

How Welfare Reform Might Affect Children: Updating the Conceptual Model

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Overview Welfare reform will likely move back into central focus as Congress considers reauthorization. Important questions remain about this major social change, and particularly about how this change might be affecting children.

This Research Brief was developed to update discussions of welfare reform through the lens of child well-being. It briefly sketches the history of research on welfare reform and children and shares the conceptual models that provided initial mappings of the ways in which welfare reform might affect children. The brief then presents a revised conceptual model that takes into account issues raised in the actual implementation of welfare reform, such as whether any income gains experienced by low-income families translate into additional resources for children. At the same time, the revised conceptual model acknowledges new research findings that have bearing on welfare reform, such as the role of biological fathers, father-figures, and the partners of mothers in families receiving or leaving welfare. Finally, this Research Brief highlights ongoing disparities and identifies areas in which research gaps exist, pointing out, for instance, the need for better information about adolescents and infants whose mothers have entered the work force in the wake of welfare reform.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF WELFARE REFORM AND CHILDREN

Although Aid to Families with Dependent Children was designed in the 1930s with the goal of assisting children, evaluations of the success of welfare reform programs generally focused on the adults in welfare families. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Child Trends, working with MDRC, began to conceptualize how welfare reform might have implications for the development and well-being of children in families that received welfare, and particularly those subject to the Family Support Act welfare reform provisions. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Education funded this work.

This conceptualization initiative grew out of the recognition that, while reform provisions focused on the parents, a growing body of research showed that changes in the lives of parents could be anticipated to influence children's development.¹

The model guiding research in the early 1990s served as a starting point. As shown in **Figure 1**, the implications of welfare reform in the form of

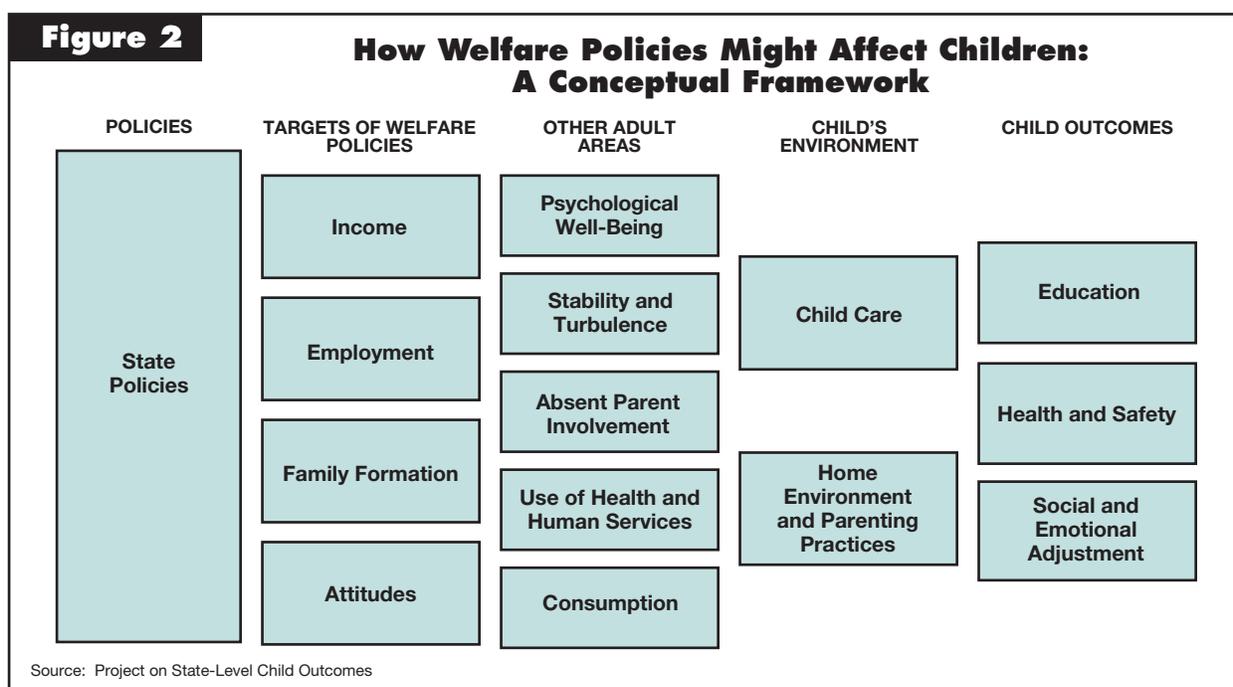
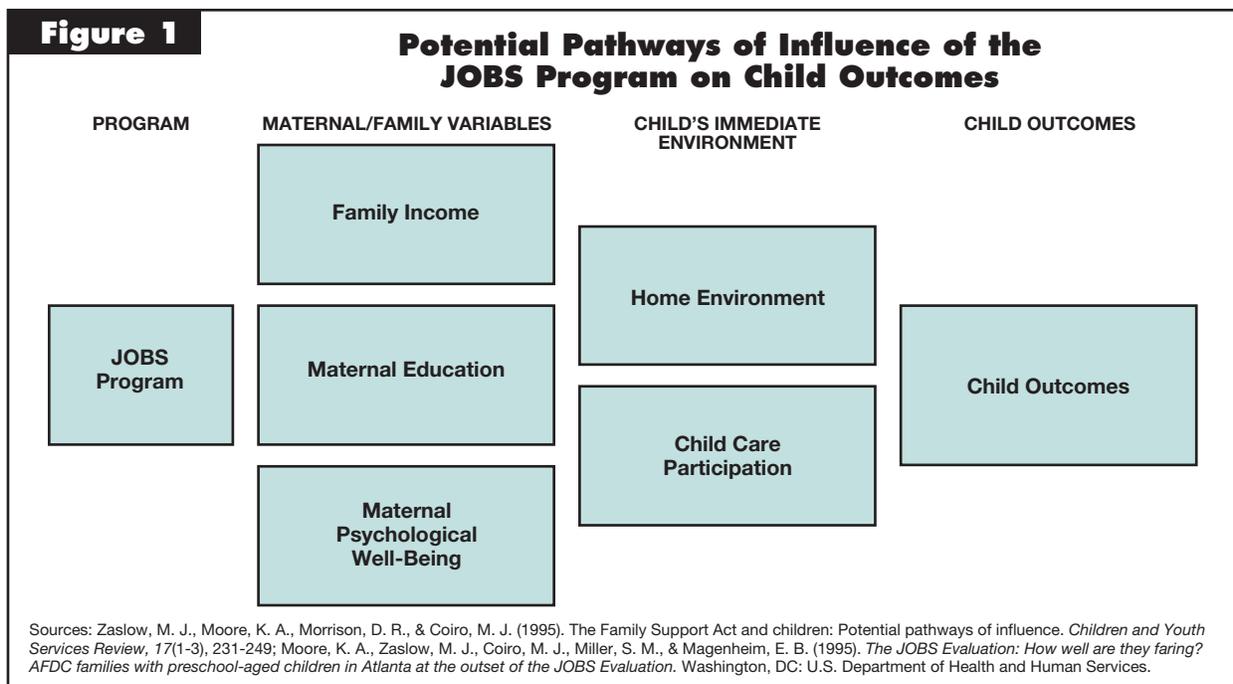
the JOBS program (an early welfare-to-work initiative) were hypothesized to affect family income, maternal education, and maternal psychological well-being. These factors, in turn, were hypothesized to affect the child's home environment and child care participation, which, in turn, were hypothesized to affect child outcomes.²

In the mid-1990s, efforts to conceptualize how welfare reform might affect children were expanded through the Project on State-Level Child Outcomes, which was funded by ACF and ASPE through the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Family and Child Well-Being Research Network. Under this project, a process was undertaken to refine a conceptual model of how welfare policies might affect children. Involved in this broad-based effort were federal officials; representatives of twelve states;³ researchers at Child Trends and the NICHD Network; foundation officials, including representatives of the Annie E. Casey Foundation; researchers involved with the Assessing the New Federalism project; and staff at MDRC, Abt, and Mathematica.

The conceptual model developed as a part of this process informed much of the research on welfare reform and children during the 1990s. The model is shown in **Figure 2**.

When the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was passed in 1996, ushering in dramatic changes in the welfare system, including mandating work requirements and setting time limits, interest in how such changes might affect children accelerated work on conceptualizing and assessing child well-being in the context of welfare reform. A diverse array of initiatives drew on the conceptual model and measures development work under way in the Project on State-Level Child Outcomes. These included the Assessing the

New Federalism work conducted by the Urban Institute and Child Trends, the Survey of Program Dynamics conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, and five experimental evaluation studies funded by ACF and ASPE/HHS as part of the Project on State-Level Child Outcomes. In addition, research teams centered at Rand, Northwestern University, and Johns Hopkins University drew on this conceptual work, as well as other research studies, to inform their respective research projects.⁴



As researchers have collected and analyzed data, new questions have arisen. Initial findings suggested that welfare reform has had important effects on welfare receipt and on employment among adults, but modest effects on children. Results for children who were of preschool age when their mothers were mandated to participate in welfare reform activities generally seem neutral, though specific findings ranged from positive to negative.⁵ However, no studies have examined impacts for infants whose mothers are now subject to work requirements and time limits. Experimental results suggest that, despite many neutral impacts for adolescents, the impacts that have been found are generally negative.⁶ In addition, results have found only scattered impacts on family structure, with the Minnesota Family Investment Program being an important exception,⁷ though trend data indicate a small increase in the formation of two-parent households.⁸

Child well-being as the foremost goal of welfare reform represented one of the changes in the Administration bill and the bill advanced by the House of Representatives when welfare reform came up for reauthorization after five years. Indeed, this legislation stated specifically that child well-being was the “overarching goal” of the reform. This statement has validated and strengthened efforts to build a knowledge base about whether, when, and how varied policies affect children and also to monitor the well-being of children at the state level.

As policy changes have unfolded over time, the economic context has changed substantially, with the nation entering a recession and then a recovery. In view of the accumulating literature on the implications of welfare reform for children, combined with an ongoing interest in how welfare reform is affecting children in this changing economy, it seems appropriate to examine the conceptual model that has been used to guide work to date.⁹ Specifically, it is important to explore whether all of the critical constructs were included in the earlier model and whether any constructs can be discarded at this point.

CONSTRUCTS THAT NEED GREATER ATTENTION

Fathers and Men. The role of biological fathers, father-figures, and the partners of

mothers received only modest attention in studies conducted during the 1990s.¹⁰ For example, mothers were asked about the nature and extent of the child’s contact with his or her biological father, how often and how much the father paid child support, and how often the father ate meals with the child. However, except for the “Three City” Study, fathers were not interviewed directly, and rich information about their interactions with their children was not obtained. Given recent data on fathers in Early Head Start, Fragile Families, and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort, the lack of such information seems particularly acute.

Since the major welfare evaluation studies were designed, considerable new work has been done on becoming and being a father. This work includes quantitative research,¹¹ as well as qualitative research, and the development of new data resources. The DADS (Developing a Daddy Survey) project has brought together researchers and agency officials working on six major studies to design better data collection methods, develop better measures, and collect comparable data across studies. These studies include the Early Head Start evaluation; the Fragile Families Study; the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort; the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 Cohort; the National Survey of Family Growth; and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health).¹²

Building on a framework distinguishing father engagement, responsibility, and accessibility,¹³ these studies are in the process of fielding new measures that promise to greatly enhance the capacity of the field to assess the influence of fathers. Psychometric analyses that assess how well the measures are working will enable researchers to identify valid and reliable measures, and substantive analyses will identify the aspects of father involvement that are important to measure. Analyses that contrast the influence of the biological father with other father-figures and the spouse or partner of the mother will better inform decisions about who should provide data, as well as the roles played by different father-figures.

Even now, however, it is clear that fathers and father-figures can play important roles in the lives of children, both positive and negative, and that conceptual models need to focus not just on mothers, but on fathers as well.¹⁴

Extending Measures of Marriage and Family Structure.¹⁵ Marriage was a focus of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Most studies launched in the 1990s examined whether marriage occurred, and some assessed the biological relationship of the husband or cohabiting partner to the child, but little information was obtained beyond these structural measures. Interestingly, the one exception is domestic violence, about which a brief module was included in several of the experimental studies. Information has not been collected on critical aspects of marital dynamics or satisfaction.

But the goal now is to go beyond measures of *marital status* to understanding whether and how policies and programs affect *marital quality*. The Administration for Children and Families commissioned Child Trends to work on the conceptualization and measurement of healthy marriage. The goal was to develop stronger measures for use in evaluation studies, as well as in other research. Work completed to date¹⁶ indicates that most studies of marriage take a very narrow approach to addressing marital quality, typically focusing on marital satisfaction and communication.¹⁷ Drawing on available data, research and theory, Child Trends is proposing a much broader conceptualization that goes beyond satisfaction and communication to include such factors as commitment; conflict resolution; lack of domestic violence; fidelity; interaction and time together; intimacy and emotional support; commitment to children; and duration.¹⁸

Fertility. Research has tended to place considerable emphasis on abstinence among young adolescents, less focus on contraception, and very little focus on couples aged 20 and over,¹⁹ despite the fact that women 20 and older account for 70 percent of all nonmarital births in the U.S.²⁰ Obviously, the timing and circumstances of childbearing are important to individuals and families. Adolescent childbearing²¹ and nonmarital childbearing²² are both linked to developmental difficulties for children. And family size is such an important factor in economic well-being that it is officially included as the denominator of the poverty index. Information about fertility is needed that goes beyond childbirth to include data on relationships, sexual activity, contraception, abortion, and pregnancy intentions. Some studies will not collect all or even some of this important but sensitive

information, but a conceptual model should not ignore these topics.

Resources for Children. Analysts frequently find that welfare reform increases work, but not necessarily family income, though the combination of the Earned Income Tax Credit, welfare reform, and a strong economy was associated with a reduction in child poverty during the late 1990s.²³ Some studies conducted in the 1990s have suggested that several program expansions resulted in added resources for children, especially access to formal child care and after-school care. More detailed information about net income, after work expenses, and how net income is expended on children would allow researchers to examine whether and how earnings and other income translate into more supportive environments for children.

Attitudes, Values, and Norms. While many policy makers are focused on behavioral change, such as caseload decline, information about the attitudes and values of individuals and norms of the public can also be useful.²⁴ Attitude changes can signal future trends that are just unfolding. In addition, such information can indicate the extent to which the public agrees with a public policy direction.²⁵ For example, if the majority of the public were to accept nonmarital childbearing, and public acceptance would increase over time, this suggests that the public may not be very inclined to support policies that provide sanctions for nonmarital fertility.²⁶ Indeed, as family patterns have changed during past decades, attitudes have changed as well,²⁷ and, on an individual level, attitudes have been found to predict behavior.²⁸

A handful of attitudinal items have been included in the National Survey of America's Families, the Survey of Program Dynamics, the National Survey of Family Growth, and in experimental studies of welfare reform such as the Project on State-Level Child Outcomes and the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (NEWWS) Child Outcomes Study. However, the breadth and number of items warrants some expansion to include additional attitude items about fathers, marriage, cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, and employment. Also, adolescent attitudes need to be examined, as adolescents represent the population about to make the transition to adulthood.

Community Factors. Although the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

program is a federal program, there is substantial state latitude; it is implemented by the states; and it unfolds in communities. While research consistently indicates that family factors are critical influences on children's development, communities can also provide important supports to families and to children.²⁹ Some of the differences in how welfare reform, devolution, and employment affect children presumably reflect the community context in which families live. However, at present, little is known about what community-level constructs need to be conceptualized. Candidates include employment opportunities, child care and after-school programs, crime and safety, norms, and neighborhood cohesion.³⁰

Based on these observations, we present a revised and updated conceptual model in **Figure 3**.

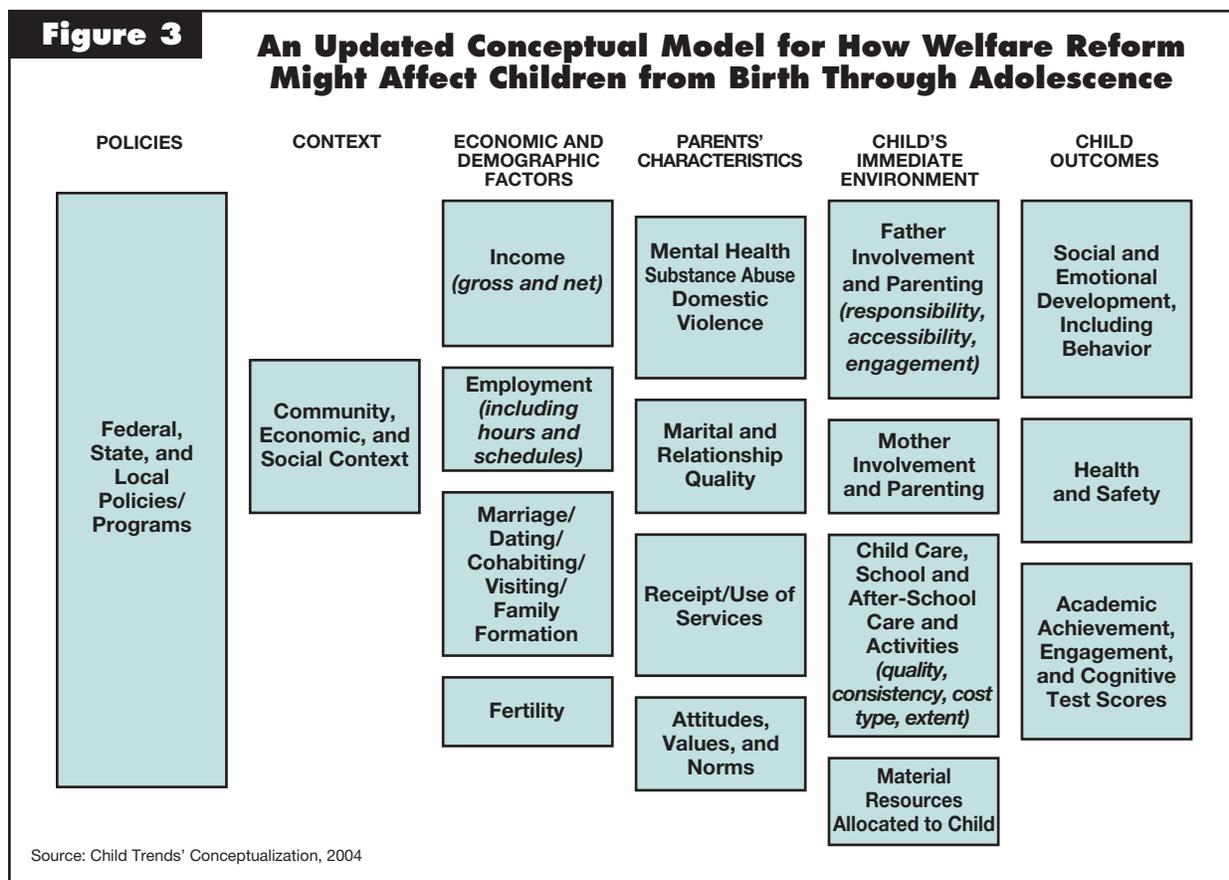
CHILD OUTCOMES

With the organization of the federal government along narrow topical areas, policy discussions and research often focus on quite narrow definitions of child outcomes as well. Fortunately, the conceptual model used to examine the implications of welfare reform for children

has taken a broad perspective on child outcomes from the start.³¹ This perspective remains critical because of accumulating evidence that different aspects of children's development are highly interactive.³²

In addition, from the outset, multiple methods and informants have been used to obtain information about whether and how welfare reform might affect children. For example, interviews with mothers have been supplemented by interviews with children;³³ observational studies have been conducted by videotaping mother-child interaction;³⁴ and teacher surveys have been conducted with the teachers of school-age children.³⁵ In addition, telephone surveys with large samples have been conducted, most prominently the National Survey of America's Families, fielded in 1997, 1999, and 2002.

Moreover, data collection has occurred at the national, state, and local levels, and data have been collected within experimental studies, longitudinal national samples, and cross-sectional samples. Given this richness, an abundance of data now exists, much of it being made widely available for secondary analysis.



One aspect that has been present in some studies (e.g., the NEWWS Child Outcomes Study and the “Three City” Study) is the direct assessment of cognitive and educational achievements. Such assessments are complicated to conduct and expensive. In addition, they can only be conducted face-to-face, so they have to be held in the setting of an in-home or in-school interview. Also, participants in the Project on State-Level Child Outcomes decided that they did not think that the welfare reform programs that were unfolding in their states were likely to affect children’s cognitive development.³⁶ For all these reasons, only some studies have directly assessed children’s cognitive development. Most studies, instead, have focused on other important and easier-to-measure constructs, such as school engagement, perceived progress in school, and suspension /expulsion. However, results from available data indicate some impacts on cognitive development and suggest that direct assessment may be appropriate in some studies.

DATA GAPS

Driven by theory and a child-focused perspective, studies on the implications of welfare reform for children have considered outcomes for children of all ages, but fewer studies have been conducted for infants and for adolescents than for children in between these ages.³⁷

Better information about adolescents. Experimental studies of welfare reform focused on school-age children have found a mixture of neutral, positive, and negative impacts, with most falling in the neutral range. However, while impacts for adolescents are often neutral, when they do occur, they have tended to be negative across a range of studies.³⁸ As yet, the strength of these findings is not certain, in part because the mechanisms underlying the negative impacts are not well-understood. Heavy household responsibilities, mother-child conflict, and a lack of supervision have been suggested as reasons for these negative impacts,³⁹ but the data to explore such possibilities are not currently available. These constructs need to be incorporated into conceptual models and assessed.

Better information about infants. The other group about which there is a paucity of

information is made up of children who are infants when their mothers are mandated to return to work.⁴⁰ Although, in general, researchers have not found maternal employment to be harmful to children,⁴¹ some studies have found extensive hours of work among mothers of young infants to be associated with poorer development.⁴² Moreover, in many states, an early return to work is expected among mothers on welfare, often when infants are just a few months old. The implications of this early return are unclear and may depend upon the context in which an early return to employment occurs and the quality and consistency of the child care available for infants.⁴³

Accordingly, there is a significant need to study infants and to explore the mechanisms that might affect the development of very young children in low-income households with mothers making a rapid transition back into the labor force after childbirth. The quality and consistency of child care for infants need to be studied.

Better information about child care quality. Empirical analyses across multiple databases indicate that child care quality has a modest but significant effect on children’s outcomes,⁴⁴ yet few studies of welfare reform and devolution have assessed the quality of child care. Moreover, a major national study on this topic, the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, has a somewhat limited sample of low-income families, and data on infant care pertains to the period prior to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Thus, there is a real need for more focus on child care quality.

CONCLUSION

Over the past decade, a quite sophisticated body of research and data has developed on the implications of welfare reform and devolution for children and on the development of children in low-income families more generally. However, policy initiatives and findings from recent research suggest several ways to improve and expand available data.

Studies consistently indicate that outcomes for children in low-income families and families that receive welfare assistance are substantially below outcomes for children in

more advantaged families.⁴⁵ These continuing socioeconomic disparities suggest the need to improve our conceptual models, measures, and data resources and continue to examine the factors that account for such disparities, so that stronger public policies, programs, family processes, and community supports can be identified and sustained.

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