

# Who Benefits Most from Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt in the Child Support Program?

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April 2024



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# OVERVIEW

**W**hen a child does not live with both parents, the parent with whom the child does not live is known as the “noncustodial parent.” The noncustodial parent may be obligated to pay child support to help with the costs associated with raising the child. However, most parents receive less than the amount they are owed. Parents who do not make their child support payments can be subject to enforcement measures that might lead to arrest or jailing, but there is little evidence that such actions lead to increased child support payments.

The Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration tested a different approach to improving child support payment compliance. Developed by the federal Office of Child Support Services, it integrated principles of procedural justice (the idea of fairness in processes) into enforcement practices in six child support agencies as an alternative to standard contempt proceedings. With oversight from the Georgia Division of Child Support Services, MDRC led a study of the model’s effectiveness in collaboration with MEF Associates and the Center for Justice Innovation.

PJAC enrolled noncustodial parents who were about to be referred for civil contempt of court for not meeting their child support obligations even though a child support agency had determined they had the ability to make payments. These parents were assigned at random to a PJAC services group or to a business-as-usual group. As described in earlier reports, the evaluation found that PJAC substantially reduced civil contempt filings but overall did not increase child support payment compliance or regularity (as measured in the evaluation). However, it is possible that some groups of enrolled parents were more engaged with PJAC’s case managers or that the impacts of PJAC on child support outcomes were more positive for some groups of parents. This report investigates whether either of those things could have been true. The results indicate the following:

- Parents who had higher recent formal earnings, had made some recent payments, had higher order amounts, or had simpler cases were more likely to engage with PJAC case managers, and PJAC had greater impacts on payments and child support debt for those parents. “Recent payments” includes measures of the total amount paid, the proportion of orders paid, and payment regularity. The research team considered parents to have simpler cases if they had shorter histories with the child support agency, owed current support on all cases (as opposed to having some cases for which they only owed child support debt), had lower amounts of child support debt, and had no previous referrals for civil contempt.
- Combining parent and case characteristics reveals substantial differences in engagement with PJAC case managers and differences in PJAC’s impacts on payments and debt across parents with different levels of recent earnings, recent payments, and case complexity. For example, parents with higher earnings, some recent payments, and less complex cases were up to 29 percentage points more likely to have had a successful contact with a case manager than other parents. In addition, for those parents, PJAC increased the proportion of obligations paid by about 21 percentage points more than it did for other parents.

The results suggest that, at the point of contempt referral, the procedural justice approach may work best with parents with higher formal earnings, some recent payments, higher monthly order amounts, and less complex cases. Those findings do not mean procedural justice should not be used with other parents, but additional support might be needed to help parents with limited earnings meet their obligations.

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The Authors



## Introduction

**W**hen a child does not live with both parents, the parent with whom the child does not live is known as the “noncustodial parent.” The noncustodial parent may be obligated to pay child support to help with the costs associated with raising the child. In 2019, however, most parents who were owed child support received less than the amount they were owed.<sup>1</sup> Parents who do not make their child support payments can be subject to enforcement measures including civil contempt proceedings that require the parent to attend court hearings and may lead to arrest or jailing. However, there is little evidence that such actions lead to improved ongoing child support payments.

The Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt (PJAC) demonstration tested a different approach to improving child support payment compliance. Developed by the federal Office of Child Support Services, it integrated principles of procedural justice into enforcement practices in six child support agencies across the United States as an alternative to standard contempt proceedings. Procedural justice is the idea that “how individuals regard the justice

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau (2019). This 2019 statistic is based on all families owed child support, not just those receiving services from the child support program.

system is tied more to the perceived fairness of the *process* ... than to the perceived fairness of the *outcome*.”<sup>2</sup> PJAC applied this premise to the child support context with the goal of improving compliance with child support orders. With oversight from the Georgia Division of Child Support Services, MDRC led a study of the model’s effectiveness in collaboration with MEF Associates and the Center for Justice Innovation.

PJAC enrolled noncustodial parents who were about to be referred for civil contempt because they had not met their child support obligations for at least several months yet had been determined by child support agency staff members to have the ability to pay child support.<sup>3</sup> As described in earlier reports, the evaluation found that PJAC substantially reduced civil contempt filings but overall did not increase child support payment compliance or regularity (as measured in the evaluation).<sup>4</sup> However, it is possible that some groups of enrolled parents were more engaged in PJAC’s services or that the impacts of PJAC on child support outcomes were more positive for some groups of parents. This report investigates those possibilities: it describes how engagement with PJAC case managers and the impacts of PJAC on service receipt, enforcement, payments, and debt varied based on the characteristics of noncustodial parents and their child support cases. The results, which were generated through inferential statistical models, could help child support agencies decide which parents at the point of contempt would benefit most from approaches based on procedural justice and which parents might need services beyond those based on procedural justice to improve child support outcomes.

## Background and Methods

Between 2018 and 2020, eligible noncustodial parents were randomly assigned either to a group receiving PJAC services or to a business-as-usual group sent through standard contempt proceedings. The six child support agencies that participated in PJAC were in Arizona (Maricopa County); California (Riverside and San Bernadino Counties); Michigan (Muskegon County); Stark County, Ohio; Franklin County, Ohio; and Virginia (Richmond and Newport News districts).<sup>5</sup> The current report focuses on parents who enrolled between February 2018 and April 2019, as these parents’ one-year follow-up windows elapsed before the COVID-19 pandemic’s full onset.

This report addresses two broad research questions:

- 1. Within the PJAC services group, were some groups of noncustodial parents more likely to engage in services than others?** To answer this question, the research team used predictive modeling to investigate the relationship between parents’ characteristics and three

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<sup>2</sup> Gold (2013).

<sup>3</sup> For more information on how ability to pay is determined, see Cummings (2020) and Skemer (2023).

<sup>4</sup> Skemer (2023); Skemer et al. (2022).

<sup>5</sup> These six participating PJAC study agencies are hereafter called “sites.” While two of the participating agencies are in Ohio—Franklin County and Stark County—they were operated independently and are therefore considered two separate study sites. On the other hand, California and Virginia had PJAC services available at multiple locations but those locations were operated centrally, so each is considered a single study site.

types of engagement, measured using data from the PJAC management information system: successful contacts with PJAC case managers, case conferences, and case action plans.<sup>6</sup> (These PJAC services are described in more detail in Box 1, and descriptions of the outcome measures can be found in Appendix B, Section III.) As described in the following pages, these analyses looked at the relationship between parents' characteristics and engagement outcomes while holding constant parents' other characteristics.

### BOX 1 Summary of the PJAC Model

As noted earlier, parents entered PJAC when they were about to be referred for a contempt hearing. Parents assigned to the PJAC services group were diverted from contempt and assigned to a PJAC case manager. These case managers, who were [trained](#) in the principles of procedural justice and applied such principles throughout their work with PJAC services group parents, became parents' main point of contact at the child support agency. A PJAC case manager first reviewed the noncustodial parent's case history, then conducted outreach to and engaged both parents on the case and facilitated a case conference, which was a back-and-forth exchange between parents to identify reasons for nonpayment, come to a preliminary agreement about how to address these reasons for nonpayment, and develop a plan to achieve payment compliance. Case managers and noncustodial parents then completed a case action plan, an individually tailored plan for the parent to become compliant with the child support orders. Depending on the parent's needs and interests, the PJAC case manager included supportive service referrals or specific enhanced child support services as part of the case action plan. After those steps were completed and if the parent started making payments, the case maintenance phase began, in which the PJAC case manager monitored payments and checked in on the parent regularly. These services tried to address parents' reasons for nonpayment, promote their positive engagement with the child support program and the custodial parent, and improve the consistency of their payments. If members of the PJAC services group refused to engage in PJAC services or comply with their case action plans and continued to not make child support payments, they could be subject to enforcement actions, including contempt.

- 2. Comparing outcomes for the PJAC services and business-as-usual groups, were the impacts of PJAC larger for some groups of noncustodial parents than for others?** The research team used predictive modeling to investigate how different parent characteristics interact with PJAC's impacts for three groups of outcomes, which were created from child support administrative records.<sup>7</sup> The first group of outcomes pertains to child support ser-

<sup>6</sup> A management information system is a computer-based system used to capture information about program participants and the activities they engage in with the program's staff.

<sup>7</sup> Administrative records are data collected in the normal course of administering a program.

vice receipt: case closures and order modifications.<sup>8</sup> The second group pertains to enforcement actions: license suspensions, civil contempt referrals, and bench warrants.<sup>9</sup> The third group pertains to child support payments and debt outcomes: the amount paid, payment regularity, the proportion of the child support order paid, and debt amount owed. (Descriptions of the outcome measures can be found in Appendix B, Section III.) These analyses looked at the relationship between parent characteristics and impacts, while holding constant the relationship between impacts and other parent characteristics.

To investigate these questions, the research team used a technique called a least absolute shrinkage and selection operator (lasso) regression.<sup>10</sup> A lasso regression can analyze many predictors—or *covariates*—and eliminate from the analysis the predictors that show only a weak association with the outcome. For any remaining predictors, the lasso estimates the association between the predictor and the outcome. One benefit of this approach is that the research team could include many potential predictors and investigate complicated relationships between predictors and outcomes. For more details on this method and related specifications, see Appendix B.

In answering the two research questions, the research team included in the analysis a variety of covariates representing characteristics of noncustodial parents and their child support cases when they entered the PJAC study, described below.<sup>11</sup> The research team converted continuous covariates into categorical ones, which are easier to interpret and synthesize.<sup>12</sup> To construct the categories, the research team considered the distribution of the continuous covariates in tandem with conceptual factors. (Detailed information about each covariate, including how the categories were chosen and the research team's reasoning for including each covariate, is available in Appendix B, Section II.)

**Recent earnings, payments, and order amounts** relate to parents' ability to meet their child support obligations. Earnings covariates included in the analysis represented the following two characteristics:

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<sup>8</sup> A case closure signifies the end of a child support agency's enforcement of a child support order; various criteria must be satisfied before a case can be closed, and it is relatively rare that all criteria can be met. Order modifications are updates to parents' obligations to better match their financial and family circumstances in the event of a change, such as having another child, sharing child custody, or experiencing the emancipation of a child for whom a parent previously owed child support.

<sup>9</sup> Enforcement measures are actions taken by child support agencies with the intention of collecting past-due child support and securing current and future payments. License suspensions may be automated or discretionary and extend to driver's, professional, and recreational licenses. A bench warrant is a legal document issued by a judge that authorizes an individual's arrest. A judge may issue a bench warrant if a parent fails to appear for a civil contempt hearing.

<sup>10</sup> Tibshirani (1996).

<sup>11</sup> The analysis also adjusted for when individuals entered the study and for demographic and background characteristics. It did not examine how outcomes and impacts varied with these characteristics since agencies are typically not able to target services based on them. Measures of demographics included gender, age, and race and ethnicity. The analysis excludes about 5 percent of the sample for which information on race and ethnicity was not available. Any other missing information on covariates was imputed before the analysis was conducted.

<sup>12</sup> Continuous variables are those that indicate an amount or level of something, for example, the amount of child support a parent paid. Categorical variables are those that measure discrete states, for example, paying more or less than a certain threshold level.

- Earnings from formal employment in the year before study enrollment (henceforth called formal earnings), which excludes earnings from informal employment and some forms of self-employment and independent contracting<sup>13</sup>
- Total monthly amount due in child support across all an individual's cases in the month of study enrollment<sup>14</sup>

Recent-payment covariates included in the analysis represented the following three characteristics:

- Total amount paid in the year before study enrollment
- The proportion of child support obligation paid in the year before study enrollment
- The proportion of months with any payments in the year before study enrollment<sup>15</sup>

The research team created covariates to capture the following characteristics representing the **complexity of noncustodial parents' child support cases** at the time of study enrollment. The complexity of a parent's child support case may be reflective of that parent's relationship and history with the child support agency.

- Whether the noncustodial parent had more than one open child support case
- Number of years since the noncustodial parent's oldest open case was established
- Whether the custodial parent and child(ren) received benefits from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
- Whether the noncustodial parent had any debt-only cases (a case for which there is no current support order, but for which the noncustodial parent still has unpaid child support debt)
- Total child support debt owed
- Whether the noncustodial parent was ever previously referred to contempt

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<sup>13</sup> Formal employment is work with an employer that reported earnings to the government so that its employees would be eligible for unemployment insurance. These earnings do not include unemployment benefits or monetary benefits from other government programs, and they may not include informal employment, self-employment, and independent contracting or any other employment that was not reported to a state workforce agency. See Office of Child Support Enforcement (1999); Office of Child Support Services (2024a); California Code, Unemployment Insurance Code § 1088.8 (2001); Virginia New Hire Reporting Center (n.d.); Ohio Revised Code § 3121.891 (2013).

<sup>14</sup> A noncustodial parent's monthly child support order amount is typically a reflection of the parent's ability to pay; the order amount is based on the noncustodial parent's earnings, income, and other evidence of an ability to pay. See Office of Child Support Enforcement (2017).

<sup>15</sup> The last two measures were not available for the California site. For that reason, each question was addressed twice, once with the full sample but excluding the two proportion measures and once without the California site but including the proportion measures.



The research team included covariates for the **site** of enrollment. Earlier reports compared the implementation and impacts of PJAC at each site and identified differences across the sites. For this report, the analysis investigated whether those differences remain after adjusting for how parent and case characteristics are associated with outcome levels and the impacts of PJAC.<sup>16</sup>

## Parents' Characteristics at PJAC Enrollment

Figure 1 summarizes some characteristics of noncustodial parents and their child support cases that were examined in addressing the two research questions. Regarding demographics, parents were diverse in age—ranging from 18 to 66 years old—and race and ethnicity. Although the child support agencies had determined they had the ability to make child support payments, a large majority of parents had formal earnings of \$10,000 or less in the year before entering the study, and only 3 percent earned more than \$30,000 in that year.<sup>17</sup> Although more than half had made some payments in the previous year, only 10 percent had made payments in more than six months of the previous year, and only 13 percent had paid half or more of their obligation during the previous year. A sizable minority had multiple child support cases open and had a previous contempt filing, and most owed at least \$10,000 in debt from their child support cases. These baseline characteristics and all others included in the analysis can be found in more detail in Appendix Tables A.1-A.8.

## Results

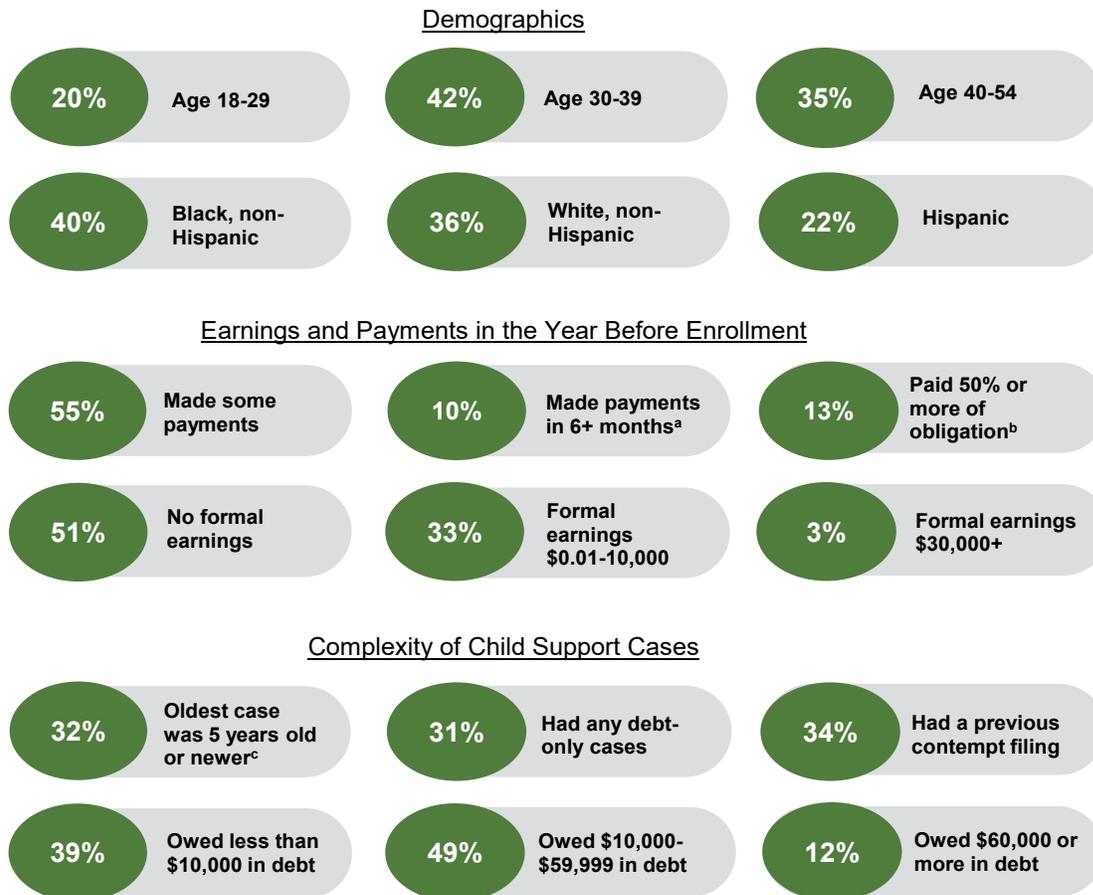
This section is divided into four subsections. Each of the first three discusses one of the three groups of characteristics outlined in the Background and Methods section: (1) recent earnings, payments, and order amounts; (2) complexity of child support cases; and (3) site. The fourth subsection presents the outcomes and impacts for parents with specific profiles combining these characteristics. Each subsection first discusses the relevant results for research question 1 and then discusses the relevant results for research question 2. As a reminder, results for research question 1 are about engagement outcomes and were calculated in an analysis of only the PJAC services group. Results for research question 2 are about impacts on child support outcomes that are based on comparing outcomes between the PJAC services group and the business-as-usual group. For research question 2, the results indicate whether impacts are larger, smaller, or similar for a parent with a certain characteristic than for a parent without that characteristic. The findings in this results section focus on characteristics

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<sup>16</sup> The PJAC implementation research report presented results by site without accounting for differences in the characteristics of parents and cases across sites. See Treskon, Phillips, Groskaufmanis, and Skemer (2022). The current analysis, in contrast, assesses that variation after taking those characteristics into account. The analysis discussed in the PJAC impact report estimated impacts by site but did not account for how the characteristics of parents and cases were associated with those impacts. See Skemer (2023). In contrast, the current analysis does account for the relationship between those characteristics and the impacts of PJAC when assessing differences across sites.

<sup>17</sup> All parents in the study had to be assessed as having an ability to pay before they could be referred for contempt or be eligible for the PJAC study. However, the research team learned both from parents and child support staff members that, in actuality, many parents struggled with obtaining and maintaining consistent employment that paid enough for them both to meet their own basic needs and to make child support payments in the amount they were ordered. The PJAC demonstration was unable to measure parents' true ability to pay accurately or fully, as the demonstration had only limited data on financial resources. For further information on the implications of ability-to-pay determinations on the PJAC demonstration, see Skemer (2023).

**FIGURE 1. Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents at PJAC Enrollment**



**SOURCE:** MDRC calculations based on child support administrative records and quarterly earnings data from the National Directory of New Hires.

**NOTES:** The sample includes noncustodial parents enrolled from February 1, 2018 through April 30, 2019 and excludes any noncustodial parents for whom race and ethnicity information was not available. Sample sizes by site are as follows: Arizona = 935, California = 1,231, Franklin County = 859, Michigan = 817, Stark County = 770, Virginia = 741.

<sup>a</sup>This calculation assumes a 12-month year and was calculated from the proportion of months with any payment in the prior year out of the number of months with any open cases in the prior year. This calculation excludes California.

<sup>b</sup>Excludes California.

<sup>c</sup>This measure is calculated among cases open at the time of study enrollment only.

that the research team identified as most predictive of outcomes based on results of the lasso regression. For example, the section does not discuss whether a parent had more than one open case at the time of study entry, because that characteristic was not a strong predictor of multiple outcomes and impacts. The findings reported are also limited to characteristics that were strong predictors of multiple outcomes and that had largely consistent results across model specifications. Additionally, this results section does not discuss outcomes that had few strong predictors. Therefore, the first two subsections do not discuss the impacts of PJAC on order modifications, license suspensions, contempt referrals, or bench warrants because the impacts for those outcomes did not vary much with the characteristics of parents and their child support cases; however, the third subsection does discuss impacts on such outcomes, because they varied across the sites.

Appendixes C and D show the lasso regression coefficients for each individual outcome and characteristic, indicating the estimated association between a characteristic and the measured outcome or impact. Appendix C shows results for research question 1; more specifically, Appendix Tables C.1 through C.6 show the characteristics' coefficients for engagement outcomes. Appendix D shows results for research question 2. Appendix Tables D.1a through D.6a show the characteristics' coefficients for the business-as-usual group's levels of services received, enforcement actions, payment, and debt. Appendix Tables D.1b through D.6b show the characteristics' coefficients for the impacts of PJAC on services received, enforcement actions, payment, and debt.

## Recent Earnings, Payments, and Order Amounts

Parents who had earnings from formal employment in the year before study enrollment, parents who made some payments in the year before study enrollment, and parents with higher monthly order amounts at the time of study enrollment were more likely to engage with PJAC case managers than other parents during the follow-up year, and the impacts of PJAC on payments and debts during the follow-up year were typically stronger for such parents.

### Parents Who Made Recent Payments

Among parents in the PJAC services group, those who made payments in the year before study enrollment were more likely to engage with their case managers than parents who made no payments in the previous year.<sup>18</sup> Parents who made any payment in the previous year, regardless of the amount, were at least 14 percentage points more likely to have a successful contact, 5 percentage points more likely to have a case conference, and 15 percentage points more likely to create a case action plan than parents who made no payments. Relative to parents who made no payments, engagement was highest for parents who paid over \$3,000 in the previous year: parents who paid over \$3,000 were about 17 percentage points more likely to have a successful contact with a PJAC case manager and averaged about 1.4 more contacts with a PJAC case manager than parents who made no payments toward child support. Additionally, parents who made payments in more than a quarter of months in the previous year were typically more likely to engage with their case managers than parents who made payments in no more than a quarter of months in the previous year.<sup>19</sup> As a reminder, all parents in PJAC had several months of nonpayment or severe underpayment before enrollment. While the aforementioned parents made more payments than other parents in the year before study enrollment, they probably still were not meeting their obligations.

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<sup>18</sup> Again, engagement outcomes were neither collected for nor applicable to parents in the business-as-usual group.

<sup>19</sup> This estimate excludes parents from the California site, as data on the proportion of months with a payment in the year before enrollment were not available in California. The measure of payment regularity (the proportion of months during which the parent made a payment) is equal to the number of months during which a payment was made divided by the number of months during which the parent had any open case. Some parents had open cases for fewer than 12 months of the previous year, and thus, the results for the regularity measure are expressed as proportion of months in the previous year, not as the number of months in the previous year.

Comparing the PJAC services group with the business-as-usual group indicates that PJAC services generated more positive impacts on child support payments for parents who made some payments in the year before study enrollment than they did for parents who made no payments.<sup>20</sup> For example, PJAC's effect on the proportion of child support obligations paid in the follow-up period was 17 percentage points higher for parents who had made payments in more than three-quarters of months in the previous year than it was for parents who had made no payments in the previous year.<sup>21</sup> PJAC's impact on the number of months with any payment during the follow-up period was nearly two months greater for the former group than for the latter group.<sup>22</sup> PJAC's impact on the amount paid was \$1,809 larger for the former group than for the latter group.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, PJAC's impact on the percentage of obligations parents paid during the follow-up period was 6 percentage points to 8 percentage points larger for parents who had paid at least 20 percent of their obligations in the previous year, compared with parents who had made no payments in the previous year.

## Parents with Higher Recent Formal Earnings

Within the PJAC services group, parents with the highest formal earnings were most likely to engage with case managers. Parents who earned at least \$30,000 from formal employment in the year before study enrollment had more successful contacts with their case managers and were more likely to complete a case conference and a case action plan than parents who earned less than \$30,000.

PJAC also produced greater impacts on payments for parents with at least \$30,000 in formal earnings in the year before enrollment than it did for parents who had no earnings in the year before enrollment. PJAC increased the proportion of obligations parents paid by 8 percentage points more for parents who had at least \$30,000 in formal earnings in the year before study enrollment than it did for parents who had no formal earnings. Further, PJAC services reduced child support debt by \$1,189 more for parents who earned at least \$30,000 in the year before enrollment than it did for parents who earned less than that.<sup>24</sup>

Again, only 3 percent of parents in the sample earned \$30,000 or more from formal employment in the year before enrollment, as shown in Figure 1. Typically, parents with formal earnings would be issued an income withholding order covering at least some portion of their obligations, making it more dif-

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<sup>20</sup> The estimates in this paragraph exclude parents from California, as data on the proportion of months with a payment and proportion of obligations paid in the year before enrollment were not available in California.

<sup>21</sup> Parents paid about 25 percent of their obligations during the follow-up year, on average, so a 17 percentage point difference is substantial.

<sup>22</sup> The average parent made payments in 3 out of 12 months during the follow up year, so a 2-month difference is substantial.

<sup>23</sup> The average parent paid about \$1,193 in child support during the follow-up year, so a \$1,809 difference is substantial.

<sup>24</sup> The average parent owed about \$28,549 in debt at the end of the follow-up year, so a \$1,189 difference in debt is notable.

difficult to fall into a pattern of nonpayment that leads to a contempt referral.<sup>25</sup> That said, this group of parents are more likely to have access to some financial resources that could be used to make payments than those with no earnings. These results, however, capture only a very limited cross-section of ability to pay, as the research team did not collect information on assets, informal or not-reported earnings, and other financial resources that may affect a parent's true ability to pay.

## Parents with Higher Monthly Order Amounts

Among parents in the PJAC services group, parents whose total monthly order amounts were at least \$500 across all their cases at the time of enrollment were more likely to engage with their case managers than parents with lower order amounts. Parents who had owed at least \$750 per month had about one more successful contact and were about 8 percentage points more likely to create a case action plan in the follow-up period than parents whose orders were less than \$250 per month. Parents whose monthly order amounts were at least \$500 were up to 7 percentage points more likely to have a case conference than parents with lower monthly order amounts.

Regarding PJAC's impacts on payments, parents whose order amounts were at least \$500 paid up to 6 percentage points more of their obligations in the follow-up year than parents with lower order amounts.<sup>26</sup>

## Complexity of Child Support Cases

Parents with simpler child support cases, including those with newer cases, lower child support debt balances, and no debt-only cases, were more likely to engage with their case managers. PJAC also had greater impacts on payments and debt for parents with simpler cases, including those with newer cases, lower child support debt balances, and no previous contempt referrals.

## Parents with Newer Cases

The number of years since a parent's earliest case was established often indicates the length of time for which that parent has been involved with a child support agency. A parent who has lengthier involvement with the agency has probably had more past engagement with case managers and longer-standing child support obligations. Among parents assigned to the PJAC services group, parents whose oldest cases were established less than six years before enrollment in PJAC were slightly more likely to engage with case managers than parents with older cases. Parents with newer cases were about 2 percentage points more likely to have a successful contact, 3 percentage points more likely to

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<sup>25</sup> Federal and state laws limit the amount an employer may withhold from a parent's wages, so it is possible for a parent's withholdings to be less than the full obligation amount. Lags in withheld income are possible when parents have a change in obligation amounts or switch employers, among other situations, making it possible for parents to earn formal income that is, at least temporarily, not subject to an income withholding order. Generally, lapses by the child support agency or employer in following the procedure for establishing, issuing, and fulfilling an income withholding order could inhibit proper income withholding. See Office of Child Support Services (2022); Office of Child Support Services (2024b).

<sup>26</sup> This estimate excludes parents from California, as data on the proportion of obligations paid in the year before enrollment were not available in California.

have a case conference, and 1 percentage point more likely to create a case action plan than parents with older cases.

Comparing the PJAC services and business-as-usual groups, PJAC generated a larger impact on debt for parents with newer cases than it did for parents with older cases. PJAC reduced debt by \$674 more for parents with newer cases than it did for those with older cases.

These results align with findings in past PJAC reports. The PJAC demonstration found that parents with older cases may have been subject to previous enforcement actions, and as a result, they may have been less responsive to caseworkers and less motivated to engage in PJAC services. Additionally, parents with older cases may have faced more challenges that made them less likely to be able to pay from the outset of the study. For example, past PJAC reports hypothesized that parents with older cases may have long struggled to meet their child support obligations and may have established an approach wherein they make payments when they have no other choice, which is when the court tells them they must. When PJAC removed this impetus, some parents in this circumstance may not have pulled together payments as they otherwise would.<sup>27</sup>

## Parents with Less Child Support Debt

Among parents enrolled in the PJAC services group, those with higher child support debt amounts at the time of study enrollment were less likely than other parents to engage with PJAC case managers. Many parents entered PJAC with large amounts of child support debt: the average parent owed over \$27,000 in past-due payments at the time of study enrollment, and some parents owed more than \$90,000.<sup>28</sup> Parents who owed less than \$10,000 in debt at study enrollment were up to 5 percentage points more likely to have a successful contact with their case managers than those who owed at least \$90,000. Parents who owed less than \$10,000 were also more likely to create a case action plan than parents with greater amounts of debt, with the difference ranging between 4 percentage points compared with parents who owed between \$10,000 and \$29,999 to 13 percentage points compared with parents who owed more than \$90,000.

Turning to the impacts of PJAC on payments, parents with less debt at enrollment were more likely to make payments under PJAC. PJAC increased the proportion parents paid toward their monthly child support obligations by 4 percentage points more for those who owed less than \$30,000 in debt than it did for those who owed more than \$90,000. The impact of PJAC on payment amounts was \$151 more for parents who owed less than \$10,000 at study enrollment than it was for those who owed between \$30,000 and \$59,999. Additionally, PJAC increased debt owed at the end of the follow-up period by \$7,535 more for parents who owed at least \$90,000 at study enrollment than it did for parents who owed less than \$90,000 at study enrollment.

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<sup>27</sup> Skemer (2023).

<sup>28</sup> For more information about child support debt and related services under PJAC, see Phillips (2021).

The results among parents with large amount of child support debt suggest that such parents may have long-standing barriers to payment that PJAC services alone cannot remedy. Among other barriers, such levels of debt may become overwhelming and discourage engagement and voluntary payment.

## Parents with No Previous Contempt Referrals

PJAC had slightly more positive impacts on payments for parents with no previous contempt referrals than it did for parents with previous contempt referrals. PJAC services had a 3 percentage point greater effect on the proportion of obligations paid for parents with no previous contempt referral than it did for those with previous contempt referrals. Parents with a previous contempt referral also paid \$83 less in child support under PJAC services than business-as-usual services, compared with no difference in payment amounts among parents with no previous contempt referral. Contempt referrals are commonly issued for noncompliance, so parents with previous contempt referrals probably had other periods in the past where they struggled to make payments, suggesting that they may have persistent barriers to payment. Additionally, these previous contempt referrals may have led parents to develop negative [perceptions of the child support agency](#) that affected how they responded to PJAC; these parents often reported feelings of confusion and frustration with the agency after contempt proceedings.<sup>29</sup>

## Parents with No Debt-Only Cases

Among parents who received PJAC services, parents who owed current support on all cases were more likely to engage with their case managers than parents with any debt-only cases. A case was considered debt-only at the time of enrollment if the case no longer had an active current support order but had unpaid debts accrued from past missed or incomplete child support payments, meaning the noncustodial parent did not pay the full obligation amount while the current support order was active. Such cases are likely to have been open for many years. In contrast, if parents have no debt-only cases, all their cases are current, meaning they have active current support orders on all their cases and may also have unpaid debt on some or all of their cases.

Parents who owed current support on all cases were about 5 percentage points more likely to have a successful contact with their case managers and 4 percentage points more likely to have a case conference than parents with any debt-only cases. Parents who owed current support on all cases were also slightly more likely to create a case action plan than parents with debt-only cases.

Like parents with older cases and large debt balances, parents with debt-only cases probably have long histories with the child support agency in which they have developed patterns of nonpayment or have had negative interactions with the agency. Parents with debt-only cases may owe debts to

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<sup>29</sup> Treskon and Groskaufmanis (2022).

custodial parents, the state, or both.<sup>30</sup> Parents who owe debts to custodial parents may feel less motivated to make payments after their children are grown and no longer live with the custodial parents (as is commonly the case in debt-only cases), because they feel their payments only go to the custodial parents. Parents who owe debts to the state may question why they should pay the state now for something that happened years ago.

## Revisiting the Site Story

Differences in outcomes and impacts by site, which were identified in earlier reports, decreased when the analysis adjusted for parent and case characteristics' association with outcomes and impacts.

Differences in local child support policies constrained the services case managers could provide, and sites differed in how PJAC staff members delivered services.<sup>31</sup> Analyses described in past reports found that participants' engagement in PJAC and the impacts of PJAC on service receipt, enforcement actions, payments, and debts varied by site.<sup>32</sup> However, those analyses did not account for the ways the characteristics of parents and cases were associated with site differences in outcomes and impacts. This report fills this gap by investigating how variation across sites changes when accounting for the relationship between parents' characteristics and the outcomes and impacts of PJAC. Any remaining variation across sites may be attributable to differences in the sites' implementation of PJAC, local laws and guidelines, and other attributes of the sites that are not accounted for by parent or case characteristics. This section discusses how adjusting for characteristics of parents and their child support cases changed site variation in: (1) engagement with case managers, (2) service receipt and enforcement contrast, and (3) impacts on child support payments and debts.

In the [earlier report on the implementation of PJAC](#), the evaluation found that sites had different levels of engagement with child support staff.<sup>33</sup> The current analysis suggests that variation across sites is smaller after adjusting for characteristics of parents and their child support cases. Without adjusting for those characteristics, the proportion of parents with successful contacts ranged from a high of 77 percent in Franklin County to a low of 56 percent in California, a difference of 21 percentage points. After adjusting for parent characteristics, that range shrank to 15 percentage points. Still, parent characteristics did not account for all variation in engagement by site, especially in the other engagement outcomes the research team analyzed.

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<sup>30</sup> Debt owed to the state accrues in two ways: (1) While custodial parents and their children receive public assistance (for example, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), the custodial parents must assign their right to receive support to the state. If child support payments are not received while the custodial parents are on public assistance, the unpaid support accrues as debt owed to the state. (2) Most noncustodial parents incur fees associated with child support actions, such as processing fees for child support payments. If those fees go unpaid, they become a debt owed to the state. Additionally, in 34 states—including the 5 states in the PJAC demonstration—child support debt is subject to interest, increasing debt amounts further. See National Conference of State Legislatures (2021).

<sup>31</sup> Treskon, Phillips, Groskaufmanis, and Skemer (2022).

<sup>32</sup> Skemer (2023); Skemer et al. (2022); Treskon, Phillips, Groskaufmanis, and Skemer (2022).

<sup>33</sup> Treskon, Phillips, Groskaufmanis, and Skemer (2022).

In [the earlier report on the contrast in service and enforcement experiences](#) between the PJAC and business-as-usual groups, the evaluation found that the impacts of PJAC on order modifications, license suspensions, contempt referrals, and bench warrants varied across sites.<sup>34</sup> The current analysis found that accounting for parent characteristics reduced much of that site variation. Of note, adjusting for parent characteristics reduced variation in site impacts on order modification from 12 percentage points to 6 percentage points. It also reduced the cross-site spread of impacts on bench warrants from 21 percentage points to zero.

Finally, in [an earlier report on the impact analysis](#), the evaluation found that PJAC was least successful in improving payment and debt outcomes in Michigan and Virginia, but it produced more promising results in Franklin County, Ohio.<sup>35</sup> The report hypothesized that the characteristics of parents might in part explain this variation by site. The results in this report are consistent with that hypothesis. Controlling for how parent and case characteristics are associated with impacts, sites' impacts on the proportion of obligation paid varied by less than 3 percentage points. Sites' impacts on the total amount paid varied by only \$8. Sites' impacts on debt amounts varied by just \$103.<sup>36</sup>

## Predicted Outcomes and Impacts

The results discussed above all describe how individual characteristics are associated with someone's likelihood of engagement and the impacts on payments and debt under the PJAC intervention, holding other parent characteristics constant. This section puts those results together to explore how much outcomes and impacts vary between a parent who has characteristics associated with better engagement and more positive impacts, as described in the previous sections, and a parent who has none of those characteristics. These predictions also demonstrate the sizes of outcomes and impacts of PJAC for different types of parents, whereas the results in previous sections presented the relative differences in outcomes and impacts by characteristics.

For this analysis, the research team constructed three hypothetical parent profiles, with each profile consisting of a set of characteristics with high, medium, or low association with increased engagement, more payments, and lower debt during the follow-up period. Characteristics with high association with these outcomes and impacts include higher earnings, greater and more consistent recent child support payments, and simple child support cases. Characteristics with low association with increased engagement, more payments, and lower debt include no earnings, no recent payments, and complex child support cases. Characteristics with medium association fall somewhere between those two. It is important to note that these profiles do not represent very many parents enrolled in the study because they combine so many different characteristics.

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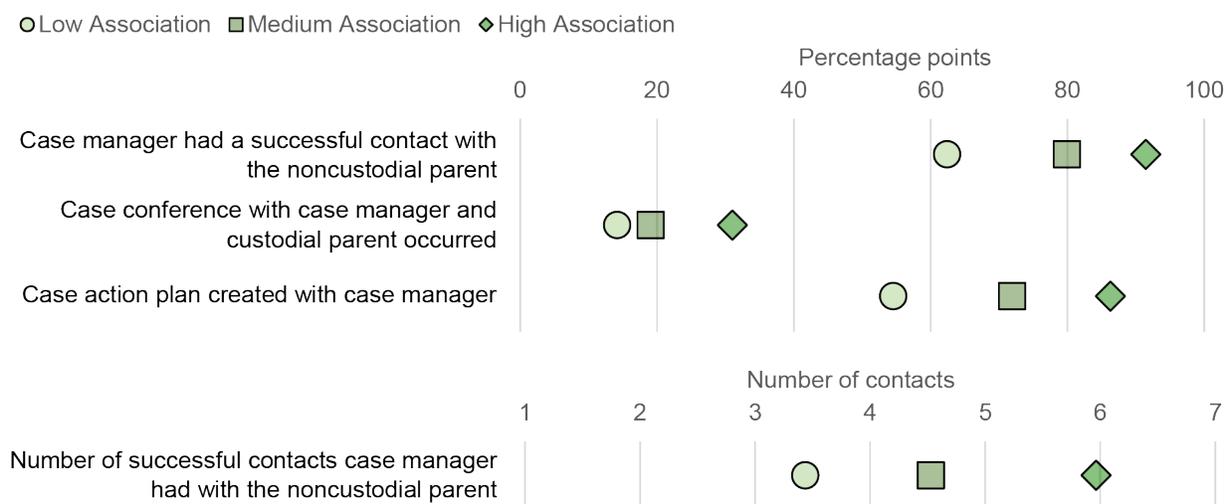
<sup>34</sup> Skemer et al. (2022).

<sup>35</sup> Skemer (2023).

<sup>36</sup> These figures may be compared with the following variation in impacts from Skemer (2023): 10 percentage point variation in proportion of order paid, \$616 variation in total amount paid, and \$2,145 variation in debt amounts.

Figure 2 shows the predicted successful contact, case conference, and case action plan rates for the three profiles in the PJAC services group. Parents with high-association characteristics—characteristics with high association with increased engagement, more payments, and less debt—are predicted to have greater engagement levels than parents with low- and medium-association characteristics. For example, 91 percent of parents with high-association characteristics are predicted to have a successful contact with their case managers, while only 62 percent of parents with low-association characteristics are predicted to have a successful contact. Parents with high-association characteristics are also predicted to have about 2.5 more successful contacts than parents with low-association characteristics. About 31 percent of parents with high-association characteristics are predicted to have a case conference, and 86 percent are predicted to create a case action plan, while rates among parents with low-association characteristics are 14 percent and 55 percent, respectively.

**FIGURE 2** Predicted Engagement Levels for Three Parent Profiles



SOURCES: MDRC calculations based on child support administrative data, PJAC management information system data, and quarterly earnings data from the National Directory of New Hires.

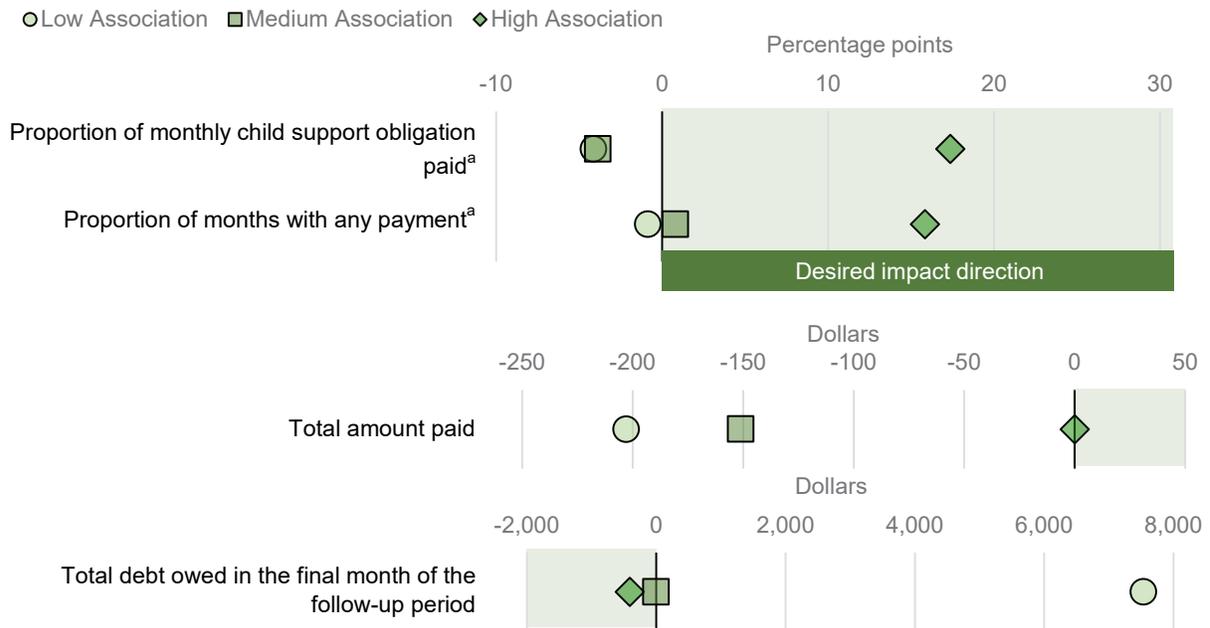
NOTES: This figure shows the predicted outcome values for three profiles. The predicted outcome values were calculated using the regression coefficients from a given outcome's noninteracted lasso model evaluated across all six study sites but excluding covariates for the proportion of child support obligation paid in the year before study enrollment and the proportion of months with any payment in the year before study enrollment. For additional information on how the predicted values were calculated, see Appendix B.

The three profiles represent three sets of covariate values for selected characteristics. For more information on the characteristics that make up each profile, see Appendix B, Section V.

For detailed results, see Appendix Table E.1.

Figure 3 shows the predicted impacts of the PJAC intervention on payments and debt for the three profiles. The impacts of PJAC on predicted payment compliance and regularity are much larger for parents with high-association characteristics than those with low-association characteristics. Parents with high-association characteristics are predicted to pay 17 percent more of their obligations

**FIGURE 3** Predicted Impacts on Payments and Debt for Three Parent Profiles



SOURCES: MDRC calculations based on child support administrative data and quarterly earnings data from the National Directory of New Hires.

NOTES: These results in this table are the predicted impact values for three profiles. The predicted impact values were calculated using the regression coefficients from a given outcome's research group–interacted lasso model evaluated across all six study sites but excluding covariates for the proportion of child support obligation paid in the year before study enrollment and the proportion of months with any payment in the year before study enrollment, except where noted otherwise. For additional information on how the predicted impacts were calculated, see Appendix B.

The three profiles represent three sets of covariate values for selected characteristics. For more information on the characteristics that make up each profile, see Appendix B, Section V.

For detailed results, see Appendix Table E.2.

<sup>a</sup>Calculated using regression coefficients from the outcome's research group–interacted lasso model evaluated across all sites except California, but including covariates for the proportion of child support obligation paid in the year before study enrollment and the proportion of months with any payment in the year before study enrollment.

and make payments in almost two more months of the follow-up year under PJAC services compared with business-as-usual. Meanwhile, for parents with low-association characteristics, PJAC is predicted to *reduce* the proportion of the obligation paid by 4 percentage points and to have no effect on the number of months in which payments were made. While PJAC is predicted to have little effect on payment amounts and debt for parents with high-association characteristics, parents with low-association characteristics are predicted to pay \$203 less in child support and accrue over \$7,500 more in debt under PJAC services than under business-as-usual services.

## Discussion

Although PJAC had little effect on child support payments and debt for the average parent, this report explored whether its approach centered on procedural justice applied at the point of contempt worked better for some parents based on their formal earnings, their recent payments, their monthly order amounts, and the complexity of their child support cases. If it did, it might suggest focusing the use of approaches informed by procedural justice on parents in specific groups when child support program resources are limited. It might also suggest where child support agencies should seek other approaches to engage parents successfully and improve their compliance with child support orders.

The research team found that PJAC worked better for parents with higher formal earnings and parents who had made some recent payments. PJAC was intended for parents who had an ability to make payments, and these results suggest this intended targeting of parents who had the ability to make payments was appropriate. PJAC, however, did not work as well for parents with low or no formal earnings and no recent payments. Past reports suggest that despite having been determined to have an ability to pay, parents in PJAC often faced significant difficulty finding and maintaining employment that paid enough for them to meet both their own basic needs and their child support obligations. In summary, the results suggest PJAC might be best used with parents with more earnings and recent payments, while different approaches may be needed for parents with limited earnings and no recent payments to engage them in services and help them meet their child support obligations.

The findings in this report also suggest that parents with simpler child support cases may be more likely to respond to PJAC services. Parents with more complex cases probably entered PJAC with more persistent barriers to payment and more negative interactions with the child support agency that can create feelings of frustration or confusion, and as a result, such parents may have responded differently to PJAC services. Additional services beyond those provided under PJAC are needed to address these long-standing barriers and repair negative relationships such parents may have with the child support program.

Finally, variation across sites in engagement and in the impacts of PJAC was smaller after adjusting for the relationship between parents' characteristics and said engagement outcomes and impacts. This finding suggests that who is in the child support program *and* the approach taken by a child support agency are both important in determining whether an approach informed by procedural justice is likely to engage parents and improve their compliance with child support orders.<sup>37</sup>

In conclusion, while past reports found that PJAC had slightly negative, if any, effects on payments and debt, these findings suggest that after one year, PJAC probably produced fewer negative effects and may have even produced some positive effects on payments and debt for parents who at the time of study enrollment had higher formal earnings, had recently made payments, had higher monthly order amounts, and had simpler child support cases. The current analysis also found that parents with such characteristics may be more likely to engage with the child support agency than other

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<sup>37</sup> See Treskon, Phillips, Groskaufmanis, and Skemer (2022) for more information on the differences in how PJAC was implemented across sites.

parents. Using procedural justice on parents with these characteristics may provide more benefits to the custodial parents and children, as they are more likely to receive payments under PJAC than the average parent. Outside the bounds of PJAC, all parents engaging with social services should be treated with dignity and respect. Further research should be conducted to determine the long-term benefits of procedural justice and the benefits of procedural justice when applied earlier in a parent's relationship with the child support agency than the point of a contempt referral.

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