

**Issues Discussed at
Connecticut Child Support Policy Conference
Friday, June 27, 2014**

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This conference focused on the relationship between child support and effective parenting. It emphasized the importance of co-parenting and of father involvement with their children. The judicial branch, Support Enforcement Services (Charisse Hutton) and Family Support Magistrates Division (Norma Sanchez-Figueroa) emphasized the importance of parental involvement and the negative influence of excessive support orders.

Many attendees were from Connecticut Department of Social Services. Bureau of Child Support Enforcement was the best represented group.

- Others were from nonprofit organizations related to divorce and child support.
- Examples: Madonna Place in Norwich. CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Major Themes of the Conference:

- The damage caused by absence of one parent, typically the father. Nationwide, 25% of children now live only with their mother.
- The keynote speaker was Vicki Turetski, Commissioner, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement.
 - She emphasized that regular child support payments increase with parental involvement.
 - She lauded the Fatherhood Initiative, a federal program that began in 2000.
- Ms. Turetski pointed to five factors increasing regular payment of child support.
 - Right sized orders for child support, which she placed at 15-20% of income. She pointed out that, if orders are too large, the payor gets discouraged.
 - Debt reduction - programs that reduce massive arrearages. Participants in these programs get reductions in debt in return for regular payment of current child support.
 - Family income. Excessive support orders and arrearages are most likely to occur when both parents earn low incomes.
 - Parenting time. Noncustodial parents with more parenting time are more likely to pay child support.
 - Employment programs increase child support payments.
- A broader concept of child support has been tested in several forums.
 - On tribal lands, in-kind payments (e.g., firewood, or fresh fish) can be counted towards child support.

- Child care provided by a NCP is counted as child support in some pilot programs.
- Parent involvement was promoted as more important than child support.
 - Liza Andrews, CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence, stated that co-parenting can be successfully structured even where there is a history of domestic violence.
 - Co-parenting techniques were discussed, such as familiar objects and routines shared by both households.
- David Mulligan, Director, Bureau of Child Support Enforcement discussed CT's Commission on Child Support Guidelines.
 - The Commission has been meeting for 4.5 years and it still has not adopted new Guidelines. Current Guidelines are from 2005.
 - The Commission funded an economic study as the basis for new child support Guidelines. It was completed June 5, 2012 by Jane Venohr, PhD, Center for Policy Research (CPR), Denver, Colorado.
 - The CPR Commission study recommended lowering Guideline percentages for low income obligors and raising them for higher income.
 - The Commission recommended accepting the part of the CPR study that increases percentages, but rejected lowering Guidelines for low income obligors.
 - Mr. Mulligan pointed out that this is detrimental to child wellbeing and to father involvement.

Summary of Conference Theme

The theme of the conference might be summarized by a 2014 letter from DSS Commissioner Rodrick L. Bremby to CT's Commission on Child Support Guidelines. Commissioner Bremby makes the case for accepting the entire CPR economic study. He says "A father's emotional, social and educational support as well as financial support is imperative to the growth of a well-rounded child." He states that the percentages required of low income obligors are unrealistic and "counterproductive to fostering the parent-child relationship as it may lead to uncollectable child support orders and drive noncustodial parents to underground economies and alienation from their children."

Conclusions with respect to root causes of excessively high child support orders

The root cause of the problem addressed by the Conference is the economic studies used to justify excessively high support orders. The studies are flawed in many ways, including: 1) The assumption that percentages should be based on an intact family; 2) the assumption that only one parent, the “custodial parent” is capable of making financial decisions on behalf of children.

A 2013 economic study by Sarro and Rogers provides some new thinking and new data. See: Mark A. Sarro and R. Mark Rogers, “Economic Review of the Massachusetts Child Support Guidelines,” submitted to the Massachusetts Child Support Guidelines Task Force (June, 2013). Here are some key points from that study:

- “Most states base their child support guidelines, to some extent, on specific economic studies. However, the most widely used studies do not measure actual direct spending on children and are based on national data. Most child costs are not directly observable, but rather are indirect costs shared by adults and children in a household, such as housing and food. Therefore, the available economic data are estimates with theoretical and practical limitations, and the resulting child cost estimates are informative and important to consider, but they are not determinative.” p 1
- “There simply is not a definitive source of data to dictate whether the resulting Guidelines amounts are right or wrong with certainty and in every case. This is why presumptive awards are rebuttable, based on case specific facts that diverge from presumptive facts. The rest of this report summarizes the economic principles, approaches, and most current data available to help inform the Task Force’s review of the current Guidelines.” p. 13
- Income Shares estimates, such as the Betson-Rothbarth amounts, also rely on data from intact (specifically, husband-wife) households to inform policy decisions for households, which are not intact. These guideline models implicitly assume economic decisions are made the same way for separate households as for married households, when, in fact, the economic tradeoffs may be very different. One obvious difference is the additional overhead cost required by two separate households relative to the cost of a single household. By failing to account for this additional cost, economic models likely overestimate the standard of living of a non-intact household at a given income level. Maintaining a standard of living estimated based on intact household data likely requires more income than is actually available to a non-intact household.” pp 19-20. Sarro and Rogers show that shared parenting implies higher fixed costs associated with maintaining two households, and that intact families would adjust to such costs.
- Sarro and Rogers (2013) produce detailed data – based on a large random sampling of support orders from several districts within Massachusetts –

showing that a large percentage of couples agree to amounts far below Guidelines. These new data raise questions: why any state adopts Guidelines that many consider unreasonable? Why is only one parent presumed to be competent to make spending decisions on behalf of children?