hidalgo
Consistent payment of child support, at least 2 out of 3 months	11.9% **	21.2% **	15.7% **	31.3% **
Consistent payment of child support, 3 out of 3 months	5.8% **	12.7% **	7.3% **	18.2% **
Consistently meet current child support obligation, at least 2 out of 3 months	6.1% **	12.4% **	8.2% **	29.1% **
Consistently meet current child support obligation, 3 out of 3 months	1.1%	7.0% **	2.6% **	16.8% **

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

Workforce Development Participation by Non-custodial Parents

The next set of outcome analyses examines two questions:

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

Since one of the major purposes of the NCP Choices program was to get NCPs into workforce development services that they may need in order to improve their employment prospects, the first question was included as a check on whether and to what extent NCP Choices clients actually followed through with workforce development services. The second question, on the other hand, attempts to measure the extent to which NCPs were subjected to greater rates of incarceration for either a failure to cooperate with NCP Choices requirements, or for non-payment of child support. Unfortunately, the best measure of incarceration currently available in administrative data for both NCP Choices clients and comparison group members has several weaknesses, as noted below. Better measures are being sought for subsequent reports.

In examining these results, it is important to recognize, as discussed elsewhere in this report, that the impact evaluation does not measure the impact of workforce development participation per se. Instead, the impact of NCP Choices captures the effect of *being ordered into* the program, together with the corresponding threat of jail time for noncompliance. Thus, it was expected that not all NCPs ordered into the program would participate in Choices, and in fact, some portion would likely end up being ordered to serve time in jail.

Overall

Table 8 reveals that, as expected, the NCP Choices program was significantly associated with greater levels of NCP participation in the Choices program subsequent to program entry. The first measure, capturing the percent of time NCPs participated in the Choices program in particular¹⁴, reveals that those ordered into NCP Choices participated a substantial 33 percent of the time subsequent to program entry, as compared to almost zero

¹⁴ This measure captures NCP participation in Choices, whether that participation was recorded under regular Choices codes, or under a special code created specifically to track participation in this program.

participation by comparison group members. The second measure, which gives a better idea of the total share of NCPs participating in Choices, shows that 90 percent of those ordered into the program participated within nine months of this order, as compared to about one percent of comparison group members. These findings confirm a high degree of compliance with the order.

The third and fourth measures of NCP workforce development participation, shown in Table 8, capture NCP involvement in *any* program, including Choices, Employment Services (ES), Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Food Stamps Employment and Training (FSE&T), Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders), and Trade Adjustment Act (TAA) services¹⁵. These measures also revealed significantly increased participation by NCP Choices clients, relative to that of the comparison group. About 91 percent of clients ordered into NCP Choices participated in some form of workforce development within nine months of program entry, while only about six percent of their comparison group counterparts participated. Again, this indicates that the program was highly successful in getting NCPs into workforce development services.

Table 8: NCP Choices Impact on NCPs' Workforce Development Participation

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time NCPs participating in Choices program	33.2%	.1%	33.1% **
Any Choices participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	90.3%	.9%	89.4% **
Percent of time NCPs participating in any workforce development program(s)	34.2%	1.2%	33.0% **
Any workforce development participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	90.9%	6.4%	84.5% **
Capias issued for arrest of NCP	19.1%	12.4%	6.7% **

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

¹⁵ Note that these 'any workforce development' measures are not strictly independent of the 'any Choices' measures above. They are presented as additional descriptive information only.

Table 8 also indicates that those ordered into NCP Choices were *potentially* subjected to greater rates of incarceration through the issuance of capiases. Note, however, that this figure should be interpreted with caution, since not all capiases result in jail time, and conversely, not all jail time for non-compliance is initiated through the issuance of a capias. It should also be noted that, although we currently have no adequate measure of this, it is possible that targeted NCP Choices clients would have gone to jail at higher rates had the program not been made available to them. Nevertheless, these findings suggest overall that although compliance with the order to participate in NCP Choices was the predominant response of NCPs, some of them still required additional encouragement.

Impacts by Site

Additional tests indicated that the estimated impacts of NCP Choices on all workforce development and capias issuance measures varied significantly by site. The results of these comparisons are shown in Table 8. Somewhat surprisingly, Hidalgo County, which showed the greatest impacts on child support collections, showed the least impact on workforce development participation. These differences are due in part to reduced participation by NCPs ordered into the program in Hidalgo County, as might have been expected due to their lack of immediate enrollment on site at the courthouse. Some of this reduced effect on workforce participation in Hidalgo also appears to be due to slightly greater workforce development participation among comparison group members in this site (see Appendix). Also interesting is the finding that Hidalgo County showed no impact of NCP Choices on the rate of capias issuance among the sites. Taken together, these findings suggest that Hidalgo County achieved the greatest compliance among NCPs, in terms of increased child support collections, but that not all of the child support gains resulted from delivery of workforce development services.

Table 9: NCP Choices Impacts on NCPs' Workforce Development Participation by Site

	Bexar	Galveston/ Brazoria	El Paso	Hidalgo
Percent of time NCPs participating in Choices program	55.0% **	30.6% **	17.0% **	27.2% **
Any Choices participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	84.1% **	95.1% **	94.8% **	82.8% **
Percent of time NCPs participating in any workforce development program(s)	54.3% **	31.4% **	16.4% **	29.2% **
Any workforce development participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	81.2% **	88.2% **	91.8% **	69.0% **
Capias issued for arrest of NCP	10.5% **	5.0% **	5.3% **	1.8%

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

Table 10: NCP Choices Impact on Employment and Earnings

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time NCP employed	46.7%	40.7%	6.0%**
Average quarterly earnings, among employed NCPs	\$2385	\$2691	-\$306**

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

Overall

As shown in Table 10, the NCP Choices program appeared to have significant impacts on both NCP employment rates and earnings levels, but interestingly these two effects went in opposite directions. Although six percent more NCP Choices participants were employed at any given time after program entry, those who were employed earned about \$300 *less* per quarter than did employed comparison group members. The increased employment effect is consistent with program goals, but the reduced earnings level is somewhat troublesome. It is quite possible that the reduced earnings levels of those employed is a direct result of a greater share of NCP Choices participants gaining employment, albeit in low-wage entry-level jobs. If this is the case, then the negative earnings effect might be expected to diminish over time, as those recently entering jobs gain more experience. In fact, the tendency toward lesser earnings among NCP Choices enrollees is reduced somewhat from the impact reported in the preliminary report (Schroeder et al, 2007), which would tend to support this prediction. On the whole, these two opposing impacts tend to cancel each other, so that the net NCP Choices impact on average earnings across all participants, whether employed or not, is close to zero.

Impacts by Site

Impacts of NCP Choices on employment and earnings were not found to vary significantly by site. Thus, no site-specific comparisons are presented (but see Appendix for details).

Receipt of TANF by Custodial Parents

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

Table 11 illustrates that, as expected, and consistent with program goals, custodial parents associated with NCP Choices program participants were significantly less likely than

those associated with comparison group members to be receiving TANF at any given point in time following program entry. This 1.1 percentage-point decrease in TANF receipt, although seemingly small in absolute terms, represents about a ten percent decrease in TANF receipt relative to that of CPs associated with the comparison group. This suggests that the NCP Choices program successfully led to decreased reliance on TANF benefits among custodial parents associated with NCP Choices participants.

Table 11: NCP Choices Impact on Receipt of TANF by Custodial Parent

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time CP(s) receiving TANF benefits	9.7%	10.8%	-1.1% **

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

Impacts by Site

The NCP Choices impact on TANF receipt by the custodial parent was found to vary significantly by site. As with the child support measures, the greatest reductions in TANF receipt were found in the Hidalgo County site. Lesser reductions in TANF receipt were found in the Bexar County and Galveston/Brazoria sites, and no significant impact on TANF receipt was found in El Paso County.

Table 12: NCP Choices Impacts on Receipt of TANF by Custodial Parent by Site

	Bexar	Galveston/ Brazoria	El Paso	Hidalgo
Percent of time CP(s) receiving TANF benefits	-1.4% *	-1.9% *	1.3%	-5.5% **

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

Discussion

In summary, the results of the impact analysis suggest that those ordered into the NCP Choices program were more likely to pay their child support obligations, paid more of it, and paid it more consistently over time. Those ordered into NCP Choices also displayed greater participation in workforce development, as compared to comparison group members, whether measured as participation in Choices itself, or in any major workforce development program. And, consistent with the options placed before them, NCP Choices enrollees were also slightly more likely to have capias issued for their arrest. Those ordered into NCP Choices were subsequently employed at higher rates, but among those who were employed, they had lesser average earnings. Finally, the custodial parents associated with NCP Choices participants showed lesser rates of TANF receipt subsequent to program entry.

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

Also encouraging among the results reported here is the finding of positive impacts on virtually all the outcome measures at all of the four sites. Generally, one can expect to see lesser statistical significance of impacts when estimated at the site level, due simply to reduced statistical power associated with smaller sample sizes at this level of analysis. That does not appear to have been the case with NCP Choices, however, as the local impacts also tended to be statistically significant to a large degree. This robustness of findings across sites

serves as a testament to the strength of the design of the NCP Choices program, and should bode well for any planned expansion of NCP Choices beyond these four sites. Sometimes the strength of programs can rely too heavily on the presence of dedicated staff to make them work, and thus might fail a wider rollout when such dedicated staff members cannot be placed at all locations. Although there is clearly no shortage of highly dedicated staff members at the four NCP Choices sites, the program results do appear to be robust enough to be successful even if it were staffed with ordinary human beings.

Notwithstanding the previous paragraph, some significant site differences did emerge in the NCP Choices program impacts. In particular, it seems as though the Hidalgo County site showed the best results on most measures. Hidalgo had the greatest increases in child support collection, and the greatest reduction in TANF participation by associated CPs. These differences are difficult to explain, however, particularly since Hidalgo also had the least increases in workforce development participation and zero impact on capias issuance for noncompliance. It is possible, of course, to explain this pattern by assuming that Hidalgo NCPs were simply most compliant in the option of paying their child support when ordered, thus requiring lesser workforce development, and lesser use of the threat of jail time. This explanation is not very satisfying, however, since these NCPs did not take advantage of ample opportunities to pay beforehand, including previous enforcement actions and prior court appearances for nonpayment.

A related, somewhat puzzling feature of the results presented here is revealed when one tries to reconcile the differential program impacts by site with the findings of the process analysis. One of the few distinguishing features about the Hidalgo site that was uncovered in the site visits was related to their lesser ability to provide an immediate connection for NCPs to workforce services, due to lack of on-site workforce facilities at the courthouse, and currently inadequate technology for on-site enrollment. But this should have led to lesser impacts in Hidalgo County, not greater. It was noted, however, that Hidalgo County had three workforce staff members in court, so it is possible that this more than made up for the previously noted weakness.

Caveats and Limitations of Analysis

It is critical to note that, to the extent that not everyone ordered into the program participates in Choices, the design of this evaluation does *not* test for effects of the Choices program itself. This is because some who are ordered into the program will almost certainly prefer to find a job on their own, or may already have found one, while some will find the money to make a child support payment to avoid going to jail, and others will simply go to jail. Thus, instead of measuring the effects of the Choices program, this impact evaluation measures the effects of being given the choice to participate in the Choices program or make a payment, with the threat of jail time for non-compliance. While this is clearly one of the best inducements to encourage participation in workforce development among NCPs that we have seen in the literature, and the results bear this out with over 90 percent participation, it is still not quite perfect. As a result, we can conclude only that a portion of the measured effect is due to Choices participation, and a portion is due to the motivating properties of the choice NCPs are given.

Furthermore, the utilization of a quasi-experimental comparison group design has to some extent limited our ability to conclude that the effects observed were caused by the NCP Choices program. The results of a well done quasi-experiment can suggest but not prove a causal connection between the NCP Choices program and the outcomes observed. The strength of this conclusion depends on the ability of researchers to identify a comparison group that is as equivalent as possible to the NCP Choices group just before being ordered into the program. In this case, the NCP Choices and comparison groups appeared nearly identical on all measured dimensions. However, the possibility still exists that the two groups differed on some *unmeasured* dimensions that could at least partially account for the impacts. Refinements to the comparison group selection for this report, including the addition of arrears balances, obligation amounts, and project RIO participation, had the effect of substantially increasing confidence levels in these findings, as compared to the similarly positive findings in the preliminary report (Schroeder et al, 2007). Continuing to refine the comparison group selection for subsequent reports should help to ensure the equivalence of the two groups before program entry, and thus add to our confidence that the NCP Choices program itself was solely responsible for the positive impacts.

Another caveat to this study is related to slight differences among procedures at the four sites, as revealed by the process study. Because the sites vary in many respects, in

addition to these procedural variations, it is not possible to conclusively prove that one feature or another is responsible for the differential success of the sites. Thus, it is difficult to know what components of the program were responsible for the largely positive program impacts, or in fact whether the program simply works better for the different populations or geographies of these sites. On the other hand, the fact that the findings were positive in all sites suggests that the NCP Choices program is robust enough to work in different environments, and with slightly varying procedures.

It is also possible that the NCPs who entered the program later, and thus experienced a more mature NCP Choices program, could have shown even greater benefits. This possibility will be explored in detail in the final report, when the expected sample sizes and longer follow-up intervals will better support such analysis.

Next Steps

As described above, the comparison group selection will continue to be further refined to enhance the confidence in the internal validity of this study. We will also seek to include better measures of offender status, both for inclusion in the matching procedure, and as a potentially superior measure of incarceration as an outcome (in lieu of the capias issuance measure). Outcomes will also be reported with additional clients and at greater follow-up intervals in the report to be completed in summer 2008. This report will also include further process analysis based on additional interviews that should aid in deciphering the reasons behind the differential site impacts.

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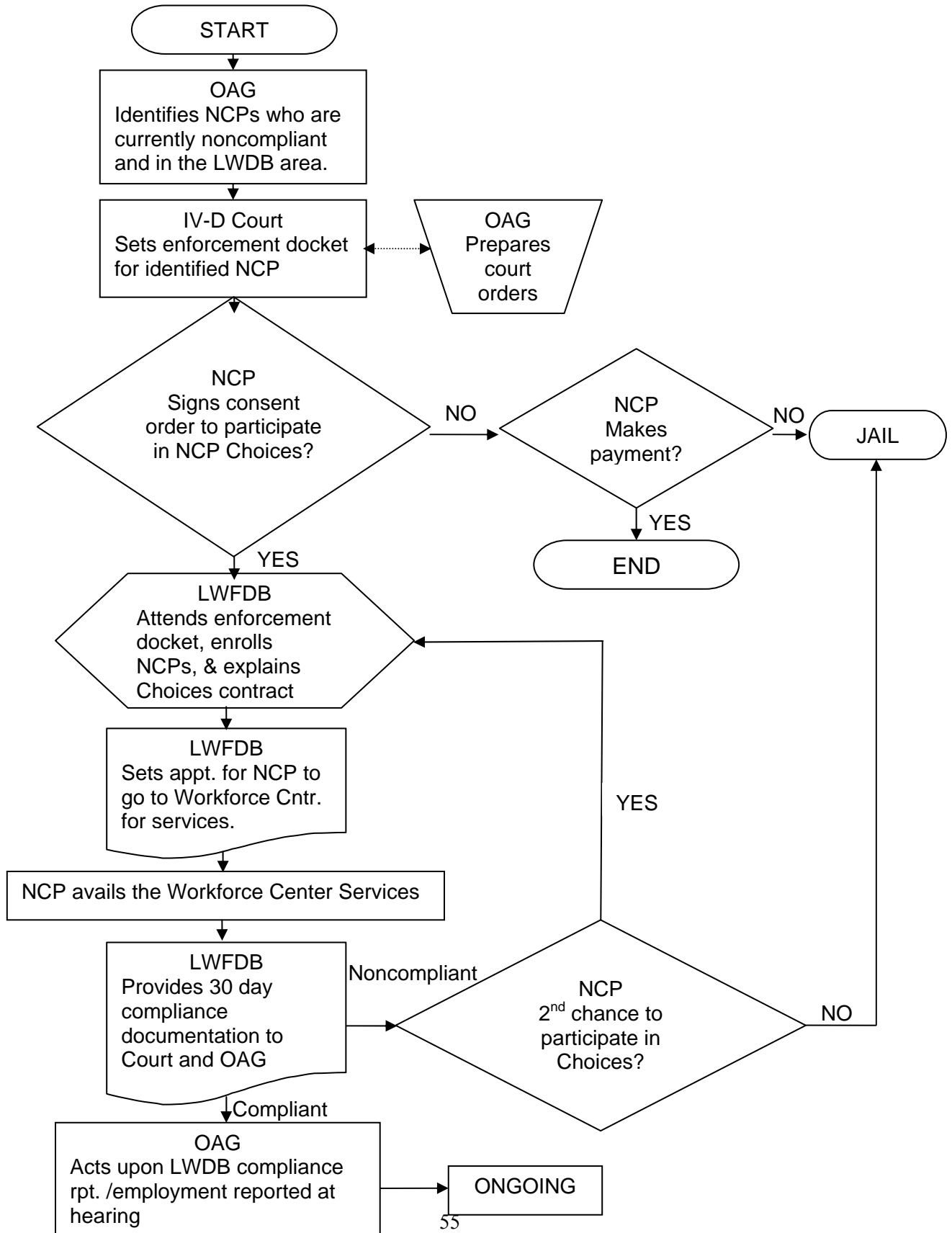
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Appendix A

This appendix includes Figure 1, with a detailed participant flow diagram for the NCP Choices program, followed by detailed results of the matching procedure, separately by site, in Tables A-1 to A-4. Next are detailed outcome results, also by site, in Tables A-5 to A-8.

Figure 1. NCP Choices Program Participant Flow



**Table A- 1: Comparison of NCP Choices Clients
with Selected Comparison Group, Bexar County**

	NCP Choices	Comparison Group	
All NCPs	N=237	N=237	
NCP age (years)	33.5	33.1	
NCP male	96.2%	96.2%	
NCP number of active CS cases	1.9	1.9	
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	21.0	21.7	
NCP employed at program entry	43.5%	43.5%	
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	39.9%	42.5%	
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program	\$1,639	\$1,710	
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	52.3%	52.3%	
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	34.4	34.6	
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	8.1	8.0	
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	22.6%	22.6%	
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	13.1%	11.4%	
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior year	20.9%	17.8%	
Any Choices participation in year prior to program	.8%	1.3%	
Any ES participation in year prior to program	.4%	.8%	
Any FSE&T participation in year prior to program	.4%	.4%	
Any WIA participation in year prior to program	1.7%	1.7%	
Any Project RIO participation in year prior to program	5.5%	2.1%	
Capias issued for arrest of NCP in 6 months prior to program	31.6%	31.6%	
Approximate arrears balance at program entry	\$51,221	\$45,516	
Total current support obligation (PP1) at program entry	\$649	\$606	
Total arrears obligation (PP2) at program entry	\$148	\$121	
Those experiencing an earnings dip	N=124	N=124	
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	4.4	4.6	
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	84.5%	84.9%	

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

**Table A- 2: Comparison of NCP Choices Clients with
Selected Comparison Group, Galveston/Brazoria Counties**

	NCP Choices	Comparison Group	
All NCPs	N=154	N=154	
NCP age (years)	34.5	33.9	
NCP male	94.2%	94.2%	
NCP number of active CS cases	1.6	1.5	
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	20.7	22.0	
NCP employed at program entry	32.5%	31.2%	
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	37.2%	39.7%	
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program	\$2,357	\$2,372	
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	54.5%	54.5%	
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	30.7	31.6	
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	7.7	7.4	
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	16.9%	17.5%	
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	13.0%	9.7%	
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior year	12.7%	8.9%	
Any Choices participation in year prior to program	1.3%	1.3%	
Any ES participation in year prior to program	2.6%	.0%	*
Any FSE&T participation in year prior to program	3.9%	1.3%	
Any WIA participation in year prior to program	4.5%	3.2%	
Any Project RIO participation in year prior to program	1.3%	.6%	
Capias issued for arrest of NCP in 6 months prior to program	30.5%	30.5%	
Approximate arrears balance at program entry	\$33,728	\$25,162	
Total current support obligation (PP1) at program entry	\$520	\$451	
Total arrears obligation (PP2) at program entry	\$113	\$127	
Those experiencing an earnings dip	N=84	N=84	
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	4.6	5.0	
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	87.2%	87.3%	

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

**Table A- 3: Comparison of NCP Choices Clients
with Selected Comparison Group, El Paso County**

	NCP Choices	Comparison Group	
All NCPs	N=258	N=258	
NCP age (years)	34.2	33.6	
NCP male	97.3%	97.3%	
NCP number of active CS cases	1.5	1.5	
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	20.3	20.7	
NCP employed at program entry	47.7%	47.7%	
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	47.2%	46.6%	
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program	\$1,931	\$1,962	
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	51.6%	51.6%	
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	33.0	33.4	
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	8.9	8.3	
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	21.1%	21.2%	
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	15.1%	12.8%	
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior year	18.5%	16.6%	
Any Choices participation in year prior to program	2.7%	3.9%	
Any ES participation in year prior to program	3.5%	2.3%	
Any FSE&T participation in year prior to program	1.6%	.0%	*
Any WIA participation in year prior to program	1.9%	1.9%	
Any Project RIO participation in year prior to program	.8%	.0%	
Capias issued for arrest of NCP in 6 months prior to program	10.5%	10.5%	
Approximate arrears balance at program entry	\$23,351	\$20,655	
Total current support obligation (PP1) at program entry	\$441	\$370	
Total arrears obligation (PP2) at program entry	\$139	\$113	
Those experiencing an earnings dip	N=133	N=133	
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	4.7	4.7	
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	82.6%	81.6%	

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

**Table A- 4: Comparison of NCP Choices Clients
with Selected Comparison Group, Hidalgo County**

	NCP Choices	Comparison Group	
All NCPs	N=102	N=102	
NCP age (years)	34.6	34.2	
NCP male	99.0%	99.0%	
NCP number of active CS cases	1.3	1.3	
Time since first observed NCP earnings (quarters)	19.6	20.1	
NCP employed at program entry	24.5%	24.5%	
Percent of time NCP employed over 4 years prior to program	30.6%	34.4%	
NCP average quarterly earnings over 4 years prior to program	\$1,824	\$1,819	
NCP experienced earnings dip of at least 20% within prior 2 years	37.3%	37.3%	
Time since CS first collected on this case (months)	35.6	36.4	
Time since CS last collected on this case (months)	6.8	7.6	
Percent of time CS collection was made in prior year	26.2%	26.1%	
Any CS collection made via federal offset in prior year	17.6%	15.7%	
Percent of time TANF received by associated CP(s) in prior year	14.3%	11.1%	
Any Choices participation in year prior to program	2.0%	2.9%	
Any ES participation in year prior to program	19.6%	11.8%	
Any FSE&T participation in year prior to program	2.0%	2.0%	
Any WIA participation in year prior to program	4.9%	4.9%	
Any Project RIO participation in year prior to program	1.0%	.0%	
Capias issued for arrest of NCP in 6 months prior to program	13.7%	13.7%	
Approximate arrears balance at program entry	\$15,853	\$14,303	
Total current support obligation (PP1) at program entry	\$347	\$301	
Total arrears obligation (PP2) at program entry	\$40	\$61	
Those experiencing an earnings dip	N=38	N=38	
Time since earnings dip occurred (quarters)	4.6	4.8	
Percent of earnings which earnings dip represents	92.6%	91.0%	

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

Table A- 5: NCP Choices Impacts by Site, Bexar County

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time any child support collections made	40.3%	27.7%	12.6% **
Percent of time current child support amount collected	32.1%	26.7%	5.4% **
Monthly average child support collections	\$149	\$103	\$46 **
Any child support collection made within 9 months of program entry	84.2%	65.6%	18.6% **
Consistent payment of child support, at least 2 out of 3 months	39.0%	27.1%	11.9% **
Consistent payment of child support, 3 out of 3 months	22.7%	16.9%	5.8% **
Consistently meet current child support obligation, at least 2 out of 3 months	20.5%	14.4%	6.1% **
Consistently meet current child support obligation, 3 out of 3 months	9.9%	8.8%	1.1%
Percent of time CP(s) receiving TANF benefits	9.8%	11.2%	-1.4% *
Percent of time NCPs participating in Choices program	54.7%	-.3%	55.0% **
Any Choices participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	83.9%	-.2%	84.1% **
Percent of time NCPs participating in any workforce development program(s)	54.8%	.5%	54.3% **
Any workforce development participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	84.8%	3.6%	81.2% **
Capias issued for arrest of NCP	28.3%	17.8%	10.5% **
Percent of time NCP employed	46.9%	41.8%	5.1% *
Average quarterly earnings, among employed NCPs	\$1856	\$2152	-\$296

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

Table A- 6: NCP Choices Impacts by Site, Galveston/Brazoria Counties

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time any child support collections made	44.6%	24.9%	19.7% **
Percent of time current child support amount collected	30.9%	28.9%	2.0%
Monthly average child support collections	\$172	\$95	\$77 **
Any child support collection made within 9 months of program entry	88.0%	56.1%	31.9% **
Consistent payment of child support, at least 2 out of 3 months	45.7%	24.5%	21.2% **
Consistent payment of child support, 3 out of 3 months	27.6%	14.9%	12.7% **
Consistently meet current child support obligation, at least 2 out of 3 months	26.3%	13.9%	12.4% **
Consistently meet current child support obligation, 3 out of 3 months	14.4%	7.4%	7.0% **
Percent of time CP(s) receiving TANF benefits	7.6%	9.5%	-1.9% *
Percent of time NCPs participating in Choices program	30.1%	-.5%	30.6% **
Any Choices participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	94.1%	-1.0%	95.1% **
Percent of time NCPs participating in any workforce development program(s)	32.5%	1.1%	31.4% **
Any workforce development participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	94.6%	6.4%	88.2% **
Capias issued for arrest of NCP	22.3%	17.3%	5.0% **
Percent of time NCP employed	41.0%	32.8%	8.2% **
Average quarterly earnings, among employed NCPs	\$2721	\$2517	\$204

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

Table A- 7: NCP Choices Impacts by Site, El Paso County

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time any child support collections made	43.3%	29.7%	13.6% **
Percent of time current child support amount collected	32.9%	31.2%	1.7%
Monthly average child support collections	\$143	\$104	\$39 **
Any child support collection made within 9 months of program entry	84.7%	66.2%	18.5% **
Consistent payment of child support, at least 2 out of 3 months	44.6%	28.9%	15.7% **
Consistent payment of child support, 3 out of 3 months	27.9%	20.6%	7.3% **
Consistently meet current child support obligation, at least 2 out of 3 months	26.1%	17.9%	8.2% **
Consistently meet current child support obligation, 3 out of 3 months	13.8%	11.2%	2.6% **
Percent of time CP(s) receiving TANF benefits	12.1%	10.8%	1.3%
Percent of time NCPs participating in Choices program	17.5%	.5%	17.0% **
Any Choices participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	98.0%	3.2%	94.8% **
Percent of time NCPs participating in any workforce development program(s)	17.7%	1.3%	16.4% **
Any workforce development participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	98.0%	6.2%	91.8% **
Capias issued for arrest of NCP	11.5%	6.2%	5.3% **
Percent of time NCP employed	49.1%	44.8%	4.3% *
Average quarterly earnings, among employed NCPs	\$2560	\$2960	-\$400 *

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

Table A- 8: NCP Choices Impacts by Site, Hidalgo County

	NCP Choices Adjusted Mean	Comparison Adjusted Mean	NCP Choices Impact
Percent of time any child support collections made	59.7%	31.9%	27.8% **
Percent of time current child support amount collected	50.1%	38.5%	11.6% **
Monthly average child support collections	\$270	\$114	\$156 **
Any child support collection made within 9 months of program entry	98.7%	67.3%	31.4% **
Consistent payment of child support, at least 2 out of 3 months	61.8%	30.5%	31.3% **
Consistent payment of child support, 3 out of 3 months	37.8%	19.6%	18.2% **
Consistently meet current child support obligation, at least 2 out of 3 months	50.6%	21.5%	29.1% **
Consistently meet current child support obligation, 3 out of 3 months	27.7%	10.9%	16.8% **
Percent of time CP(s) receiving TANF benefits	5.7%	11.2%	-5.5% **
Percent of time NCPs participating in Choices program	27.0%	-.2%	27.2% **
Any Choices participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	82.4%	-.4%	82.8% **
Percent of time NCPs participating in any workforce development program(s)	30.7%	1.5%	29.2% **
Any workforce development participation by NCPs within 9 months of program entry	84.5%	15.5%	69.0% **
Capias issued for arrest of NCP	10.3%	8.5%	1.8%
Percent of time NCP employed	47.5%	35.3%	12.2% **
Average quarterly earnings, among employed NCPs	\$3119	\$3696	-\$577

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