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Using a structured decision making protocol to stratify caseloads in the child support program

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2010

Abstract

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MPA., California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2007

BS, University of Phoenix, 2004

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Although structured decision making and risk assessment protocols have successfully been used in human service programs, little research has been done on their applicability in the child support program. In this study, problems identified with child support case management were examined, along with positive and negative attributes of various risk assessment tools utilized in other arenas. The overall research problem asserted that there are no structured decision making protocols in the child support program to support case assignment by enforcement difficulty. The primary research question asked whether or not a process stratified by risk and level of enforcement difficulty could be developed to increase child support collections and improve program cost-effectiveness using custodial parent data obtained at time of intake. The theoretical foundation of the study revolved around descriptive decision theory and specifically, risk assessment as means to stratify child support caseloads. A nonparametric quantitative research methodology was utilized to examine 1501 cases from the program. The goal was to identify those variables that had the greatest impact on case payment so that they could be incorporated into a structured decision making protocol. The results of the data analysis, using a Cramer's V test for association, indicated that of the 11 independent variables chosen for the study, seven variables appeared to be very strongly associated with the dependent variable. Those variables were custodial parent age, gender, ethnicity, welfare status, number of children, relationship to each child and the ages of the children. Ultimately, the social change implication is to improve collection of child support payments for low income children and families. Enhancing the economic lifestyles of these individuals has the potential to reduce government dependency and to improve economic self sufficiency.

Using a Structured Decision Making Protocol to Stratify Caseloads in the Child Support Program

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Dedication

To my mother, Dolores, who always believed in me. I'm sorry she isn't here to share in this accomplishment but somehow I know she is nonetheless very proud of me.

To my grandchildren, Shannon, Megan, Everett and Charlotte. May you experience educational opportunities as exciting and challenging as this one was for me.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend appreciation and thanks to everyone who supported this massive undertaking in one way or another. Specifically, I would like to thank my friend and fellow classmate, Natalie Chrastil, for her unconditional encouragement as we both labored through the doctoral processes. At every step of the way, Natalie has been a source of inspiration and intellectual support. This dissertation would not have been possible without her.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of my committee. My chair, Dr. Gloria Billingsley, has been a constant source of support and encouragement. Her guidance and expertise were truly inspirational. Similarly, Drs. Joyce Haines, David Milen and Raj Singh cheered me on and helped to make this germ of an idea a reality.

When it came time to actually begin the statistical analysis critical to this study, my friend and fellow classmate, Shelley Butler, patiently walked me through the complex world of SPSS and the use of syntax. I shall be forever grateful for her guidance. My colleagues at the workplace, David “Jake” Jacobson, David Kilgore, Dennis Snapp, Alejandro "Alex" Resurreccion and Doyle Smith helped me decide which independent variables to focus on and then were instrumental in the actual extraction of the 1501 sample cases from the sequel server. I am very appreciative for their assistance in this process.

Finally, I am deeply thankful for my life partner, Douglas Warde. His unconditional support, patience and unqualified love truly set the stage for this doctoral

journey. At every step of the process, he was there to share my victories and lament my setbacks. My life is better because of him.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background

Federal and state child support laws require that parents who do not live with their children must provide those children with both financial and medical support. Over the years there have been several attempts to strengthen the national child support program. The most significant progress occurred with the passage of Title IV-D (P.L. 93-647) of the Social Security Act (SSAct). Signed into law by President Gerald Ford in January 1975, Title IV-D required every state to operate a child support enforcement program but largely left the program's design and execution to each state. The legislation authorized federal matching funds, at a 2:1 rate, to augment state resources. The federal government also became involved in locating noncustodial (absent, or nonresidential) parents (Hatcher, 2007). Under Title IV-D, custodial parents who received welfare benefits through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program had to identify the father of the child in their custody and sign over any state-collected child support to the government as reimbursement for the welfare expenditures. Failure to cooperate would result in reduced welfare benefits (Hatcher, 2007).

The overarching goal of the child support program is to collect money from the noncustodial parent for the dependent child and the custodial parent. The process includes establishing parentage, obtaining formal judgments for payment and enforcing the judgment. This study proposes a novel approach for assessing risk in order to determine the level of enforcement intervention necessary to collect child support in a particular case.

Program Administration

Before Title IV-D, state welfare agencies were the mandated enforcers of child support. Title IV-D required each state to designate one state organizational unit to administer its child support program. Although Title IV-D presented opportunities for innovation (Sorenson & Halpern, 2000), the amendment's latitude created significant challenges for local and state child support enforcement programs. Some states implemented programs administered exclusively by state employees. Other states, like California, implemented programs in which state officials determined program policy and direction but city or county employees conducted the program's daily operations. Ten states implemented programs administered completely at the local level.

Currently, most state child support programs are located within a social-services department. However, those of Alaska, Arkansas, Florida, and Massachusetts are within the state's department of revenue and those of Guam, Hawaii, Texas, and the Virgin Islands are administered by the attorney general's office (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2009). Until 1999 legislatively mandated changes, California's child support program was located within the state's Department of Social Services and administered by each local jurisdiction's Office of the District Attorney. The legislation created a separate California Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) and mandated a child support department in each county (Waller & Plotnick, 1999). Currently, the California program is state supervised and locally administered in 52 county child support departments. In Los Angeles County, that department is known as the Child Support Services Department (CSSD).

Failure to Cooperate

As a result of Title IV-D, in some states the entire family loses its welfare benefits when a custodial parent fails to cooperate with child support officers (CSOs). In other states, including California, only the uncooperative custodial parent loses her or his welfare benefits. In California $50 of the total amount of child support collected is passed on to the custodial parent. Therefore, the custodial parent has little incentive to provide a CSO with information on the noncustodial parent (Furstenberg, Sherwood, & Sullivan, 1992).

Automation

Automation can be problematic with regard to child support programs (Ducanto, 2009). As of 1981, enhanced federal financial participation (FFP) at the 90% rate became available to state child support enforcement agencies for costs associated with developing and implementing statewide, automated child support systems. The Family Support Act of 1988 mandated that each state have a statewide automated system to meet Title IV-D requirements and set the deadline for enhanced FFP at September 30, 1995. This deadline was later extended for 2 years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

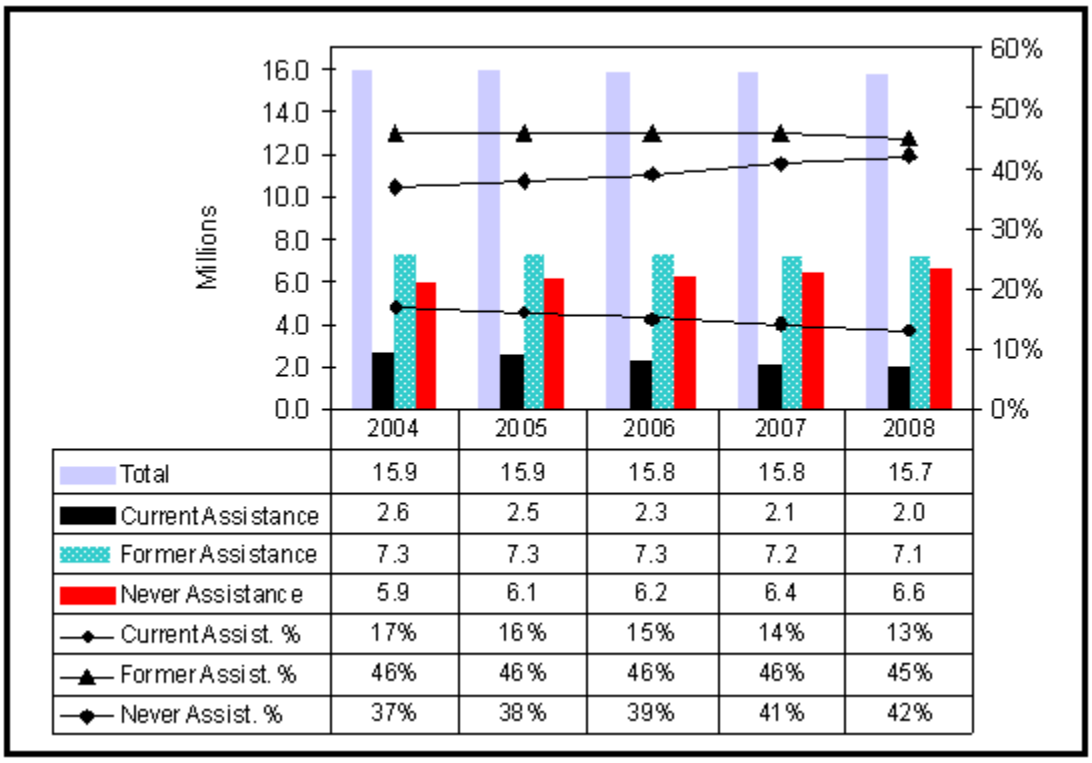
On June 27, 2008 California finally received a Certificate of Achievement from the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) indicating that the state had met the functional requirements of the Family Support Act and of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (HHS, 2008). As a result, California child support enforcement has become high-tech and involves relatively little human intervention in case management. For example, automated child support

systems remind staff of imminent or missed deadlines for important tasks. Most communication with custodial and noncustodial parents is generated through automated systems. Thus, personal contact is reduced and child support collection has a mechanical quality (Ducanto, 2009).

Caseload Composition

The way in which child support cases are categorized can also create problems. Federal law requires that cases be reported as currently assisted, formerly assisted, or never assisted (Federal OCSE, 2008). In current-assistance cases, custodial parents receive (a) benefits under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) of Title IV-A of the SSAct or (b) foster-care payments under Title IV-E of the SSAct. In former-assistance cases, custodial parents received payments under Title IV-A or Title IV-E. In never-assisted cases, custodial parents receive services under Title IV-D but are not currently eligible for, and have not previously received, TANF or foster-care assistance.

Figure 1 shows the nationwide breakdown of the three reporting categories for federal fiscal years (FFYs) 2004–2008. Notably, the percentages of current- and former-assistance cases decreased over the 5-year period, whereas the percentages of never-assisted cases increased. These data suggest that people are leaving welfare and that more individuals who have never received welfare are going to the child support program for enforcement assistance.

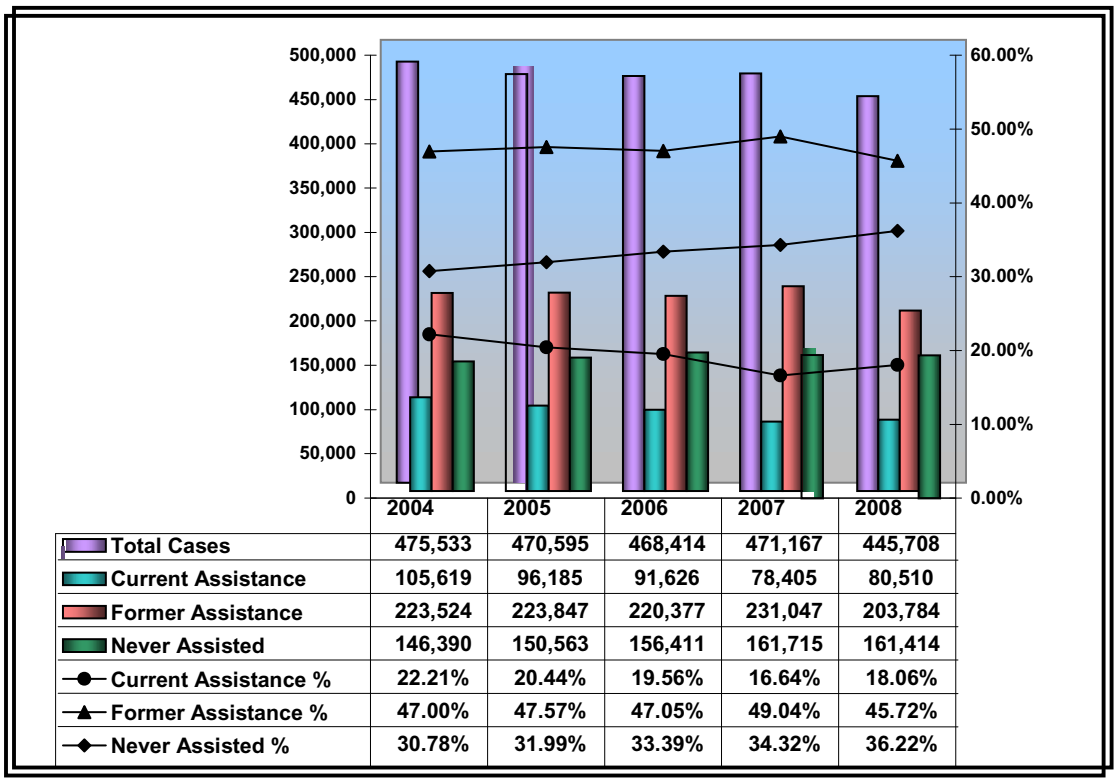


	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Total	15.9	15.9	15.8	15.8	15.7
Current Assistance	2.6	2.5	2.3	2.1	2.0
Former Assistance	7.3	7.3	7.3	7.2	7.1
Never Assistance	5.9	6.1	6.2	6.4	6.6
Current Assist. %	17%	16%	15%	14%	13%
Former Assist. %	46%	46%	46%	46%	45%
Never Assist. %	37%	38%	39%	41%	42%

Figure 1. Currently assisted, formerly assisted, and never-assisted cases and percentages for 5 consecutive fiscal years, nationwide.

From *Form OCSE-157* of the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2005–2009, lines 1 and 3.

Figure 2 shows comparable data for the same 5 years for the Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department (CSSD). Compared to the national figures, the Los Angeles County figures show a higher proportion of currently assisted cases, a slightly higher proportion of formerly assisted cases, and a substantially lower proportion of never-assisted cases. These data suggest that, on average, child support is harder to collect in Los Angeles County than in other parts of the nation.



	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Total Cases	475,533	470,595	468,414	471,167	445,708
Current Assistance	105,619	96,185	91,626	78,405	80,510
Former Assistance	223,524	223,847	220,377	231,047	203,784
Never Assisted	146,390	150,563	156,411	161,715	161,414
Current Assistance %	22.21%	20.44%	19.56%	16.64%	18.06%
Former Assistance %	47.00%	47.57%	47.05%	49.04%	45.72%
Never Assisted %	30.78%	31.99%	33.39%	34.32%	36.22%

Figure 2. Currently assisted, formerly assisted, and never-assisted cases and percentages for 5 consecutive fiscal years, for Los Angeles County.

From Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department.

Generally, it is easier to collect child support payments for middle-class families than for poor families (Baskerville, 2008; Ducanto, 2009). States such as California that have more welfare recipients fare less well with regard to child support collection (Frye, 1997). However, families are categorized as currently assisted, formerly assisted, or never-assisted rather than by their income level, making it difficult for a caseworker to determine which enforcement intervention or approach is likely to be optimal for any particular family.

Provided that a family has a particular socioeconomic level, never-assisted cases are usually easiest to enforce (Baskerville, 2008). In many such cases, the parties have

already participated in, and become subject to, a divorce decree which specifies the terms of child support. In previously assisted or currently assisted cases, it is far more difficult to locate noncustodial parents and enforce child support, given the parents' presumed lower socioeconomic status and the previously noted disincentives to cooperation.

Frye (1997) indicated in testimony before Congress that collections from middle class families were easier to make and yielded higher collections than efforts directed toward poor families. At the time of her testimony, Frye was chief of the California Office of Child Support which was then located within the California Department of Social Services. Frye was lamenting the point that states with greater proportions of welfare recipients would perform at a lesser level than states with smaller numbers of individuals on aid. California has traditionally had large numbers of individuals on welfare, given the generous benefit levels prescribed by the legislature.

National Performance Measures

As prescribed by the Child Support Performance and Incentive Act of 1998, the performance of a state's child support program is assessed in five areas: (a) whether the child's paternity has been established, (b) the percentage of cases with child support orders, (c) collections on current support, (d) the number of cases with collections on arrears, and (e) the program's cost-effectiveness. The first three areas are weighted more heavily than the last two for incentive payment calculation purposes. If a state's score is consistently lower than the federally required minimum, its TANF funding may be reduced.

Ultimately, the success of a state's child support program depends on the amount of money collected in behalf of the children involved. Each state designs and operates its own program. Some states require that the child support agency enforce only public child support orders; other states require that the agency also enforce private child support orders. Performance outcomes are better in the latter states (Baskerville, 2008).

The ability to locate a noncustodial parent, establish a court order, and enforce the judgment largely depends on the custodial parent's willingness to assist child support staff. In many states, there is little or no incentive for the custodial parent to cooperate. Also, the automation of case-management systems reduces the ability of child support workers to personalize their handling of cases and interact with the families involved.

All of these issues contribute to the problem addressed by this study. When child support cases are not stratified by level of difficulty, caseworkers cannot easily determine the best way to enforce collection.

Statement of the Problem

Child support agencies are charged with collecting payments from noncustodial parents within their respective jurisdictional caseloads. Cases are not stratified by their level of enforcement difficulty. In the Los Angeles County CSSD, cases are assigned to CSOs based on the last digit of the case identifier. Would stratification based on level of difficulty result in a more efficient use of limited resources?

Case stratification is a means of acknowledging the differences among child support cases. In its simplest explantion, some cases pay immediately and some require more extensive work on the part of the caseworker. Noncustodial parents have different

motivations for making child support payments, some have different financial abilities to pay support, and others require supportive services, such as counseling or parenting classes, in order to pay. Case stratification, or sorting, is a potential strategy for more effectively targeting limited child support staffing resources (Policy Studies Inc., 2006).

The wide latitude allowed by the federal legislation, combined with the intricacies of California child support legislation passed in 1999, make it challenging for local child support agencies to allocate limited enforcement resources in the most effective way. With a caseload comprising currently, formerly, and never assisted individuals, the child support case manager must depend on the automated system's indications regarding what action to take and when. The manager, therefore, cannot effectively focus on cases requiring more intervention (Ducanto, 2009).

The ability to ascertain the difficulty of enforcement at the onset of a child support case could allow cases to be prioritized on a rational basis. If a structured decision making model could be developed based on actual data from the Los Angeles County CSSD, cases with a high likelihood of payment can be set aside and caseworkers could focus their time and effort on cases requiring more intervention. This approach has the potential to improve outcomes, such as collections of current support due and collections on cases with arrears in Los Angeles County. A study conducted in Knox County Tennessee using a case management stratification approach concluded that a stratification tool was generally a valid indicator of compliance (Policy Studies Inc., 2006). Enhanced compliance can lead to improved performance outcomes for the child support agency.

Research Questions

In the interests of enhancing productivity and efficiency within the Los Angeles County CSSD, this study will address three research questions:

1. Can custodial parent intake data be utilized to determine the difficulty of enforcing child support in a particular case?
2. Can a child support program use structured decision making?
3. What is the potential impact of case stratification on caseloads for child support officers?

Research Hypothesis

This study tests the following hypothesis: There are relationships between custodial parent data and the child support agency's ability to collect full payment from the noncustodial parent for at least 6 consecutive months.

Research Design and Method

This research study utilizes a nonexperimental research design. Events were observed as they naturally occurred and no intervention or treatment was applied to the independent variables. Specifically, under a nonexperimental rubric, this was a study using a Cramer's V nonparametric analysis, and utilizing archival data from the Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department. The goal of the research was to examine the relevance of various independent variables as determinants of case success. This statistical approach has been shown to have wide application in social research (Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973).

The study used archival data from FFY 2008 (October 1, 2007 to September 30, 2008) from the Los Angeles County CSSD. Glaser (1963) and Hyman (1978) have recommended the use of secondary data as more cost-effective and less time-consuming than the collection of primary data.

Variables

Independent Variables

The 11 independent variables were the different categories of custodial parent data from Los Angeles County child support applications in FFY 2007–2008. The variables included the custodial parent's age, gender, residential zip code, ethnicity, marital status, welfare status, number of children and relationship to each child, the ages of the children, whether paternity was known, and whether a court order was present at time of application.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable was case success, defined as receipt of the ordered amount of child support for at least 6 consecutive months. It was hypothesized that a corrrelation existed between at least one independent variable and the dependent variable. The research will be directed at determining the difficulty of enforcing particular child support cases so that cases could be assigned on the basis of likely degree of enforcement difficulty.

Definition of Terms

Actuarial decision making: decision making based on numerical data (Dawes, R., Faust, D., & Meehl, P.,1989).

Clinical decision making: decision making based on personal or professional judgment (Dawes, R., Faust, D., & Meehl, P.,1989).

Custodial parent: the person who lives with and has legal custody of the child. This person may be the child's parent or some other individual designated by the court (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

Decision theory: in statistical theory, the process of making choices between alternatives (Berger, J.O. 1993)

Descriptive decision making: computational decision making (Slovic, P., Fischoff, B., & Lichtenstein, S. 1977).

Genetic testing: testing of blood or tissue to determine paternity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

Noncustodial parent: a parent who does not have primary custody of his or her biological child (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

Normative decision making: judgmental decision making (Slovic, P., Fischoff, B., & Lichtenstein, S. 1977).

Predictive correlational design: A predictive correlational study has the potential to predict a later event (payment of child support) from an earlier set of data (custodial parent variables). Prediction studies are often used to predict or forecast academic success based on variables such as test scores and high school grades (Diem, 2002).

Stratification: the sorting of cases into categories to determine what services or enforcement techniques will be used for the case (Policy Studies Inc., 2006).

Structured decision making: decision making in which the processes and criteria that must guide decision making are formally defined (Shook & Sarri, 2007

Purpose of the Study

Using custodial parent data obtained at intake, this study examined the feasibility of determining case success. Other studies have examined noncustodial parent data. This study focused on custodial parent data because such data are immediately available on opening a case, whereas noncustodial parent data often take weeks or months to obtain.

The current random method of case assignment does not take into account the difficulty of enforcing a particular child support case. If caseworkers can focus on those cases that require more attention, custodial parents may receive more child support and the agency may improve its performance.

Study Rationale

California's child support program is subject to the state's family law codes. A member of the state bar must obtain a court order before enforcement of a child support case can begin. Like other states, California is required by the federal government to show adequate performance on five federal measures. Federal regulations require that a state child support program actively seek to recoup funds spent on welfare recipients and then repay the government for the welfare expenditures. Typically, states allow the custodial parent to receive $50 from the child support funds collected. The balance of the child support collected is assigned back to the state to recover welfare costs associated with the case. In California, custodial parents have little financial incentive to provide

CSOs with the information necessary to locate the noncustodial parent. As a result, custodial parents often fail to provide this information.

A state's child support program receives 66% of its funding from the federal government and must provide the remaining 34%. The amount of federal funding is not capped but is limited by the state's investment in the child support program. California's investment in its program has remained flat from 2003 to 2009. State funding, therefore, has not kept pace with inflation. Staff salaries and benefits are often the most significant portion of California's child support budget. Given the reduced funding relative to inflation, California's local child support agencies have seen a decrease in available staff over the past several years. At the same time, the economic downturn has resulted in more case applicants. As a result, there is an increased need for local governments to use staff more efficiently.

Los Angeles County child support cases are currently assigned on the basis of the case number's last digit. For instance, all cases ending in the number 3 are assigned to one caseworker. This random method of assignment ignores the difficulty of enforcing any particular case. If this difficulty can be deteermined at the outset, a stratification method could be used to assign cases more effectively. Cases with a high likelihood of enforcement could then receive less intervention.

Significance of the Study

If a correlation between custodial parent data and successful child support enforcement can be demonstrated, U.S. child support programs would be able to assign cases based on their likely degree of difficulty. Such stratification could greatly increase

child support collection and improve agencies' cost-effectiveness. Such an outcome would benefit not only the recipients of child support payments but also child support workers and taxpayers in general.

Assumptions

It was assumed that cases opened during FFY 2007-2008 were typical of cases opened in subsequent years. This study used secondary data collected by the Los Angeles County CSSD for FFY 2007–2008. Specifically, it examined data collected on custodial parents at time of case opening. The data in the applications were assumed to be accurate but were unverified. Accuracy self attestations are part of the application process. Additionally, it was assumed that a benchmark of six months of consecutive payments constituted a case success.

Limitations

The time period of this study represented the beginning of the economic downturn in Los Angeles County. The unemployment rate in Los Angeles County was 5.1% in 2007 and rose dramatically to 8.3% by September 2008 (Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation, 2009). Using this caseload data to determine future case outcomes may not be realistic if the economy improves. It may not also be possible to generalize findings to other jurisdictions, given the unique urban nature of Los Angeles County.

Delimitations

The study does not intend to provide a model for using noncustodial parent data in the child support program. A conscious decision was made to focus only on custodial

parent data given the immediate availability of this data when a case is open. The study also excluded consideration of reasons why noncustodial parents do not pay child support. While there may be valid reasons, including loss of employment or incarceration, this research only included those cases where six consecutive months of payments were actually received.

Weaknesses

A potential weakness of the study is the exclusive use of data from the Los Angeles county child support program. Given the county's highly urban nature, findings may not be generalizable to rural and suburban areas. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the percentage of currently assisted cases in FFY 2008 was higher in Los Angeles County than in other parts of the nation, and the percentage of never-assisted cases was lower. Therefore, the child support caseload in Los Angeles County is particularly burdensome.

The definition of case success may also be a potential weakness of this study. While on the surface, six consecutive months of payment may appear to be positive, there was no assurance that payments continued in month seven. The length of time required for the noncustodial parent to begin making payments was also unknown.

Bounds

The bounds of the study would suggest that the model developed in this study may be useful only in Los Angeles County or California. It is hoped, however, that it will have broader applicability. Farrington and Tarling (1985) discovered that generalizing prediction tools across jurisdictions was "suspect." They posited that it was important that

the population from which the sample was drawn also needed to be the population for which the tool was actually used on.

Social Change

Walden's goal of promoting positive social change is a desired outcome of this study. Improving the use of public sector resources and increasing overall collections to custodial parents and their children has tremendous appeal to taxpayers and end users of the child support program.

Other researchers (Blomberg & Long, 2006) have attempted to use noncustodial parent data to determine difficulty of case enforcement. However, a review of the literature uncovered no research on the utilization of custodial parent data. Bloomberg and Long (2006) examined noncustodial parent data in their attempt to forecast case outcomes. This study focused on the custodial parent because all child support agencies have data on the custodial parent at the time of case opening. In contrast, relatively little was known about the noncustodial parent at that time. Making maximum use of readily available data is key to efficiency and positive outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Structured decision making is crucial to the daily operations of many fields, from health care to banking. For example, physicians assess a patient's risk of stroke, and banks assess a loan applicant's credit worthiness. Child-welfare workers assess the risk to children of remaining within a particular environment. Structured decision making relies on some way of gauging risk. This study's goal was the development of a model that CSOs could use to determine the enforcement difficulty of child support cases. In the

proposed child support example, a rating of low difficulty would indicate that a case is likely to have a positive outcome without extensive intervention by the caseworker. This determination would be a conclusion reached after determining which factors had been demonstrated to result in positive outcomes in the proposed model.

Specifically, this study addressed whether custodial parent data could be used to determine the difficulty of enforcing child support in certain Los Angeles County CSSD cases. Decision theory served as the study's conceptual framework. In decision theory observable events are used to predict future events. While decision making is a dynamic process, there are basically two approaches to human decision making (Zeleny, 1982).

In normative decision making, the decision maker has all the information that is needed to make the best decision. He is fully informed and fully rational. In a simple example, one might engage in normative decision making if one can see it is raining and understand the implications of not using an umbrella. One would, therefore, use an umbrella to stay dry. In contrast, in descriptive decision making, the decision maker would not have all of the relevant information. Consider this scenario: Meteorologists have forecast rain at times when it is not currently raining. Although carrying an umbrella in such situations is a nuisance, one still wants to stay dry, so an umbrella is carried (Author's example).

This study entails descriptive decision theory because caseworkers do not know for certain how easy or difficult it will be to collect child support in any particular case. The study applies multiple regression analysis to calculate the probability of case success, defined in this study only as at least 6 consecutive months of full child support payments.

Determining a definition of case success in child support is a challenging task. In prior research, such as the Blomberg and Long (2006) study, the concept of delinquency was used. Delinquency typically has two facets: time and money. Enforcement tools such as passport revocation calculate the dollar amount of delinquent payments as the baseline for punitive action. The assignment of interest on child support is based on the amount of time that the case has been delinquent. This study used a definition of case success primarily because the literature review did not reveal any such approach.

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to improve the efficiency and success of child support programs. A mathematical model was designed with the goal of determining a case's degree of difficulty. At the time of this study, no other investigations have focused on the exclusive utilization of custodial parent data.

Nationwide, custodial parents have little incentive to inform CSOs of the identity and location of noncustodial parents. Therefore, it makes sense to focus on custodial parent data, which are readily available when a case is opened. Funding of state child support programs is limited. It is crucial that available resources be used efficiently. Currently, case assignment is highly inefficient—based on random rather than on useful criteria such as the likely difficulty of enforcing a particular case.

The current study used data from the Los Angeles County CSSD from FFY 2007–2008. Los Angeles County has an especially high number of child support cases. Its CSSD is the largest local child support agency in the nation. Yet no previous study had addressed the predictive value of data from this agency. The next chapter reviews the

existing literature on child support programs, case-management approaches, and the use of structured decision making in publicly funded programs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will analyze and synthesize the literature on child support programs, particularly in terms of structured decision making and risk assessment. Specifically, it will address problems associated with child support programs; the ways in which structured decision making and risk assessment are defined and conceptualized; and uses of various risk-assessment instruments in the fields of child welfare, criminal justice, health care, and credit-risk management.

The problem statement highlights the fact that Los Angeles county child support cases are not stratified by their level of enforcement difficulty. Could case stratification, or sorting, based on perceived level of difficulty result in a more efficient use of limited resources? If so, the case manager could then focus time and energy on those cases requiring more intervention. The ability to determine the difficulty of enforcement at the onset of a child support case could allow cases to be prioritized on a rational basis. Structured decision making and risk assessment protocols have been effectively used as a means of case stratification in other disciplines. This literature review will attempt to define those aspects of risk assessment that could have applicability to the child support program.

Literature relevant to this study's research questions was searched using databases such as EBSCO (Academic Search Premier and Business Search Premier), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Full Text, and the Google search engine. The literature comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, reports of state and federal agencies, textbooks, Congressional testimony, and newsletters of professional organizations. Search terms

included *child support enforcement*, *child support performance*, *decision theory*, *risk assessment*, and *structured decision making*.

Problems Associated with Child Support Programs

The national child support program has significantly changed over the past 50 years. As a precursor to child support, Title IV-A of the SSAct of 1935 provided cash benefits to families with only one parent present (Morgan, 2008). In 1974, with Title IV-D of the SSAct, financial responsibility for children shifted from the government to parents. In the 1980s, further federal legislation created several tools for enforcing collection of child support: wage withholding, property lines, and federal and state tax intercepts for delinquent payers. Later legislation established criminal prosecution of those who fail to provide required child support, national performance standards for child support agencies, requirements that each state establish uniform guidelines for ordered amounts of child support, financial incentives to state child support programs with regard to collecting required child support payments, and a requirement of statewide automated case-management systems (Morgan, 2008).

Family structure, too, has significantly changed in recent decades. In 1970 approximately one in eight U.S. families with children was headed by a single mother. In 2006, 23% of U.S. children were living in single-mother families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). As of 2003, about 33% of single-mother families were living below the federal poverty line (U.S. House of Representatives, 2004). Research has demonstrated that child support payments have the potential to improve the custodial parent's income and can reduce the poverty gap for single parent families (Bartfeld, 2000; Meyer & Kim, 1998).

Meyer and Hu (1999) cited evidence that the financial effects of child support payments increase over time. Ongoing receipt of child support payments can prevent families from falling into poverty and reduce welfare payments (Pukstas & Albrecht, 2008).

In FFY 2007–2008, California had 10.4% of the country's total child support caseload (U.S.HHS, 2009). During that same period, the Los Angeles County CSSD had 27.4% of the California caseload—the nation's largest local caseload (California DCSS, 2009)—and employed 1,859 full-time staff.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the federal Child Support Performance and Incentive Act of 1998 established five measures for assessing the performance of a state child support program: (a) paternity establishment, (b) percentage of cases with child support orders, (c) collections on current support, (d) number of cases with collections in arrears, and (e) the program's cost-effectiveness. States are evaluated and compared on each measure. If a state consistently scores lower than minimum federal performance standards, its TANF funding may be reduced. A state's score is used to calculate the amount of federal funding provided to that state as an incentive to improved performance. In FFY 2008 $483 million was allocated by Congress for the child support national incentive fund.

Goal 1 of the 2006–2009 Strategic Plan of the California DCSS (2006) is to improve the program's performance. Acknowledging that California's overall performance is very low compared to that of other states, the plan notes a need to increase the percentage of currently assisted cases in which child support is collected,

reduce the percentage of cases with overdue payments, and increase the program's cost-effectiveness.

Each of California's 52 local child support agencies is also evaluated in terms of the federal performance measures. In its FFY 2008 report to the state legislature, the DCSS (2009) noted that the state's largest six counties (Los Angeles, San Bernardino, San Diego, Orange, and Sacramento) all perform at levels below those of smaller counties elsewhere in the state.

Since 2003, the Los Angeles County CSSD has been under a corrective action plan with regard to two especially substandard areas: collections on currently assisted cases and number of collections in arrears. The department's 2008/2009 Performance Improvement Action Plan identifies improving these areas as the department's top two priorities (Los Angeles County CSSD, 2008). End-of-year outcomes on the federal performance measures indicated that Los Angeles County was the lowest performing jurisdiction in California on these measures: the county collected child support in only 48.3% of currently assisted cases, and collected on 49.6% of those cases with overdue amounts (California DCSS, 2009).

Funding for the Los Angeles County CSSD has remained flat since 2003. Given that employee salaries, employee benefits, and the overall cost of doing business have increased, available funding has decreased. County government leaders have also implemented a hiring freeze. The resources of the child support department are strained. Developing and implementing a means of determining which cases are likely to be easily

enforced has the potential to help caseworkers handle their workloads more efficiently and effectively.

Literature on the use of custodial parent data is very limited. In 2005 Huang and Pouncy conducted a quantitative analysis to determine why some custodial parents choose not to obtain a court order for child support. They found that custodial parents who were younger, less educated, and never married were less likely to seek such an order. Other factors included ethnicity, age, marital status, number of children, and residential location. The current study uses custodial parent data available at the time of application for child support. The 11 independent variables include the custodial parent's age, gender, residential zip code, ethnicity, marital status, welfare status, number of children, and relationship to each child in the case, the age of each child in the case, whether paternity was known, and whether a court order was present at time of application.

Structured Decision Making

Providing services to the public in an environment of limited resources and increasing demand is challenging. Public agencies should be as efficient as possible. In structured decision making, the processes and criteria that must guide decision making are formally defined (Shook & Sarri, 2007). The term *structured decision making* is derived from a copyrighted model developed by the Children's Research Center, a division of the National Center on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD). Based in Oakland, California, the NCCD focuses on improving decision making in the areas of corrections

and child welfare. However, the term *structured decision making* is now used in a variety of settings.

Structured decision making can be clinical (based on personal and/or professional judgment) or actuarial (based on numerical data). In clinical decision making, workers assess characteristics previously identified by a consensus of supposed experts and make a judgment partly based on their own experience (Baird & Wagner, 2000). Relying on intuition can be helpful to suggest, guide, and modify decisions (Srivastava & Grube, 2009). However, such informal decision making can result in bias, errors, and inconsistency, even among those considered experts (Hughes & Rycus, 2007; Rossi, Schuerman, & Buddle, 1996).

According to Dawes, Faust, and Meehl (1989), actuarial decisions are generally more reliable than clinical decisions. Actuarial decisions are based on the statistical relationships between variables (Gottfredson & Moriarty, 2006). These variables reflect available data, which must be valid for the population being studied (Farrington & Tarling, 1985). By giving decision making a formal structure, an actuarial approach helps individuals analyze a multidimensional problem (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Dixit & Nalebuff, 1991). Actuarial variables are defined as those that can be assessed with little or no expert judgment. They are considered "static" because they refer to personal variables such as age or gender and have little potential to change over time with or without any intervention (Kumar & Simpson, 2005).

The current study was aimed at developing a model for actuarial decision making in the field of child support. The study's independent variables were characteristics of

custodial parents, and the dependent variable is case success, defined as full collection of court-ordered child support payments for at least 6 consecutive months. The model is intended to determine the likelihood of such success in particular cases.

As previously mentioned, the Los Angeles County CSSD is the nation's largest local child support program. At any given point in time, its staff of some 1,800 individuals handles approximately 425,000 cases. Each month, the department opens approximately 7,000 cases and closes approximately 6,000. Once a case is opened and a court order for child support is obtained, the case is randomly assigned to a CSO, who manages the case. No stratification methods exist to determine which cases require more enforcement intervention. Generally, collections are easier for middle class families than for poor families (Baskerville, 2008; Ducanto, 2009) as well as easier for families who have never been on public assistance (Baskerville, 2008). However, random case assignment does not make use of this information.

Blomberg and Long (2006) conducted two case studies to determine how available data might be used to predict which noncustodial parents were likely to become delinquent in their child support payments. In their first case study, which employed data from State A, they attempted to identify characteristics shared by delinquent parents, defined as those owing at least twice the amount due each month. These characteristics included having an above-average number of dependents born out of marriage, having paid child support for fewer consecutive months than is average among payers of child support, being twice as likely as ever having been on public assistance, having frequently changed jobs or residential locations, and having a commercial driver's license.

In their second case study, Blomberg and Long (2006) analyzed noncustodial parent data from State B to determine which noncustodial parents were most likely to pay child support continuously. As in the present study, they classified as nondelinquent those noncustodial parents who had paid the full amount of ordered child support for at least 6 months. Blomberg and Long found that noncustodial parents who never had paid any child support were highly unlikely to ever do so. Weakly significant independent variables included the number of miles between the two parents, the marital status of the parents, whether an arrest warrant had been issued due to nonpayment, the number of children born out of marriage, and possession of a commercial driver's license. Delinquent noncustodial parents were less likely to avoid authorities if they resided in small rural counties. The Los Angeles County child support program is the largest local child support program in the nation and clearly is within a major urban area.

This study utilized data from the custodial parents, unlike Blomberg and Long (2006) who focused on noncustodial parent information. Custodial parent data are available to the child support agency on the day of case application. It often takes weeks or months to accurately obtain data on the noncustodial parent. In an attempt to readily determine a case's chance for success, this study used the custodial parent data.

Uses of Risk-Assessment Protocols

Risk assessment typically assesses the likelihood that a harmful event will occur and such an event's likely severity (Hughes & Rycus, 2007). The present study is intended to assess child support cases in terms of risk of nonpayment. A high risk case would be one in which the expectation of collection was low. Risk analysis based on

actuarial structured decision making could enable caseworkers or program management staff to determine the likelihood of collection, and then more efficiently identify those enforcement techniques appropriate to particular cases.

This study's review of the literature did not uncover any use of risk assessment protocols by child support programs. However, such assessment is common in the fields of credit-risk management, health care, criminal justice, and child welfare. Risk assessment in these areas can provide lessons applicable to child support programs.

Child Welfare

Jointly funded by the federal and state governments, child welfare programs provide preventive services to families at high risk for child abuse and neglect, especially families with small children. Mistakes at any point in the decision making or risk assessment process can result in serious harm to children, either through future maltreatment from foster parents or from unnecessary separation from their parents (Shlonsky & Wagner, 2005). How do child welfare staffs assess this risk? Ordinarily they use some form of structured decision making to determine which cases involve the greatest threat to children (Camasso & Jagannathan, 2000; Leschied, Chiodo, Whitehead, Hurley, & Marshall, 2003; Rycus & Hughes, 2003; Wald & Woolverton, 1990).

Kahneman and Tversky (1982) found that people tend to be overconfident about their ability to predict events; to make the most informed decisions, they need the assistance of objective assessment instruments. Munro (1999) postulated that Kahneman and Tversky's finding also applied to child welfare caseworkers. In their routine interactions with families in their caseload, child welfare workers look for signs that a

child is in danger. However, such risk assessment is somewhat subjective as it is based on clinical judgment.

A number of researchers have concluded that actuarial decision making is more valid than clinical decision making (e.g., Dawes et al., 1989; Grove & Meehl, 1996; Meehl, 1954). For example, Rossi et al. (1996) found that different social workers widely differed in their clinical assessments of the same cases.

Baird and Wagner (2000) collected data on 1,400 families from Alameda County, California; Dade County, Florida; Jackson County, Missouri; Macomb, Muskegon, Ottawa; and Wayne Counties in Michigan. They found that child welfare workers in the Michigan counties, which used actuarial structured decision making to assess a family's risk of child abuse and neglect, were most accurate in predicting risk. For example, cases rated as high risk by the Michigan system but as low or moderate risk by the Washington and California systems subsequently had higher rates of child maltreatment. Baird and Wagner noted that increased computerization is making data more readily available—a development suited to structured risk assessment. The current study capitalizes on the wealth of secondary data available from the Los Angeles County CSSD.

Using statistical analysis, actuarial instruments identify and weigh factors that predict future events, such as child abuse (Rycus & Hughes, 2003). These factors are then incorporated into a checklist. Caseworkers enter actual characteristics of the case they are working on and calculate an overall risk score. However, Nguyen (2007) cautioned that the data should be processed in real time terms and that any underlying database should be updated continually in order for the results to be meaningful.

Actuarial instruments assess fewer factors than clinical assessments do. Nevertheless, D'Andrade, Austin, and Benton (2008) found the former to have higher predictive value. Actuarial protocols focus on factors that have been statistically demonstrated to correlate with risk (Hughes & Rycus, 2007).

This study proposed that actuarial risk assessment such as that employed in the field of child welfare be applied in the field of child support. In an actuarial approach, caseworkers focus on a small set of case characteristics that have been demonstrated to have predictive value (Ereth, Johnson, & Wagner, 2003). In the current study, these characteristics were characteristics of custodial parents that predicted the likelihood of child support collection.

Criminal Justice

Criminal-justice professionals use actuarial instruments to assess the risk of offender recidivism. Some such instruments are based on observations of offenders and comparisons between the behavior of those who turn out to be recidivist and those who do not. Although these instruments depend on the composition of a particular population sample Bonta (2007) considered them superior to intuition or professional judgment.

The use of actuarial methods to assess risk in the criminal justice field can be traced back to the 1920s in this nation. Ernest Burgess (1928) developed a simple instrument to predict who was a good risk for parole and who was not. It then was not until the 1970s that others in this field took the next step to create objective assessment tools to forecast potential offender risk recidivism. In 2007 James Bonta wrote that it was

his belief that risk assessment tools, while not being perfect, were preferable to intuition or even professional judgment.

Actuarial instruments are based on the observations of offenders over a period of time and compares recidivist to nonrecidivist behavior. This aspect of the risk assessment is what makes the approach considered to be evidence based. The downside of any actuarial instrumentality is that it is sample specific and therefore dependent on the composition of the sample (Andrews & Bonta, 2003).

In order to reduce offender recidivism, risk assessment protocols can help to differentiate between high and lower offenders. The obvious end goal of public safety is tantamount to making these determinations. Prior to the advent of risk assessment in this arena, judges were often presented with information pertaining to the offender's physical health, financial history and residence (Bonta, Bourgon, Jessemand, & Yessine, 2005). Bonta, et al., report that this information was generally considered irrelevant to the judges who were faced with making sentencing determinations. On the other hand, information on important risk factors such as substance abuse and attitudes toward the offense were rated highly by judges.

The jails in this country, and particularly in California, are in a state of crisis, regarding overcrowding. Massive budget cuts in the current fiscal year have led lawmakers and public safety officials to call for the release of those individuals who are considered minor offenders. As we move forward, there will be increased pressure on the courts to utilize home monitoring applications for individuals considered to be at low risk of committing additional crimes. In their 2006 final report to the Rock County (WI)

Board of Supervisors, the Jail Alternatives Ad Hoc Study Committee indicated that additional inmates might be able to succeed on electronic monitoring without jeopardizing public safety (Rock County, 2006)

The use of formal and structured risk assessment tools to assist the judiciary in their pre-sentencing decisions appears to be a move in the right direction (Shook, J. & Sarri, R., 2007). Again, as is the case with child welfare programs and child support, limited resources and reduced staffing call for more effective decision making earlier in the case assignment process. The utilization of evidence based actuarial tools in this field is but another example of the merits of a scientific and empirical approach to structured decision making.

Health Care

Actuarial risk assessment is common in the health care industry. The Framingham Heart Study identified factors that increase an individual's risk of heart disease, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, a history of smoking, obesity, diabetes, and physical inactivity (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2009). Today health care providers and patients can use a Framingham scorecard that assesses an individual's risk of heart disease based on these factors. Risk is assessed using multiple factors known to cause heart disease. A score is calculated and is used to predict the potential for developing heart disease within the coming ten years.

The study, originally under the direction of the National Heart Institute (now known as the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute) was initiated at a time when little was known about the causes of heart disease and strokes. The death rates for

cardiovascular diseases had been climbing at that time and were quickly becoming an American health care epidemic. As we have learned from other references to risk assessments, the basic approach in any risk analysis is to first identify a series or set of factors that may contribute to potential outcomes or threats.

The researchers enrolled 5,209 men and women, between the ages of 30 and 62, all from the town of Framingham. Since 1948, the participants have returned every two years for a complete health assessment including lab tests and physical examinations. In 1971 the study began a second generation of study participants and then again in 2002 a third cohort was added to the study. The 2002 individuals were all grandchildren of the original 1948 group (National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, 2009).

As a result of the Framingham Heart Study, the following factors were identified as contributing significantly to cardiovascular disease: high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, smoking, obesity, diabetes, and physical inactivity, as well as a great deal of valuable information on the effects of related factors such as blood triglyceride and HDL cholesterol levels, age, gender, and psychosocial issues (National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, 2009). These findings have led to the development of significant advances in the field of heart disease prevention.

Similarly, various risk-assessment instruments estimate an individual's risk of different types of cancer. For example, the Gail Model Risk Assessment Program estimates the risk of breast cancer based on five factors known to correlate with the disease: a woman's age, the age at which she started menstruating, previous breast pathology (as indicated by one or more previous biopsies), the age at which the woman

first gave birth (if she did so), and any family history of breast cancer. An instrument developed by the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center predicts a smoker's long-term risk of lung cancer, based on the individual's age, gender, and number of years smoking; the number of cigarettes smoked per day; the length of time since the individual stopped smoking; and whether the individual had prolonged exposure to asbestos.

Credit-Risk Management

Financial institutions are an important part of any economy. Recent events in the American banking and mortgage industries have led many individuals to wonder why proper safeguards weren't in place to prevent these disastrous consequences from occurring. Credit problems and particularly weaknesses in credit risk management have been identified as major contributors behind our banking difficulties (Richard, Chijoriga, Kaijage, Peterson, & Bohman, 2008).

In the field of credit-risk management, lending institutions screen loan applicants based on factors that contribute to default risk (Richard, et al.). Similarly, issuers of credit cards consider credit histories and current financial data (such as amount of savings) to differentiate between low- and high-risk borrowers (Zhao, Zhao, & Song, 2009). A commonly known tool in the credit industry is the FICO score. Developed by Fair Isaac & Company, the score predicts the likelihood of default using variables such as existing debt and income levels (Bielski, L., 2005).

Several risk-adjusted performance measures have been proposed in the financial industry (Kealhofer, 2003). The assessment of credit applicants can be performed

through the use of both qualitative and quantitative models. Translating the terminology into earlier models described in this study, a qualitative protocol would be referred to as a consensus based approach in social services and a quantitative model would be identified as an actuarial approach.

As Bryant (1999) and Chijoriga (1997) pointed out, use of qualitative models is dangerous, given the subjective nature of the instrument. However, even with this approach, risk factors and borrowers characteristics can be assigned numbers with the sum of the score being assigned to a credit threshold. This approach is referred to as credit scoring in the financial markets (Hefferman, 1996). Hefferman argued that this approach can reduce processing costs, subjectivity and possible biases.

Chijoriga (1997) wrote that the use of quantitative models allowed the lending institution to establish which factors are most important in explaining default risk, to evaluate the degree of importance of the factors, and to be better able to screen out bad loan applicants. Again, a primary argument for the use of quantitative or actuarial instruments relates to the elimination of bias and the incorporation of empirical data, resulting in evidence based conclusions.

While prior research has demonstrated the superiority of the actuarial approach compared to the consensus based approach (Meehl, 1954; Dawes, Faust & Meehl, 1989; Grove & Meehl, 1996) it should be pointed out that there are also known weaknesses in the actuarial approach. Farrington and Tarling (1985) concluded that data in and of itself does not always portray a complete picture of a situation. In their studies of criminal justice, they observed that while criminal history may be an important determinant of

risk, lifestyle was also an important consideration. Clearly, lifestyle is not as easily quantified as criminal history. These researchers also cautioned that actuarial models are limited to data actually available in the file. Additionally, Dawes (1999, 2001) has written that people are often driven by "a good story" when making decisions rather than statistical data. Relying totally on statistics is contrary to human nature, according to Dawes.

Additionally, the utilization of an actuarial protocol presupposes a set of data that has been analyzed and validated. The variables contained in the data are limited to information that is actually available to the researcher and that have a practical link to the subject at hand. When attempting to make decisions about future human behavior, be it in child welfare or in the financial arena, there may well be factors or data not available to include in the predictive model. Farrington and Tarling (1985) also discovered that generalizing prediction tools across jurisdictions was "suspect." They posited that it was important that the population from which the sample is drawn also needs to be the population for which the tool is actually used on.

The issue of credit card borrowing presents itself as a prime candidate for a formalized risk assessment methodology. Credit card lending is extremely risky for banks due to the fact that there are not assets secured by the loan or use of the card. Given these risks, it is important for card issuers to identify various consumer risk types as early as possible in order to prevent card holders from borrowing too much before default occurs (Zhao, Zhao, & Song, 2009).

Risk type identification is an important managerial issue for the credit providers. Therefore, a model that can provide a means to differentiate between low risk but occasionally delinquent customers and high risk consumers could help credit card companies improve their profits and reduce default rates (Zhao, Zhao & Song, 2009). Spending and repayment data are important in developing a model, as is a customer's spending and repayment behavior.

Consumer delinquency rates in the credit card industry are typically higher than those in other parts of the loan market. Since these loans are unsecured, the ability to determine risk, regarding ability to pay, is a critical component in the bank's profitability. Risk assessment instruments, be they qualitative or quantitative, have been shown to play an important role in this arena.

Method

In their study of child support, Blomberg and Long (2006) used logistic regression to analyze noncustodial parent data. Because they did not have credit scores or similar information for noncustodial parents, they could not quantify a noncustodial parent's ability to pay. Blomberg and Long acknowledged this handicap as a major limitation of their study. They considered their operational definition of delinquency–number of months, within a 6-month period, that child support was paid—to be another limitation. They speculated that their model would be more accurate if they used a narrower definition based on total number of months that the full amount of child support was paid. Partly for this reason, the current study employs the following definition of

nondelinquency: ability to collect full payments from the noncustodial parent for at least 6 consecutive months.

Conclusion

A review of the literature showed that structured decision making was an especially effective approach to assessing risk. The child welfare, criminal justice, health care and credit-risk management use actuarial risk-assessment instruments. Such instruments employ statistical processes to identify and weigh factors that predict future events (Rycus & Hughes, 2003). Risk assessment in these areas provide lessons applicable to child support programs.

A literature review uncovered no analysis or application of actuarial risk-assessment tools in the field of child support. The current study tested the feasibility of using such a tool in that field. Chapter 3 details the study's research design.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This chapter reviews the study's research design and approach, provides the justification for selecting the particular research design, describes the population from which the sample will be taken, defines how the study sample will be selected, discusses the secondary data that will be used, and explains the proposed statistical analysis that will test the hypothesis. It also notes the study's ethical safeguards.

The federal child support legislation provides for a wide range of decisions concerning program implementation to be made by individual state legislatures. As indicated earlier, some states chose to operate child support through a state controlled agency and others decide that the program is best administered by local counties and cities within the state. Some states require all enforcement activities to be court approved while others allow an administrative approach to enforcement.

This wide latitude allowed by federal child support legislation, combined with the intricacies of California child support legislation passed in 1999, makes it difficult for local child support agencies to allocate limited enforcement resources in the most effective way. With a caseload comprising currently, formerly, and never assisted individuals, the child support case manager must depend on the automated system's indications regarding what action to take and when. The manager, therefore, cannot effectively focus on cases requiring more intervention (Ducanto, 2009).

The ability to determine the difficulty of enforcement at the onset of a child support case would allow cases to be prioritized on a rational basis. If a model can be developed based on actual data from the Los Angeles County CSSD, cases with a high

likelihood of payment could be set aside and caseworkers could then focus their time and effort on cases requiring more intervention. That approach should improve outcomes, such as collections of current support due and collections on cases with arrears.

To verify these ideas, the research questions in this study asked whether or not custodial parent intake data could be used to effectively determine the difficulty of enforcing child support in a particular case, whether or not a child support program could use structured decision making and if so, what was the potential impact of case stratification on caseloads for child support officers?

Research Design and Approach

Determining the appropriate research design is critical to the success of the study. The design is the structure that holds all of the elements of the research project together. Research designs can be broadly classified into two categories: experimental and nonexperimental. The experimental approach is a classical means of conducting research and typically is designed to determine cause and effect. Independent variables are considered “treatments” in experimental research. An example of an experimental design would be a pretest, posttest approach. Comparison of these test results allows the researcher to determine the effectiveness of the treatment (Sheldon, G, & Zedeck, K. 1989).

This research study utilized a nonexperimental research design. Events were observed as they naturally occurred and no intervention or treatment was applied to the independent variables. Specifically, under a nonexperimental rubric, this was a nonparametric design and utilized archival data from the Los Angeles County Child

Support Services Department. A predictive correlational study has the potential to determine a later event (payment of child support) from an earlier set of data (custodial parent variables). Prediction studies are often used to predict or forecast academic success based on variables such as test scores and high school grades (Diem, 2002). The goal of the research was to examine the relevance of various independent variables as determinants of case success. This statistical approach has been shown to have wide application in social research (Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973).

The study used archival data from FFY 2008 (October 1, 2007 to September 30, 2008) from the Los Angeles County CSSD. Glaser (1963) and Hyman (1978) have recommended the use of secondary data as more cost effective and less time consuming than the collection of primary data. This study's secondary data were available in a sequel (or dedicated) database that contained all CSSD case information for the 12-month period ending September 30, 2008.

CSSD case data are entered into the automated case-management system when a child support case is opened. Before November 2008 the system was the Access Replacement System (ARS), designed and maintained by the Los Angeles County CSSD. The system was used by the child support agencies of Los Angeles County, Orange County, and San Diego County. California's other 48 local child support agencies used the Computer Assisted Support Enforcement System (CASES) for case management purposes.

In November 2008, California implemented the Child Support Enforcement (CSE) computer system, a new statewide computer system funded by the federal

government and the state. However, this study's data were derived entirely from the ARS. Data for all CSSD cases before November 2008 were stored on a sequel server. The sequel server maintains data so that analyses can be performed without compromising the original records. I used SQL Server Management Studio software to extract the data. The software used to analyze the data was the IBM SPSS Statistics 18. SPSS is one of the most widely used statistical packages in the social sciences.

Instrumentation and Materials

Instrumentation

The data used for this study were derived entirely from the Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department's Access Replacement System (ARS) database. These data were stored on a sequel server which maintained data so that analysis could be performed without compromising the original records. Extraction of the data was accomplished using the SQL Server Management Studio software. Once extracted, the IBM SPSS Statistics 18 was the software used to analyze the data. SPSS is one of the most widely used statistical packages in the social sciences.

Scores and Calculations

The correlation coefficient calculation will vary from no relationship (0) to a strong relationship (1). When the correlation coefficients are high, the variable plays a significant role in predicting success. When the coefficient is close to zero, there is little relationship between the variable and success. The closer the points are to the regression line (or the higher the correlation coefficient), the more accurately the predictor predicts the criterion.

Design Justification

A quantitative approach was selected because the study does not focus on attitudes but on factual data such as demographic, social, familial, and economic information. The research design was nonexperimental. This was the most appropriate direction given that no treatment was applied to the independent variables, as is the case with experimental design. Another option considered was quasi-experimental. This also was not selected because this approach involved random assignment to experimental treatments.

The most common mode of statistical analysis in the field of public administration (McNabb, 2008), regression analysis was chosen as the statistical tool because this approach calculates the degree of relationship between independent variables and the dependent variable. Specifically a Cramer's V nonparametric analysis was conducted utilizing multiple regression as the tool. The results assisted in determining case success. The study focused on identifying specific correlations between various independent variables (custodial parent characteristics) and a dependent variable (case outcome).

A predictive correlational approach allows for simultaneous analysis of multiple variables, revealing the extent to which they have statistically significant relationships (McNabb, 2008). In other words, it shows which independent variables are related to the dependent variable and to what degree they are related. The present study included 11 independent variables: the custodial parent’s age, gender, residential zip code, ethnicity, marital status, welfare status, number of children, and relationship to each child in the case, the age of each child in the case, whether paternity was known, and whether a court

order was present at time of application. The dependent variable was case success, defined as full child support payments for at least 6 consecutive months.

The analysis results demonstrated that there were correlations between the independent and dependent variables. A predictive correlational approach is the most appropriate means to determine which of the independent variables are related to the dependent variable, in order to effectively determine future outcomes. Again, the primary research question asked whether it was possible to determine outcomes in child support. Relationships between variables assist in determining which variables are positve and which ones are negative, relative to case success (Sheldon & Zedeck, 1989).

Participants and Sample Size

In a child support case, the custodial parent is the person who lives with the child and has legal custody. This person may be the child's parent or another individual designated by the court. The noncustodial parent is a natural or adoptive parent who does not have primary custody of the child. The custodial parent opens the child support case, and the noncustodial parent is required to pay child support. In FFY 2008, 93.2% of all custodial parents in Los Angeles County were women (Los Angeles County CSSD, 2009).

A custodial parent who receives welfare benefits must assign all child support payments (less $50) back to the government, as repayment for the welfare assistance. Most Los Angeles County child support cases come through the county's welfare department, the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS). Figure 2 shows that in FFY 2008, 63.78% of all Los Angeles County CSSD case participants were either current

or former welfare recipients. All DPSS offices have CSSD staff that (a) interview custodial parents who are applying for child support and (b) obtain as much information as possible on the noncustodial parent. The cases in Figure 2 that were classified as never-assisted were opened at one of seven CSSD public contact offices in Los Angeles County.

This study focused exclusively on custodial parent data. For many reasons, custodial parents are reluctant to provide information about the noncustodial parent. The reasons include fear of domestic violence, a desire to conceal from the welfare office that the parents are living together, and the custodial parent's not knowing who has fathered the child. CSSD staff often must do research to obtain the needed information on the noncustodial parent. It may take them several months to identify and locate noncustodial parents in or outside the country, even with the help of the National Parent Locator System, credit-report bureaus, and state and federal tax agencies. Once the putative father is located, multiple attempts at genetic testing may be required to establish paternity.

Study Sample

This study focuses on custodial parent data primarily because this information is readily available when a child support case is opened. In Los Angeles County, a child support caseworker typically manages about 1,000 cases at any point in time (Los Angeles County CSSD, 2009). This study had the potential to enable the CSSD to make more efficient use of limited staff by assigning new cases based on the predicted level of enforcement difficulty.

The study utilized participant case data from Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2008. This point in time was chosen for two reasons. First, FFY 2008 was the most current data available. FFY 2009 information will not be accessible for several months after the end of the fiscal year. Secondly, FFY 2008 was the beginning of the current economic recession. Using case data from earlier years would not reflect the growing unemployment and welfare dependency that has been seen in Los Angeles County since late 2007. If the model model is to be effective in the future, the data should be reflective of contemporary economic conditions.

In FFY 2008, approximately 19,000 CSSD cases involved at least 6 consecutive months of full child support payments. The eligibility criteria for selection is specifically focused on cases which received 6 consequtive months of full child support payments. A sample size of 377 cases would mathmatically result in a confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of 5%. This study used 1,501 cases. The larger the sample size, the more the data represent the target population. A sample of approximately 1,533 cases would result in a confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of +/-2.4%. The sample was selected randomly**,** without replacement, so each case in the population will have an equal (1 in 8) chance of being selected. The sample was pulled from a Microsoft SQL Server using the SQL Server Management Studio software.

This software is included with Microsoft SQL Server 2005 and is ostensibly used for configuring, managing and administering all data contained within the Microsoft SQL Server. It replaced the SQl Server 2000. Random sampling is based on the establishment of column criteria as there is no “random sampling” of rows in this software. The analyst

adds a column to the table and assigns values (a new ID) from the "Random" function within the operating system. The parameters were then established: In this study the sample size of 1501 cases was the overarching parameter. The software then selected the random 1501 cases from the population.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The database belongs to the Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department (CSSD). I am director of the CSSD. In order to assure appropriate access authority, a letter of access approval was obtained from the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Los Angeles County for the Children and Families Well Being Cluster, Kathleen House. Ms. House is responsible for the oversight of several Los Angeles County government departments including CSSD. I report to Ms. House.

Ethical Considerations

All case participant data was de-identified and presented anonymously to this researcher. Because a full street address would identify a particular case, each address variable will consist of only a zip code. Thus, the study will maintain privacy and confidentiality with respect to the individuals involved in the child support cases. The data was extrapolated from the SQL Server Management Studio software by Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department Technology and Analysis Division (TAD) staff. The study data then was exported to an Excel spreadsheet and provided to me. I then imported the data to SPSS from the Excel spreadsheet. At no time was any case participant identifying information exchanged or provided.

Chapter 4: Presentation and Analysis of the Data

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine the feasibility of determining case success in the Los Angeles County child support program utilizing custodial parent data obtained at intake. The research hypothesis tested whether or not custodial parent data were related to the child support agency's ability to collect full payment from the noncustodial parent for at least 6 consecutive months. The research questions asked the following

1. Can custodial parent intake data be utilized to determine the difficulty of enforcing child support in a particular case?
2. Can a child support program use structured decision making?
3. What is the potential impact of case stratification on caseloads for child support officers?

The hypothesis was tested using a nonexperimental research design, given that events were observed as they occurred without any intervention or treatment. Specifically, the test utilized was a Cramer's V nonparametric statistical technique. This chapter addresses the original research questions, data screening and data cleaning procedures, descriptive statistics, data analysis, test results, hypothesis testing, and the conclusion of the analyses.

Research Questions

1. Can custodial parent intake data be utilized to determine the difficulty of enforcing child support in a particular case?

The analyses performed on the 1,501 sample cases indicate that it is possible to determine the difficulty of enforcing child support in a particular case. Specifically, there were 7 independent variables that exhibited a very strong association with the dependent variable. The study began with 11 independent variables, but I eliminated 4 variables due to a less than very strong correlation.

The variables dropped were marital status, paternity status of the children, existense of a court order and residential zip code. Both the contingency coefficient and Cramer's V scores indicated very weak associations between the first three of these variables and the dependent variable. The zip code association, while stronger than these three, was still not within the very strong category. The model ideally should be robust and strong enough to support case success prediction.

2. Can a child support program use structured decision making?

Given the results cited above, it appeared that a child support program could use a structured decision-making protocol to determine case outcomes. The study began with 11 independent variables and there were 7 independent variables that exhibited a very strong association with the dependent variable. Those variables were custodial parent age, gender, ethnicity, welfare status, number of children, relationship to each child, and the ages of children. Structured decision making can be clinical (based on personal and/or professional judgment) or actuarial (based on numerical data). According to Dawes, Faust, and Meehl (1989), actuarial decisions are generally more reliable. Actuarial decisions are based on the statistical relationships between variables (Gottfredson & Moriarty, 2006).

These variables reflect available data, which must be valid for the population being studied (Farrington & Tarling, 1985). By giving decision making a formal structure, an actuarial approach helps individuals analyze a multidimensional problem (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Dixit & Nalebuff, 1991). Actuarial variables are defined as those that can be assessed with little or no expert judgment. They are considered "static" because they refer to personal variables such as age or gender and have little potential to change over time with or without any intervention (Kumar & Simpson, 2005). In this study those variables are custodial parent age, gender, ethnicity, welfare status, number of children, relationship to each child and the ages of the children.

3. What is the potential impact of case stratification on caseloads for child support officers?

The study provides evidence that it is possible to determine case outcomes based on 7 independent variables all associated with the custodial parent at time of case opening. Stratification is defined as the sorting of cases into categories to determine what services or enforcement techniques will be used for the case (Policy Studies Inc., 2006). The data affirm that it is possible to determine case success and to use a structured decision making protocol to make those determinations. The research would further point to the potential for using this information to better align staffing resources based on caseload difficulty.

A study on the benefits of case stratification, conducted by the Tennessee Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Services (2004) concluded that case stratification allowed the child support agency to better match enforcement

techniques to individual case circumstances, allowing the County to more effectively and efficiently utilize its staff resources. Their findings support a conclusion that case stratification could potentially impact caseloads, relative to degree of difficulty.

Data Screening and Data Cleaning

The study used data from 1,501 randomly selected archived cases from FFY 2008 (October 1, 2007 to September 30, 2008). The cases were pulled from the Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department's sequel data base. The 11 independent variables were the custodial parent's age, gender, residential zip code, ethnicity, marital status, welfare status, number of children and relationship to each child, the ages of the children, whether paternity was known and whether a court order was present at time of intake. The dependent variable was case success, defined as receipt of the court ordered amount of child support for at least 6 consecutive months. Data analysis protocols dictated that never paying cases also be included for comparison purposes.

IBM SPSS Statistics 18 (formerly SPSS Statistics) was used for all data analyses. Prior to conducting any analysis, the researcher engaged in extensive data screening and cleanup activities. The data cleanup was conducted to ensure that there was no missing values and that all cross tabulation cells had at least 5 members in order to ensure that the data could not be traced back to a particular case. Confidentiality edits are applied to micro data for the purpose of protecting data that will be released in tabular form (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Individually identifiable data are information that may be revealed by either direct or indirect means. In this study, in order to avoid attribution

to particular cases, confidentiality editing included ensuring that all cells had at least 5 members.

There were several decision points during the data cleanup process. The age at intake variable required the recoding of smaller incremental ranges between 14 and 41. The residential zip code variable presented other challenges as child support cases are located throughout the nation, although predominately in California and then within Los Angeles County. Ultimately, a truncated zip code was utilized, with the first three digits of the code selected to winnow down geographical locale of the custodial parent. Earlier studies, incorporating noncustodial parent data, concluded that the miles between the noncustodial and custodial parents had weak but significant effects on collecting child support. In nonurban jurisdictions, this variable was not a significant consideration (Blomberg & Long, 2006). Based on the Blomberg and Long report, this study attempted to incorporate a variable related to residency. Given that custodial parent data was utilized, the only information in this category was residential zip code.

Ethnicity was also a variable that required further truncation, given the extremely wide range of populations contained within the Los Angeles County caseload. Ultimately, several groups (Cambodian, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) associated with Asian countries were combined into one grouping (Asian). A wide range of miscellaneous ethnicities, such as Armenian, American Indian and Samoan were combined into an “other” category.

The last two independent variables requiring a range or parameter determination were the age of the child and the associated paternity status. Ages of children ranged

from a negative number (unborn at time of intake) to age 21. Unborn children were coded as "0" and the upward range of age was determined to be 15+ years. There were significant numbers of cases with the unborn status. This is due ostensibly to the fact that the majority of new child support cases come from the welfare department and expectant mothers apply for aid prior to the birth of the child.

Paternity status contained several categories that were determined to be duplicative. The first step in establishing a child support case is to determine paternity. The cleanest cases are ones in which the child was conceived during marriage. This is commonly referred to as the "marriage presumption." The second most common manner of determining paternity is through voluntary declaration at the hospital, following the birth of the child. Other categories include adjudicated (determined in court), and "unknown." The remaining categories "at issue", "excluded due to genetic testing" and "stipulated" were combined into "other."

Data screening and cleaning were ultimately conducted on the complete data sample ($N = 1501$) to ensure that there was no missing data and that the date eventually utilized for analysis were accurate and intuitive. Frequency analyses were performed on the sample to ensure that there were no missing values.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive analysis was conducted on the study sample ($N = 1501$). Data were extracted from case information specifically for the custodial parent. The majority of the custodial parents were females ($n = 1,456$), which represented 97% of the total.

Many national studies have shown that around 90% of custodial parents are mothers (Ellman, 2004).

Demographic Profile of Participants

Hispanics comprised the largest ethnic segment at 57% (*n* = 856), while African Americans were represented in the sample at 25% (*n* = 375) and whites were at 11% (*n* = 163). Regarding marital status, over half (53%) of the sample were never married (*n* = 792) and only 9% were married at time of case opening (*n* = 135). National data from the Census Bureau indicate that the marriage rates for custodial parents with child support cases were 19% and 32% for never married (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The demographic and frequency information for ethnicity, gender, and marital status are contained in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Participants by Ethnicity and Gender

Ethnicity	Gender		Frequency	Percentage
	Female	Male		
Hispanic	836	20	856	57
Black	359	16	375	25
White	156	7	163	11
Filipino	25	0	25	2
Asian	22	0	22	1
Other/Unknown	54	2	56	4
Missing	4	0	4	0
Total	1456	45	1501	100

Table 2

Participants by Ethnicity and Marital Status

Marital Status	Ethnicity						Frequency	Percent
	Hispanic	Black	White	Filipino	Asian	Other Unknown Missing		
Never Married	459	231	74	9	8	11	792	53
Married	97	21	8	4	3	2	135	9
Separated	109	12	17	3	1	2	144	10
Divorced	53	21	37	6	6	9	132	9
Other/ Unknown	91	50	17	1	3	11	173	12
Missing	47	40	10	2	1	25	125	8
Total	856	375	163	25	22	60	1501	100

Over half (63%) of the cases in the sample were either currently on assistance (n = 261) or were former recipients (n = 679). As indicated in chapter one, the national figure for individuals either currently or formerly on assistance was 58%. The similar calculation for the Los Angeles County caseload was 63%, further confirming that our sample was representative of the entire Los Angeles County caseload for FFY 2008. Table 3 contains demographic and frequency information by ethnicity and welfare status.

Table 3

Participants by Ethnicity and Welfare Status

Welfare Status	Ethnicity					
	Hispanic	Black	White	Filipino	Asian	Other Unknown Missing
Current Assistance	171	54	26	3	3	4
Former Assistance	383	182	83	8	7	16
Never Assistance	302	139	54	14	12	40
Total	856	375	163	25	22	60

The demographic and frequency information of the entire 1,501 case sample are contained in Table 4.

Table 4

Frequencies for Participants in the Study

Independent variable		Frequencies	Percentage
Custodial parent age	14-17	44	3
	18-21	352	23
	22-25	300	20
	26-30	302	20
	31-35	227	15
	36-40	147	10
	41+	129	9
Gender	Male	45	3
	Female	1456	97
Residential zip code	900	430	29
	902	207	14
	903-907	155	10
	908	79	5
	909-916	111	7
	917	191	13
	918-934	76	5
	935-986	128	9
	Other	124	8
Ethnicity	Hispanic	856	57
	Black	375	25
	White	163	11
	Filipino	25	2
	Asian	22	1
	Other	10	1
	Unknown	53	3

(table continues)

Independent variable		Frequencies	Percentage
Marital status	Never Married	792	53
	Married	135	9
	Separated	144	10
	Divorced	132	9
	Other	32	2
	Unknown	266	17
Welfare status	Current Assistance	261	17
	Former Assistance	679	45
	Never Assistance	561	38
Number of children	One	958	64
	Two	356	24
	Three	131	9
	Four +	56	3
Relationship to each child	Mother	1399	93
	Father	39	3
	Other Relative	18	1
	Missing	45	3
Age of child # 1	0	386	26
	1	313	21
	2	149	10
	3	112	8
	4	93	6
	5-10	294	20
	11+	153	9
	Missing	1	

(table continues)

Independent variable		Frequency	Percentage
Age of child # 2	0	248	16
	1	43	3
	2	37	2
	3	29	2
	4	25	2
	5-10	116	8
	11+	45	3
	Missing	958	64
Age of child # 3	0	104	7
	1	12	1
	2	11	1
	3	13	1
	4	13	1
	5-10	27	2
	11+	7	1
	Missing	1314	86
Paternity status (child #1)	Acknowledged	250	17
	Adjudicated	890	59
	Never at Issue	290	20
	Not Established	21	1
	Missing	50	3
Paternity status (child #2)	Acknowledged	88	6
	Adjudicated	212	14
	Never at Issue	198	13
	Not Established	25	2
	Missing	978	65

(table continues)

Independent variable		Frequency	Percentage
Paternity status (child #3)	Acknowledged	24	2
	Adjudicated	72	5
	Never at Issue	79	5
	Not Established	6	
	Missing	1320	88
Court order exists	Yes	1270	85
	No	177	12
	Unknown	9	
	Missing	45	3

Data Analysis

Correlation and multiple regression tests were performed on the sample data. Regression helps to describe how one variable, the dependent variable, is numerically related to the predictor (independent) variables. Correlation refers to the relationship of the variables.

The 11 independent variables and the dependent variable were recorded using syntax in SPSS to convert the raw data into nominal data. Nominal data are not as powerful as ordinal, interval or ratio data. With nominal level data, numbers or labels are used to differentiate between things. The numbers or labels serve no purpose or function. Different numbers mean different things.

There are two types of test data and consequently, two different types of analysis. Parametric statistics require that data come from a population (as opposed to a sample) in which the distribution would result in a typical bell-shaped curve. Nonparametric statistics, on the other hand, must be used when working with nominal or ordinal data. No

assumptions can be made relative to the distribution of the data. Because the data utilized in this study were all nominal, the appropriate tests to be used were nonparametric.

Test Results

The contingency coefficient and Cramer's V tests were utilized to test for association or strength of the relationships of the variables. These determinations were critical to the research design and the research questions relative to predictability of outcomes. If a strong relationship existed between the independent variables and the dependent variable, then prediction would be feasible. If a weak relationship resulted from the analyses, then prediction would not be reliable. Table 3 provides a legend to determine whether relationships were very strong, strong, medium, weak, very weak or extremely weak. Results of the contingency coefficient and Cramer's V tests are included in Table 5.

Table 5

Nonparametric Tests for Association

Independent variable	Contingency Coefficient	Cramer's V
Custodial parent age	.716	.726
Gender	.707	.707
Residential zip code	.610	.544
Ethnicity	.710	.712
Marital status	.185	.133
Welfare status	.714	.721
Number of children	.708	.709
Relationship to each child	.710	.713
Ages of children	.711	.715
Paternity status of children	.186	.134
Court order exists	.153	.110

The results indicate that three of the independent variables exhibit very weak relationships with the dependent variable. Those variables were marital status, paternity status and the status of a court order at time of intake. In both the contingency coefficient and Cramer's V tests, the results were consistent, relative to weakness of the variables. Each of these variables had scores within the very weak designation, using Table 3 as the legend for interpretation. These variables would therefore not be considered as appropriate predictors for case success.

Those variables exhibiting the strongest association (very strong) with the dependent variable were custodial parent age at intake, gender, ethnicity, welfare status, number of children, relationship to each child and the ages of the children. Residential zip code, while still considered strong, fell slightly below the previously cited seven variables. This means that the zip code, in and of itself, is not a viable predictor of case success. The fact that seven variables appear to be very strongly associated with the dependent variable would suggest that these seven should be used in future predictive models and not the zip code variable. Table 6 provides a legend to interpret the test results.

Table 6

Strengths of Association

Test result	Strength
> 0.7	Very strong
0.5 - 0.7	Strong
0.3 - 0.5	Medium
0.2 - .03	Weak
0.1 - .02	Very weak
< 0.1	Extremely weak

Hypothesis Testing

This study tested the following hypothesis: There are relationships between custodial parent data and the child support agency's ability to collect full payment from the noncustodial parent for at least 6 consecutive months. This was a nonexperimental study and no treatment or intervention was applied. Data were observed in the natural habitat as they occurred. Therefore, there was no null hypothesis to accept or reject. The study attempted to determine if there were relationships or correlations between the independent variables and the dependent variable, payment for at least 6 consecutive months. The analyses confirmed very strong associations between seven of the independent variables and the dependent variable.

Conclusion

This research was based on an analysis of actual data taken from the archives of the Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department for Federal Fiscal year 2008. Specifically, caseload data from 1,501 randomly selected files were extracted with payment outcome information and 11 demographic variables relative to the custodial parent. Using the actual outcomes of these cases, the study attempted to determine if there were strengths or associations between some or all of the independent variables and the dependent variable, payment for 6 consecutive months. If there were associations between the variables, the hypothesis looked at the potential to use those variables as predictive factors for future cases.

The correlational analyses resulted in identification of seven variables with a very strong association with the dependent variable. Three variables have weak associations

and 1 variable had less than a very strong association. The main study was conducted using a nonexperimental, nonparametric Cramer's V analysis. This chapter provided a number of tables to show descriptive statistical data for the independent variables and correlational relationships between the independent and dependent variables. The summary and interpretation of the findings, implications for social change, recommendations for action and future study will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine the feasibility of determining case success in the Los Angeles County child support program using custodial parent data obtained at the time of case intake. The research hypothesis tested whether or not there were relationships between custodial parent data and the child support agency's ability to collect full payment from the noncustodial parent for at least 6 consecutive months. The research questions asked the following:

1. Can custodial parent intake data be used to determine the difficulty of enforcing child support in a particular case?
2. Can a child support program use structured decision making?
3. What is the potential impact of case stratification on caseloads for child support officers?

The findings of the study are reported in Chapter 4. They include the demographic profile and frequencies of study participants, various cross tabulations between two variables and the results of nonparametric tests for association. This chapter will provide a summary and interpretation of the findings, implications for social change, recommendations for action and further study and close with conclusions.

Summary of the Findings

The results of the data analysis, using a Contingency Coefficient and Cramer's V nonparametric tests for association indicated that of the 11 independent variables chosen for the study, seven variables appeared to be very strongly associated with the dependent variable. Those variables were custodial parent age, gender, ethnicity, welfare status,

number of children, relationship to each child and the ages of the children. The dependent variable, case success, was defined as receipt of the ordered amount of child support for at least 6 consecutive months.

Three variables had weak associations and one variable had less than a very strong association. These four variable were marital status, paternity status, existence of a court order at time of intake and residential zip code. In summary, the analysis demonstrated that it is possible to determine case success using seven independent variables obtained from the custodial parent at time of case intake.

Interpretation of the Findings

The study put forward three research questions:

1. Can custodial parent intake data be used to determine the difficulty of enforcing child support in a particular case?
2. Can a child support program use structured decision making?
3. What is the potential impact of case stratification on caseloads for child support officers?

Determining the Difficulty of Enforcing Child Support

The analyses performed on the 1501 sample cases indicate that it is possible to determine the difficulty of enforcing child support in a particular case. Chapter 4 provides documentation of the fact that there were 7 independent variables that exhibited a very strong association with the dependent variable. The study began with 11 independent variables, but I eliminated 4 variables due to a less than very strong correlation.

Using Structured Decision Making

It does appears that a child support program could use a structured decision making protocol to determine case outcomes. Chapter 4 concludes that very strong associations existed between 7 of the independent variables and the dependent variable. Structured decision making can be clinical (based on personal and/or professional judgment) or actuarial (based on numerical data). According to Dawes, Faust, and Meehl (1989), actuarial decisions are generally more reliable. Actuarial decisions are based on the statistical relationships between variables (Gottfredson & Moriarty, 2006).

These variables reflect available data, which must be valid for the population being studied (Farrington & Tarling, 1985). By giving decision making a formal structure, an actuarial approach helps individuals analyze a multidimensional problem (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Dixit & Nalebuff, 1991). In this study, the problem was being able to determine whether or not the case would eventually end up paying as ordered.

Actuarial variables are defined as those that can be assessed with little or no expert judgment. They are considered "static" because they refer to personal variables such as age or gender and have little potential to change over time with or without any intervention (Kumar & Simpson, 2005). In this study those variables were custodial parent age, gender, ethnicity, welfare status, number of children, relationship to each child and the ages of the children.

Chapter 4 provided evidence that it is possible to determine case outcomes based on 7 independent variables all associated with the custodial parent at time of case opening. Stratification is defined as the sorting of cases into categories to determine what

services or enforcement techniques will be used for the case (Policy Studies Inc., 2006). The data affirm that it is possible to determine case success and to use a structured decision making protocol to make those determinations. The research would further point to the potential for using this information to better align staffing resources based on caseload difficulty.

The Impact of Case Stratification on Caseloads for Child Support Officers

A study on the benefits of case stratification, conducted by the Tennessee Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Services (2004) concluded that case stratification allowed the child support agency to better match enforcement techniques to individual case circumstances, allowing the County to more effectively and efficiently utilize its staff resources. Their findings support a conclusion that case stratification could potentially impact caseload size, relative to degree of enforcement difficulty.

Implications for Social Change

Walden's goal of promoting positive social change was a desired outcome of this study. Improving the use of public sector resources and increasing overall collections to custodial parents and their children has tremendous appeal to taxpayers and end users of the child support program. In the significance section of Chapter 1, I speculated that child support programs could potentially assign cases to workers based on a likely degree of enforcement ease or difficulty, if a correlation between custodial parent data and case success could be demonstrated. The results of the data analysis in Chapter 4 clearly address this issue and conclude that it is indeed possible to demonstrate a positive

correlation between custodial parent data and case success. The implications of these conclusions have potential positive social change improvements for individuals, communities and society, and organizations and institutions.

Improvements for Individuals

Individuals in the child support program include the custodial parent, the noncustodial parent and the child or children. In the significance section of Chapter 1, it was posited that case stratification could greatly increase child support collection and improve the cost effectiveness of the child support program. Case stratification, or the sorting of cases into categories to determine what services or enforcement techniques should be used for the case (Policy Studies Inc., 2006), is the key component or outcome of this research. Chapter 4 has demonstrated that it is possible to determine these outcomes.

The goal of any child support program is basically to collect money. The money comes from the noncustodial parent and goes to the custodial parent, through the child support agency. Enforcement of child support orders rests with the child support staff using a variety of federally and state mandated enforcement tools including but not limited to wage withholdings, tax intercepts, license suspensions, real estate liens, and bank levies. A critical aspect of any enforcement action is being able to locate the noncustodial parent. Several national and state databases assist the child support caseworker in finding the noncustodial parent when the custodial parent either does not cooperate or they truly do not know where the noncustodial parent is. It is in these instances where the work is very time consuming and labor intensive.

Being able to determine potential case success at time of the case opening has the potential to more effectively allocate limited staff resources and to then focus energies on locating those recalcitrant noncustodial parents who are attempting to hide their location or their assets. The structured decision making model would provide the basis for more efficient case assignment protocols. For example, one case worker might have only the "easy" cases. Those cases would be the ones that the model would determine to be successful. The number of cases in this instance would be larger. Another case worker, given the cases unlikely to succeed, could have a much smaller caseload so that he or she could focus on the locate aspect of the case, the work that takes much more time.

Focusing staff resources in this manner could result in enhanced child support collections, benefiting the custodial parent and the child or children on the case. Further, research has shown that when noncustodial parents pay their child support, they are more likely to be involved in their children's lives (Koball & Principe, 2002). This level of involvement could potentially lead to positive social outcomes such as improved educational achievement and reduced involvement in the criminal justice system.

Improvements for Communities and Society

Improved child support collections have the potential to benefit local, state and national communities. As indicated in Chapter 1, in previously assisted or currently assisted welfare cases, it is far more difficult to locate noncustodial parents and enforce child support, given the parents' presumed lower socioeconomic status. Frye (1997) indicated before Congress that states with a greater proportion of welfare recipients would perform at a lesser level than states with smaller numbers of individuals on aid.

California, for instance, has traditionally had large numbers of individuals on welfare, given the generous benefit levels prescribed by the legislature. As also shown in Chapter 1, Los Angeles County has a higher proportion of currently assisted welfare cases compared to national figures. The implication here and the potential improvement to communities could be construed as both financial and societal.

Federal child support legislation requires that custodial parents on welfare assign, or turn over, child support to the government as reimbursement for the welfare expenditure. Fifty percent of the collection is returned to the federal government, 47.5% to the state government and 2.5% to the local government. If the goal using the model developed in this study is to increase child support collections, then given the high percentage of current and former welfare recipients on the caseloads, the amount of money recouped to the government would increase exponentially.

As indicated earlier in this chapter, Koball and Principe (2002) concluded that when noncustodial parents pay their child support, they are more likely to be involved in their children's lives. From a societal perspective, this involvement could have profound impacts on family reunification and enhanced relationships between parents and their children.

Improvements for Organizations and Institutions

The purpose of this study, as detailed in Chapter 1, was to determine the feasibility of determining case success using custodial parent data obtained at time of case intake. It was speculated that if caseworkers could focus on those cases that required more attention, then custodial parents could receive more child support and the child

support agency could improve its performance. Case stratification, based on degree of enforcement difficulty, could improve cost effectiveness outcomes as well as federal child support performance measures encompassing the collection of current support and arrears. Conversely, when child support cases are not stratified by level of difficulty, caseworkers cannot easily determine the best way to enforce collection.

Improving outcomes on federal performance measures can position states to earn a larger portion of the incentive funds provided by federal legislation. States can then match earned incentive funds at a ratio of 2:1 for increased funding. These funds are incorporated back into the child support program, providing additional resources for local and state programs. Thus, using the model developed in this study to further enhance a child support agency's ability to collect child support, could have the potential result of increasing funding for basic program operations. Research has shown a correlation between available program funding and positive outcomes in the child support arena (Huang & Edwards, 2009).

Recommendations for Action

As stated earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 4, the analysis demonstrated that it is possible to determine case success using seven independent variables obtained from the custodial parent at time of case intake. These conclusions can provide the basis for development of a case stratification model in the Los Angeles County child support program. Elected and appointed officials in Los Angeles county, including the Board of Supervisors and the Chief Executive Officer will need to be breifed on the potential impact of this change to the business model currently utilized by the local program. On

the state level, the director of the California Child Support Department will need to be consulted and advised about the potential for enhancing and improving local program performance using the model.

Dissenmination of Results

As indicated in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application for this study, it is my intention to disseminate the research conclusions at the annual training conference of the California Child Support Directors Association. Additionally, I will also showcase the findings at the annual conference of the National Child Support Enforcement Association. Other opportunities exist for similar presentations at conferences conducted annually by the Eastern Regional Interstate Child Support Association and the Western Interstate Child Support Council. Attendees at these meetings include federal, state, and local child support directors, all of whom have the ability to implement changes using this study's structured decision amking model, within their respective jurisdictions and programs.

Recommendations for Further Study

The study did not intend to provide a study for using noncustodial parent data in the child support program. Given that the study demonstrated an ability to determine outcomes using custodial parent data, perhaps another study focusing exclusively on noncustodial parent data should be undertaken. Other researchers, including Blomberg and Long (2006) have attempted to do this type of analysis but had limited success in defining a detailed compilation of significant independent variables.

The study utilized data exclusively form the Los Angeles County child support program. It may not be possible to generalize findings to other jurisdictions, given the unique urban nature of Los Angeles County. Additional research could be conducted, using the same model, on other nonurban parts of California or elsewhere in the country to see if similar outcomes occur.

The study used data from cases opened during FFY 2007-2008. It is not clear whether these cases were typical of cases opened in subsequent years. Another study could be conducted using information now available from later years to test the consistency of the outcomes. The time period of the study represented the beginning of the economic downturn in Los Angeles County. Using this caseload data to determine future case outcomes may not be realistic if the economy improves. Additional time studies could be considered.

Conclusions

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine the feasibility of determining case success in the Los Angeles County child support program using custodial parent data obtained at intake. The research hypothesis tested whether or not there were relationships between custodial parent data and the child support agency's ability to collect full payment from the noncustodial parent for at least 6 consecutive months.

The results of the data analysis, using a Cramer's V nonparametric tests for association indicated that of the 11 independent variables chosen for the study, seven variables appeared to be very strongly associated with the dependent variable. Those

variables were custodial parent age, gender, ethnicity, welfare status, number of children, relationship to each child, and the ages of the children.

Demonstration of these associations indicates that it is, in fact, possible to determine case success at time of case opening using custodial parent data. As a result, child support management will be able to allocate caseworker resources more efficiently by effectively sorting cases early in the process. Some caseworkers will be assigned larger caseloads, if the determination is that the cases will achieve success without significant intervention and other caseworkers will receive smaller caseloads, assuming a greater degree of hands-on action. Currently, cases are assigned on the basis of digits. One worker might have all cases ending with the number "1" and another with the number "4". There is no underlying logic for the current assignment protocol. The structured decision making model will allow for a more sophisticated approach to case assignment. In the long run, this model could enhance the ability of the child support program to collect more payments for children and families. If the program can be redefined to enhance efficiency and effectiveness, the costs to taxpayers could potentially decline as more monies are distributed to families and children requiring assistance. Additionally, and certainly not the least of potential benefits, if enhanced collections can be achieved, then there is also the possibility of greater involvement in children's lives by the noncustodial parent.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Steven J. Golightly
stevenatl@aol.com

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Executive-level administrator with 34 years of experience in Federal, State and local welfare and social services programs, organizational leadership, operations, public/private partnerships and community-based coordination initiatives.

Proven ability to lead staffs, contractors and consultants in environments characterized by fiscal uncertainty, tight and changing deadlines and political pressures.

Excellent experience in directing large-scale projects and programs related to the economic independence and healthy development of low-income children and families.

Demonstrated ability to work constructively with elected officials at the Federal, State and local levels.

Recognized for working collaboratively and supportively with commissions, councils and task forces, such as Private Industry Councils, Workforce Investment Boards and Community Action Agency Boards.

Proven leadership in the building of public/private partnerships nation-wide in the areas of social services, employment, job training and education.

Extensive and diverse knowledge of federal, state and locally funded health and human services programs.

Highly regarded for promoting solution-based linkages among state, local and community-based stakeholders.

RELEVANT SKILLS AND EXPERIENCES

California State University, Dominguez Hills, January to June 2009
Adjunct Faculty, College of Business and Public Administration

County of Los Angeles, October 1999 to Present
Director, Child Support Services Department, April 1, 2007 to present

Appointed by the County Board of Supervisors; director of the nation's largest locally operated child support program. Responsible for a staff of 1971 individuals, including 114 attorneys, and an annual budget of $173 million.

Chief Deputy Director, Child Support Services Department, 3/02 to 3/07

As Chief Operating Officer for this very large public agency, I was responsible for assisting the Director of Child Support Services in planning, evaluating and directing all day to day operations of the department, the largest locally operated child support services agency in the nation. At that time, the Department had an annual operating budget of $190 million and a workforce of 2100 individuals.

I was charged with directing all programs, facilities and services necessary for the administration of child support enforcement programs in accordance with Federal, State and County statutory and regulatory requirements.

Interim Director, Department of Public Social Services, 3/20/01 to 3/1/02

Responsible for planning, organizing and directing all operations of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, the largest locally operated welfare agency in the nation. The Department had an annual budget of $3.5 billion and a workforce of 13,469. A wide variety of social services, health and nutrition programs, designed to assist low income individuals, children and families, are provided by departmental employees in over 60 offices located throughout the county. The Department serves 1.7 million County residents each month.

Reported directly to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

Interim Chair of the New Directions Task Force, a consortium of County health and human services departments.

As Interim Director, I also continued to execute the duties of the DPSS Chief Deputy Director position.

Chief Deputy Director, Department of Public Social Services, 10/99 to 3/20/01
Second in command of the Department, reporting to the Director. Assisted the Director in the overall direction and management of the department.

Responsible for overseeing day-to-day operations of the Department including all administrative, programmatic, and line operations. Four assistant directors and the department's chief information officer, each of who is responsible for a major bureau of the Department, reported directly to me.

Formulated departmental policy, directed its implementation and evaluated work accomplished.

Developed changes in the organization, staffing, work processing and management information systems to increase effectiveness and efficiency in the delivery of services and the reduction of administrative costs.

Chief liaison and spokesperson with federal, state and other governmental agencies concerning the operations of welfare programs and on public hearings directly related to public assistance.

Maintained frequent communication with senior representatives of the Federal and State agencies which provide funding to the Department.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Atlanta, Georgia, 1996 to 1999 - Southeastern Hub Director & Regional Administrator,

As a career appointee to the United States Senior Executive Service (SES), I served as the senior Federal official for the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families in Federal Region IV, the largest of the 10 Federal regions. The region consists of the 8 southeastern states - Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee and Florida. Represented the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families to the public on matters concerning the economic independence and healthy development of low-income children and families in the southeastern region of the nation.

Provided broad executive leadership, direction and coordination at the regional level for 15 critical federally funded programs with an annual national budget of over $37 billion, and a Region IV budget of $6.5 billion. These programs included Welfare (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), Child Support Enforcement, Head Start, ChildCare, Child Welfare Services, Foster Care and Adoption Assistance, Child Abuse and Neglect, Runaway and Homeless Youth and Developmental Disabilities.

Designated national lead administrator for welfare reform and welfare to work by the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Represented the Federal government's regional interests, concerns and relationships within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and among other Federal agencies. Primary customers were Governors, State Legislatures and State Cabinet-level Commissioners and Secretaries of Health & Human Service agencies.

Focused on the implementation of welfare reform in the poorest area of America, building effective partnerships, improving customer service and implementing a results-oriented performance measurement system, both internally and for the state, local and nonprofit agencies which were my agency's partners.

Provided leadership to an immediate staff of 105 individuals; responsible for directing budget, personnel, fiscal, information technology and administrative functions for this large Federal regional office.

National Alliance of Business, Washington, D.C., 1984 to 1996 – Vice President

The National Alliance of Business was a business-led national nonprofit organization which provided leadership in the human services and education reform arenas for corporate America, primarily Fortune 500 corporations. I served as the Alliance's senior staff member responsible for all Federal, State and local work in welfare to work and job training initiatives. Responsible for directing customer service operations for the organization's 3,000+ private sector members through a network of 7 regional offices spread throughout the Unite States. Directed a cadre of in-house staff and contractors totaling 300 individuals; responsibility for budgets ranging from $6 million to $11 million annually. Specific responsibilities included the following initiatives:

U.S. Department of Labor - Training and Technical Assistance for Private Industry Councils ($6 million annually) – Directed all activity related to the development and delivery of training programs for PIC staff and members throughout the nation.

US Departments of Labor, Education and Health & Human Services -The Interagency Technical Assistance Project to Assist States and Localities Implementing the JOBS Program - a multi-year, multi-million dollar federal contract - the largest ever awarded jointly by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Labor and Education. ($6.9 million). Project director for the development and delivery of management training programs for the entire nation (States and communities) as they implemented the first iteration of national welfare reform.

U.S. Departments of Education, Commerce and Housing & Urban Development – Directed various projects, all national in scope and all focusing on improving the quality of life for low income children, families and individuals.

Chautauqua County (NY) Private Industry Council / Office of Employment and Training, Mayville, NY, 1976 – 1984 – Executive Director

Director of county government department; designed and implemented programs to increase employment opportunities for disadvantaged populations and ensured business community involvement and commitment to publicly funded human service programs.

Reported directly to the County Executive and to elected members of the County Board of Legislators. Directed programs including CETA, JTPA and all county welfare grant diversion, supported work, CWEP and General Relief-like initiatives. Responsible for the County's Department of Social Services Welfare Employment Unit and the Private Industry Council. Total dollar amount annually was in excess of $13 million. Directed a staff of 300 individuals.

EDUCATION / PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Walden University, Minneapolis, MN., Ph.D., Public Policy and Administration, 2010

California State University, Dominguez Hills, CA, M.P.A., May, 2007

University of Phoenix, Los Angeles, CA, B.S., 2004

PROFESSIONAL/COMMUNITY AFFILIATIONS

Past President, West Hollywood West Residents Association
Chairman, City of West Hollywood Public Facilities Commission
Member, Board of Directors, California Child Support Directors Association
Member, National Child Support Enforcement Association
Past Member, Board of Directors, California Welfare Directors Association
Past Member, American Public Human Services Administrators Association
Member, American Society of Public Administrators
Member, Pi Alpha Alpha (National Honor Society for Public Administration)
Member, Los Angeles County Management Council
Past Member, National Governor's Association Task Force on Welfare Reform
Past Chair, Los Angeles County New Directions Task Force
Past Member, Los Angeles County Children's Planning Council
Past Chair, Alexandria/Arlington (VA) Private Industry Council
Past Member, Board of Directors, National Association of Private Industry Councils
Past Member, Board of Directors, National Association of Workforce Professionals