

Dual Debt: Child Support and Criminal Legal Financial Obligations

Translating research to practice may be difficult, yet a better understanding of current research is necessary to ensure child welfare workers and other affiliated professionals engage in best practices when working with children and families.

The Minn-LInK Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful discussions about the information presented in the research brief in order to inform practice and enhance discussion surrounding meaningful issues.

*This study examines the experiences of people who carry both child support and criminal legal financial obligations, whom we refer to as people with dual debt. By linking individuals through administrative data from the Minnesota State courts and child support system, this study provides the first description and comparison of people with dual debt. We find that child support debt carries a far greater financial burden in the average month than criminal legal debt, but those who experience both **forms** of debt in the same month are particularly burdened and experience greater **amounts** of both forms of debt. Each debt status shows significant variation by race and gender, with males and Black and American Indian individuals carrying more debt on average.*

Discussion on Practice Implications

1. This study focused on a unique population of individuals that owe two different kinds of legal debt — criminal legal debt and child support debt. Why do you think it is important to study this population? How can the findings about this population potentially translate to other social issues? How does this population connect to your own work or the systems you engage with?
2. This study further demonstrates legal debt systems exacerbate social inequalities. What are potential solutions in your field of work that can help reduce these inequalities? What can you do in your field to support people with legal debt, or people experiencing economic disadvantage more broadly?

Discussion on Agency- & System-Level Changes

1. A key finding from the study is that debt varies significantly by gender and race: males and Black and American Indian individuals carry more legal debt on average. How does this finding influence your understanding of the criminal legal debt and child support debt systems as a whole? What social policies or structural changes might alleviate this racial and gendered disparity in legal debt??
2. The conclusion of the study offers several policy recommendations to reduce inequalities in the criminal legal and child support debt systems. What do you think of these policies? Do you agree or disagree, and why? Can you think of other policy recommendations for reducing inequalities and burdens in the legal debt system?
3. We argue that while the child support system is an essential pillar of anti-poverty policy, it fails to reduce aggregate economic disadvantage while exacerbating racial and gender inequalities. What barriers exist to reforming child support and more broadly, anti-poverty policies? What available systems and policies can address this issue? How can we advocate for systemic change in anti-poverty policies?