



**TRUTH AND
JUSTICE
IN CHILD SUPPORT**

California Should Lift the Burden of Government-Owed Debt from Low-Income Parents

The Problem

For over 40 years, California has required non-custodial parents to repay the state for public assistance received by the custodial family. When parents cannot afford to pay, a child support debt to the state grows rapidly, because California adds 10% interest each year. As a result, today low-income parents owe over \$6.5 billion in unpaid child support debt to the state.¹ This is child support owed to California and the federal government, that would otherwise go to families.

The billions of dollars of child support debt is the legacy of decades of child support orders established by California courts at amounts higher than the parent can afford. In 2011, 68% of the child support orders sampled in the state program were set by default, meaning the non-custodial parent wasn't present at the hearing.² When parents' voices are not involved, the court presumes their income is full-time minimum wage, which for many low-income parents is not true. Orders are set higher than a parent can pay, and child support debt swiftly starts to accrue, especially when California then adds a 10% interest rate.

Why We Need to Act Now

- Research shows that 95% percent of this debt in California is uncollectible.³ It is owed by low-income parents or it is stale, old debt. Over 60% of parents with child support debt have annual incomes less than \$10,000, and 75% have owed the debt for over two and a half years.
- Lifting the burden of child support debt from parents has shown to reduce employment barriers, improve housing status and credit scores, and most importantly, improve parent-child and co-parenting relationships.⁴ All of these outcomes occurred when San Francisco piloted a program to forgive government-owed child support debt.

¹ U.S. Office of Child Support Enforcement, [FY2021 Preliminary Data Report](#), Table P-89, page 95.

² Review of the Statewide Uniform Child Support Guideline 2021. Page 191.

<https://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/lr-2022-review-uniform-child-support-guideline-2021-fc-4054.pdf>

³ Examining Child Support Arrears in California: The Collectibility Study. The Urban Institute. 2003.

<https://www.urban.org/research/publication/examining-child-support-arrears-california-collectibility-study>

⁴ Relief from Government-Owed Child Support Debt and Its Effects on Parents and Children. The Urban Institute. 2019.

https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/100812/relief_from_government-owed_child_support_debt_and_its_effects_on_parents_and_children_4.pdf

- Families of color are disproportionately represented in the child support program. Child support policies play a role in today's racial wealth gap. The California Reparations Task Force specifically calls out eliminating government-owed child support debt.⁵
- Last year, California changed its policies to stop the interception of child support by the state and instead pass the money to families, a historic reform that strengthens the program moving forward. Continuing to hold this massive amount of government-owed debt is not aligned with California's values and the state should now fix an issue for today's parents that has already been remedied for future parents.
- A portion of this child support debt is owed by parents whose children were in the foster care program. Last year, the state also promised to reduce the referrals from foster care and discontinue requiring parents to repay the state for periods of time when their children were in foster care. A study found these cases are not cost-effective; for every dollar the child support agency spends to work these cases, only 27 cents is collected.⁶
- Forgiving government-owed debt will make a huge impact at very little cost, which is a benefit in our lean budget year. This is debt on the books that can be written off with no penalty to California or the federal government.

Our Solution

California should act now in the 2023-2024 budget to forgive government-owed child support debt. This debt can be eliminated at little or no cost to the state. But as demonstrated by the San Francisco pilot project, this debt relief will have enormous benefits for families by reducing employment barriers, improving housing status and credit scores, and most importantly, improving parent-child and co-parenting relationships.

[Truth and Justice in Child Support](#) is a growing statewide coalition of 50+ organizations that seeks to change state policy on child support pass-through, payments and collections to better support low-income children and their families and reduce child poverty in California. For more information, watch our video "[Everything You Think You Know About California Child Support is Probably Wrong](#)". Please contact Mariko Yoshihara with questions at mariko@yoshihara-lp.com.

⁵ Task Force to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Initial Report, page 21. <https://oag.ca.gov/system/files/media/ab3121-interim-report-preliminary-recommendations-2022.pdf>

⁶ Child Support and Foster Care in California. Orange County Department of Child Support Services. <https://www.css.ocgov.com/sites/css/files/import/data/files/100280.pdf>