

**The Impact of Welfare Reform on Child Welfare and
Child Protective Services: A Literature Review**

Morgan B. Ward Doran,
Northwestern University School of Law, Human Development & Social Policy

Dorothy E. Roberts,
Northwestern University School of Law, Institute for Policy Research

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I. Introduction

There is little question that the sweeping changes in welfare policy initiated by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193) (PRWORA) will have an impact on families involved in state child protection systems. The new law ended the entitlement to federally supported financial assistance to poor families and replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with a new social welfare ideology embodied in Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) (Berrick, 1999). Although the PRWORA does not dramatically alter the funding of federal child protection programs, the law is likely both directly and indirectly to affect the financing and allocation of child welfare services. In addition, new requirements imposed on families receiving TANF are likely to affect the experiences of those families that are concurrently involved in state child welfare systems. Because so many families in Illinois receive welfare, even a slight increase in the rate of child welfare involvement from this population can have a significant impact on Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) caseloads (Shook, 1999a). What remains uncertain in the wake of these changes is the nature and extent of the impact that ending “welfare as we know it” will have on poor families in general, and on children involved with child welfare services in particular.

This paper provides a review of the current research on the impact of welfare reform on child welfare and child protective services. Our goal is to examine both the changes in welfare policy mandated by the reform and the implications of these changes for youth involved in the child welfare system. We begin with a discussion of the background factors that are closely associated with child welfare involvement, giving special attention to the context of poverty. Next, we examine the impact that welfare reform may have on families and on parents’ ability to care adequately for their children. We discuss the history of welfare reform and the modern

emphasis on shaping the behavior of TANF recipients. In the following section, we examine the potential impact that welfare reform may have on child welfare involvement. We conclude this literature review with our assessment of the gaps in the research and important questions for future study.

II. Background: Poverty, Welfare, and Child Well-Being

The connection between welfare reform and the child welfare system is grounded in the well-documented relationship between poverty and involvement in the child welfare system. (Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Pelton, 1989, 1994; Wolock & Horowitz, 1979). Children raised in poverty are more likely to be reported to child protective services (Goerge et al., 1996; Pelton, 1997), more likely to have the report substantiated (Hampton, 1987; Zellman, 1992), more likely to be removed from the home (Lindsey, 1992), and more likely to remain in substitute care for a longer period of time (Jenkins & Diamond, 1985). Reported cases of child abuse and neglect among poor children is almost 7 times as great as the incidence among non-poor children (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). This section examines the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment.

A. CHILD OUTCOMES

While the exact pathways through which poverty affects child development are not perfectly clear, that poverty has deleterious effects on children is well-established. Children from poor homes are almost twice as likely as non-poor children to be reported in fair or poor health (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Poor children experience developmental delay and learning disability at a greater rate than do other children (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Poverty is also moderately associated with lower achievement scores, lower IQ scores, and

increased chances of high-school dropout (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Lastly, the rate of child maltreatment among poor children is 6.8 times as high as among non-poor youth (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

Research also suggests that the negative effects of poverty may be different at different stages in childhood development. In particular, poverty during the early childhood years is most strongly associated with the academic ability and achievement of youths as they develop (Duncan & Leonard, 1998). For example, low income during the preschool years was found to be more predictive of high-school dropout than income deficits during the later years of childhood (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). This finding is especially troubling given that the age distribution of children receiving welfare is becoming more heavily skewed toward early childhood (Smith & Yeung, 1998).

B. INVOLVEMENT WITH THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Poor children are at a greater risk of involvement in the child welfare system. This increased risk may stem from the negative effects of poverty on family functioning, the disproportionate number of single-parent families that are poor, or the greater degree of institutional scrutiny imposed on poor families. Recent research based on state-level data suggests that poor single-parent families are also more likely than other families to become involved with the child welfare system (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2000).

Most cases of child maltreatment stem from parental neglect. In 1997, 55.9 percent of opened cases were indicated for neglect, compared to 24.6 percent for physical abuse, 12.5 percent for sexual abuse, 12.2 percent for “other” abuse (typically drug-related), and 6.1 percent for psychological abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Although the category of neglect is intended to capture only incidents where parents have the

ability to provide for their children and choose not to do so, neglect is often hard to disentangle from poverty (Pelton, 1989). The high proportion of maltreatment cases that involve neglect likely includes a large number of poor families whose behavior was a consequence of poverty rather than any mistreatment of their child (Pelton, 1994). Thus, poverty is an important dimension of the child maltreatment caseload.

1. Poverty, Welfare, and Child Welfare Involvement

Estimates of the number of poor families involved with the child welfare system vary by state and type of maltreatment (Shook, 1999a). One study conducted in Washington State found that 75 percent of a sample of neglect cases involved families with incomes under \$10,000 (Bath & Haapala, 1993). In Illinois, an income of below 50 percent of the poverty threshold is associated with more than twice the likelihood of child welfare involvement than families with earnings greater than 50 percent of the poverty line (Shook, 1999b). Even among a sample of generally impoverished families, researchers find that extreme poverty is significantly associated with a higher incidence of neglect (Giovannoni & Billingsley, 1970; Pelton, 1994). Low income has also been found to be predictive of physical abuse in mother-only homes (Gelles, 1989) and in homes with incomes under \$15,000 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993). Neglect is also associated with poverty at the community level. Neighborhood poverty has been found to be more closely related to neglect reporting than to reports of other forms of maltreatment (Drake & Pandey, 1996).

Across all categories of maltreatment, the incidence of abuse and neglect is approximately 22 times as great for families with incomes under \$15,000, compared to families that earn over \$30,000 (Courtney, 1997). Poverty, rather than type or severity of maltreatment, is the single most important predictor of a child's time spent in foster care (Jenkins & Diamond,

1985; Lindsey, 1992). Taken together, these findings indicate that “there is no doubt that the children in foster care have come predominantly from impoverished families, and that child abuse and neglect are strongly related to poverty” (Pelton, 1978, p.546, 1989, 1994).

The connection between income and child protection involvement is even more pronounced for children receiving welfare. Children from families who receive welfare are at the greatest risk for involvement with the child welfare system due to the extreme poverty among this population (Goerge et al., 1996). Researchers estimate that approximately 50 percent of the families referred to the child welfare system received welfare at the time of the referral (Lindsey, 1994; Paxson & Waldfogel, 2000; Pelton, 1994).¹ Neglect in particular is highly associated with past welfare receipt and significantly more so than other forms of maltreatment (Bath & Haapala, 1993). In Illinois, 40 percent of the children in foster care came from a family that received AFDC in the month of the initial case report (Shook, 1998). An additional 20 percent of the children in the Illinois foster care population came from families that had some active AFDC association, but did not receive an actual cash award (Shook, 1998). These findings suggest that children from families receiving welfare are at an increased risk for child welfare involvement.

Another study of 63,768 children who entered California’s AFDC program between 1990 and 1995 found a considerable overlap between the two populations (Needell, et al., 1999). Of the children entering AFDC in 1990, 27 percent received a report of child maltreatment and 22 percent had their case investigated within the first five years of welfare receipt. Eight percent of the 1990 cohort had a child protection services case opened and 3 percent of the sample entered foster care. Factors found to be associated with child welfare involvement among this sample of

¹ Although a large percentage of the child welfare population have received welfare, a much smaller percentage of children who receive welfare become involved with the child protection system. While relatively small, this percentage is certainly greater than that of the overall population (Shook, 1999 diss.).

AFDC recipients included entering AFDC as an infant, coming from a single-parent household, having more children in the household, and having a mother under 18 years old.

There is also a strong connection between child neglect, poverty, and female-headed households (Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Lindsey, 1991). Recent state-level research indicates that increases in poverty and single-parenthood is associated with higher levels of abuse and neglect (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2000). Because the absence of a wage earner can have severe implications for family income, single-parent homes are over-represented among both the poor and the welfare populations (Lindsey, 1994; Needell et al., 1999). Although to a large extent single-parenthood is likely acting as a proxy for poverty in these studies, family structure is nonetheless hypothesized to have an independent effect on the level of child maltreatment (Paxson & Waldfogel, 1999).

2. Racial Differences in Child Welfare Involvement

Race is another family characteristic that is closely associated with involvement in the child welfare system. African-American families are over-represented in child maltreatment reports, case openings, and the foster care population (Garland et al., 1998; Lee & Goerge, 1999; McMurtry & Lie, 1992). For example, black children in Illinois are 3.3 times more likely to have an allegation of neglect than are white children (Lee & Goerge, 1999). African-American children comprise 70 percent of the first admissions to foster care in Illinois (Goerge et al., 1996), and over 63 percent of foster children in large U.S. cities (Jenkins & Diamond, 1985). In a sample of San Diego County, California, researchers found that black children are “markedly over-represented” in the foster care system – at a rate of 5.9 times their overall census proportion (Garland et al., 1998). Nationwide, black children constitute 17 percent of the general

population, but 48 percent of the foster care population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).

African-American children also spend longer periods of time in care once they enter the foster care system (Courtney et al., 1996). In a study of the California foster care population, Richard Barth (1997) found that 33 percent of blacks remained in foster care after 6 years compared to only 11 percent of whites. Black children were also found to be twice as likely to remain in foster care as be adopted and were significantly less likely than white children to be adopted (Barth, 1997). A similar finding was reported in a study of Maricopa County, Arizona: black children in this sample were half as likely as white children to leave temporary substitute care (McMurtry & Lie, 1992). In Cook County, Illinois, African-American youth spent a median of 53.3 months in substitute care while the median for white and Latino children is one-third that duration – 18 months (Lindsey, 1992). This association between race and duration of foster care involvement remains significant even when researchers control for poverty (Jenkins & Diamond, 1985). African-American families in the child welfare system, however, are also more likely to be poor than are other families, which may account for a large part of this relationship (Hampton, 1987).

3. Family Characteristics and Child Welfare Involvement

The stress that often accompanies poverty can affect the quality of parent-child interactions. Poor mothers experience elevated levels of psychological distress and depression (McLoyd, 1990; Needell, et al., 1999). Among welfare-recipient parents the problem of impaired psychological functioning is even more common, with 48% of one sample of TANF recipients reporting poor mental health or poor general health (Zedlewski, 1999). Low-income parents are especially susceptible to diminished feelings of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and life

satisfaction which can negatively affect the ability to provide adequate child care (Conger et al., 1994; Elder et al., 1995). The combination of poverty and parental stress is associated with more punitive parenting and the use of harsher punishment (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; McLoyd, 1990). In general, neglectful mothers tend to have a more stressful life situation with fewer resources to cope with this stress (Giovannoni & Billingsley, 1970; Shook, 1999a).

A study of AFDC recipients in Illinois found maternal characteristics to be predictive of child welfare involvement (Shook, 1999a). In particular, mothers with lower feelings of self-efficacy, lower educational attainment, and poorer perceived health were more likely to have children involved with the child welfare system (Shook, 1999a). Mothers with more than two children and who had previous interaction with child protection services were also more likely to have child welfare involvement (Shook, 1999a). Notably, this study also found that children from extremely poor families, defined as less than 50 percent of the poverty threshold, were more than twice as likely as less poor families to become involved with the child welfare system.

Children who enter foster care disproportionately come from homes with multiple stressors that exacerbate, or are exacerbated by, poverty. These stressors include giving birth as a teenager, having a large number of children, single-parenthood, and inadequate resources (Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Lindsey, 1991; Pelton, 1989). Further, parents with low self-esteem and poor mental health – of whom there are a disproportionate number of poor parents – are more likely to become involved with the child protection system (McLoyd et al., 1994).

Accordingly, researchers consider psychological distress to be a primary pathway by which the association between poverty and child maltreatment operates (Needell et al., 1999). In sum, there is a constellation of family characteristics that interact with poverty to elevate the risk for child welfare involvement.

III. Welfare Reform: Its Impact on Families

A. HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN WELFARE AND CHILD WELFARE

The Social Security Act of 1935 created Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), a social welfare program designed to ensure that the children of widows and orphaned youth would not grow up in poverty. ADC provided short-term minimum income support to mothers who had no other means to provide for their children. However, as did the Mother's Pension statutes before it, ADC incorporated an implicit requirement of parental fitness into its eligibility requirements (Frame, 1999). Only mothers who were "deserving" of assistance were allowed to enroll in ADC (Gordon, 1994).

Determinations of deservingness were based on the moral framework of the era. Indeed, Congress explicitly enabled states to consider the "moral character" of the parent when determining aid for children under ADC. Women of color and women of "illegitimate" children were routinely denied support (Quadagno, 1994). These moral and racial requirements created an implicit "suitable home" restriction on ADC receipt that Congress formally enacted in 1940 (Frame, 1999). Although the restriction was eventually repealed in 1945, states continued to use birth status, moral character of the mother, and condition of the home as criteria for ADC grant decisions (Bell, 1965).

Due to the widespread denial of benefits to minority and single-parent families, in 1960 the Secretary of Health Education and Welfare issued a policy statement directing states to abandon the suitable home criteria for ADC receipt.² Because this shift in policy left children in truly neglectful homes at risk for continued maltreatment, Congress amended Title IV of the Social Security Act in 1961 to provide federal funds for children in homes of unemployed

² In 1968, the United States Supreme Court took the first step toward formally invalidating suitable homes provisions by nullifying "absent father" rules which denied benefits to AFDC recipient's who cohabit with a non-parental male (*King v. Smith*, 1968). Subsequent case law reiterated and extended the *King* holding, effectively

parents and in foster homes (Frame, 1999). These amendments established a conjunction between federal welfare programs and child protection programs that continues today.

B. WELFARE REFORM GOALS AND REQUIREMENTS

The new welfare law reflects the government's response to a public assistance program that was perceived as overly-generous and insufficiently supportive of core American values. Based on these perceptions, the PRWORA eliminated the federal guarantee of a basic income support for all families and replaced it with TANF, a programmatic combination of work requirements and sanctions for non-conforming behavior.

1. *Behavior Modification*

Like the restrictions present in ADC of the past, the current welfare program imposes a set of behavioral requirements upon mothers as a condition of federal assistance. The eligibility conditions required by TANF leave less discretion to caseworkers than did ADC. Nevertheless, the modern welfare program addresses issues of parental fitness and moral character by using sanctions and benefit reductions to modify the behavior of recipients. As TANF becomes more and more involved with the business of modifying parental character and behavior, the connections between welfare reform and child welfare are likely to grow (Frame, 1999).

For example, TANF permits states to implement child exclusion policies or "family caps" to deter additional pregnancies among the recipient population. Somewhat akin to the ADC prohibition on single-mothers having sexual relations while receiving government assistance (Frame,1999), family caps function as a loosely-controlled behavioral deterrent. Under child exclusion policies, mothers who currently receive welfare benefits and give birth to a child (or

prohibiting states from assuming that non-legally responsible lodgers in an AFDC home contribute financially to the

children) will not receive an increase in their award to compensate for the additional financial burden imposed by another child. Thus, the family cap acts as a form of punishment for unwanted conduct – pregnancy -- as a means to prevent that behavior. Although the effectiveness of family caps at deterring pregnancy is under study (Camasso et al., 1996; Lens, 1998; Rutgers University, 1998), it is clear that this policy reduces the amount of benefits for many children born to welfare-dependent families.

TANF attempts to regulate other behaviors of recipients, in addition to childbearing. Minors under the age of 18 may be denied cash assistance unless they agree to live with a parent, adult relative, or legal guardian (42 U.S.C. § 608(a)(5)(A)). If a responsible adult is not available, the minor must rely upon the welfare agency to locate one. Although the purpose of this provision is to avert teen-age pregnancies, the policy may also have the unintended consequence of increasing contact between young recipients and the child welfare system (Hardin, 1996). Child welfare agencies are better able to place young parents in supervised living arrangements and may also be asked to act as outside assessors of private placements (Hardin, 1996).

TANF also targets drug use among recipients. Individuals who are convicted of drug-related felonies after 1997 suffer a lifetime prohibition from receiving both TANF and food stamp benefits, although states may opt out of or modify this prohibition (21 U.S.C. § 862a (1996)). Given the substantial proportion of child welfare cases either directly or indirectly related to parental drug use, the potential implications of this lifetime ban for state child protection agencies could be great (Hardin, 1996; Matthews, 1999). Substance-abusing parents who are permanently cut from the welfare rolls will find it more difficult to care for their

household (see e.g., *Lewis v. Martin*, 1970; *Van Lare v. Hurley*, 1975).

children. What was conceived as an attempt to curb drug use among welfare-reliant mothers could, therefore, result in significant increases in foster care expenditures.

2. Work Requirements and Time Limits

The centerpiece of TANF is the requirement that all able parents work in return for the government's financial support (Pavetti & Wemmerus, 1999). TANF is intended to provide only short-term assistance to families until the primary caregiver finds work. In keeping with the emphasis on threatened punishment as a tool of behavioral modification, work is mandatory under TANF: non-compliance generates sanctions. Welfare receipt under TANF is limited to a 5 year lifetime maximum, and able-bodied recipients must work within 2 years of initial receipt or risk termination of benefits. These work-based requirements also have important ramifications for child welfare. The goal of moving more families from public assistance to work might improve child protection outcomes and decrease the likelihood of child welfare involvement in the first place. On the other hand, some studies suggest that TANF requirements will not only increase the number of children at risk for child protection intervention, but also affect the ability of families to meet permanency planning requirements.

The general guidelines laid out in TANF dictate that all capable adults find work within twenty-four months of their initial receipt of federal aid. To facilitate compliance, states may require recipients to engage in work-related activities or specific work-program mandates. The flexibility embedded in the PRWORA allows states to modify these federal requirements and obligate recipients to work within a shorter period of time. States may also exempt 20 percent of their caseloads from the time-limits and work requirements due to extreme hardship, battery, or cruelty (Hardin, 1996).

Underlying TANF's work and time-limit requirements are a set of assumptions regarding the financial and cognitive benefits associated with work as opposed to welfare receipt. This position considers welfare receipt, in and of itself – that is, independent of economic and socio-demographic factors -- as a negative force on family functioning and child development (Kalil & Eccles, 1998). According to this theory, unfettered public assistance undermines recipients' motivation and self-esteem by discouraging work and reinforcing negative perceptions about their ability to provide for their children. In turn, the children of welfare recipients are expected to be harmed by the combined effects of less effective parenting and the absence of the primary positive role model in the child's life.

Some limited support for these assertions is evident in the empirical literature. For example, studies have found that, even after controlling for income and other demographic characteristics, welfare recipients provide less monitoring, parental supervision, and discipline for their children (Kalil & Eccles, 1998). Welfare recipients have also been found to provide less intellectual stimulation and emotional support to their children compared to low-income mothers who do work (Moore et al., 1995). Despite these findings, a substantial body of evidence suggests that economic and demographic factors, rather than welfare alone, account for any negative effects of public assistance receipt (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Danziger et al. 2000; Duncan et al., 1998). Since the type of work that welfare recipients are able to secure is unlikely to raise them far above the poverty line, the distinction between work-effects and income effects is critical. That work is independently beneficial to welfare recipients regardless of the extent of additional income earned is an open question in the literature.

Supporters of the welfare reform contend that by encouraging parents to work TANF will positively affect recipients' self-perception and confer cognitive and social benefits to their children. As stated above, time-limits ensure that at least 80 percent of all able-bodied adults

will work within 24 months of welfare receipt. Families who do not comply with these requirements are subject to a range of sanctions by the states.

3. Sanctions

Sanctions are used in TANF as a form of behavioral modification to facilitate compliance with work requirements (Frame, 1999). Recipients who do not fully participate in a given state's job assistance program, called "Work First" in most states (Pavetti & Wemmerus, 1999), or who reach the 24 month limit for receipt without work, are subject to sanctions. In addition to these work-based sanctions, the PRWORA mandates that states institute a lifetime ban on all TANF and food stamp benefits to any individual who is convicted of a felony involving a controlled substance (Geen & Waters, 1997). This mandatory sanction is especially significant to the child welfare programs in states with major cities like Illinois, where 40 percent of all child maltreatment reports involve drugs (Barth, 1996). Finally, sanctions may also be imposed by caseworkers for perceived uncooperativeness on the part of recipients (Brodkin, 1997).

According to 1999 figures, 36 states impose "full-family sanctions" (the elimination of a family's entire cash assistance grant) for initial or continued non-compliance with work programs (Pavetti & Wammerus, 1999). Fourteen of these states impose a full-family sanction as the initial penalty for noncompliance with state program requirements (Pavetti & Wammerus, 1999). Most states, however, use partial sanctions first. These states reduce the family grant or eliminate the adult portion of the TANF award as a warning to families that compliance is necessary to continue receipt of benefits.

The incidence rate of state sanctioning is not well known. Because the economic and employment climate differs state by state, a similar divergence can be expected in sanctioning rates. One study of post-TANF recipients in Maryland found that, after 9 months of the

program, only 4 percent of clients received a full-family sanction (Born, et al., 1998). In contrast, an examination of welfare reform in Delaware found that 50 percent of all recipients received some form of sanction after the implementation of TANF (Pavetti & Wammerus, 1999). Although it is not clear how many recipients have been sanctioned under the TANF program, the impact of sanctions on family functioning is likely to be felt by the child welfare system.

4. Child Care

As more mothers are required to work, a commensurate increase in demand for adequate child care is likely to emerge. Access to child care is considered one of the primary barriers to welfare-to-work transitions (Gault et al., 1998). Welfare recipients have a special need for child care assistance because they are significantly more likely to have children with at least one chronic health condition (Heymann & Earle, 1999). Coupled with the work demands imposed by TANF, the special characteristics of welfare families makes the availability of child care a crucial determinant of welfare reform's impact on children. Adding sanctions for non-compliance to sparse child care services for compliant mothers makes it likely that the TANF work requirements may increase the incidence of abuse and, particularly, neglect (Shook, 1999a). The increased need for child care, then, further links child protective services to welfare reform and the implications that it holds for families.

The drafters of the PRWORA did not ignore this need; they incorporated programs to aid in child care for poor mothers. The new Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) consolidates four federal child care programs into a single block grant. Because the CCDF eliminates administrative requirements previously imposed by AFDC, the states are better able to cater their child care programs according to the characteristics of their population (Long et al., 1998). While the new funding structure gives states greater flexibility in allocating funds to both

the welfare and non-welfare populations, at least 70 percent of CCDF funds must be disbursed to families currently receiving welfare, transitioning off of welfare, or at risk of welfare involvement (Long et al., 1998). Poor families who work also receive financial assistance in the form the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, which provides tax reductions for child care expenses. In addition, the PRWORA does not allow states to impose TANF sanctions upon single-parents with a child under the age of six who is unable to meet the work requirements due to a lack of available child care (P.L. 104-193).

Despite the existence of these programs, the Congressional Budget Office projects a shortfall of over \$1.8 billion in child care funds for low-income working families by 2002 (Courtney, 1997). Families in need of subsidized care far exceed the supply afforded by federal reimbursement programs (Gault et al., 1998). Approximately one-third of welfare recipients currently below the poverty line would escape poverty if their child care costs were fully subsidized (Gault et al., 1998). The dearth of adequate child care funds means that many welfare recipients will have a difficult time during the initial transition to work and will likely find it infeasible to maintain continuous employment for extended periods. As a result, it is questionable whether the stated goal of the PRWORA, to assist families in achieving self-sufficiency, can succeed without increases in federal child care funding.

5. Funding

The federal programs for public assistance and child welfare are also connected, both in the present and historically, by their funding structure. Aid to Families with Dependent Children – the predecessor to TANF – was funded through Title IV-A of the Social Security Act. In 1980, the federal government created a separate foster care program under Title IV-E of the Social

Security Act. This new program consolidated the foster care aspect of AFDC formerly administered under Title IV-A. Title IV-E provides states with funds for the bulk of child welfare services including out-of-home care, casework services for child placement, adoption assistance, and caseworker training. In 1995, the federal government spent over \$3 billion on Title IV-E alone (U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, 1996). Title IV-B of the Social Security Act provides the funding source for child protection services that include family preservation and support. In contrast to the \$3 billion spent on child placement, the government spent under \$450 million on child protection in 1995 (U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, 1996). As was true before the passage of TANF, both of these funding sources are restricted to families that meet the June 1, 1996 AFDC eligibility requirements (Courtney, 1998).³

The PRWORA replaced the programmatic funding of AFDC with a large, free-standing block grant under TANF. For example, the Emergency Assistance Program that had existed under Title IV-A was eliminated and its funds (\$1.6 billion in 1995) were rolled into the TANF block grant. The PRWORA also reduced the size of the second largest source of child protection services funding, the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG or Title XX), by 15 percent. The 1995 federal expenditure on the SSBG was \$2.8 billion. Prior to the reductions mandated under the PRWORA, the SSBG provided states with discretionary funds for child welfare. The portion spent on family preservation and child maltreatment prevention likely exceeded the \$450 million directly allocated to these services under Title IV-B (Geen & Waters, 1997). Thus, the SSBG provided an important source of discretionary funding for child protection and family preservation. Under TANF, states may continue to use the reduced SSBG funds, as well as the

³ It is important to note that these funds, indexed to 1996 AFDC standards, are not adjusted for inflation. Given that both incomes and the price of consumer goods inevitably rise with inflation, it is possible that fewer families will meet these requirements. Families that fail to meet eligibility standards will not be eligible for TANF support and may risk contact with the child welfare system.

block grant of federal funds, for these services. However, the creation of a large pool of undirected funds dictates that there will be an increase in the competition for federal dollars that previously were applied to child welfare protection (Geen & Waters, 1997). Because the TANF block grant is capped and Title IV-E funds for foster care are not, it is also possible that states have an incentive to shift expenditures away from child-only grants (covered under TANF block grant) to kinship care grants (covered under Title IV-E).

IV. Welfare Reform's Impact on the Child Welfare System

A. IMPACT OF TANF ON CHILD WELFARE CASELOADS

Due partly to the relatively recent enactment of the legislation, there are few studies that examine the connection between the TANF program and child protection services. As discussed in Section II(B)(1), however, prior studies suggest that children from families receiving AFDC were at risk for involvement with the child protection system (Goerge et al., 1996; Shook, 1998; Needell, et al., 1999). At this point, there is no evidence that welfare reform has led to dramatic increases in reports of child maltreatment or in states' foster care populations (Matthews, 1999). In fact, official data show a decline in IDCFS cases after TANF went into effect (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2000). The full impact of welfare reform on state child welfare caseloads may be temporarily mitigated by current favorable economic conditions and may not be felt for several years (Matthews, 1999).

B. POSSIBLE EFFECTS ON PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Welfare reform is certain to have an impact on families involved with child protective services due to the large proportion of welfare recipients among this population. A recent

analysis of state data found that approximately 50 percent of the families referred to the child welfare system receive welfare (TANF/AFDC) at the time of the referral (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2000). As the primary goal of the PRWORA, leaving welfare to enter the workforce carries with it both the potential for self-sufficiency and the uncertainty of a major life transition. What is clear is that, at least in the short-term, these families are likely to experience a number of potentially adverse life events including transitions to work, economic strain, parental stress, and possibly sanctions. This section considers the impact of welfare reform on the family and its interaction with child welfare services.

1. Work

As noted above, a key goal of welfare reform is to meet family income needs through work rather than public assistance. The time-limit and work requirements of TANF ensure that fewer families currently receiving assistance will be eligible for future benefits. The availability of employment opportunities for welfare “leavers” is a critical determinant of the reform’s success or failure, as well as a strong predictor of family and child outcomes. It is likely that participation in welfare-to-work programs will help some families who become involved with child protective services comply with agency permanency plans. On the other hand, the new state and federal welfare policies may make it more difficult for some poor families to care for their children in several ways: they reduce the amount of cash assistance to families; they include deadlines for payments to families; and they require parents to work and to participate in job training, counseling, and other programs, often without adequate child care. Welfare-to-work programs appear to decrease the risk of involvement in child protective services only under certain conditions: “if participants find good jobs that significantly raise family income, families with children under one year old are exempted, and families with mental health problems,

educational deficits, and other barriers to employment are given supportive services” (Matthews, 1999, p. 398).

Approximately 70 percent of the women who voluntarily leave the welfare rolls report increased income or a new job as the principal reason for their exit (Loprest, 1999). Researchers estimate that these women work between 68 and 88 percent of the year following their welfare exit (Danziger et al., 2000). Welfare leavers tend to find their employment in the same industries as poor and low-income mothers (Loprest, 1997). However, compared to their non-welfare counterparts, these women work more hours, have shorter tenures at their jobs, and use public benefits (medicaid, food stamps, etc.) at a greater rate (Loprest, 1999). Parents who leave welfare are also less likely than poor non-welfare recipients to have sick leave, paid vacation, or a schedule flexible enough to care for their children in the event of an illness (Heymann & Earle, 1999). Given that welfare mothers are more likely to have a child with at least one chronic illness (Heymann & Earle, 1999), the absence of these benefits may lead to declines in child well-being or, alternatively, in the loss of employment. Although voluntary welfare leavers earn more money than the near-poor, this result has been found to be an artifact of individual level characteristics such as self-esteem and personal skills (Loprest, 1999). Controlling for these personal characteristics, voluntary welfare leavers earn the same wages as poor, non-welfare mothers (Loprest, 1999). In sum, women who voluntarily leave welfare fare no better than other low-income families in the types of jobs they secure, and fare worse on a number of important economic and work-based measures.

Involuntary welfare leavers -- those who reach time-limits or are sanctioned -- are at even greater risk for negative outcomes. In contrast to the 80 percent employment rate among voluntary leavers, only 50 percent of the women forced to exit welfare find work (Brauner & Loprest, 1999). Little is known about this population of parents (Zaslow & Emig, 1997).

However, in the absence of employment or substantial government assistance, it is likely that women forced to exit welfare are faring considerably worse than either voluntary welfare leavers or low-income mothers.

There is an established connection between work, welfare receipt, and child welfare involvement. Families who leave welfare and do not find subsequent employment are 3 times more likely to become involved with the child protection system than unemployed families who receive welfare benefits (Shook, 1999a). Part-time employment is a likely effect of welfare reform that is also associated with an elevated risk of child welfare involvement. Families whose primary caregiver works part-time are 2.8 times as likely to have a child removed from the home compared to caregivers who work full-time (Lindsey, 1992). Indeed, unstable family income is considered the best predictor of child removal and foster care placement (Lindsey, 1992).

In contrast, the implications of maternal employment for child outcomes is less clear. Although employment itself does not seem to have a negative influence on childhood development (see e.g. Hoffman et al., 1999; Moore & Driscoll, 1997; Zaslow & Emig, 1997; Zaslow et al., 1998), the interaction between poverty and employment may. For example, children whose parents work full-time, but earn less than \$7.50 an hour, were found to have significantly elevated risk for behavioral problems (Moore & Driscoll, 1997). Children from homes with a single-parent and an inadequate income source are considerably more likely to experience foster care involvement (Lindsey, 1991). In addition, the effects of employment on child well-being may be different in situations where the caregiver chooses to work as compared to being forced to work – as some mothers are under TANF. These findings reinforce the importance of considering income in assessments of the connection between employment and child maltreatment (Green & Waters, 1997).

2. Poverty

Families leaving welfare for work are unlikely to escape poverty entirely (Duncan, et al., 1998). Rather, welfare leavers are likely to experience continued income deficits and greater economic strain (Kalil & Eccles, 1998). Past welfare recipients tend to work the same sort of “pink collar” jobs as poor non-welfare mothers (Born et al., 1998). Although a large proportion of past-TANF recipients work more than 30 hours a week in these jobs, their income is not sufficient to help them out of poverty (Brauner & Loprest, 1999). Perhaps due to the low salaries in the types of jobs they do obtain, the duration of employment spells for women leaving welfare is low. Approximately 20 to 40 percent of welfare leavers return to welfare within three months (Edelman, 1999).

In addition, it is important to note that not all welfare leavers find work. An estimated 30 to 50 percent of the women leaving welfare do not find jobs (Edelman, 1999). For these women, about whom little is known, the implications of welfare reform are great. The loss of welfare support coupled with the absence of a replacement income source results in continued poverty. Former welfare recipients report significant problems providing enough food for their children, paying the utility bills, and paying the rent (Brauner & Loprest, 1999). Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that the declines in welfare caseloads since TANF was implemented has not been matched by equal reductions in poverty (Danziger et al., 2000).

3. Parental Mental Health

Many women who exit welfare experience not only continued poverty, but also financial strain. Unlike welfare, low-income work may be unstable. The financial strain that accompanies low-paying jobs and periods of unemployment is associated with parental stress, depression, and lower self-esteem (Conger et al., 1994). Each of these mental health factors is associated with a

diminished capacity to care for children (McLoyd, 1990). In turn, children from families with stressful life events are more likely to become involved with the child welfare system (Shook, 1999a).

4. Sanctions

Although sanctions have long been part of public assistance, the reforms introduced by TANF make it more likely that a greater proportion of the welfare population will experience benefit reductions (Frame, 1999). Women who receive sanctions are more likely to experience a constellation of income-straining life events (Shook, 1999a). These events include problems that affect the care of children such as the ability to provide food and pay for basic utility services (Shook, 1999a). Thus, sanctions represent not just temporary income loss, but also a greater likelihood of involvement with the child welfare system (Shook, 1998).

In Illinois, families who had their welfare grant terminated or reduced by greater than \$75 and found no subsequent employment experienced a significantly greater likelihood of child welfare involvement (Shook, 1999b). Children with sanctioned grants were twice as likely to be placed in foster care (Shook, 1998). Sanctioned families are also at an increased risk for allegations of neglect and risk of harm (Shook, 1998). The overall odds of a family experiencing a case opening or child placement is 53 percent higher for sanctioned grants compared to full grants (Shook, 1998). Across states, welfare benefits are negatively related to neglect (lower welfare benefits yield higher rates of neglect) and foster care involvement (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2000; Pelton, 1999). In sum, children from homes with sanctioned welfare grants are at a heightened risk for involvement with the child welfare system.

5. *Experiences of Families in the Child Welfare System*

In addition to the link between welfare reform and the risk of child welfare involvement, TANF regulations probably affect the *experiences* of families who are already involved with child welfare services, as well as the *outcomes* of their cases. For example, TANF terminates awards to parents whose children are removed from the home for more than 45 days (42 U.S.C. § 602(a)(10)). If reunification is not possible within this period, the resultant loss of benefits may lead to hardships such as eviction or termination of utilities that, in turn, interfere with the chances of reunification (Matthews, 1999; Hardin, 1996). It is also possible that the pressure to find work imposed by TANF may lead to speedier reunification.

In addition, these families must simultaneously comply with new rules that TANF imposes while attempting to remedy the circumstances that led to their referral to child protective services. Parents may experience conflicts between compliance with work, training, and counseling requirements mandated under TANF by welfare caseworkers and the permanency plan implemented by child welfare caseworkers. (Matthews, 1999). Again, the pressure from both agencies to improve the family's situation may also have a beneficial impact.

V. Suggestions for Future Research

Despite disturbing predictions in the wake of welfare reform, there is little empirical research that examines the law's actual effect on families involved with child protective services. Rather, most of the literature that addresses the impact of welfare reform on the child welfare system employs data that were collected before the reforms were implemented. Of the research that has been published, the findings tend to overlook the individual experiences of these families in favor of a broad assessment of the child welfare system. As a result, few studies are

able to report findings that show whether or how the lives of families are affected by the new rules imposed under TANF.

Indeed, no ethnographic study has been published that examines the child welfare population after the 1996 welfare reform law was passed. While statistical analysis of the impact of welfare reform on child welfare caseloads and outcomes is important, an in-depth study of the experiences of families managing both systems can shed light on the *reasons* for these outcomes. The ethnographic methodology is particularly suited to demonstrate which aspects of TANF regulations are beneficial for families involved with child protective services and which are problematic. As such, future studies may wish to incorporate an ethnographic component to facilitate a more complete picture of the impact of welfare reform.

In addition to ethnographic methods, research is needed that considers the impact of welfare reform over an extended period of time. Because the full impact of welfare reform is necessarily delayed (until time limits expire), point-in-time examinations of the welfare population are inadequate tools for understanding the effect of the new law. Instead, longitudinal studies examining the effect of TANF on families and family functioning have the potential to elucidate the etiology of welfare receipt and its consequences. Studies utilizing a longitudinal methodology are uniquely capable of demonstrating the intricacies any causal relationship between welfare receipt and child welfare involvement. A longitudinal analysis may also help dissect the differential impact that welfare receipt has on family functioning in contrast to poverty or income loss.

VI. Conclusion

Welfare reform eliminated the entitlement to basic income support previously held by poor families and replaced it with a mandate to work. At the same time, the PRWORA reiterated

a federally-funded commitment to promoting child welfare. In many ways, these two objectives are at odds with each other and contribute to opposing outcomes for children.

In this literature review, we examined the potential impact that the welfare reform law may have on families. Although it is too soon to determine the full effect of TANF on involvement with the child welfare system, many affected families are likely to experience a number of potentially adverse life events. With the law's emphasis on work rather than public support, parents will need to transition from welfare to work. Coupled with the need for child care, the increased responsibilities of former TANF recipients transitioning to work can lead to parental stress, a known predictor of child welfare involvement. In addition, families transitioning to work risk sanctioning of their welfare benefits if they fail to adequately comply with new, stricter time requirements. For parents already involved with the child welfare system, these sanctions, as well as welfare reform requirements, may conflict with requirements imposed by the court and caseworkers to facilitate the return of their children.

Welfare reform will have a significant impact on the lives of recipients. Despite both dire and optimistic predictions, the nature and extent of this impact is yet to be determined. Of particular concern, however, is the potential for the new requirements imposed by the PRWORA and TANF to negatively affect family functioning. If this occurs, the child welfare system may be called upon to provide services to a population of youth whose number may increase dramatically each year as more and more families reach TANF's time limits.

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