

No. 10-10

In the Supreme Court of the United States

MICHAEL D. TURNER, PETITIONER

v.

REBECCA L. ROGERS, ET AL.

*ON WRIT OF CERTIORARI
TO THE SUPREME COURT OF SOUTH CAROLINA*

**BRIEF FOR THE UNITED STATES AS AMICUS CURIAE
SUPPORTING REVERSAL**

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the Court has jurisdiction to review the decision of the South Carolina Supreme Court.
2. Whether due process requires that the State provide counsel, at its expense, to an indigent parent in a child-support proceeding, when the parent is subject to a civil-contempt order for non-payment that may lead to confinement.

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INTEREST OF THE UNITED STATES

This case concerns the due process protections that apply in a state civil contempt proceeding for non-payment of court-ordered child support. The state child-support enforcement program at issue in the case, like that in every other State, is part of one of the largest cooperative federal-state programs, established under the Social Services Amendments of 1974 (1975 Act), Pub. L. No. 93-647, § 101(a), 88 Stat. 2351 (42 U.S.C. 651 *et seq.*) (adding Title IV-D to the Social Security Act). The program, which is administered by the Secretary of Health and Human Services (Secretary), provides that States with approved plans for child and spousal support that meet federal requirements are reimbursed by the federal government for 66% of the costs of operating their child-support enforcement programs. 42 U.S.C.

655(a)(2)(C). The United States has a substantial interest in the effective and equitable operation of such child-support programs.

STATEMENT

1. This case involves proceedings in South Carolina family court to enforce a child-support order entered against petitioner for the support of his and respondent Rogers' minor child. South Carolina, like every other State, maintains a child-support enforcement program as a condition of receiving federal funding for its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. Since Congress first required States receiving federal funds to undertake child-support enforcement efforts, it has shifted its emphasis from a localized, court-based enforcement approach to centralized and automated efforts. South Carolina, however, maintains a localized, court-based approach to child-support enforcement.

a. Congress first required States receiving federal funds to establish child-support enforcement programs in 1950, pursuant to the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. See Social Security Act Amendments of 1950, ch. 809, § 321(b), 64 Stat. 550 (requiring States receiving AFDC funds to “provide for prompt notice to appropriate law-enforcement officials of the furnishing of aid to dependent children in respect of a child who has been deserted or abandoned by a parent”). In 1968, Congress required States participating in AFDC to create statewide or local “organizational unit[s]” for establishing paternity and collecting child support. Social Security Amendments of 1967, Pub. L. No. 90-248, § 201(a)(1), 81 Stat. 877-879. It also required States to “provide for entering into cooperative arrangements with appropriate courts and law enforce-

ment officials * * * to assist” with administration of the program. *Id.* § 201(a)(1), 81 Stat. 879.

b. In 1975, Congress adopted Title IV-D, 42 U.S.C. 651 *et seq.*, and established the general statutory framework that exists today. See 1975 Act § 101(a), 88 Stat. 2351; *Blessing v. Freestone*, 520 U.S. 329, 333-335 (1997) (describing program). The 1975 Act required States participating in AFDC to “have in effect a plan approved” by the Secretary under Title IV-D and to “operate a child support program in conformity with such plan.” 1975 Act § 101(c)(5)(C), 88 Stat. 2360. In particular, each State was required to provide services to locate noncustodial parents and to establish the paternity of, and secure support for, children receiving AFDC benefits. 42 U.S.C. 654(4).

Under the 1975 Act, AFDC recipients were required to assign their support rights to the State and cooperate in enforcement efforts. 42 U.S.C. 602(a)(26) (1976). Amounts recovered generally were retained by the State to reimburse it and the federal government for AFDC assistance provided to the child’s family. 42 U.S.C. 657(b) (1976). Once assigned, the support obligation was owed to the State and was collectible under all applicable state processes. 42 U.S.C. 656(a)(1) (1976).¹

The Secretary’s regulations implementing the 1975 Act reflected a localized, court-centered approach to enforcement. States’ efforts to collect past-due child support were required to include (“as applicable and necessary”): “[c]ontempt proceedings to enforce an extant court order,” court-ordered wage garnishment, and

¹ Congress required States to provide services to non-AFDC families as well, 42 U.S.C. 654(6) (1976), although those families were not required to assign their support rights and any child support the State collected was paid to the family, 42 U.S.C. 657(a)(4)(B) (1976).

attachment of real and personal property. 45 C.F.R. 303.6 (1975). States were also required to maintain sufficient staff (either statewide or locally) to “enforce collection of support” by “executing contempt proceedings, wage assignments, obtaining garnishment orders, attaching real and personal property, criminal prosecution and executing judgments.” 45 C.F.R. 303.20(c)(7) (1975).

c. In 1984, Congress found that there remained “a critical lack of child support enforcement,” which had “a critical impact on the health and welfare of the children of the Nation.” Child Support Enforcement Amendments of 1984 (1984 Amendments), Pub. L. No. 98-378, § 23(a)(2) and (5), 98 Stat. 1329. The 1984 Amendments required States to adopt laws and procedures providing for, among other things, (i) mandatory wage withholding; (ii) expedited processes for obtaining and enforcing support orders; (iii) state income tax refund intercepts; and (iv) reporting overdue support to consumer credit agencies. 42 U.S.C. 666(a)(1)-(8) and (b).

Congress ultimately set the federal share of reimbursable expenditures at 66%, 42 U.S.C. 655(a)(2), but expanded the availability of matching funds at the 90% level for (optional) State expenditures for automating data processing systems to improve “the monitoring of support payments, the maintenance of accurate records regarding the payment of support, and the prompt provision of notice to appropriate officials with respect to any arrearages in support payments which may occur.” 1984 Amendments § 6, 98 Stat. 1314; 42 U.S.C. 654(16); 655(a)(3)(A).

d. Congress amended Title IV-D again in 1988 to improve the rate of child-support collection. Family Support Act of 1988 (1988 Act), Pub. L. No. 100-485,

102 Stat. 2343. Because effective child-support enforcement “had long been thwarted by localized enforcement systems that were unable to quickly and effectively track delinquent parents who crossed county and state lines,” *Hodges v. Shalala*, 121 F. Supp. 2d 854, 874 (D.S.C. 2000), *aff’d*, 311 F.3d 316 (4th Cir. 2002), cert. denied, 540 U.S. 811 (2003), Congress in the 1988 Act emphasized centralized, automated record-keeping and information retrieval in order to improve collection rates. In particular, Congress mandated “automated data processing and information retrieval system[s]” that had previously been optional. 1988 Act § 123(a)(C), 102 Stat. 2352; 42 U.S.C. 654(24).

The Title IV-D regulations were amended after adoption of the 1988 Act. As amended, the regulations omitted specific references to contempt proceedings as required means for enforcing child-support obligations. See 45 C.F.R. 303.6, 303.20(c)(7) (1989);² cf. pp. 3-4, *supra*.

e. Finally, Congress made further changes to the child-support enforcement system in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (1996 Act), Pub. L. No. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2105, which, among other things, replaced AFDC with the block-grant program called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).³ Those changes again emphasized a centralized, automated approach to child-support

² Federal financial support remained available for “[e]nforcement of a support obligation” through a variety of means, including contempt citations. 45 C.F.R. 304.20(b)(3)(iv).

³ The 1996 Act also imposed a five-year cap on benefits. 42 U.S.C. 608(a)(7). As before, a custodial parent is required to assign her rights to child support to the State as part of the application for TANF assistance. 42 U.S.C. 608(a)(3)(A).

enforcement. The amended statute established detailed requirements for the “statewide automated data processing and information retrieval systems” made mandatory in 1988. *Id.* § 344(a)(2), 110 Stat. 2235, 42 U.S.C. 654a(a). Among other things, the system must include a state case registry that includes every child-support case in the State, including the amount of monthly support owed and collected in all cases administered by the state agency. 42 U.S.C. 654a(e)(1) and (4); see 42 U.S.C. 654a(e)(5) (States must “promptly * * * update” case records when circumstances change). The States are required to use their centralized databases “to the maximum extent feasible, to assist and facilitate the collection and disbursement of support payments,” including by establishing wage-withholding orders and sending wage-withholding notices to employers. 42 U.S.C. 654a(g)(1); see 42 U.S.C. 666(c).

f. Despite the changes in federal law, South Carolina maintains a localized, court-based approach to child-support enforcement. It is the only State that does not have a certified automated system. See Office of Child Support Enforcement, U.S. Dep’t of Health & Human Servs., *National Status of Automated Child Support Systems*, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/stsys/certmap.htm>.⁴

⁴ In the 1996 Act, Congress determined that any State that failed to automate its child-support program should incur substantial penalties. 42 U.S.C. 655(a)(4). In 2000, South Carolina unsuccessfully challenged the Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) authority to impose a penalty for its non-compliance, see *Hodges v. Shalala*, *supra*, and subsequently submitted a corrective-action plan and accepted imposition of a penalty retroactive to 1998. The State paid more than \$55 million in penalties through 2007. South Carolina Dep’t of Social Servs., *Response to Budget Proviso 13.27* at 4 (Aug. 31, 2007), http://www.scstatehouse.gov/reports/DSS/Provisoresponse1327_

Acting pursuant to express statutory authority, S.C. Code Ann. § 43-5-235 (West Supp. 2009), the State's Department of Social Services has contracted with county clerks of court across the State to administer its program. The South Carolina courts have in turn adopted a special rule governing child-support enforcement. See S.C. Rule of Family Ct. 24 (S.C. Rule 24). The rule requires clerks of court to review on a monthly basis "all child support and periodic alimony accounts paid through the clerk of court," as are all accounts for children whose custodial parent receives TANF assistance. S.C. Rule 24(a); see 42 U.S.C. 608(a)(3)(A). When any such account is in arrears, the clerk is required to "issue a rule to show cause and an affidavit identifying the order of the court which requires such payments to be made and the amount of the arrearage [and] directing the party in arrears to appear in court at a specific time and date" to face contempt proceedings. S.C. Rule 24(b).

A "wilful[]" violation of a "lawful order" of a South Carolina court constitutes contempt and may subject the contemnor to up to 12 months confinement. S.C. Code Ann. § 63-3-620 (West 2010).

2. Respondent Rogers and petitioner are the parents of a minor child, B.L.P. In 2003, the family court in Oconee County, South Carolina, entered an Order of Financial Responsibility against petitioner. Although the order noted that petitioner was unemployed, the court imputed a gross monthly income of \$1386 to him and ordered him to pay \$59.72 a week in child support through the court. Pet. App. 22a; see *id.* at 19a-24a, 25a.

083107.doc. We are informed by HHS that the State has now paid a total of more than \$72 million in penalties to date and currently owes an additional incurred penalty of more than \$10 million for fiscal year 2010.

Because respondent Rogers was receiving public assistance, she assigned her right to collect child support to the Department of Social Services. Pet. Br. 8; see *id.* at 9 n.6 (payments were remitted to respondent Rogers starting in 2004 because her benefits had ended but her case continued to be administered as a Title IV-D case). Petitioner fell behind on his payments, received a number of rules to show cause from the court clerk why he should not be held in contempt, and was jailed three times as a result. *Id.* at 9-10.

By 2007, petitioner was \$5728.76 behind on his child-support payments, and a judge of the Oconee County Family Court issued a bench warrant for his arrest. Pet. App. 6a; Pet. Br. 8-9. A hearing was held on January 3, 2008. After noting petitioner's outstanding balance and stating that he had not made a payment since August 2006, the judge asked petitioner, "[i]s there anything you want to say?" *Id.* at 17a. Petitioner responded:

Well, when I first got out, I got back on dope. I done meth, smoked pot and everything else, and I paid a little bit here and there. And, when I finally did get to working, I broke my back, back in September. I filed for disability and SSI. And, I didn't get straightened out off the dope until I broke my back and laid up for two months. And, now I'm off the dope and everything. I just hope that you give me a chance. I don't know what else to say. I mean, I know I done wrong, and I should have been paying and helping her, and I'm sorry. I mean, dope had a hold to me.

Ibid.

After a brief exchange between petitioner and respondent about his SSI application, the court said:

If there's nothing else, this will be the Order of the Court. I find the Defendant in willful contempt. I'm gonna sentence him to twelve months in the Oconee County Detention Center. He may purge himself of the contempt and avoid the sentence by having a zero balance on or before his release.

Pet. App. 18a. The court made no finding that petitioner was capable of paying the arrears while incarcerated. See *id.* at 17a-18a.

At this hearing, neither petitioner nor respondent Rogers was represented by counsel. Pet. App. 6a. However, pro bono counsel filed an appeal on petitioner's behalf, alleging that petitioner had a right under the Sixth Amendment and the Due Process Clause to have appointed counsel in the contempt proceeding. *Id.* at 10a-15a. Before the intermediate state court could rule, the South Carolina Supreme Court granted discretionary review and affirmed the family court. *Id.* at 1a-5a.

The court noted that the "purpose of civil contempt is to coerce the defendant to comply with the court's order," while criminal contempt's purpose is "to punish a party for disobedience or disrespect." Pet. App. 2a-3a. "Civil contempt sanctions are conditioned on compliance with the court's order. * * * A contemnor imprisoned for civil contempt is said to hold the keys to his cell because he may end the imprisonment and purge himself of the sentence at any time." *Id.* at 3a. The court recognized that the "distinction between civil and criminal contempt is crucial because criminal contempt triggers additional constitutional safeguards not mandated in civil contempt proceedings." *Ibid.*

The court noted that in this case the family court had said that petitioner could “purge himself of the contempt” by achieving a “zero balance” on his arrearage. Pet. App. 3a. Reasoning that “[t]his conditional sentence is a classic civil contempt sanction,” the court concluded that petitioner had no right to appointed counsel. *Ibid.*

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

1. The Court has jurisdiction to review the decision of the South Carolina Supreme Court. Petitioner has completed his term of confinement for civil contempt and has not identified any collateral consequences flowing from the contempt. Those facts would ordinarily render his case moot. Petitioner, however, qualifies for a narrow exception to the mootness doctrine because the controversy is capable of repetition yet evading review. Sentences for civil contempt in South Carolina are limited to 12 months, and it is highly unlikely that petitioner would be able to secure plenary review by this Court within any future period of confinement. In addition, the constitutional violation petitioner asserts is capable of repetition because he remains subject to the underlying child-support order and still has substantial arrears. There is thus a reasonable expectation that he will receive automatically-generated rules to show cause for contempt in the future. Indeed, since the contempt at issue in this case, petitioner has been jailed again for civil contempt.

2. Petitioner’s confinement for civil contempt violated due process, not because he lacked counsel, but because the procedures employed by the family court were inadequate to ensure the accurate determination of petitioner’s present ability to pay his child-support ar-

rears. That ability to pay was a necessary predicate to the civil contempt sanction.

The defining feature of confinement for civil contempt is its purpose to coerce compliance with a court order. Such confinement must therefore end upon discharge of the contemnor's obligations; he is said to hold "the keys of [his] prison in [his] own pocket[]." *Shillitani v. United States*, 384 U.S. 364, 368 (1966) (citation omitted). Such confinement may not be imposed, however, where the contemnor demonstrates his inability to comply with the order. In such cases, he does not truly hold the keys to the prison; to confine him nonetheless would render the confinement punitive and thus a sanction that may be imposed only after compliance with criminal case safeguards.

The question of petitioner's ability to pay his child-support arrears therefore should have been a focus of the civil contempt proceeding, but it was not. Pro se petitioner was afforded no meaningful opportunity to establish his indigency, and even after he made a statement that could have easily been understood to mean he had no present ability to pay nearly \$6000 to avoid jail, the family court judge made no further inquiry on the matter before committing him to a nominally conditional term of confinement.

The proceeding did not comply with due process because there was a serious risk of erroneous deprivation of petitioner's liberty through the procedures employed and because additional procedures would have enhanced the accuracy of the proceeding without materially impinging on any governmental interest. See *Mathews v. Eldridge*, 424 U.S. 319, 335 (1976). Provision of counsel would have been a sufficient, but not a necessary, means of satisfying due process in this case. There were other

means of providing petitioner with a meaningful opportunity to establish his present inability to pay, such as asking him to complete an understandable form seeking his financial information, or asking him questions on the topic as necessary at a hearing. In the typical case, providing basic information about one's personal finances is not the kind of undertaking that requires assistance of counsel, and due process protections are based on the requirements of the mine-run case, not the exceptional one.

There is no basis for petitioner's proposed categorical due process right to appointed counsel in civil contempt proceedings where confinement is imposed. The Court has declined to recognize a categorical constitutional right to appointed counsel in the context of other non-criminal proceedings that can result in confinement. *Gagnon v. Scarpelli*, 411 U.S. 778, 782-790 (1973) (probation revocation); *Middendorf v. Henry*, 425 U.S. 25, 43 (1976) (summary court-martial). Civil contempt proceedings in child-support cases are relatively brief; the custodial parent may not be represented by counsel; and the issues in dispute are generally not complex. Given those circumstances, there is no warrant for recognizing a categorical right to defense counsel in such proceedings. Finally, recognizing a due process right to counsel in such proceedings would upset the balance struck by Title IV-D and its implementing regulations, both of which stress the importance of due process protections in child-support proceedings but neither of which permit federal funding for provision of counsel.

ARGUMENT

I. THE COURT HAS JURISDICTION TO REVIEW THE DECISION OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA SUPREME COURT

Although petitioner has completed his term of confinement for the civil contempt at issue here, his claim is not moot because he remains subject to the underlying child-support order and because there is a reasonable expectation that he will face future contempt proceedings. His claim thus avoids mootness because it is capable of repetition yet evading review. This Court thus has jurisdiction to review the final judgment of the South Carolina Supreme Court. See 28 U.S.C. 1257(a).

1. “In general a case becomes moot when the issues presented are no longer ‘live’ or the parties lack a legally cognizable interest in the outcome.” *Murphy v. Hunt*, 455 U.S. 478, 481 (1982) (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting *United States Parole Comm’n v. Geraghty*, 445 U.S. 388, 396 (1980)). While a currently confined individual’s challenge to his confinement generally presents no question of mootness, an individual who has been released from confinement ordinarily may continue to press his challenge only if he suffers some “collateral consequence” that constitutes a “concrete and continuing injury.” *Spencer v. Kemna*, 523 U.S. 1, 7 (1998). Because this Court “ha[s] been willing to presume that a wrongful conviction has continuing collateral consequences,” the Court ordinarily will not dismiss as moot a criminal defendant’s challenge to his conviction once the defendant has completed his term of imprisonment. *Id.* at 8. But the Court has not employed that presumption in other contexts, instead requiring a party not in custody to demonstrate that he will actually face collateral consequences if he does not secure relief

on appeal. See *id.* at 14 (no presumption of collateral consequences for parole revocation); see also *id.* at 14-16 (reviewing party’s claimed collateral consequences).

Petitioner has completed his term of confinement for civil contempt. Because he challenges a civil order, not a criminal conviction, no presumption of collateral consequences applies. Moreover, petitioner has not identified any collateral consequences flowing from the finding of civil contempt. Ordinarily, petitioner’s challenge to that finding would be considered moot and beyond this Court’s jurisdiction.

2. Petitioner’s claim in this case, however, avoids mootness because his is one of the “exceptional situations” in which a claim is capable of repetition, yet evading review. *City of L.A. v. Lyons*, 461 U.S. 95, 109 (1983). In non-class actions, this doctrine requires satisfaction of two elements: “(1) the challenged action was in its duration too short to be fully litigated prior to its cessation or expiration, and (2) there [is] a reasonable expectation that the same complaining party would be subjected to the same action again.” *Murphy*, 455 U.S. at 482 (quoting *Weinstein v. Bradford*, 423 U.S. 147, 149 (1975) (per curiam)). Petitioner satisfies both elements.

First, confinement for civil contempt in South Carolina is limited to 12 months, S.C. Code Ann. § 63-3-620 (West 2010), and it is exceedingly unlikely that a contemnor could appeal through the South Carolina court system, petition this Court for a writ of certiorari, and receive a decision on his claim within such a limited time period. See, e.g., *First Nat’l Bank v. Bellotti*, 435 U.S. 765, 774 (1978) (18 months was “too short a period of time for appellants to obtain complete judicial review”); cf. *DeFunis v. Odegaard*, 416 U.S. 312, 319 (1975) (per curiam) (future challenge to law school

admission procedure could likely come to this Court for decision within three-year period of law school matriculation). Indeed, in this case, petitioner had completed his term of imprisonment for civil contempt more than a year before the South Carolina Supreme Court rendered its decision. Compare Pet. App. 8a with *id.* at 1a.

Second, petitioner “can make a reasonable showing that he will again be subjected to the alleged illegality.” *Lyons*, 461 U.S. at 109. Petitioner is still subject to the underlying order for child support, and he is nearly \$14,000 in arrears. Pet. Br. 15; J.A. 104a. Given that clerks of court in South Carolina automatically issue rules to show cause when a non-custodial parent is late on a required payment, there is a reasonable expectation that petitioner will again be subject to contempt proceedings. Indeed, after he was released from jail for the contempt at issue here, petitioner was again held in contempt and reincarcerated. In May 2010 yet another rule to show cause for contempt issued due to failure to pay support to respondent. Pet. Br. 13-15; see *id.* at 15 (May 2010 rule to show cause is still outstanding); see also *Olmstead v. L.C.*, 527 U.S. 581, 594 n.6 (1999) (suit by plaintiffs seeking community-based services rather than institutionalization not moot even though they were then receiving desired services, because of “the multiple institutional placements [they] ha[d] experienced”). This is thus far from “an abstract dispute about the law” that might be thought “unlikely to affect [petitioner] any more than it affects other [South Carolina] citizens.” *Alvarez v. Smith*, 130 S. Ct. 576, 580 (2009).⁵

⁵ That petitioner was represented by pro bono counsel in a subsequent contempt proceeding involving a different support order, see Pet. Br. 15 n.10, does not mean his claim is incapable of repetition. Were pro bono counsel bound to represent petitioner in every future contempt

II. THE ABSENCE OF ADEQUATE PROCEDURES NECESSARY TO SECURE AN ACCURATE ADJUDICATION OF CIVIL CONTEMPT VIOLATED DUE PROCESS

The validity of the civil contempt order against petitioner turned on a critical fact: his present ability to purge himself of contempt by paying off his past-due child support. The family court's procedures in this case violated due process because they were inadequate to ensure an accurate determination of that fact and thus prevent an erroneous deprivation of petitioner's liberty. Although provision of government-provided counsel would have been a sufficient means of complying with due process requirements in this case, it was not a necessary one. Other mechanisms, such as requiring an affidavit for disclosure of financial information and a preliminary assessment of petitioner's current ability to pay child support, would have satisfied the requirements of due process.

A. Confinement For Civil Contempt Is Permitted Only When The Contemnor Is Presently Able To Comply With The Underlying Order

Both civil and criminal contempt can lead to confinement, but this Court has long distinguished the two based on the "character and purpose" of the sanction imposed. *Gompers v. Buck's Stove & Range Co.*, 221 U.S. 418, 441 (1911). In civil contempt, the "punishment * * * [is] remedial," in that it is intended to "coerc[e]

proceeding, then his claim of entitlement to the assistance of counsel would be moot. There is no indication in the record, however, that pro bono counsel is under any such obligation, and, in fact, counsel did not appear in a 2009 contempt proceeding involving support owed respondent, see *id.* at 13-14 (noting that petitioner appeared pro se in 2009 and served six months for civil contempt).

the defendant to do what he had refused to do.” *Id.* at 442. Punishment for criminal contempt, on the other hand, is “punitive” and is imposed “to vindicate the authority of the court.” *Id.* at 441.

Because of that fundamental distinction, confinement imposed for civil contempt is conditional. The sentence must include a purge clause under which the contemnor will be immediately released upon compliance with the underlying court order. *Hicks v. Feiock*, 485 U.S. 624, 634 (1988). When confined under such a civil contempt order, the contemnor holds “the keys of [his] prison in [his] own pocket[.]” *Shillitani v. United States*, 384 U.S. 364, 368 (1966) (citation omitted); see *id.* at 370 (“While any imprisonment, of course, has punitive and deterrent effects, it must be viewed as remedial if the court conditions release upon the contemnor’s willingness” to comply with a court order.).

A purge clause by itself, however, will not render the contemnor’s confinement remedial rather than punitive because “the justification for coercive imprisonment as applied to civil contempt depends upon the ability of the contemnor to comply with the court’s order.” *Shillitani*, 384 U.S. at 370-371. Accordingly, “punishment may not be imposed in a civil contempt proceeding when it is clearly established that the alleged contemnor is unable to comply with the terms of the order.” *Hicks*, 485 U.S. at 638 n.9; see *Maggio v. Zeitz*, 333 U.S. 56, 72 (1948) (“[T]o jail one for a contempt for omitting an act he is powerless to perform would * * * make the proceeding purely punitive, to describe it charitably.”); see also *Moseley v. Mosier*, 306 S.E.2d 624, 626 (S.C. 1983)

(“When the parent is *unable* to make the required payments, he is not in contempt.”)⁶

The burdens of production and persuasion may be placed on the defendant to demonstrate his present inability to comply with an order. See *Hicks*, 485 U.S. at 637; *United States v. Rylander*, 460 U.S. 752, 757 (1983). Accordingly, if the defendant “offers no evidence as to his inability to comply,” “stands mute,” or is disbelieved by the court, then he fails to carry his burden and may be held in contempt. *Maggio*, 333 U.S. at 75. But the trial court “is obliged” to consider “all the evidence properly before it in the contempt proceeding in determining whether or not there is actually a present ability to comply and whether failure so to do constitutes deliberate defiance which a jail term will break.” *Id.* at 76.

If, upon examination, a contempt penalty is considered punitive rather than remedial, it will be vacated unless all “the protections that the Constitution requires of * * * criminal proceedings” were provided. *International Union, United Mine Workers v. Bagwell*, 512 U.S. 821, 826 (1994) (quoting *Hicks*, 485 U.S. at 632).

⁶ A defendant may not avoid a finding of civil contempt for violating an order by collaterally attacking that order in the contempt proceeding. See *Maggio*, 333 U.S. at 74-75. The defendant may, however, make the distinct assertion that he has a “*present* inability to comply with the order in question.” *United States v. Rylander*, 460 U.S. 752, 757 (1983); see *ibid.* (“While the court is bound by the enforcement order, it will not be blind to evidence that compliance is now factually impossible. Where compliance is impossible, neither the moving party nor the court has any reason to proceed with the civil contempt action.”); *Maggio*, 333 U.S. at 74-75.

B. The Family Court's Procedures Were Inadequate To Ensure An Accurate Determination Of Present Ability To Pay

The procedures employed by the family court violated petitioner's due process rights because they were inadequate to ensure that petitioner was not erroneously confined as an inducement to perform a task he was powerless to perform, while additional procedures to ensure petitioner's present ability to pay his child-support arrears would have been minimally burdensome.

"Procedural due process imposes constraints on governmental decisions which deprive individuals of 'liberty' or 'property' interests within the meaning of the Due Process Clause of the Fifth or Fourteenth Amendment." *Mathews v. Eldridge*, 424 U.S. 319, 332 (1976). Confinement for civil contempt is a deprivation of liberty, and the alleged contemnor is thus entitled to procedural due process protections before its imposition. Cf. *Morrissey v. Brewer*, 408 U.S. 471, 482 (1972) (termination of parole triggers due process protections); see also *Bagwell*, 512 U.S. at 827 (civil contempt requires "notice and an opportunity to be heard").

The conclusion that due process applies is the beginning of the inquiry, not its end, because "the requirements of due process are 'flexible and cal[] for such procedural protections as the particular situation demands.'" *Wilkinson v. Austin*, 545 U.S. 209, 224 (2005) (brackets in original) (quoting *Morrissey*, 408 U.S. at 481). The Court has "generally * * * declined to establish rigid rules and instead ha[s] embraced a framework to evaluate the sufficiency of particular procedures." *Ibid.* That framework involves "consideration of three distinct factors:

First, the private interest that will be affected by the official action; second, the risk of an erroneous deprivation of such interest through the procedures used, and the probable value, if any, of additional or substitute procedural safeguards; and finally, the Government's interest, including the function involved and the fiscal and administrative burdens that the additional or substitute procedural requirements would entail.

Mathews, 424 U.S. at 335.

Application of the *Mathews* factors here demonstrates that the family court proceeding did not comply with the requirements of procedural due process. First, petitioner's private interest in avoiding incarceration was significant. See *Foucha v. Louisiana*, 504 U.S. 71, 80 (1992).

Second, there was a serious "risk of an erroneous deprivation" of petitioner's liberty interest under the procedures employed by the family court, and there would have been value in additional procedures. *Mathews*, 424 U.S. at 335. Petitioner did not dispute that he had failed to comply with his child-support order, so the propriety of his confinement for civil contempt thus turned on his present ability to do so. See pp. 17-18, *supra*; Pet. Br. 3-4 (petitioner's ability to pay "was the precise question before the family court"); *id.* at 17. But South Carolina automatically referred petitioner for contempt proceedings without considering whether petitioner was employed or had assets. At the contempt hearing, the court solicited no financial information from petitioner, nor was there apparently any mechanism in place for him to provide it on his own. Petitioner's statement at the hearing that he had been un-

able to work because he broke his back, Pet. App. 17a, could reasonably be understood to constitute a claim that he had no present ability to pay nearly \$6000. The court did not explore this question, however; it made no inquiry into petitioner's income or assets. Instead, the court imposed a jail sentence unaccompanied by any finding that petitioner had the ability to pay off his outstanding balance from a jail cell.⁷ Taking additional modest steps to determine whether petitioner had the present ability to discharge his obligation, see pp. 24-25, *infra*, would have improved the accuracy of the proceeding.

Finally, the government's interests also favor additional procedural safeguards to ensure that only those parents with a present ability to pay are confined for civil contempt. While the State has a strong interest in enforcing child-support orders, it secures no benefit from jailing a non-custodial parent who cannot discharge his obligation. The period of incarceration makes it less, rather than more, likely that such parent will be able to pay child support. See Elizabeth G. Patterson, *Civil Contempt & the Indigent Child Support Obligor: The Silent Return of Debtor's Prison*, 18 Cornell J.L. & Pub. Pol'y 95, 126 (2008) (*Civil Contempt*). Meanwhile, the State incurs the substantial expense of confinement.

Moreover, as a general matter, the routine use of contempt for non-payment of child support is likely to be an ineffective strategy for enforcing support orders. See National Child Support Enforcement, U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Servs., *Strategic Plan: FY 2005-2009*, at 2, 10 (*Strategic Plan*), <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/>

⁷ The judge told petitioner, "[i]f you've got a job, I'll make you eligible for work release," Pet. App. 18a, but petitioner states he was ineligible for work release, Pet. Br. 12 n.8.

programs/cse/pubs/2004/Strategic_Plan_FY2005-2009.pdf. While child-support recovery efforts once “followed a business model predicated on enforcement” that “intervened only after debt, at times substantial, accumulated and often too late for collection to be successful, let alone of real value to the child,” experience has shown that alternative methods—such as order modifications, increased contact with non-custodial parents, and use of “automation to detect non-compliance as early as possible”—are more effective. *Id.* at 2.

A substantial portion of child-support obligors have no or low reported income. Elaine Sorensen et al., *Assessing Child Support Arrears in Nine Large States & the Nation* 22 (2007) (*Assessing Child Support Arrears*), <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/07/assessing-CS-debt/report.pdf> (obligors with \$10,000 or less in annual income constituted half of the child-support obligors and owed 70% of the arrears in a nine-state study). Such individuals’ child-support obligations are often substantial. See *id.* at 54 (“For obligors with reported income of \$10,000 a year or less, the median percent of reported income that was due as current support was 83[%].”). A low-income individual in arrears on child-support payments is “rarely a candidate for civil incarceration because of the likelihood that he or she is unable to pay the hefty sum represented by the accumulated arrears, or even a portion thereof that may be set by the court as the purge amount.” *Civil Contempt* 116.⁸

⁸ To be sure, coercive enforcement remedies, such as contempt, have a role to play in child-support enforcement efforts, such as with non-custodial parents who are hiding assets or unreported self-employment or under-the-table income. See *Strategic Plan 2*; *Assessing Child Support Arrears* 4-5, 22-23, 25; *Civil Contempt* 97. There is no evi-

Many States have taken alternative steps to avoid child-support arrears, such as establishing more realistic support orders, “increas[ing] parental participation in the order establishment process,” providing employment services to non-custodial parents, or using automation tools to improve wage withholding. *Assessing Child Support Arrears* 10-11, 80-89; see *id.* at 85 (study of Florida program that provides employment services and case management to non-custodial parents found that program participants paid nearly five dollars in child support for every dollar spent on the program). Such alternatives, which focus on early intervention rather than after-the-fact efforts to collect substantial accumulated arrears, are more likely to be effective means of enforcing the child-support obligations of the substantial number of low-income obligors. See *Strategic Plan 2*.

C. Due Process Can Be Satisfied By A Variety Of Procedures Intended To Assure An Accurate Determination Of Present Ability To Pay In A Civil Contempt Proceeding

Petitioner argues that, in order to ensure that his civil contempt proceeding “remain[ed] civil,” Pet. Br. 39, due process required the appointment of counsel to assist him in establishing his inability to comply with the court’s order, see *id.* at 41. Although we agree that petitioner’s due process rights were violated, we disagree that the State’s failure to appoint counsel was itself the basis of the violation. Appointment of counsel is certainly one way to help ensure an accurate determination of the obligor’s current ability to pay—the determination on which the “civil” nature of a civil contempt sanction rests—but it is not the only way. It was the State’s

dence, however, that routine use of contempt among low-income non-custodial parents is generally effective. See *Civil Contempt* 126.

failure to provide any meaningful mechanism for making that determination in this case, and not its failure to provide counsel in particular, that violated petitioner's due process rights.⁹

1. Courts can comply with due process by providing a meaningful opportunity for an alleged contemnor to establish his present ability to pay

While there is no basis for a constitutional rule categorically requiring appointment of counsel in all civil contempt that could lead to deprivation of physical liberty, see pp. 25-32, *infra*, due process does require procedures sufficient to ensure fundamental fairness. In the context of a civil contempt proceeding for non-payment of child support that could lead to confinement, this means procedures adequate to allow a pro se contemnor to attempt to carry his burden of establishing his present inability to pay.

Such procedures may include requiring a non-paying parent to complete an understandable form seeking financial information. South Carolina already requires

⁹ Although petitioner's submissions below and in this Court have focused on the value of appointed counsel in ensuring that indigent child-support obligors are not erroneously jailed as a means of inducing them to comply with their obligations, see, *e.g.*, Pet. i, Pet. App. 13a, fairly encompassed in those submissions is the proposition that due process demands an appropriate procedure to evaluate an obligor's present ability to pay. See Sup. Ct. R. 14.1(a); *Yee v. City of Escondido*, 503 U.S. 519, 534 (1992). In conducting that inquiry, it should be open to the Court to consider whether there are alternative procedures, other than the specific procedure petitioner has proposed, that would satisfy constitutional requirements. To the extent the Court concludes otherwise, however, the proper course would be to dismiss the writ of certiorari as improvidently granted and await a case that expressly raises a broader due process claim.

noncustodial parents to fill out such a form when a support order is originally sought in a Title IV-D case, see S.C. Code Ann. § 43-5-220(c) (West Supp. 2009), but apparently does not do so in subsequent contempt proceedings. Requiring that such forms be completed at the outset of a contempt proceeding would impose little expense on the State or burden on the proceeding while materially advancing the accuracy of the court's determination. Such information could by itself establish the contemnor's present inability to pay his arrears or, conversely, demonstrate his ability to pay. To the extent the court had questions about the information on the form or disbelieved it, the court could question the contemnor about his finances at the contempt hearing. Such simple, minimally burdensome procedures would enable the court to evaluate whether the alleged contemnor has the ability to pay his arrears and is thus an appropriate candidate for a civil contempt sanction.

2. *There is no basis for an inflexible right to counsel rule in civil contempt proceedings*

Although the constitutional inadequacy of the family court's procedures could have been cured by appointment of counsel (who presumably would have addressed petitioner's inability to pay his arrears and urged the court not to jail him for that reason), appointment of counsel was not constitutionally compelled.

a. "The very nature of due process negates any concept of inflexible procedures universally applicable to every imaginable situation." *Lujan v. G&G Fire Sprinklers, Inc.*, 532 U.S. 189, 196 (2001) (quoting *Cafeteria & Rest. Workers v. McElroy*, 367 U.S. 886, 895 (1961)); see *Mathews*, 424 U.S. at 334 ("[D]ue process is flexible and calls for such procedural protections as the particular

situation demands.”) (brackets in original) (quoting *Morrissey*, 408 U.S. at 481). The question in a due process case is how to ensure a fundamentally fair proceeding, taking into account the importance of the private interest at issue, the risk of error and value of additional procedures, and the government’s interest. See *id.* at 335. This is not an inquiry that typically lends itself to the kind of categorical approach advocated by petitioner. See *Gagnon v. Scarpelli*, 411 U.S. 778, 789 (1973) (contrasting categorical Sixth Amendment right to counsel in criminal prosecution “with the more limited due process right” in other contexts).¹⁰

In fact, in areas outside traditional criminal prosecutions where an individual’s liberty is nonetheless at stake, the Court has declined to recognize a categorical right to counsel, instead relying on alternative procedural safeguards to ensure due process. See *Gagnon*, 411 U.S. at 782-790; see also *Middendorf v. Henry*, 425 U.S. 25, 43 (1976) (no due process right to counsel for summary courts-martial).¹¹ For example, in *Gagnon*,

¹⁰ The Sixth Amendment right to counsel is inapplicable to a civil contempt proceeding because it is not a “criminal prosecution[.]” U.S. Const. Amend. VI; see *Bagwell*, 512 U.S. at 826-827.

¹¹ In *In re Gault*, 387 U.S. 1 (1967), the Court recognized a due process right to appointed counsel in a juvenile delinquency proceeding, but, as the Court later explained, that was because the proceeding “while denominated civil, was functionally akin to a criminal trial.” *Gagnon*, 411 U.S. at 789 n.12. In *Vitek v. Jones*, 445 U.S. 480 (1980), a plurality would have held that there is a due process right to counsel before a State involuntarily transfers a prisoner to a state mental hospital for psychiatric treatment. See *id.* at 497. Justice Powell’s controlling concurrence, however, disagreed, concluding that “the fairness of an informal hearing designed to determine a medical issue” does not “require[] participation by lawyers.” *Id.* at 500. Justice Powell agreed that a prisoner “required assistance” in such a proceeding to ensure

the Court held that due process required the government to provide a preliminary and final hearing before it could incarcerate an individual for violating the terms of his probation. See 411 U.S. at 782; see also *id.* at 785-786 (hearings necessary in order to provide notice of the alleged probation violation and ensure “accurate finding of fact and the informed use of discretion”). At the same time, however, the Court rejected the “contention that the State is under a constitutional duty to provide counsel for indigents in all probation or parole revocation cases.” *Id.* at 787; see *id.* at 790 (stating that due process may require appointment of counsel in exceptional cases). The Court recognized that “such a rule has the appeal of simplicity” but concluded that “it would impose direct costs and serious collateral disadvantages without regard to the need or the likelihood in a particular case for a constructive contribution by counsel.” *Id.* at 787.

The Court in *Gagnon* noted that in many cases a probationer’s mitigating evidence may be “so simple as not to require either investigation or exposition by counsel.” 411 U.S. at 787. Here too, with the provision of easy-to-understand forms on assets and income and, if necessary, a colloquy with the trial court, it will often be simple for a delinquent child-support obligor to demonstrate his present inability to discharge his obligation without the assistance of appointed counsel. Indeed, even in criminal cases to which the Sixth Amendment right of counsel applies, defendants are not entitled to government-appointed counsel for the purpose of filling out the forms routinely used to establishing their financial eligibility for government-appointed counsel. See

fairness, but said that it could be “rendered by competent laymen in some cases.” *Ibid.*

18 U.S.C. 3006A(b) (counsel will be appointed only after court is “satisfied after appropriate inquiry that the person is financially unable to obtain counsel”); *United States v. Bauer*, 956 F.2d 693, 695 (7th Cir.) (“Under the Criminal Justice Act, the public fisc need not contribute one penny unless the accused first establishes that he cannot afford counsel. Nothing in the statute directs the Treasury to assist the accused in making this determination.”), cert. denied, 506 U.S. 882 (1992). Just as “[n]o legal expertise is needed to participate effectively in hearings under the Criminal Justice Act,” *ibid.*, no legal expertise is generally required to establish inability to pay child-support arrears.

Gagnon also expressed concern that “[t]he introduction of counsel into a revocation proceeding will alter significantly the nature of the proceeding,” since the States typically relied on probation officers to conduct revocation hearings but might turn to attorneys if all probationers were represented. 411 U.S. at 787. “[T]he decisionmaking process will be prolonged, and the financial cost to the State * * * will not be insubstantial.” *Id.* at 788. In the context of civil contempt for child support as well, automatic appointment of counsel could delay the proceedings, create an asymmetry in representation between non-custodial parents and custodial parents who may appear pro se, see, *e.g.*, Pet. App. 16a, and impose considerable financial cost on the government without an automatic increase in accuracy.

Lassiter v. Department of Social Services, 452 U.S. 18 (1981), upon which petitioner relies, see, *e.g.*, Pet. Br. 32-33, is not to the contrary. In that decision, the Court held that there was no due process right to counsel in a parental-rights termination proceeding. See *Lassiter*, 452 U.S. at 32-33. In dictum, the Court said its cases

had established a “presumption” that an indigent had a right to appointed counsel “when, if he loses, he may be deprived of his physical liberty.” *Id.* at 26-27. The Court has not subsequently relied on any such presumption derived from the *Lassiter* dictum, and *Lassiter* itself recognized that *Gagnon*, which involved a deprivation of physical liberty, had held that “due process is not so rigid as to require that the significant interests in informality, flexibility and economy must always be sacrificed” through appointment of counsel. *Id.* at 31 (quoting *Gagnon*, 411 U.S. at 788).

That there may be atypical cases with “complex factual and legal issues” (Pet. Br. 46) in which counsel would provide a significant benefit beyond what could be obtained through other procedural safeguards does not mean there should be a right to counsel. “[P]rocedural due process rules are shaped by the risk of error inherent in the truth-finding process as applied to the generality of cases, not the rare exceptions.” *Walters v. National Ass’n of Radiation Survivors*, 473 U.S. 305, 321 (1985) (quoting *Mathews*, 424 U.S. at 344); see *id.* at 331 (“existence of complexity in some cases” was not “sufficient to warrant a conclusion that the right to retain and compensate an attorney in [Veterans Administration] cases is a necessary element of procedural fairness under the Fifth Amendment”).

b. A recognition that due process requires fair proceedings before a child-support obligor can be held in civil contempt but that this due process right does not encompass appointment of government-funded counsel is also consistent with the balance struck by Congress and the Secretary in enacting and administering the Title IV-D program. Cf. *Middendorf*, 425 U.S. at 43 (“[W]e must give particular deference to the determina-

tion of Congress, made under its authority to regulate the land and naval forces, U.S. Const., Art. I, § 8, that counsel should not be provided in summary courts-martial.”); *Walters*, 473 U.S. at 319-320 (“This deference to congressional judgment must be afforded even though the claim is that a statute Congress has enacted effects a denial of the procedural due process guaranteed by the Fifth Amendment.”).

Congress and the Secretary have demonstrated their concern that child-support-related proceedings be conducted fairly by repeatedly making compliance with procedural due process rules a requirement of State participation in the program.¹² At the same time, however, they have declined to reimburse the States for the cost of providing counsel to non-custodial parents. See S. Rep. No. 387, 98th Cong., 2d Sess. 23 (1984) (statute does not provide federal funding for “defense counsel for absent parents” or “incarceration of delinquent obligors”); 45 C.F.R. 304.23 (i) and (j) (no federal funding for “[t]he costs of counsel for indigent defendants in

¹² See, e.g., 42 U.S.C. 666(a)(3)(A) (reduction of non-custodial parents’ state income tax refunds to pay overdue support permitted only “after full compliance with all procedural due process requirements of the State”); 42 U.S.C. 666(a)(7)(B)(i) (States must report child-support delinquency to credit bureaus “only after [the] parent has been afforded all due process required under State law, including notice and a reasonable opportunity to contest the accuracy of such information.”); 42 U.S.C. 666(a)(8)(B)(iv) (income withholding “must be carried out in full compliance with all procedural due process requirements of the State”); 42 U.S.C. 666(c)(1)(H) (expedited State agency procedures “shall be subject to due process safeguards, including (as appropriate) requirements for notice, opportunity to contest the action, and opportunity for an appeal on the record to an independent administrative or judicial tribunal”); see also 45 C.F.R. 302.70(a)(5)(iii), 303.5(g)(2)(iii), 303.100(a)(6) & (f)(4), 303.101(c)(2), 303.102(c)(1), 303.104(b).

IV-D actions” or “[a]ny expenditure for jailing of parents in child-support enforcement cases”); see also 52 Fed. Reg. 32,130 (1987) (Federal “policy since the inception of the [Title IV-D] program has been that costs of incarceration of delinquent obligors and costs of defense counsel are not necessary and reasonable costs associated with the proper and efficient administration of the Title IV-D program.”).

Finally, at its broadest, the categorical rule petitioner suggests—that there is a right to government-appointed counsel in all “proceedings denominated as ‘civil’ where an individual nonetheless faces the prospect of confinement to state custody,” Pet. Br. 30—conflicts with Congress’s express judgment that provision of government-funded counsel is not warranted in all such areas. See *Middendorf*, 425 U.S. at 43 (deferring to such a judgment); *Walters*, 473 U.S. at 319-320 (same); see also *Landon v. Plasencia*, 459 U.S. 21, 34-35 (1982) (“The role of the judiciary is limited to determining whether the procedures meet the essential standard of fairness under the Due Process Clause and does not extend to imposing procedures that merely displace congressional choices of policy.”).

For example, while aliens are sometimes detained during removal proceedings or pending enforcement of removal orders, Congress has long explicitly provided that there is no obligation to provide government payment for counsel in such proceedings. See 8 U.S.C. 1362 (“In any removal proceedings before an immigration judge and in any appeal proceedings before the Attorney General from any such removal proceedings, the person concerned shall have the privilege of being represented (*at no expense to the Government*) by such counsel, authorized to practice in such proceedings,

as he shall choose.”) (emphasis added); 8 U.S.C. 1229a(b)(4)(A). Congress’s judgment is consistent with this Court’s repeated holdings that removal proceedings are civil and non-punitive, see, e.g., *INS v. Lopez-Mendoza*, 468 U.S. 1032, 1038 (1984) (“A deportation proceeding is a purely civil action to determine eligibility to remain in this country, not to punish an unlawful entry, though entering or remaining unlawfully in this country is itself a crime.”), and its conclusion that detention of an alien during the removal process is permissible because it is incidental to the proceedings, and not their purpose or goal, see, e.g., *Carlson v. Landon*, 342 U.S. 524, 538 (1952) (“Detention is necessarily a part of this deportation procedure.”). As the Court has also noted, removal proceedings—whose purpose is removal of aliens from the country, not deprivation of their physical liberty—are “streamlined” administrative proceedings held before administrative personnel, immigration judges, under rules offering the aliens more limited procedural rights than are available in court. *Lopez-Mendoza*, 468 U.S. at 1039; see *ibid.* (“a deportation hearing is intended to provide a streamlined determination of eligibility to remain in this country, nothing more”). The due process guarantee of fundamental fairness does not mandate the appointment of counsel in such proceedings, which would be contrary to the judgment of Congress.¹³

¹³ For these reasons, the lower courts have held that aliens in removal proceedings have no constitutional right to appointment of counsel at government expense. *United States v. Gasca-Kraft*, 522 F.2d 149, 152 (9th Cir. 1975) (“courts have uniformly held in this circuit and elsewhere that in light of the non-criminal nature of both the proceedings and the order which may be a result, that respondents are not entitled to have counsel appointed at government expense”) (citing cases); see *Moham-*

CONCLUSION

The judgment of the Supreme Court of South Carolina should be reversed.

Respectfully submitted.

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med v. Gonzales, 400 F.3d 785, 793 (9th Cir. 2005); *United States v. Torres-Sanchez*, 68 F.3d 227, 230 (8th Cir. 1995); *Nazakat v. INS*, 981 F.2d 1146, 1148 (10th Cir. 1992); *United States v. Campos-Asencio*, 822 F.2d 506, 509 (5th Cir. 1987).