



**Improving Judicial Processing
of Child Support Enforcement Cases
Through the Use of Technology**

**Final Report
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Submitted to:
Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County
Fifth Judicial District of Pennsylvania
Family Division – Adult Section
440 Ross Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Submitted by:
Center for POLICY RESEARCH
1570 Emerson Street
Denver, Colorado 80218
303/ 837-1555



Executive Summary

Allegheny Family Court's Special Improvement Project tested the effectiveness of allowing nonresident, noncustodial parents to "appear" at court conferences and hearings to establish or modify child support orders using video and teleconferencing techniques. By making the video- and teleconference option available to all noncustodial parents (NCPs) in local cases who lived outside of Allegheny County, the court hoped to improve the rate of participation in order-making proceedings. A further expectation was that participation would lead to the generation of more appropriate orders that were better paid over time.

As part of the grant, the court installed electronic equipment in a courtroom and developed written materials explaining the option to appear via video- or teleconference. All local cases filed between June 2005 and October 2006 with a noncustodial parent who had a zip code outside of Allegheny County were randomly assigned to treatment and comparison groups based on the last digit of their Social Security number. Parents in the treatment group were mailed materials about the teleconference option and an application to participate. They were required to return the application along with relevant financial documents within 14 days and to be available to participate by telephone or video at their local child support agency (if the agency was willing to cooperate), or at their home or place of business. Parents in the comparison group were instructed to come to the court for a scheduled conference or file a written pleading requesting permission to participate remotely. Parents in both groups who failed to reach an agreement at a court conference were referred to a hearing that was scheduled later that same day.

Over the 17-month recruitment period, noncustodial parents in 325 cases were offered the teleconference option. The comparison group consisted of 172 cases.

As part of the evaluation, project staff maintained records on all 325 cases offered the video and teleconference option. Parents who were offered the opportunity to participate remotely but chose to appear in person were asked to complete a brief questionnaire indicating the reasons for their decision, and 30 percent of eligible parents (n=27) did so. A follow-up telephone interview was conducted with 57 noncustodial parents approximately one month following their teleconference, yielding a response rate of 54 percent. Qualitative, telephone interviews were conducted with 16 legal and court personnel including conference and hearing officers, court administrators, judges, project staff, and attorneys. Finally, computer programmers at the court extracted selected payment information on all cases in the treatment and comparison groups, while a project staff member collected a limited amount of information on the appearance of noncustodial parents at conferences and hearings for order-making purposes.

The key project findings were as follows:

Use of Teleconferencing

- Only 32 percent of the 325 cases eligible to appear remotely did so, 29 percent appeared in person, and 39 percent failed to appear at all. Those who chose to personally appear felt that in-person formats were better, that it was unsafe to fax or mail payroll and tax documents, and/or that they would combine their court appearance with a visit with the child.



- ▶ All of the 103 cases with remote participation were done using teleconference techniques. No one requested to participate by video.
- ▶ Some noncustodial parents chose not to participate because of a project rule saying that they had to go to their local child support agency for the call if the agency agreed to assist.
- ▶ Half of surveyed NCPs who opted to participate in person said that they did not understand how the teleconference worked or that it seemed complicated.
- ▶ Nearly all (91%) interviewed noncustodial parents who teleconferenced said they did so because it was more convenient and less expensive than traveling into Allegheny County.

User Reactions to Teleconferencing

- ▶ Teleconferencing appealed to NCPs who appeared to be better educated and wealthier than many child support populations, with 50 percent reporting annual incomes of \$30,000 or more.
- ▶ Teleconferencing appealed to NCPs who lived a great distance from the court, with 55 percent living over 300 miles from their children in Allegheny County and 70 percent living over 100 miles away.
- ▶ Teleconferencing was an effective way of communicating with NCPs about their personal child support situation, with more than three-quarters of interviewed NCPs reporting greater understanding of their child support obligation and what to do after their conference.
- ▶ Users of teleconferencing were pleased with the experience and 88 percent felt it was convenient; no custodial parent objected.
- ▶ Those who opted for in-person conferences also rated their experiences highly, with 100 percent saying that they had been fair and their questions had been answered.
- ▶ Despite their favorable assessments of the teleconference experience, 29 percent of interviewed NCPs anticipate problems paying all their child support due to employment instability, high order levels, and having another family to support.

Reactions of Conference and Hearing Officers, Attorneys, and Project Architects

- ▶ Conference and hearing officers say there are few differences between in-person and teleconferences, but many say they take extra effort to explain things to noncustodial parents on the telephone and answer their questions.



- ▶ The biggest perceived disadvantage to teleconferences is the noncustodial parent's inability to submit last-minute financial information or examine the other parent's financial documents.
- ▶ One complaint about teleconferences is that it is difficult to discern credibility over the telephone, especially when documentation is missing or limited, although several officers feel that these conditions are challenging in in-person formats, too.
- ▶ Most attorneys, conference and hearings officers, judges, and court personnel support the use of teleconferencing and feel as though the benefits outweigh the downside, but would impose a commute threshold of one hour or 100 miles.
- ▶ Project architects plan to expand the use of teleconferences to all intrastate cases with an NCP who lives outside of Allegheny County; they will use videoconferences in all child support matters that involve incarcerated obligors.

Outcomes Associated with Teleconferencing

- ▶ The opportunity to participate by teleconference did not affect the overall appearance rate, with 39 and 36 percent of those who opted for teleconferencing and in-person formats failing to appear, respectively.
- ▶ Teleconferencing did not affect the agreement rate, with agreed-upon orders generated at conferences for 36 percent of cases with teleconferencing and 43 percent of cases with in-person formats.
- ▶ Teleconferencing did not affect the rate of child support payment, with those who participated in conferences and hearings using teleconference and in-person formats paying an identical 70 and 72 percent of what they owed, as compared with a 28 percent payment rate for those who failed to appear.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Allegheny Technology Project illustrates that it is feasible for noncustodial parents to participate in order-making and modification proceedings using telephone conference techniques. The process was well liked by those who opted to use it, the other parent did not object, and conference and hearing officers found the format to be satisfactory and no more arduous or time consuming than in-person approaches. At the same time, it was used by less than one-third of the parents given the opportunity, no one opted to use video technology, and it did not result in any improvement in the appearance or agreement rate at order-making proceedings or the subsequent child support payment rate. At a minimum, teleconferencing appears to be a more convenient way to serve a segment of the child support population, particularly those who live at some distance from the agency, without any measurable loss of efficacy, outcome, or quality.



As the Family Division expands the opportunity to participate remotely to all intrastate cases that involve new or modified orders where the NCP lives outside of Allegheny County, it may want to consider the following recommendations.

- ▶ Expand the range of cases in which teleconferencing is feasible, but consider restricting its use based on geography, commute time or distance. Although project personnel maintain that it would be difficult to implement such restrictions, many attorneys and judicial officers who support teleconferencing feel that those who can conveniently appear should do so.
- ▶ Make conference officers aware of their ability to add parties to their teleconferences on their existing phones so that noncustodial parents and their attorneys (or an employer witness) can appear by telephone simultaneously. Another suggestion is to acquire more fax machines to permit the exchange of documents during teleconferences
- ▶ Consider boosting usage of teleconferencing by publicizing the opportunity to family attorneys at relevant family law association functions, simplifying project materials and the application to participate, and placing brief “heads-up” phone calls to noncustodial parents to encourage them to check their mail for important information regarding the teleconference opportunity. Over time, the word about teleconferencing will inevitably “hit the street.” But these measures should jump-start the process of educating the public about a new way of doing child support business.
- ▶ Participate in state and national forums for child support and judicial personnel to educate the professional community about video and teleconferencing. Agencies and courts need to acquire new equipment and become comfortable with new ways of doing business. Allegheny County’s successful experiences with distance technology make it a natural leader in trying to promote cultural change and the adoption of new norms about the format of legal proceedings.



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Introduction

This report documents the results of a project in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, designed to maximize the participation of noncustodial parents (NCPs) in the establishment of child support orders. It focuses specifically on the subgroup of noncustodial parents who are under the jurisdiction of Allegheny County but who may be deterred from participating in order-establishment and modification procedures because they live a significant distance from the child support agency and court. This includes all local cases where the custodial parent and child live within Allegheny County but the noncustodial parent does not.

The project tested the effectiveness of allowing nonresident parents to “appear” at court hearings through video or teleconferencing. The assumptions underlying the project were the following:

- Allowing a noncustodial parent to “appear” at a hearing via video or teleconferencing should result in fewer default orders being entered.
- Reductions in the default rate should result in more orders being based on accurate income information and correct employment information.
- Reductions in the default rate would result in a greater incidence of orders with wage assignments and better patterns of child support payment.
- Reductions in the default rate should result in noncustodial parents having a better understanding of their child support obligation and the steps they need to take if they experience payments problems.

The report begins with a review of past research and prior literature relevant for this project. Specifically, it covers literature related to the establishment of child support orders by default, literature related to processing child support cases where the parties are separated by distance, and literature related to the use of teleconferencing in the courts and support agencies.

Default Orders

Default orders occur when a noncustodial parent (NCP) fails to make a legal appearance in a child support case being brought against him. They are used to prevent NCPs from benefiting simply by ignoring legal proceedings. Federal and state laws and regulations support the use of default orders for child support cases when defendants fail to respond, assuming legally sufficient service of process has been completed. Although states clearly have the authority to use default orders when legal appearance is not made, the default orders in child support cases are of concern for several reasons.

- The NCP may not be aware that he has a child support obligation or may not know the amount of the obligation and thus may not pay;
- Default orders are often based upon presumed or imputed income, rather than actual income information, and therefore may not reflect the ability of the NCP to pay.



Default orders are believed to contribute to the large child support arrearages accumulated by many low-income NCPs. Indeed, in a recent study of child support arrears in California, researchers attributed arrears to the high incidence of default orders. According to that study, 71 percent of the parents who owed child support arrears in March 2000 had at least one child support order set by default (Sorensen, *et al.*, 2003).

There are a number of reasons why default orders may occur in child support cases.

- ▶ The person named in the legal proceeding may not actually be served (delivered) with the documents, and therefore may not have had actual notice of the proceeding. This might occur, for example, if the documents are left at the last known residence and the person no longer lives there.
- ▶ The person served may not respond for a variety of reasons. This might include a fear of getting involved in the court system, a lack of financial resources to obtain legal representation or pay a filing fee, or a lack of understanding of the nature of the legal action being brought due to language or literacy difficulties or other problems.
- ▶ The person served may not agree with the legal relief requested but may simply choose to evade or ignore the matter, despite having an understanding of the documents and consequences of his failure to appear.
- ▶ The person served may agree with the relief requested in the documents (*e.g.*, the amount of child support requested) and therefore may choose not to respond.

When the noncustodial parent is known to reside at a significant distance from the court and child support agency, another logical explanation for a failure to appear at the child support hearing is the time and cost involved in the travel.

Distance in Child Support Cases

Distance between the noncustodial parent and the child is widely believed to reduce compliance. Physical distance can result in high transportation and communication costs of both time and money leading to less parent-child contact, which has been shown to be associated with payment (Seltzer, McLanahan, and Hanson, 1998; Argys and Peters, 2001). Distance can also intensify the problem of imperfect communication between the parents, raising the costs of monitoring the custodial parent's spending and making the noncustodial parent less willing to pay (Weiss and Willis, 1993). It is also possible that noncustodial parents with weaker ties with their children create physical distance by moving away and are less inclined to make payments (Chang and Beller, 2005).

Distance factors come to play most often in interstate cases, where the noncustodial parent lives in a state other than the one in which the order is to be "managed." Approximately 24 percent of all cases in the Federal Offset file (composed of delinquent NCPs submitted by a state for some type of Federal Offset remedy such as the Federal Income Tax Refund Program) are interstate cases (Crook, 2000). A study on separated parents conducted by the University of Michigan (Hill, 1988 as cited in Green Book, 2000) found that 12 percent of separated couples were living in different states one year after divorce or separation. The percentage grew to 25 percent three years post-divorce and 40 percent by eight years post-divorce.



Interstate cases have long posed a significant problem in child support enforcement. Although they represent at least a quarter of the national caseload, they account for only 7 percent of total collections (DHHS, 2002). Many of the early problems were logistical. No uniformity in child support enforcement laws and procedures existed among the different states. This often resulted in lengthy and complicated paperwork, bureaucratic red tape, and conflicting child support orders. Additionally, problems arose in locating interstate parents who switched jobs every few months (Chang and Beller, 2005).

The federal government's solution to these logistical difficulties was to enact a variety of legislation addressing interstate child support agreements. The Uniform Reciprocal Enforcement of Support Act (URESA), implemented in 1950, allowed states to enforce other state's child support orders. Although URESA was a step in the right direction, it was not without its flaws. It recognized multiple orders from different states, making enforcement a lengthy and complicated process. States were also able to adopt parts of the legislation and modify others, so the law was not truly uniform across the country (Alliance for Non-Custodial Parents Rights, 2004). To compensate for these flaws, the Uniform Interstate Family Support Act (UIFSA) was drafted to replace URESA. UIFSA does not recognize multiple orders; only one support order is recognized, typically the original order established in the state in which the child lives with the custodial parent. UIFSA also addresses the uniformity problem with URESA.

Child support agencies, at the state, regional, and federal levels, have continued to develop ways to improve interstate communication and cooperation. As a result, while the total number of interstate cases remained relatively steady from 2001 through 2005, total collections increased by almost \$232 million (OCSE, 2006). Nevertheless, interstate cases remain among the most problematic cases for most states (Green Book, 2000). For example, a recent analysis of the impact of physical distance between the noncustodial parent and the child using administrative data from Illinois found that regardless of state lines, physical distance lowered the likelihood of compliance, and that state borders between the parent and the child lowered the likelihood of child support payment even further. As a result, the authors conclude that the uniformity introduced by UIFSA have not improved child support outcomes in interstate cases (Chang and Beller, 2005).

One way that child support agencies can avoid some of the difficulties associated with interstate case processing is to use the expansive, long-arm provisions for establishing paternity and support and modifying orders that are available in UIFSA. Through these provisions, states can obtain jurisdiction over out-of-state parties and eliminate confusion due to multiple tribunals. Noncustodial parents can voluntarily submit to the jurisdiction of a state. If certain criteria are met, and the custodial parent prefers to file a case locally, noncustodial parents may be compelled to submit. The criteria for obtaining jurisdiction over an out-of-state party include whether the child was conceived in the state, resides in the state as a result of the acts of the noncustodial parent, or the noncustodial parent lived with the child in the state. Long-arm procedures cannot be used if the state is unable to exercise jurisdiction. These include situations where the information about the noncustodial parent is scant, there is an inability to subpoena information on earnings in order to establish orders, and/or the custodial parent lacks the information needed to testify about the NCP's earnings. In such cases, the case must be filed using two-state procedures.

Teleconferencing

Phone- and videoconferencing have been used in courts for over 20 years. The primary users have been criminal courts, which utilize the systems for bail hearings, interviewing material and expert witnesses, and preliminary arraignments. Most states have some remote conferencing system in place in their court system, including Wisconsin, Hawaii, and Kentucky.

Pennsylvania has also undertaken several projects incorporating remote conferencing into their criminal justice system. In 1998, six counties (Berks, Lancaster, York, Montgomery, Cumberland, and Schuylkill) and three state correctional facilities integrated videoconferencing. Videoconferencing was primarily used in these projects for after-hours preliminary arraignments and attorney-client conferencing. Most participants who were surveyed at the completion of these projects believed that videoconferencing was beneficial. Chief among the benefits cited were efficiency and convenience. Another benefit was savings on transportation; however, due to the underutilization of the remote conferencing system, the savings had not offset the cost of setup two years later (CONSAD Research Corporation, 2000).

Another evaluation of Pennsylvania's video preliminary arraignment systems revealed some interesting utilization patterns. According to the final report by Shastri and Wald (2004), only 36.4 percent of those courts with videoconferencing technology were maximally utilizing it. Other than preliminary arraignments, those courts studied most often used the videoconferencing technology for search warrants (53.2%) and Protection From Abuse proceedings (42.9%). However, the system was rarely utilized for interviews between public defenders and arrestees (7.8%), witness and defendant appearances (5.2%), and child support hearings (1.3%). Increasing use of videoconferencing in these areas may prove to be beneficial and may help to recover equipment costs faster

UIFSA allowed for remote appearances by the non-resident parent for interstate child support proceedings, and although use of phone or videoconferencing in child support establishment is rare, it is not without precedent. Janelle T. Calhoun (1995) reported that Delaware and Colorado have both tried using phone conferences in interstate child support cases. The Delaware and Colorado phone-conferencing experiments revealed both strengths and weaknesses of the system. On the positive side, it allowed both parties to give their side of the story, respond to each other's testimony, and quickly learn of the court's decision. It also allowed the court to use the most current information and therefore make a more informed decision. The downsides to phone conferences were problems with scheduling the hearings and notifying petitioners, as well as difficulties with technology and facilities.

Hawaii has also used teleconferencing for child support cases since 1996 in order to address transportation problems and costs associated with the state's unique geography. According to *The Compendium of State Best Practices and Good Ideas in Child Support Enforcement* (2000), approximately 40 percent of all intrastate and interstate child support hearings in Hawaii are conducted by teleconference. The Compendium also reported that teleconferencing has saved the Hawaiian courts transportation costs as well as wages associated with hearing officer travel time. Another benefit of teleconferencing was fewer requests for continuances.

More recently, the Honorable Nicholas J. Palos of the New York County Family Court (2006) reported on his experiences working with UIFSA cases involving remote conferencing. Under UIFSA, parents can arrange to submit evidence and documentation via fax or mail and appear during the hearing by video or teleconferencing. According to Judge Palos, remote conferencing has had the potential to help many nonresident parents avoid paying travel expenses and missing work. However, he also notes that some of the unique issues in remote conferencing – previously mentioned in regards to criminal proceedings – can cause complications in support hearings.

Judge Palos worries about the court's ability to impart the seriousness of the hearing to the nonresident parent in a telephone format. He says, "Much of the ritual surrounding the court process is designed to impress upon the participants the importance of what is happening." To address this problem, he sets out standards on the venue from which the nonresident parent can appear. Judge Palos has approved only



certain types of appropriate venues, none of which are the home of the parent or a witness. All appropriate venues are formal in nature and have an independent party available to confirm the identity of the parent or witness. Additionally, requiring a formal venue for remote conferencing increases the chance that the nonresident parent will have access to a fax machine so that he or she can send in new evidence or receive certain forms of evidence (*i.e.*, pictures, medical records) presented in court.

Another problem that Judge Palos addresses is that of determining the credibility of parents and witnesses appearing remotely. He recognizes that many, if not all in the case of phone-conferencing, of the visual cues to credibility are lost in these cases. Additionally, it is possible that instead of giving testimony on the spot, as they would in person, those appearing remotely may “cheat” and read their testimony from evidence not submitted to the court. His only suggestion to this is to improve technology to allow for videoconferencing in all cases of remote conferencing. He argues that the Internet provides an excellent means of connecting with the nonresident parent and transmitting evidence to and from the court hearing. However, he feels that this upgrade is a long way off because of the high cost of equipment (Palos, 2006).

Though much of the research on phone- and videoconferencing in courts has focused on criminal proceedings, many of the concerns are valid for child support cases as well. One concern is that a defendant in a criminal proceeding who appears through remote conferencing will not take the charges and the proceeding as seriously as one who appears in person, which may adversely affect due process (Treadway-Johnson and Wiggins, 2006). Similarly, in a child support case, it is possible that a noncustodial parent who appears for a support establishment or modification hearing by remote conferencing may not see the order as real and legally binding. This may produce a diminished sense of responsibility for the financial and physical care of the child and result in noncompliance with the child support order.

Another legal issue in criminal proceedings that is of concern to child support cases is access to effective counsel. In a criminal proceeding, an attorney can appear either in a courtroom or with the defendant. Either choice potentially hinders the attorney’s ability to do his or her job effectively. If counsel appears in court, clients lose immediate, private access to the attorney to explain their side and attorneys may not fully understand the clients’ positions. If counsel appears with the defendant, they lose access to potential witnesses and to opposing counsel to arrange plea bargains (Treadway-Johnson and Wiggins, 2006). Likewise, whether counsel appears in court or with the noncustodial parent in a child support case, they may not be able to adequately negotiate a child support order or modification for the client.

Finally, research regarding witness credibility has bearing on the fairness of having one parent appear by phone or videoconferencing and the other in person. Studies presenting child witness testimony via closed-circuit television versus in person testimony have shown to have an affect on jurors’ perceptions of the witness’ credibility. In a study conducted by Gail Goodman, jurors found the witness who testified via closed-circuit television as less credible than the one who testified in person (cited in Treadway-Johnson and Wiggins, 2006). Similarly, this affect on perception could put the noncustodial parent at a disadvantage with the judge should any disagreement between them and the custodial parent, who is appearing in person, arise.



Overview of the Project

Traditional Case Processing

The child support process in Pennsylvania is conducted through the county Domestic Relations Section (DRS) of the Court of Common Pleas. In 2005, Pennsylvania had approximately 558,944 open child support cases. The child support caseload in Allegheny County in 2005 was 82,835. The Allegheny County Family Division has a specialized Interstate Unit that assumed responsibility for project implementation.

The first step in the order establishment process is a conference with a conference officer. The noncustodial parent is mailed an order to appear for this conference. The custodial parent is also notified about the conference. If the conference does not result in an agreed-upon order, the case is scheduled for a hearing on the same day. If a parent wishes to challenge the order generated by the hearing officer, he must file an exception and the case will be heard before a judge on a separate day.

The Family Division of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, has traditionally made it difficult for noncustodial parents to participate in conferences and hearings by telephone; it was impossible to appear using video technology. One route to remote participation required the custodial parent to send a letter to the Family Division granting permission for the other parent to participate by telephone. Alternatively, the noncustodial parent was required to present a petition in Motions Court requesting the opportunity to appear by telephone. This required a personal appearance by the noncustodial parent or his attorney.

Not surprisingly, telephone conferences were used very rarely. And given the lack of video equipment in the Family Division, videoconferences and hearings were never done. When the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement released a grant announcement in 2004 calling specifically for projects to “remove barriers to participation in Title IV-D child support proceedings such as requiring the physical presence of the parents at hearings and other legal proceedings” (DHHS, 2003), managers in the Family Division decided to experiment with the use of video- and teleconferences to improve the participation of non-resident parents.

Project Startup

A number of activities took place prior to the start of teleconferencing. The Information Management Team of the Allegheny Court of Common Pleas selected a courtroom and installed electronic equipment to allow noncustodial parents to appear by videoconference or teleconference, and to send and receive faxes. While this work was underway, the Family Division prepared written materials to be mailed to noncustodial parents explaining the option to appear via videophone or teleconference. These materials are attached in Appendix A. They include an informational flier and an application to participate by telephone or video. In addition, the administrative judge of the Family Division issued a court rule authorizing the Family Division to have noncustodial parents participate via teleconference or videoconference and to submit documents for hearing via fax or mail.

The Project Work Group, which included the administrative judge of the Family Division, the Family Division court administrator, and the supervisor of the UIFSA Division, developed the criteria for inclusion in the project. The following types of cases were considered eligible for the project:



- ▶ The case was classified as a local Allegheny case that did not involve another Pennsylvania county or another state child support agency;
- ▶ The noncustodial parent was living outside of Allegheny County either in another county in Pennsylvania or in another state; or
- ▶ The case either needed an order established, a child added to an existing order, or an order modification.

All relevant cases filed between June 2005 and October 2006 were targeted for inclusion in the project and randomly assigned to the experimental or control group. Noncustodial parents in the experimental group were offered the opportunity to participate by teleconference or video conference and to submit documents by fax. Noncustodial parents in the control group were treated in the normal manner. Those who wished to participate remotely needed to petition the court and obtain a judicial ruling or obtain written permission by the custodial parent. Both groups were scheduled to come to court for a conference, to be followed by a hearing if the conference failed to result in an agreed-upon order. Cases in the experimental group were scheduled for conferences and same-day hearings (if necessary) on Thursdays, when the specially outfitted courtroom was available. Hearings for cases in the control group were also scheduled to occur on the same day.

Project Operating Procedures

The first challenge was to identify local Allegheny cases where the noncustodial parent lived outside of Allegheny County. The methodology ultimately selected involved a zip code analysis. NCPs in local cases who had a non-Allegheny zip code were eligible for participation. Those with an Allegheny zip code were not. Project architects considered but dropped the idea of imposing a distance criterion that involved miles or hours. Allegheny County is a large county that is close to the border of Ohio and West Virginia. Staff felt that it was impossible to come up with a simple mileage or commute limit for participation that would be equitable and easy to administer.

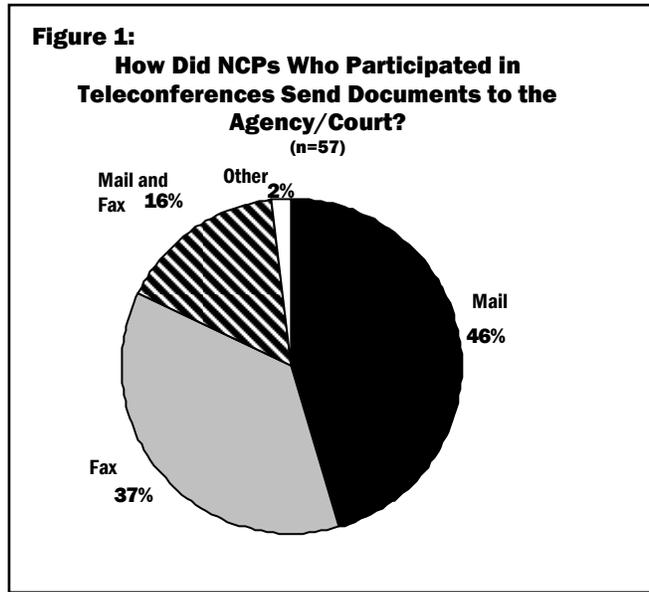
Assignment to the treatment group and the control group was based on the last digit of the NCP's Social Security number. NCPs with a Social Security number ending in an odd number were assigned to the experimental group that was offered the teleconference option. Those with a Social Security number ending in an even number comprised the control group that was treated in the normal manner.

Noncustodial parents in both groups were mailed a notice and assigned a date for a conference and hearing (if needed). NCPs in the experimental group were mailed additional materials about the teleconference and/or video option. They included a flier inviting NCPs to participate and explaining the requirements, a cover letter, and an application. They were instructed to return the application within 14 days of the mailing date, along with copies of their pay stubs for the preceding six months, W-2 form, income tax return, and medical insurance costs for the children. In addition, interested NCPs needed to verify their identity by attaching a copy of their driver's license or another photo ID. The application and supporting documents could be returned to the Family Division by mail or fax. Figure 1 shows that over a third (37%) of NCPs who opted to participate remotely sent their documents to project staff by fax. Nearly half (46%) used conventional mail techniques and 16 percent of NCPs used both mail and fax to convey their documents.



Once the NCP returned an application indicating his interest in participating electronically, the Family Division notified the custodial parent of the request. Custodial parents who objected were required to file a petition at Motions Court and obtain a court order to block the request. No such petitions were filed during the 17-month project.

Simultaneously, the Family Division would contact the child support agency in the location in which the NCP resided and request their assistance with the teleconference and/or video conference. If an agency agreed to assist with the call, the NCP was required to go to that setting for the call. If the agency declined to assist, the Family Division would contact the NCP with a dial-in number and he would be instructed to place the call at a proscribed time from his home or office.



According to Family Division staff, most child support agencies declined to assist with the teleconference arrangements and as a result most NCPs participated from their homes or places of work. To assist with a call, an agency needed to provide space and a phone, and it inevitably required some staff coordination. Since other agencies had “no reason to be involved” in direct cases of Allegheny County, assisting in teleconferences represented a burden that they typically chose to avoid. As the coordinator for Allegheny’s Interstate Unit put it, “I can’t blame them for saying no.”

The first teleconference took place in August 2005. All conferences were conducted by officers who normally handle interstate child support matters, rather than by child support officers who normally handle local Allegheny cases. Conference officers at the Interstate Unit are in a new location where they have offices with walls and doors, while their intrastate counterparts are housed in one giant room with approximately 40 modular units. Program architects thought that it would be disruptive to use speaker phones in modular offices and that at least some conferences would be conducted using video conference techniques.

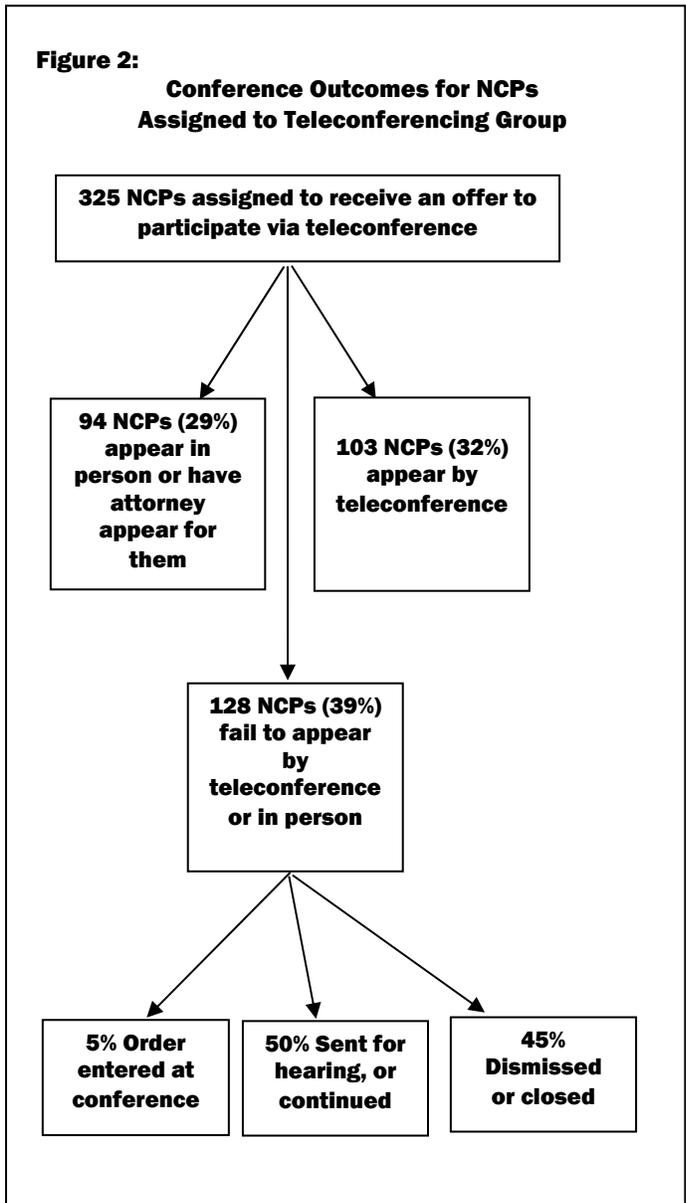
Those who failed to reach an agreement at their conference were referred for a same-day hearing. This eliminated the need for parties to return to court for a second time to be heard by a hearing officer. Hearings were conducted in the Family Court facility, which is located in a separate building and is not housed with the intercounty/interstate unit of the Family Division. NCPs in the experimental group who failed to produce an agreement at the conference were instructed to be available at their telephone for a hearing later in the day. The custodial parent was instructed to walk over to the Family Court facility for the hearing. All experimental cases were assigned to one hearing officer who utilized the renovated courtroom with telephone and video equipment.

Conference outcomes were entered as orders of the Family Division. Objecting parties could file an exception, and their case would be heard by a judge of the Family Division. Support cases are rarely appealed to the judiciary in conventional settings, so the project was expected to have minimal impact on the judiciary.



Methodology

During the 17-month recruitment process, 376 NCPs were flagged to participate in the video- and teleconferencing experiment and randomly assigned to the experimental group. All other NCPs were assigned to the control group and treated in the usual manner. A sizeable number of cases were eliminated from the experimental group because the parties requested the conference to be cancelled and/or service of



process could not be achieved. This left a total of 325 eligible NCPs who were offered the opportunity to participate electronically. Ultimately, 103 NCPs (32%) were interested in the offer and followed through with the project requirements. Almost an equal number of NCPs – 94, or 29 percent – chose to appear in person or have their attorneys appear personally on their behalf. The remaining 39 percent failed to appear at all. Figure 2 shows the disposition of cases in the experimental group.

The project coordinator was surprised by the large number of NCPs who chose to appear in person rather than participate electronically. She hypothesizes that many viewed the scheduled conference as an opportunity to visit with their children. Conference and hearing officers were also surprised at the large number that chose to appear in person. As one hearing officer put it:

I don't want to say that they weren't interested, but I had more people travel from Florida and Georgia than participate by telephone. They seem to feel that they needed to be here. They don't trust doing it over the phone. They believe that they have a legitimate issue that they need to present to the court.

Still others felt that NCPs may not have been aware of the opportunity to participate by phone. Since they rarely read notices that are sent in the mail, this respondent wondered

whether they should be telephoned and told about the teleconference option. As one conference officer observed, "They ignore their paper work, or put it aside and then it's too late to respond."

Usage issues are discussed at greater length in the next section of this report.



The evaluation was conducted by an independent research agency, the Center for Policy Research (CPR). CPR researchers, in collaboration with project staff, designed the following data collection instruments, copies of which are included in Appendix B:

- ▶ A form to be completed by project staff for each case using teleconferencing;
- ▶ A list of data elements to guide the extraction of data from automated child support records for cases in the experimental and control groups;
- ▶ A data collection form to be used in manually extracting a limited amount of information on control and experimental group cases from court files to supplement the automated extract;
- ▶ A one-page survey to be distributed by hearing officers to all noncustodial parents who were offered the opportunity to use teleconferencing but chose to personally appear for the conference; and
- ▶ A telephone survey for use with noncustodial parents approximately one month following the teleconference.

In addition, CPR staff conducted telephone interviews with project staff, conference and hearings officers, judges, and attorneys who represented noncustodial parents who teleconferenced.

Table 1 summarizes the data collected for this project using various techniques.

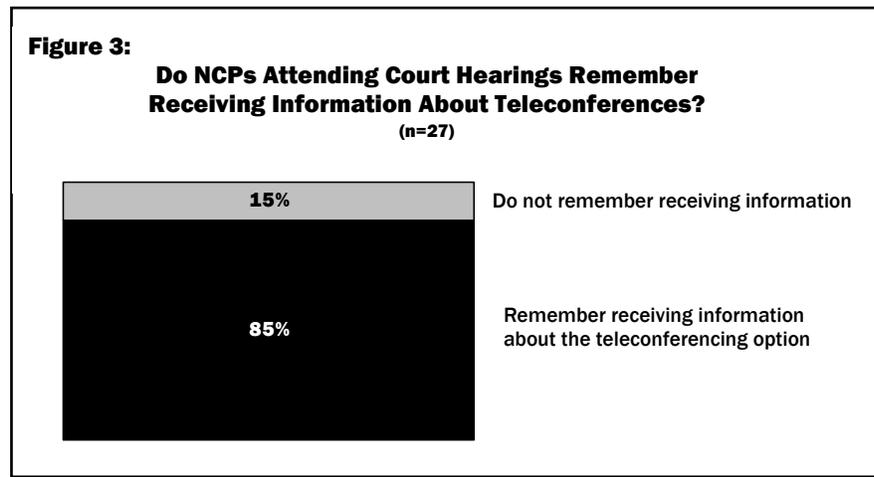
Table 1. Data Sources and Sample Sizes		
	Included in the Analysis	Total Possible
Cases offered teleconferencing	325	325
Surveys completed by NCPs who were invited to participate by teleconference but appeared in-person for the conference/hearing	27 (29%)	94
Data collection forms completed by staff, and augmented by manual file review, for cases with a teleconference session	103	103
Extract of data, and augmented by manual file review, of cases assigned to the experimental group that chose not to appear or to appear in person	216	222
Extract of data, and augmented by manual file review, of a random sample of cases assigned to the control group	176 (19%)	912
Telephone interviews with noncustodial parents appearing by teleconference	57 (55%)	103
Qualitative interviews with project staff, administrators, judges, conference and hearing officers, and attorneys	16 (62%)	26

The follow-up telephone interviews teleconference users were conducted by the Public Opinion Laboratory (POL) of Northern Illinois University. POL has conducted telephone surveys with custodial and noncustodial parents in numerous studies sponsored by the Office of the Inspector General and the Office of Child Support Enforcement. To encourage participation in the interview, respondents were offered a \$20 McDonald's gift certificate. Administered approximately four weeks after the teleconference, the 10-minute interview gauged the reasons why NCPs chose to participate electronically, the convenience and understandability of the application process and the conference itself (and hearing, if relevant), and user satisfaction.



The Decision to Use Teleconferencing

A total of 307 noncustodial parents were assigned to the experimental group and given the opportunity to participate in their child support conference by video or telephone. Of these, none participated by video but 114 took part by telephone. Ninety-one NCPs declined the offer and either appeared in person or were represented by an attorney who made a personal appearance on their behalf. In an effort to better understand why many noncustodial parents turned down the offer, conference officers were asked to distribute a short survey to noncustodial parents who appeared for an in-person conference although they were invited to participate telephonically. Only 27 surveys were completed, which limits what can be said about the decision to participate in-person.



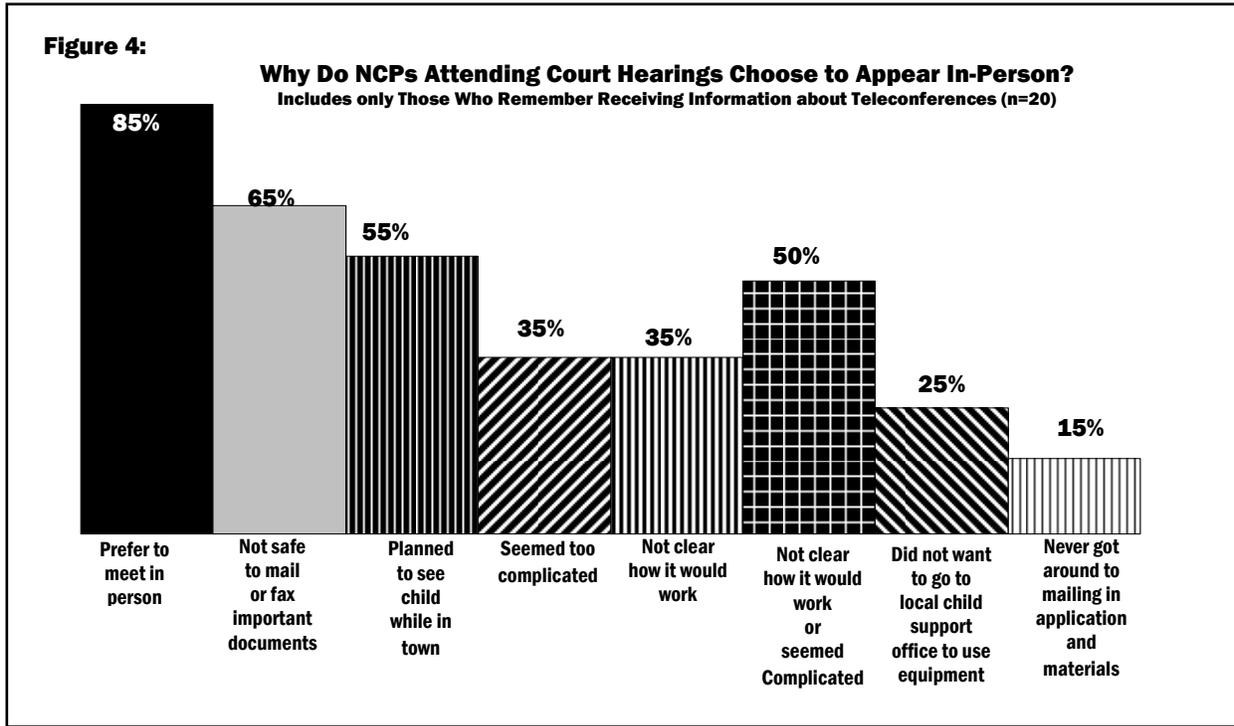
As Figure 3 shows, most of the surveyed non-custodial parents did remember receiving information in the mail that offered them a chance to participate in the child support conference through teleconferencing. This means that most noncustodial parents who appeared in-person for their child support conference made a conscious decision not to take part by telephone.

Figure 4 shows the reasons these noncustodial parents gave for this decision. The top three factors, mentioned by at least half of the noncustodial parents, were:

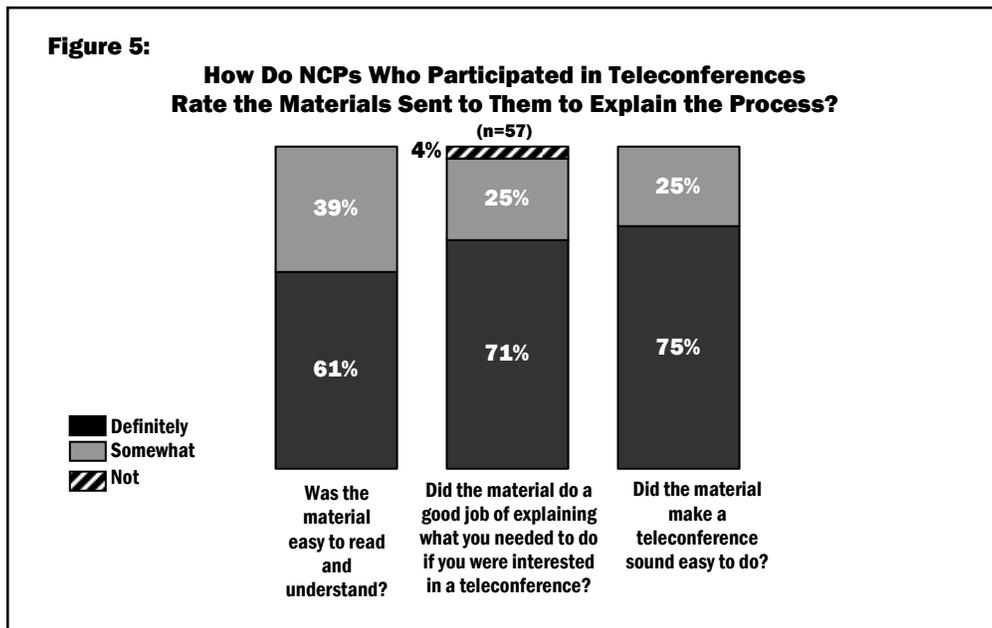
- ▶ A general sense that appearing in-person would be preferable;
- ▶ Concerns about mailing or faxing important documents, such as pay records and tax returns; and
- ▶ Plans to combine a trip in to appear for the conference with a visit to the child or children covered by the support order.

A third of the noncustodial parents who responded to the survey reported that they were not sure how the process of teleconferencing would work, and a third also said the process seemed complicated. If these two factors are considered jointly, half of the surveyed noncustodial parents mentioned one or both items as a reason for not teleconferencing.

Project rules required NCPs to participate in the call at their local child support agency if that agency agreed to “assist.” NCPs could only participate from home or their place of work if the local child support agency declined to assist. About a quarter of the NCPs declined to participate because they believed that they would have to appear at their local child support agency. Finally, a few (15%) NCPs said they intended to teleconference but simply failed to return the required documents in time to allow them to do so.

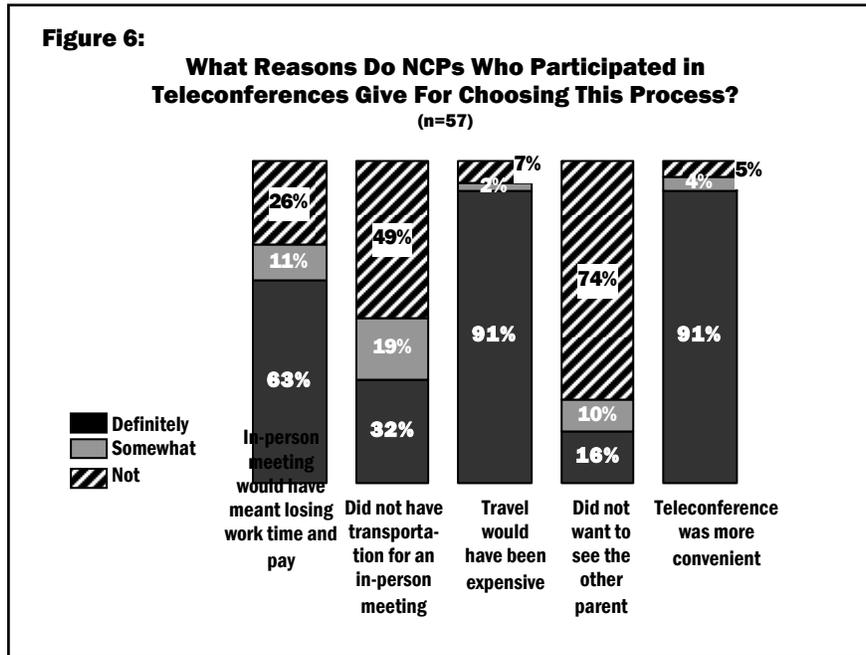


Interviews with noncustodial parents who took part in teleconferencing offer further support for the notion that the introductory materials may have been difficult for many parents to understand. Even among those noncustodial parents who did teleconferencing, nearly 40 percent said the introductory written materials were only “somewhat” easy to read and understand, while a quarter to a third said the materials were only “somewhat” effective in explaining how the process would work and making it sound easy to participate (see Figure 5).





Noncustodial parents who took part in teleconferencing and were interviewed as a part of the program evaluation were asked to explain why they chose teleconferencing over an in-person appearance. Figure 6



shows the reasons they gave for wanting to participate. Almost everyone said teleconferencing was more convenient and less expensive than traveling into Allegheny County for a conference. Approximately two-thirds said they opted for teleconferencing because an in-person appearance would have meant lost time and pay from their employment, and a third said they did not have transportation to get to an in-person meeting (see Figure 6).

User Reactions to Teleconferencing

Telephone interviewers succeeded in contacting and questioning 57 noncustodial parents who participated in a teleconference. This represented 54 percent of the noncustodial parents they attempted to reach. Interviewers made up to 10 call attempts to reach a targeted NCP. As in other studies with child support populations, interviews were not done typically because of disconnected phones or unreturned messages on an answer machine.

Most interviews were conducted with males (79%) who were white (51%) and over the age of 40 (38%). They were also relatively well educated, with 25 percent reporting that they were college graduates and 42 percent reporting some college-level training. Only 17 percent said that their highest level of education was a GED or less. More than two-thirds of interviewed NCPs were employed full-time, and 11 percent were employed on a part-time basis. About a fifth (19%) reported annual incomes of \$10,000 or less, while 50 percent reported incomes of \$30,000 or more. A substantial proportion of respondents had been married to the other parent (41%), and many others had lived together even though they had never married (36%). Less than a quarter (23%) had never married and never lived together (see Table 2).

The group of NCPs who participated in teleconferences and were interviewed by telephone researchers was clearly better off financially than many NCPs in Pennsylvania. For example, a 2003 analysis of Federal Offset Program Data found that 20 percent of Pennsylvania NCPs with child support debt had no reported wages at all and 25 percent had reported annual earnings of \$1 to \$10,000 (OCSE, 2004). More to the point, some conference officers suspect that NCPs who opted to participate in teleconferences were people who “had their act together.” In the words of one conference officer, “They have jobs and provide their earnings information, whereas those who don’t respond probably don’t have earnings.”



Table 2. Characteristics of NCPs Participating in a Teleconference (n=57)

Gender	
Male	79%
Female	21%
Race or ethnicity?	
African-American	42%
Latino/Hispanic	6%
White	51%
Multi-racial	2%
Age	
Under age 25 years	7%
Between 26-30 years	14%
Between 31-35 years	18%
Between 36-40 years	23%
Over 40 years	38%
Highest level of education	
Less than high school or GED	5%
GED	12%
High school	16%
Some college	42%
College graduate	25%
Employment status	
Unemployed	22%
Employed full-time	67%
Employed part-time	11%
Annual income	
Less than \$10,000	19%
\$10,000 but less than \$20,000	7%
\$20,000 but less than \$30,000	24%
\$30,000 but less than \$40,000	13%
\$40,000 but less than \$50,000	13%
\$50,000 but less than \$70,000	11%
\$70,000 but less than \$90,000	6%
\$90,000 or more	7%
Were parents ever married?	
Yes	41%
No, but lived together	36%
No, never lived together	23%

We get additional information about users of teleconferencing from survey responses dealing with children and the geographic distance between NCPs and their children. Table 3 shows that respondents were apt to be involved in a child support case that involved a single child (74%), or two children (16%). The age of the youngest (or only child) averaged 11.4 years and the median was 12.0. Finally, more than half (55%) of responding NCPs indicated that they lived more than 300 miles from the child, although 22 percent lived less than 50 miles apart. Looked at another way, more than two-thirds (70%) reported living at least 100 miles or more from the children.



Table 3. Characteristics of NCPs' Children (n=57)

Number of children in the child support case		
One		74%
Two		16%
Three		9%
Four		2%
Average		1.4
Age of youngest (or only) child		
Average		11.4
Median		12.0
Under age 5 years		21%
Between 6-10 years		16%
Between 11-15 years		30%
Age 16 or older		26%
Distance NCP lives from children		
Less than 50 miles		22%
51-75 miles		2%
76-100 miles		7%
101-200 miles		9%
201-300 miles		6%
Over 300 miles		55%

One concern about conferences and hearings conducted by telephone is that the NCP will fail to get a proper explanation of the child support process or have his questions answered. For example, some conference officers wonder whether NCPs who phone at their job might try to rush through the hearing to minimize their time away from work. On the other hand, other conference officers report that they make extra effort to explain things to NCPs who participate remotely. As one hearing officer explained:

They take much longer. I envision the poor [guy] sitting in Colorado and I feel a need to explain things more carefully. They have more questions. I have to say things two and three times. They are nervous and upset.

Table 4 examines the responses of NCPs who participated in teleconferences to questions pertaining to their understanding of the child support system, their obligation, the consequences of nonpayment, and the actions they should take if their financial situation changes. The table shows that approximately three-quarters of all interviewed respondents felt as though the teleconference had enhanced their understanding of their personal child support situation. By contrast, respondents did not seem to understand the child support system in a more general sense after the teleconference. It is relevant that the focus of the conference and hearing is to establish or modify a child support obligation, and that the bulk of the conversation deals with issues pertaining to income, expenses, and the relevant documentation thereto.

Table 4. Percentage of NCPs Who Report a Better Understanding of Various Issues After Participating in a Teleconference (n=53)

	Yes, understand this better	No, do not understand this better
Child support system	49%	51%
Your child support obligation	78%	22%
What to do if your salary or employment changes	77%	23%
What will happen if you do not pay	74%	26%
What to do if you get behind in your child support payments	72%	28%



Table 5 shows that more than half (58%) of interviewed respondents had previously been to court about their child support and had presumably participated in some type of conference, hearing, or judicial proceeding. Less than half (42%) had opted to participate remotely without any prior exposure to the judicial system. This underscores the view that many NCPs who participate in teleconferences are veterans of the court system and know what they are forsaking when they opt for a more convenient method of participation.

Table 5. Percentage of NCPs Participating in a Teleconference Who Also Have Had Exposure to Court Hearings (n=53)

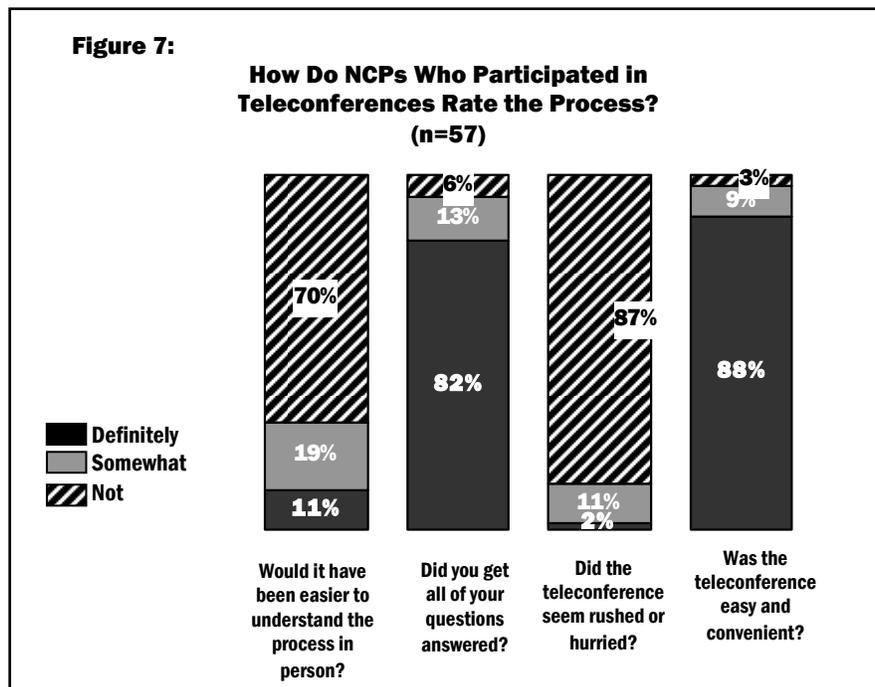
Prior to this teleconference, had you ever been to court about child support?	
Yes	58%
No	42%

Most NCPs were told to be available to receive a call from a conference officer at a certain date and time. All NCPs who participated in hearings were telephoned by the hearing officer later in the same day. While the majority of respondents (65%) reported that they had been phoned by the court at the scheduled time, 23 percent indicated that the call had been “a little late,” and 8 percent characterized the call as “very late.” Conference officers acknowledge that conferences were often delayed because of confusion about the location conference officers at the Interstate Unit who had recently moved to a separate building from the Family Court facility. Many custodial parents wrongly went to the Family Court, where they were instructed to walk over to the Interstate Unit. As a result, conferences began later than they were scheduled and the NCP was left waiting to be called. A few NCPs said that they had never been called (2%) or that they had called the court (2%).

NCP Reactions to Teleconferences and Hearings

Overall, NCPs who participated in teleconferences rated them extremely favorably. Only 11 percent of the 57 NCPs interviewed about their teleconferencing experiences were convinced that it would have been easier to understand the process if they had appeared in person. Another 19 percent were unsure. More than two-thirds (70%) rejected the view that personal participation would have been preferable.

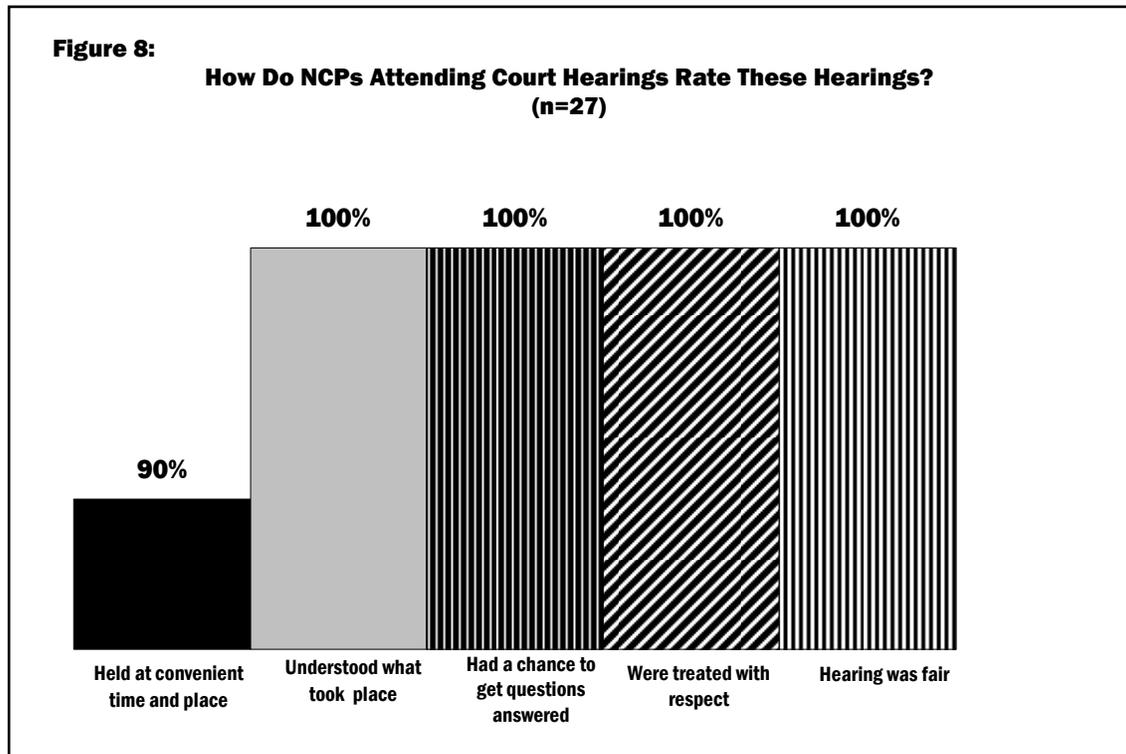
There was more certainty among NCPs that the teleconference format had permitted them to get their questions answered (See Figure 7). Fully 82 percent of responding NCPs asserted that this was “definitely” the case.





In a similar vein, nearly all responding NCPs (87%) rejected the view that the teleconference had been “rushed” or “hurried.” Finally, 88 percent indicated that the teleconference had been convenient and easy.

Figure 8 shows that NCPs who declined to teleconference and attended personally rated conferences and hearings extremely well. All of the 27 NCPs who completed a questionnaire following their conference or hearing said that they understood what had transpired, had their questions answered, were treated with respect, and felt as though the proceeding had been fair. Nearly all (90%) indicated that the proceeding had been held at a convenient time and location. Thus, respondents who appear at conferences and hearings do not appear to be burdened by the requirement and are pleased with their experience.



Anticipated Ability to Pay Child Support

Despite their favorable assessments of the teleconference experience, a substantial proportion of NCPs anticipate having problems making all of their child support payments. While two-thirds anticipated that it was “very likely” that they would be able to pay all that they owe, 29 percent were unsure or fairly certain that they would be unable to pay. More than half (52%) indicated problems with not having the money to pay child support. Other top reasons given for anticipating trouble with making payments were not being regularly employed (41%), having another family to support (44%), and the order being set too high (42%). Approximately a quarter of responding NCPs indicated potential payment problems for a variety of other factors including disagreements with the custodial parent over visitation (23%); disagreements over how the child support money is spent (25%); an objection to having to repay the state for welfare (25%); and a conviction that the custodial parent’s new partner can afford to support the child (29%). While forum is clearly important in understanding NCP reactions to the child support system, this analysis suggests that underlying economic factors are critical to explaining payment (see Table 6).



Table 6. Likelihood of Making Child Support Payments and Reasons NCPs Not Be Able to Pay All of Their Child Support Obligation (n=44)

How likely is it that you will be able to make all of your child support payments?			
	Very likely		66%
	Somewhat likely		4%
	Not sure		20%
	Somewhat unlikely		2%
	Very Unlikely		7%
Do you think the following may make it difficult for you to make payments?		Yes, may be a problem	No, will not be a problem
	Not regularly employed	41%	59%
	Do not have the money	52%	48%
	Order is set too high	42%	58%
	Have another family to support	44%	56%
	Disagreement with custodial parent over visitation	23%	76%
	Disagreements with custodial parent about how child support money is spent	29%	71%
	Money goes to the welfare department, not the child	25%	75%
	The custodial parent does not need the money to care for the child	21%	79%
	The custodial parent's new partner can afford to support the child	29%	71%
	Noncustodial parent is not sure he is the father of this child	16%	84%

Reactions of Conference and Hearing Officers, Attorneys, and Project Architects

Video- and teleconferencing enjoys widespread support among attorneys, conference and hearing officers, and judges. With few exceptions, professionals who have been exposed to it feel as though the benefits outweigh the downsides. They believe that in-person and remote formats have similar settlement rates and that the option makes it possible for some defendants to participate who might not otherwise. Few (if any) custodial parents have objected to the use of teleconferences. And although teleconferences are not recommended for contempt proceedings where the NCP might be taken into custody, they are believed to be extremely useful with incarcerated NCPs, who can participate without the expense and security risks associated with being transported to court.

Conference and hearing officers note only a few differences between proceedings done in an in-person fashion and those conducted with a defendant participating by telephone. One perceived difference is the difficulty in controlling conferences and hearings with a telephone participant. Some officers feel as though the parties are harder to “quiet down.” According to one respondent, telephonic hearings run a little longer because NCPs cannot see what anyone is doing and are somewhat more “excitable” and less able to “focus.” Still others feel that it is “harder to know if they understand,” and as a result, the officer must frequently “recap” and summarize to make sure the NCP is following. As one officer explained, “I try to keep them on the line to make sure they have all their questions answered.”

A few respondents cite more substantial concerns. For example, some feel that it is difficult to discern “credibility over the phone,” and that in a personal setting it is easier to gauge whether parties are being honest. As one attorney put it, “You don’t know if they are making it up as they go. You can’t tell if they are holding back information about income.” In her view, in-person conferences and hearings allow the attorneys and the hearing officers to assess the face value of the statements being alleged by the parties. She



offers the following examples to bolster her contention that face-to-face proceedings are superior to teleconferences.

Suppose she says he is a roofer and he doesn't admit it but he has a year-round tan. Or he denies being a mechanic but he has oil up under his fingers. Or he says he has no money and he shows up with jewelry and fancy clothes. There are credibility issues with telephone conferences.

Another perceived disadvantage is the difficulty in examining financial papers and other pieces of documentation. According to one respondent, "If you want to ask about the paper work they have submitted, it is kind of hard to figure out what you are both looking at. It is difficult to be certain that you are literally both on the same page."

Still another potential disadvantage is the inability to be certain the appropriate person is on the telephone and/or that he is alone and is not being coached by someone.

Most conference and hearing officers, on the other hand, feel as though these issues are not serious problems and/or manifest themselves in face-to-face settings as well as in teleconferences. For example, to ensure that the appropriate person is on the telephone, many conference and hearing officers ask the NCP to provide the last few digits of his Social Security number and his date of birth. Another check on identity is the reaction of the other parent who presumably knows the defendant's voice.

To the concern about being "coached" by another party — usually a new wife — conference and hearing officers note that they will be heard on the speaker phone and appropriately chastised. Since hearings are conducted in courtrooms that are open to the public, they do not see a problem with another person being in the room with an NCP. More to the point, they question whether coaching can do much good, since the heart of the proceeding is a calculation based on the guideline and the documentation provided by the parties. As one respondent put it, "Child support is about money and documents. And you either have them or you don't."

As for missing or incomplete income information, most parties acknowledge that there are problems of this type in both face-to-face proceedings as well as telephone formats. Parents and employers are both instructed to send in proof of earnings prior to conferences and hearings whether they occur in person or by telephone. In some cases, this does not happen and verbal statements are the only data available. This poses challenges in both in-person and telephone settings. As one respondent put it, "We use what we have. If we get missing information, we assess an earning capacity on a temporary basis and request the information to be mailed to us so that we can review everything at another time." And according to another officer:

If we lack documentation, we try to wing it on the telephone and in face-to-face formats. I try to get a work history from him. I try to verify some information about where he works from the system. And I'll enter an order based on the information I have.

Nor is the quality of tape recordings made in hearings that involve telephonic participation an issue. According to the court's audio-taping department, conference phones are picked up off an external microphone in the courtroom and there is no problem with getting a good-quality tape. All proceedings are monitored simultaneously by the audio department, and if someone is not speaking loudly, the audio technician phones the courtroom and instructs a party to speak up. Indeed, because most people speak loudly on the telephone, the sound quality in teleconferences is actually better than in "live" hearings.



Respondents tend to agree that the one true disadvantage to a teleconference is the defendant's inability to send in last-minute financial information or see the other parent's financial information including proof of salary and day care and medical expenses. Financial documents for the custodial parent are not sent to the NCP prior to the hearing. Unless the NCP has a fax machine at his phone, the NCP cannot send additional documentation and the other parent gets to see "more things" than he does since she can examine his documents at the conference or hearing. And hearing officers say that when they lack a fax machine in their courtrooms, they have to go to another part of the building to get a last-minute fax with a financial document.

Most respondents recommend that teleconferencing be continued, but they suggest that a commute threshold of one hour or a certain mileage distance be used as a criterion to qualify. According to one attorney, Allegheny County uses a 100-mile distance standard in equitable distribution cases, with those who exceed this amount being forgiven from appearing in person and allowed to participate by telephone. They base their recommendation on equity and quality considerations. Since custodial parents who live in Allegheny County are required to come to court and it can take one hour to get to the court from various parts of the county, some feel that it is only equitable for NCPs to be held to the same standard. More typically, conference and hearing officers feel that in-person proceedings are better unless they are inconvenient or represent a hardship.

I think the NCPs in immediately adjacent counties should come in person. It would be an hour drive. If they are close enough to participate in person, it would be better if it isn't extremely inconvenient. When in person, they can see the numbers we use and the formula.

During the 17-month project, no one conducted a video conference. Hearing officers and others attributed this to the lack of video equipment in other courts and child support agencies, or their unwillingness to bother with the use of such equipment in child support cases. The Family Division is perceived to be "ahead of the curve." Some were disappointed with the lack of use. As one judge explained, "I thought that video was a key part of the plan. It helps to determine credibility."

Although teleconferences may not be the preferred format, many recommend that the court acknowledge that video conferences are impractical at this time and focus on using telephone equipment more effectively. Although the current phone system allows multiple parties to participate in a conference or hearing, some officers believe that they can only involve in one party at a time on their current phones and that they could not include both an NCP and his attorney.

Some respondents would like to see the Family Division broaden the pool of cases that are given the opportunity to participate by telephone. The project was limited to local Allegheny cases where the NCP lives in another county or state. Attorneys recommend that the application process be expanded to all inter-county cases and UIFSA cases where one or both parties typically live at great distance from the court. It was also suggested that the Family Division do a better job of alerting eligible NCPs to the possibility of using telephone techniques and consider phoning eligible participants with the offer rather than relying exclusively on mailed notices.

Finally, the interstate conference officers who handled all teleconferences during the project recommend that local domestic relations workers assume teleconferencing duties too.



Project staff is pleased with the teleconference project and intends to expand its use to all cases where the NCP lives outside of Allegheny County. They do not see a practical and clear-cut way of implementing distance or commute-time criteria for the use of teleconferencing and intend to retain the current system of allowing all NCPs with a non-Allegheny zip code to apply. Eligible NCPs will be sent an informational flier with an application that they must return along with relevant documentation within 14 days of the mailing date. The Family Division will drop the requirement that NCPs take the call in their local child support agency (pending the willingness of the local agency to assist). Instead, NCPs will be offered a telephone appointment and be given the option of phoning from their home or work.

In addition to new establishment cases, teleconferencing will be available in modification cases. The court admits that it was “archaic about filing a modification,” and used to require everyone to come to the court in order to file a petition to modify. Now, NCPs will have the option of requesting the telephone option when they file for a review and adjustment in an in-person manner or when they mail in their petition for a modification. The new procedures are expected to be far more convenient for noncustodial parents. As one respondent put it, “We now realize we can handle modifications okay by mail and telephone. We have come into the 20th century!”

Project staff acknowledges that it will take a while for staff to “warm up” to the idea of teleconferencing and that videoconferencing will depend on other jurisdictions getting compatible equipment. Nevertheless, the project has made administrators “re-think how we do business,” and re-evaluate their views about the role of the court and litigant participation. Since the Allegheny County jail has video equipment, it intends to implement the use of videoconferencing in all types of proceedings that involve incarcerated noncustodial parents. Staff expects that video conferencing will be expanded to other groups of cases and litigants in future years. According to one administrator, “some day in the future, you will hook up two televisions, phones and fax machines and have a hearing.” More radical changes may also be forthcoming. As one administrator put it:

Even with parties who reside in your jurisdiction, why not handle things by phone. If you don’t have to have parties present, why make them come. Whenever you bring people together, there are security issues. They fight and argue. Why do that if you have an alternative? This project has really made me think about whether we want people here.



Outcomes Associated with Teleconferencing

One objective of using video and telephone conferences in child support proceeding in Allegheny County was to improve the appearance rate of noncustodial parents. By extending the opportunity to appear remotely to those who lived at a significant distance from the court, it was hoped that more noncustodial parents would participate in scheduled conferences and hearings and that the default rate would decline. Another objective was to improve child support payment patterns. It was hoped that participating noncustodial parents would provide more accurate information about their earnings, which would lead to the generation of more appropriate child support orders that were better paid over time. Finally, it was hoped that agreement making would not be jeopardized by the participation of noncustodial parents in a remote format and that parents would continue to generate stipulations at the same rate.

To determine whether these objectives were met, programmers and staff at the Allegheny County Family Court Division provided electronic and manually generated information about the child support status of project cases in the experimental and comparison groups. As was previously discussed, the two groups consisted of comparable local Allegheny child support cases with obligors who had non-Allegheny County zip codes. Cases were randomly assigned to the treatment and comparison group randomly based on the last digit of the noncustodial parent’s Social Security number. All noncustodial parents in the treatment group were invited to participate in an upcoming conference to establish or modify a child support using video- or teleconference techniques. Noncustodial parents in the comparison group were required to participate in-person or to file a motion with the court to appear telephonically or obtain consent from the other party.

Table 7 presents the rate at which noncustodial parents in the two groups appeared for their conferences. It shows that the non-appearance rate was virtually identical for noncustodial parents in both groups. More than a third (39%) of noncustodial parents in the treatment group did not appear, despite the fact that they were offered an opportunity to appear by telephone or video. And 36 percent of noncustodial parents in the group that was required to personally participate failed to appear. Thus, the opportunity to participate remotely did not affect the overall appearance rate.

Table 7. Participation in Child Support Conference by Group Assignment

	All Cases Offered the Opportunity to Appear by Teleconference	Comparison Cases Not Offered Teleconferencing
Did not appear at the child support conference	39%	36%
Appeared in-person, attorney attended for client	29%	64%
Appeared by teleconference	32%	0%
	(325)	(172)

Table 8 examines outcomes of conferences conducted with three groups of noncustodial parents in the treatment group: those who failed to appear, those who appeared in-person, and those who appeared by telephone. Not surprisingly, those who failed to appear were overwhelmingly likely to have their case continued or to have another case outcome, such as a dismissal. Orders were set in only a fraction of these cases (5%), and another handful (6%) went to a hearing officer.

The more relevant comparison considers conference outcomes for noncustodial parents who appeared either in person or by telephone. These outcomes were far more similar. Orders were set at conferences for 36 percent of cases where noncustodial parents appeared by telephone and 43 percent of cases where they appeared in person. Similar proportions of both groups of cases (33% versus 27%) were sent to a judicial



hearing. And a small fraction of both groups of cases (2% versus 5%) were continued. There were somewhat greater differences between the two groups in the proportion of cases sent for genetic testing. Only 2 percent of cases with teleconferencing had this outcome, as compared with 12 percent of cases conducted using an in-person format. Clearly, noncustodial parents who questioned their paternity status and wanted a genetic test were more likely to appear and less apt to participate remotely. There were also bigger differences in the proportion of cases with other outcomes such as case dismissal. While a quarter of the cases with teleconferencing (24%) resulted in a dismissal, this was the case for only 16 percent of cases where noncustodial parents appeared in-person.

These patterns suggest that teleconferencing does not affect the rate at which parents reach agreements on child support orders. To the extent that there are differences in case outcomes, they appear to reflect underlying case characteristics. Parents who question their paternity are more apt to appear in person, while those who anticipate a case closure are somewhat more likely to utilize a telephone format.

Table 8. Outcome of Child Support Conference for Experimental Group Cases, by Attendance ★

	Failed to Appear	Appeared in Person	Appeared by Teleconference
Order set during the conference	5%	43%	36%
Case sent for hearing	6%	27%	33%
Case ordered for genetic testing	0%	12%	2%
Case continued	44%	2%	5%
Other outcome (typically case dismissed)	45%	16%	24%
	(33)	(67)	(85)

★Chi square significant at .00.

Table 9 reconsidered the outcomes of child support conferences for cases in the experimental group after all cases that were continued, sent for genetic testing, and dismissed were eliminated. Just over half (52%) of conferences where the noncustodial parent participated remotely resulted in a child support order, compared to 61 percent of conferences where the noncustodial parents appeared in person. These differences were not statistically significant and were no greater than would be expected by chance alone. As previously noted, most cases where a noncustodial parent failed to appear were continued or closed or disposed of in another manner. Among those few that were resolved, 46 percent resulted in an order and 54 percent were sent for a hearing.

Table 9. Outcome of Child Support Conference With a Resolution During the Conference for Experimental Group Cases, by Attendance

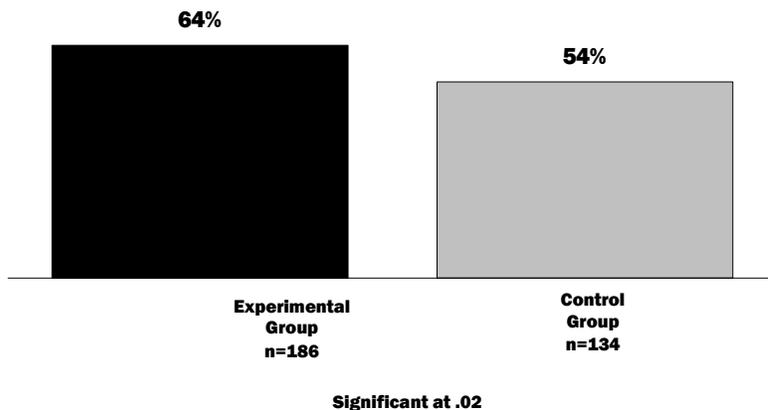
	Failed to appear	Appeared in Person	Appeared by Teleconference
Order set during the conference	46%	61%	52%
Case sent for hearing	54%	39%	48%
	(13)	(62)	(65)

The last set of analyses considers payment patterns for cases in the treatment and comparison group. Our measure of payment performance is the amount of child support paid relative to the amount due from the date at which the order was established to December 2006, when programmers at the Family Support Division generated an automated extract from the child support records.

Figure 9 shows that payments for cases in the experimental group averaged 64 percent of the child support obligation. To contrast, payments for cases in the comparison group averaged 54 percent of the child support



Figure 9:
How do the NCPs Offered Teleconferencing and Those in the Control Group Compare on the Percentage of Current Child Support Paid From Order Establishment to Data Collection?

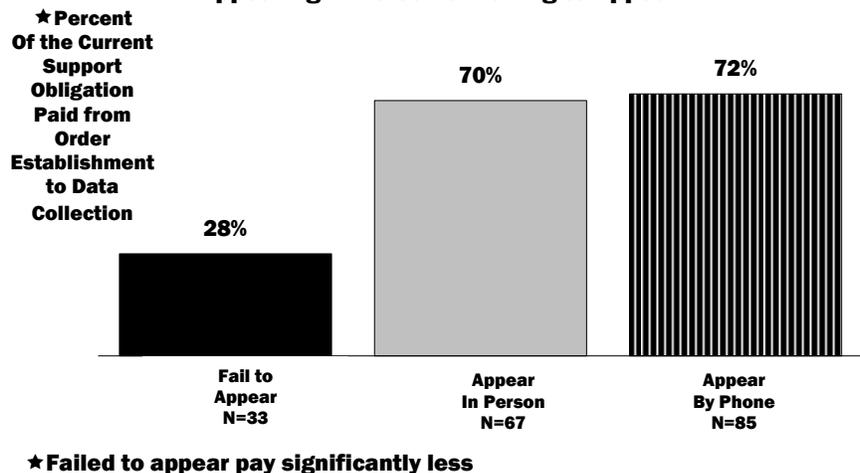


obligation. The differences between the two groups were statistically significant, suggesting that payment performance was better for cases in the group that was offered the opportunity to participate remotely. Although the two groups were generated randomly with assignment based on the last digit of the noncustodial parent's Social Security number, we cannot rule out the possibility that parents in the two groups were different in ways that would help to explain child support payment.

For example, we lacked information on the percentage of cases in the two groups with wage withholding orders, which is a key ingredient of regular child support payment.

To explore whether payment patterns are related to the method of noncustodial parent participation in order-making conferences and hearings, we compared the percentage of child support due that was actually paid for three groups of cases in the experimental groups: those in which the noncustodial parent failed to appear, those in which he appeared in person, and those in which he appeared by telephone. The results appear in Figure 10. They show that while payments were significantly lower for cases where noncustodial parents failed to appear and orders were set in their absence, orders were nearly identical in cases where noncustodial parents appeared using telephone versus in-person formats. Noncustodial parents who failed to appear paid less than a third of the child support they owed (28%). By contrast, noncustodial parents who participated in conferences and hearings to establish or modify their orders paid an identical 70 and 72 percent of what they owed.

Figure 10:
How do Payment Patterns Differ for NCPs Offered Teleconferencing Who Appear by Phone and Those Appearing in Person or Failing to Appear





Key Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Key Findings

Allegheny Family Court's Special Improvement Project tested the effectiveness of allowing nonresident, noncustodial parents to "appear" at court conferences and hearings using video- and teleconferencing techniques. By making the video and teleconference option available to all noncustodial parents (NCPs) in local cases who lived outside of Allegheny County, the court hoped to improve the rate of participation in order-making proceedings. A further expectation was that participation would lead to the generation of more appropriate orders that were better paid over time.

As part of the grant, the court installed electronic equipment in a courtroom and developed written materials explaining the option to appear via video- or teleconference. All local cases filed between June 2005 and October 2006 with a noncustodial parent who had a zip code outside of Allegheny County were randomly assigned to a treatment and comparison group based on the last digit of their Social Security number. Parents in the treatment group were mailed materials about the teleconference option and an application to participate. They were required to return the application along with relevant financial documents within 14 days and to be available to participate by telephone or video at their local child support agency (if the agency was willing to cooperate), or at their home or place of business. Parents in the comparison group were instructed to come to the court for a scheduled conference or file a written pleading requesting permission to participate remotely. Parents in both groups who failed to reach an agreement at a court conference were referred to a hearing. For the experimental group, this occurred on a same-day basis, while parents in the comparison group were typically instructed to return to court on another day.

Over the 17-month recruitment period, noncustodial parents in 325 cases were offered the teleconference option. The comparison group consisted of 172 cases.

As part of the evaluation, project staff maintained records on all 325 cases offered the video and teleconference option. Parents who were offered the opportunity to participate remotely but chose to appear in person were asked to complete a brief questionnaire indicating the reasons for their decision, and 30 percent of eligible parents (n=27) did so. A follow-up telephone interview was conducted with 57 noncustodial parents approximately one month following their teleconference, yielding a response rate of 54 percent. Qualitative, telephone interviews were conducted with 16 legal and court personnel including conference and hearing officers, court administrators, judges, project staff, and attorneys. Finally, computer programmers at the court extracted selected payment information on all cases in the treatment and comparison groups, while a project staff member collected a limited amount of information on the appearance of noncustodial parents at conferences and hearings for order-making purposes.

The key project findings were as follows:



Use of Teleconferencing

- Many noncustodial parents offered the opportunity to participate remotely chose to appear in person.

Only one-third (32%) of the 325 cases eligible to appear remotely did so. Nearly one-third (29%) appeared in person or had an attorney appear on their behalf, and slightly more than one-third (39%) failed to appear by teleconference or in person. Parents who chose to appear in person overwhelmingly felt that it was preferable (85%). Others chose to appear personally because they felt that it was unsafe to mail or fax important financial documents (65%), and/or they planned to see their child while in town (55%). And half of surveyed parents were unclear how the program worked or felt that it was too complicated.

- None of the parents appeared using video technology.

All of the 103 cases with remote participation were done using teleconference techniques. No one requested to participate by video.

- Some of the project rules may have contributed to low rates of usage.

Project rules required the NCP to participate at a local child support agency unless the local agency declined to “assist” with the call. A quarter of surveyed noncustodial parents who opted to participate in person indicated that they did not want to go to the local child support office to use telephone or video equipment. Although nearly all conferences were ultimately conducted with the noncustodial parent at his home or place of work because the local child support agency declined to assist, this requirement deterred some parents from returning a program application.

- The project materials may have contributed to low rates of usage.

Half of surveyed noncustodial parents who opted to participate in person said that they did not understand how the teleconference process worked or that it seemed complicated. Nearly 40 percent of interviewed parents who did teleconferencing said that the introductory materials were only “somewhat” easy to read and understand, while a quarter to a third said the materials were only “somewhat” effective in explaining how the process would work and making it sound easy to participate.

- Convenience was the key reason parents gave for teleconferencing.

Nearly all (91%) interviewed noncustodial parents who teleconferenced said they did so because it was more convenient and less expensive than traveling into Allegheny County. Approximately two-thirds opted to teleconference because an in-person appearance would have meant lost work time and pay, and a third said that they did not have transportation to get to an in-person meeting.



User Reactions to Teleconferencing

- ▶ Teleconferencing appealed to NCPs who appeared to be better educated and better off financially than many child support populations.

Interviews with parents who used teleconferencing revealed that they were white (51%), mature (38% over the age of 40), and relatively well educated, with 25 percent reporting that they were college graduates and 42 percent reporting some college training. More than two-thirds were employed full-time and 50 percent reported annual incomes of \$30,000 or more. Nearly half (41%) had been married to the other parent, and many others had lived together (36%). Less than a quarter (23%) had never married and never lived together.

- ▶ Teleconferencing appealed to NCPs who lived a great distance from the court.

More than half of interviewed parents who used teleconferencing (55%) lived over 300 miles from their children. Nearly three-quarters (70%) lived over 100 miles away from their children and the court in Allegheny County.

- ▶ Teleconferencing was an effective way of communicating with NCPs about their personal child support situation.

More than three quarters of interviewed NCPs reported that after their teleconference they had a better understanding of their child support obligation, what to do if their employment or salary changed, what would happen if they did not pay, and what to do if they got behind in their child support payments.

- ▶ Users of teleconferencing were pleased with the experience and rated it favorably; no custodial parent objected.

Most (88%) interviewed users said the teleconference had been convenient and easy, 87 percent rejected the view that it had been “rushed” or “hurried.” Only 11 percent were convinced that appearing in person would have enhanced their understanding of the process, and 70 percent rejected the view that personal participation would have been preferable. Although custodial parents could file an objection to teleconferencing, none did in any of the project cases.

- ▶ Those who participated personally also rated their experiences highly.

Noncustodial parents who declined the opportunity to teleconference and personally appeared at their conferences and hearings rated them extremely favorably, too. All indicated the proceeding had been fair, they understood what took place, they were treated with respect, and had had their questions answered. Nearly all (90%) indicated that it had been held at a convenient time and place.



Anticipated Ability to Pay Support

- Many noncustodial parents anticipate having problems paying all their child support.

Despite their favorable assessments of the teleconference experience, 29 percent of interviewed noncustodial parents were unsure or fairly certain that would be unable to pay support. More than half (52%) indicated problems with not having enough money, and 41 percent said that they were not regularly employed. Other perceived barriers to payment were having an order set too high (42%) and having another family to support (44%).

Reactions of Conference and Hearing Officers, Attorneys, and Project Architects

- Conference and hearing officers say they take extra effort to explain things to noncustodial parents on the telephone and answer their questions.

Remote participation is not perceived to affect the nature, format, or length of child support conferences and hearings, although some officers say that they take extra steps to explain the proceedings to the parent on the telephone and to make sure that all their questions are answered.

- The biggest perceived disadvantage to teleconferences is the noncustodial parent's inability to submit last-minute financial information or examine the other parent's financial documents.

A disadvantage of teleconferencing is the NCP's inability to send in last-minute financial information or to see financial documents submitted by the other parent. Overcoming this problem would require both the noncustodial parent and the hearing officer to have a fax machine next to their phones.

- One complaint about teleconferences is that it is difficult to discern credibility over the telephone, especially when documentation is missing or limited.

It is challenging to generate a good child support order when financial information is missing or incomplete. Some officers feel that they do a better job of judging credibility when the noncustodial parent appears in person. Others feel that they do similar things in both formats, including asking questions about work history, searching databases, generating temporary orders, and deferring final orders until documentation is provided. For the most part, officers are not worried about verifying the identity of the person on the telephone or the possibility of someone coaching him during the teleconference.

- Attorneys, conference and hearings officers, judges, and court personnel support the use of teleconferencing and feel as though the benefits outweigh the downsides, but would impose a commute threshold of one hour or 100 miles.

There is widespread support for the use of technology to encourage the participation of noncustodial parents in order-making proceedings. To encourage greater use of teleconferencing, some recommend that the court telephone noncustodial parents to alert them of the option. At the same time, most feel that the quality of conferences and hearings is better when parties appear in person. For this reason (and because custodial parents who reside in Allegheny County are required to appear in person), most respondents recommend that



teleconferencing be continued and even extended to other case types but limited to parties who live some distance from the court. A common suggestion was to impose a commute criterion of one hour or 100 miles.

- Project architects plan to expand the use of video- and teleconferences to other child support populations and case types.

Project architects were surprised that there was no interest in the use of video technology but feel that this will change as other courts and child support agencies acquire the technology. In the meantime, they plan to use videoconferencing in all child support matters that involve incarcerated parents, since the Allegheny County jail has compatible technology. They also plan to extend the option to participate by video- or teleconference to noncustodial parents who live outside of Allegheny County in all intrastate child support cases for new orders and modifications.

Outcomes Associated with Teleconferencing

- The opportunity to participate by teleconference did not affect the overall appearance rate.

The non-appearance rate was virtually identical for noncustodial parents in treatment and comparison groups. More than a third (39%) of noncustodial parents in the treatment group did not appear, despite the fact that they were offered an opportunity to appear by telephone or video. And 36 percent of noncustodial parents in the group that was required to participate in person failed to appear.

- Teleconferencing did not affect the agreement rate in order-making proceedings.

Orders were set at conferences for 36 percent of cases in the treatment group where noncustodial parents appeared by telephone and 43 percent of cases where they appeared in person. Similar proportions of both groups of cases (33% versus 27%) were sent to a judicial hearing, and a small fraction of both groups of cases (2% versus 5%) were continued. There were somewhat greater differences between the two groups in the proportion of cases sent for genetic testing and those that were dismissed. Clearly, noncustodial parents who questioned their paternity status and wanted a genetic test were more likely to appear and less apt to participate remotely, while those who anticipated a case dismissal were more apt to participate by telephone.

- Teleconferencing did not affect the rate of child support payment.

Payments for cases in the experimental group averaged 64 percent of the child support obligation, while payments for cases in the comparison group averaged 54 percent of the obligation, a difference that is statistically significant. To explore whether the difference was due to teleconferencing, however, we compared payment patterns for three groups of cases: those with teleconferencing, those with an in-person appearance, and those where a noncustodial parent failed to appear. This analysis revealed that while noncustodial parents who failed to appear and were given child support orders paid only 28 percent of what they owed, those who participated in conferences or hearings to establish or modify their orders paid an identical 70 and 72 percent of what they owed.



Conclusions and Recommendations

The Allegheny Technology Project illustrates that it is feasible for noncustodial parents to participate in order-making and modification proceedings using telephone conference techniques. The process was well liked by those who opted to use it, the other parent did not object, and conference and hearing officers found the format to be satisfactory and no more arduous or time consuming than in-person approaches. At the same time, it was used by less than one-third of the parents given the opportunity, no one opted to use video technology, and it did not result in any improvement in the appearance or agreement rate at order-making proceedings or the subsequent child support payment rate. At least some of these findings are consistent with previous research in Pennsylvania courts showing that videoconferencing is seriously underutilized in criminal and civil proceedings and that wider utilization is required to recover equipment costs.

This project shows that at a minimum, teleconferencing is a more convenient way to serve a segment of the child support population, particularly those who live at some distance from the agency, without any measurable loss of efficacy, outcome, or quality. To this end, the Family Division has decided to expand the opportunity to all intrastate child support cases where the noncustodial parent resides outside of Allegheny County. The requirement to appear at a local child support office for the teleconference has been dropped so parents will be able to phone from their home or place of work. Videoconferences will be held with all types of proceedings that involve noncustodial parents who are incarcerated in a county jail that has compatible video equipment.

While most attorneys and conference and hearing officers welcome teleconferencing and the opportunity to improve customer service, some question the decision to extend the opportunity to all non-Allegheny county parents and would prefer to limit the intervention to those who live at least 100 miles away from the court or face a commute of one hour to get to the court. They cite equity and quality considerations to justify their position. Custodial parents are required to appear in person and at least some who live in remote parts of Allegheny County may be required to drive one hour or 100 miles to get to the court. And while they are generally satisfactory, teleconferences are perceived to be less favorable than in-person formats for communicating, changing, and reviewing financial information. Indeed, unless the parent and the conference officer both have fax machines right near their phone, it is impossible to exchange additional documents or share the custodial parent's financial information with the noncustodial parent in a teleconference.

Based on interviews with parents that used teleconferencing, the 100-mile requirement would eliminate approximately 30 percent of current participants. Although project personnel maintain that it would be difficult to impose a restriction based on geography, commute time or distance, the court should reconsider this issue since many attorneys and judicial officers who support teleconferencing feel that those who can conveniently appear should be required to do so.

Given the exclusive use of telephone conferences in the project, the court might also consider making conference and hearing officers aware of their ability to add parties to their teleconferences on their existing phones so that noncustodial parents and their attorneys (or an employer witness) can appear by telephone simultaneously. Another suggestion is to acquire more fax machines to permit the exchange of documents during teleconferences.

To garner greater usage of the teleconference opportunity, the court should consider publicizing the opportunity to family attorneys at relevant family law association functions, simplifying project materials and the application to participate, and placing brief "heads-up" phone calls to noncustodial parents to encourage



them to check their mail for important information regarding the teleconference opportunity. Over time, the word about teleconferencing will inevitably “hit the street.” But these measures should jump-start the process of educating the public about a new way of doing child support business.

Finally, to promote wider knowledge and acceptance of video and teleconferencing at professional and institutional levels, project architects should participate in state and national forums for child support and judicial personnel. Agencies and courts need to acquire new equipment and become comfortable with new ways of doing business. Allegheny County’s successful experiences with distance technology make it a natural leader in trying to promote cultural change and the adoption of new norms about the format of legal proceedings.



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**Appendix A:
Materials Mailed to Noncustodial
Parents to Initiate Teleconferencing**



**You are invited to take part in a new program
The Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas
Technology Project**

You can participate in court conferences and hearings by telephone or video

If you are interested, you *must*:

- 1) Complete and sign the enclosed application indicating you want to participate electronically.
- 2) Provide the number where you can be contacted on the day of your conference/hearing.
- 3) Be available at the number provided on the date and time of the conference/hearing.
- 4) Mail or fax to the court at least 14 days before the hearing your pay stubs for the last 6 months, W-2, income tax return, and medical insurance costs for your kids.
- 5) Attach a copy of your driver's license or other photo ID to the application for verification of your identity.

Send your application with all required attachments to:

Allegheny County Family Division

210 Allegheny Building

429 Forbes Avenue

Pittsburgh, PA 15219

OR

FAX: 412-350-7197

QUESTIONS? 412-350-5837

***If you do not answer when the court calls, the
conference/hearing will occur without your participation and
you may be ordered to pay support***

***** IMPORTANT NOTICE *****

**YOUR APPEARANCE IS REQUIRED FOR THE SCHEDULED
CONFERENCE/HEARING UNLESS
YOU ELECT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROGRAM.
IF YOU DO NOT RETURN THE APPLICATION, YOU
MUST APPEAR ON THE DATE AND TIME INDICATED ON THE
ENCLOSED ORDER OF COURT**

D _____

We have received your application to be in the Allegheny County Technology Project and use the telephone or video to participate in your conference/hearing on child support coming up at the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County.

Your local child support enforcement agency has agreed to help you to participate electronically. They have video equipment and good phones that will make it easier for you to be heard and seen in the Court in Allegheny County without having to drive here.

Your conference/hearing is scheduled to be held on _____ at _____ . Our office will contact your local child support enforcement office at the date and time your conference/hearing.

Please plan to be at your local child support enforcement office at least 15 minutes before the scheduled conference/hearing. This means you should go to:

_____ (address)
on: _____ (date)
at _____ (time with 15 minute margin).

The Court will try to contact you at the scheduled time, but there might be some delay. Please be patient and wait for the Court to call. If you are not at the local child support enforcement agency when the court calls, the conference/hearing will happen without you and you may be ordered to pay child support.

If your case does not settle at the initial conference, the Court will call you back to participate in a hearing on the same day.

The Technology Project is trying to get more parents to participate in conferences and hearings, even if they live far away from the court. We hope that by using the telephone, you will find it more convenient to participate and that you will better understand your child support rights and obligations.

Thank you for your cooperation. If you have any questions, please contact our office at 412-350-5837.

D _____

We have received your application to be in the Allegheny County Technology Project and use the telephone or video to participate in your conference/hearing on child support coming up at the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County.

The Court will phone you at the number you provided on your application to participate in the conference/hearing by telephone. Please plan to be at this phone number to get the call from the Court. According to our records, the date and time of your hearing and your phone number are as follows:

_____ (phone number)
on: _____ (date of conference/hearing)
at _____ (time of conference/hearing).

The Court will try to contact you at the scheduled time, but there might be some delay. Please be patient and wait for the Court to call. If you are not at your phone number when the court calls, the conference/hearing will happen without you and you may be ordered to pay child support.

If your case does not settle at the initial conference, the Court will call you back for a hearing on the same day.

The Technology Project is trying to get more parents to participate in conferences and hearings, even if they live far away from the court. We hope that by using the telephone, you will find it more convenient to participate and that you will better understand your child support rights and obligations.

Thank you for your cooperation. If you have any questions, please contact our office at 412-350-5837.



Appendix B: Data Collection Instruments



Improving Judicial Case Processing Through the Use of Technology

The following information needs to be collected for all cases with a videoconference scheduled. This would include cases with videoconferences held, as well as cases where the NCP fails to participate.

Name: _____ Male Female

Telephone number: home: _____ work: _____ cell: _____

Address _____
Street City State Zip

Date **scheduled** for videoconference: ____/____/____

Did the NCP appear for the videoconference?

- No
 Yes

Did the NCP's attorney appear for the videoconference?

- No
 Yes, If readily available, please provide attorney's name: _____

attorney's phone number: _____

Did the CP appear?

- No
 Yes

Date conference was **held**: ____/____/____

Improving Judicial Case Processing Through the Use of Technology

Exit Survey

Today's date: _____

You were given information about appearing for your child support conference by telephone or video-conference.

Are any of the following reasons that you decided not to do a phone or video-conference?

- | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| It was not clear to you how it would work | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| It's not safe to mail or fax important papers like tax returns | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| You never got around to mailing in the application | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| You planned to see your child when you came to town | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| You didn't want to go to your local child support office to use the video-conferencing | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| It seemed too complicated | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| You prefer to meet with the child support people in person | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| You don't remember being told about phone and video conferences | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |

Is there any other reason you decided not to use phone or video-conferencing? Please explain.

What did you think of the hearing you just finished?

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| It was held at a convenient time and place for me | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| I understood what took place | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| I had a chance to get my questions answered | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| I was treated with respect | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |
| Overall, the hearing was fair | <input type="checkbox"/> True | <input type="checkbox"/> False |

Did the other parent also attend the hearing? Yes No

Improving Judicial Case Processing Through the Use of Technology

Data Collection Form for Experimental Cases

Background Information

Case number: _____

Name of NCP: _____

NCP state of residence: _____

NCP county of residence _____

Result of mailing on video/audio appearance:

- Elects to appear in-person
- Elects teleconferencing
- Elects video conferencing
- No response from NCP

Were there phone attempts with the NCP?

- Yes
- No

If there were phone attempts:

Was the phone call(s) was intended to:

- Set date and time or deal with logistics of audio/video appearance
- Determine if NCP is interested in audio/video appearance
- Other _____

Were you able to contact the NCP? Yes No

Child support agency where NCP resides: County: _____ State: _____

Phone: _____

Will child support agency assist with conference hearing? Yes No?

TANF status:

- Current TANF
- Former TANF
- Never TANF

Contact with CP:

- CP did not object to teleconferencing/video conferencing
- CP objected to teleconferencing/video conferencing
- Could not contact CP

Order status:

- New order, child support only
- New order, paternity and child support
- Foster care case
- Modification

If modification:

Date order was established: Month: _____ Day: _____ Year: _____

Date order was effective: Month: _____ Day: _____ Year: _____

Order amount: \$ _____

To be paid per: month week every two weeks other _____

Total arrears: \$ _____

Monthly payment toward arrears: \$ _____

Was the NCP represented by an attorney in one or more conferences or hearings?

- No
- Yes, attorney present with NCP in one or more conferences/hearings
- Yes, attorney never present with NCP during conference/hearing

Conference Information

Date scheduled for conference: Month _____ Day _____ Year _____

Scheduled to appear:

- In-person
- Teleconference/at child support agency
- Teleconference/at NCPs home
- Videoconference

Did the NCP provide documents prior to the conference?

- Yes, by fax
- Yes, by mail
- No
- No information

Did the NCP appear for the conference?

- Yes, in person
- Yes, by telephone
- Yes, by video
- No **Skip to Hearing Information below**

Conference outcome:

- Case heard and child support order set
- No agreement, sent to a hearing
- Referred to genetic testing
- Continued for lack of service
- Continued for other reason
- Other

If case was continued

or another conference was held following genetic testing:

New Date: Month _____ Day _____ Year _____

Outcome of rescheduled conference:

- Case heard and support order set
- No agreement, sent to a hearing
- Rescheduled, NCP failed to participate
- Continued for other reason

Number of minutes spent in conference (add across conferences if more than one conference was held) _____

Hearing Information

Was a hearing ever set for this case?

- Yes →
- No

Date scheduled for hearing: Month _____ Day _____ Year _____

Did the NCP appear for the hearing?

- Yes
- No

Hearing outcome:

- Order entered
- Case continued
- Default order entered,
- Continued for lack of service
- Continued for genetic testing
- Continued for other reason
- Referred for a UIFSA Petition
- Other

If hearing was continued:

Date for rescheduled hearing:

Month _____ Day _____ Year _____

Outcome of rescheduled hearing:

- Case heard and support order set
- Default, NCP failed to participate
- Referred for a UIFSA Petition
- Continued for other reason

Total amount of time spent in hearings: _____ minutes

Order Information

What source of information was used to set the order?

- NCP statement/affidavit
- CP statement
- Quarterly wage data
- New hire
- Tax return
- Pay stubs
- Unable to determine
- Other _____

Amount of child support to be paid: \$ _____ per month week every two weeks other _____

Order effective date: Month: _____ Day: _____ Year: _____

Was a wage assignment/attachment entered?

- Yes
- No

Amount of retroactive support entered against NCP \$ _____

Notes and Comments:

Improving Judicial Case Processing Through the Use of Technology

Follow-up Interview with NCPs who Accept the Electronic Testimony Offer

[Interviewer: Interview is with male NCP female NCP

Did you take part in a videoconference or a teleconference?

- Videoconference
 Teleconference

[Interviewer: Throughout the interview use the appropriate term, either “videoconference” or “teleconference.”]

First we have a few questions about the mailing you got telling you about tele/videoconferences.

	Definitely	Somewhat	Not	Don't remember
Was the material easy to read and understand?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did the material do a good job of explaining what you needed to do if you were interested in a tele/videoconference?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did the material make a tele/videoconference sound easy to do?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Did you call the court to see about a tele/videoconference or did the court call you?

- You called the agency
 The agency called you
 Don't remember

Were any of the following reasons why you wanted to use tele/videoconferencing?

	Definitely	Somewhat	Not	Don't remember
Attending in person would have meant losing work time and pay	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You did not have transportation to get to an in-person meeting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Traveling to an in-person meeting would have been more expensive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You did not want to see the other parent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It just seemed more convenient	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Did you fax or mail in copies of the papers that the court wanted?

- Mailed them
 Faxed them
 Don't remember

Did you do the tele/videoconference at your home or at your local court?

- Home
- Local court

If at the local court ask:

How convenient was this?

- Very convenient
- Somewhat convenient
- Somewhat inconvenient
- Very inconvenient

Did they call or contact you when they said they would?

- Yes
- A little late
- Very late
- Don't remember or don't know

Now we have a few questions about what you thought of the tele/videoconference.

	Definitely	Somewhat	Not	Don't remember
Do you think it would have been easier to understand what you were being told if you had been there in person?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you get all of your questions answered?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did the tele/videoconference seem rushed or hurried?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Overall, was the tele/videoconference easy and convenient?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

After the tele/video conference would you say you...

	Yes	No
Understand the child support system better?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Understand what you owe in child support?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Understand what to do if your job or salary changes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Understand what will happen if you don't pay child support?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Understand what to do if you get behind in your child support payments?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Before this tele/videoconference had you ever been to a court hearing about your child support order?

- Yes
- No
- Don't remember

How likely do you think it is that you will be able to make all of your child support payments?

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Not sure
- Somewhat unlikely
- Very unlikely

Are any of these reasons why you might not make all of your child support payments?	Yes	No
You are not regularly employed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You don't have the money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Your child support order is too high	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You have another family to support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You have some disagreements with the other parent about visitation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You have some disagreements about how the child support is spent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The child support money you pay goes to the welfare department or the state, not directly to your children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The other parent doesn't need the money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The other parent has a new partner who can help support the children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You don't think the child is yours	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other _____		

Finally, we have a few background questions about you.

Is there a racial or ethnic group that you identify with?

African American

Hispanic/Latino

White/Anglo

Multiracial

Other _____

What is your age group?

Under 25

26 - 30 years

31 - 35 years

36 to 40 years

Over 40

Which best describes your highest level of education?

Did not complete high school or GED

GED

High school diploma

Attended some college

Completed college

Are you currently employed full or part-time?

No

Yes, full-time

Yes, part-time

Which of these best describes your annual gross household income?

- Less than \$10,000 a year
- Between \$10-\$19,000
- Between \$20-\$29,000
- Between \$30-\$39,000
- Between \$40-\$50,000
- Between \$50-\$70,000
- Between \$70-\$90,000
- Over \$90,000

How many children do you have with the other parent? _____

If one, how old is this child? _____

If more than one, how old is the youngest child? _____

How old is the oldest child? _____

About how many miles do you live from your child/children?

- Less than 50 miles
- Between 51-75 miles
- Between 76-100
- Between 101-200
- Between 201-300
- Over 300

Who has custody of the children?

- Mother
- Father
- Joint custody
- Another relative
- Split Custody

Were you and the children's other parent ever married?

- Yes
- No

If never married, did you live together?

- Yes
- No

Thank you for your help.

Please tell me your address so that I can mail you your McDonald's gift certificate:

Name: _____

Address: _____