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Child Support Debt in Wisconsin Frustrates Economic Stability for Black Parents and Families

Parents who are behind in child support payments—called “arrears”—often owe a significant portion to the government to repay cash assistance that their child’s household received. Because African-American families are much more likely than other families to have received cash benefits, black parents who are court-ordered to pay child support are also much more likely to owe child support debt to the government.

Nationally, as of 2013, according to the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE):

- Parents owed **\$30 billion** in child support debt to federal and state governments—not to children.
- **26%** of all child support debt is owed to, and can be kept by, federal and state governments.

In Wisconsin, as of 2013, according to OCSE:

- **\$513 million** in child support debt is owed to the Wisconsin and federal governments—not to kids.
- This is **more than 19%** of the total child support debt owed by parents in Wisconsin.

States have the option to pass through a portion of current-month child support payments to families who receive cash benefits. However, Wisconsin’s policy only passes through 75% per month to each family. Any payments for past-due child support owed to the state are kept by the state. CFFPP estimates that:

- Parents struggling to achieve economic security pay **at least \$15 million every year** in child support that is kept by the Wisconsin and federal governments instead of going to their children.

African-American parents who are court-ordered to pay child support debt are much more likely to owe a portion of their debt to the Wisconsin and federal governments—not to their children. This is because:

- Black children are **at least 14 times** more likely than white children to get Wisconsin Works (W-2, TANF) cash assistance benefits according to CFFPP’s analysis of TANF and Census data.
- Black children accounted for **53%** of all children who received Wisconsin Works (W-2, TANF) benefits in 2011, however, they were only 9% of all children in Wisconsin.

The Center for Family Policy and Practice makes the following policy recommendations:

- Require that 100% of all child support payments go to children and families.
- Eliminate the requirement that parents who receive Wisconsin Works (W-2, TANF) cash assistance benefits assign their child support payments to the government.
- Require child support agencies to report the demographics—race, ethnicity, gender, income—of all noncustodial and custodial parents and their children, so that racial disparities can be tracked.

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