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# Overview

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With the introduction of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, which put into place Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), welfare changed for many families. States are now allowed to set time limits for welfare receipt, and states are also receiving incentives for strengthening their welfare-to-work programs. Much has been researched about mother's well being, family income and hours of work. Some research has been conducted on children's well being, with mostly positive results found for younger children. However, less research has been conducted on the effects of TANF on adolescents.

### How have adolescents been affected by welfare reform?

When welfare reform was introduced, it was believed that adolescents would benefit from having their parents as working role models. Most of the research conducted was designed to measure the effects of welfare-to-work programs on adolescents. These programs are all similar in that they assist people in going to work. Many of them began before TANF was introduced in 1996. The programs differ, however, in the size of cash grants, incentives for working, types of work activities allowed, the nature of supportive services and the frequency and severity for non-compliance. However, current research suggests that several negative effects for adolescents have occurred. These outcomes are related to school achievement, delinquent activity and emotional stability.

Some of the possible effects of welfare-to-work programs on adolescents (approximately ages 12-18) include:

- Increased depression (1)
- Increased risk of problem behaviors, including smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs and sexual activity (1,2,3)
- Increased delinquent activity, including increased arrests and convictions and increased police involvement (3)
- Increased theft and property damage (3)
- Decreased school achievement and increased school suspensions (3)
- Poorer attitudes towards school (3)
- An increase of running away from home (3)
- Increased use of special education services (3,5) and an increase in the likelihood of repeating a grade (5).

### How has welfare reform affected Detroit youth?

Qualitative research was conducted in a middle school in Detroit. Youth in this study reported that multiple jobs or evening/night hours interfered with parent-child relationships, contributed to declining grades and made it more difficult for the youth to get to school on time (6). These youth also reported that their household duties changed to more household management and childcare, interfering with schoolwork and time spent with friends (6).

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*Researchers suggest that teenagers whose parents enter the workforce may experience a shift in their adolescent roles. The adolescents usually will be given increased responsibility, including an increase in chores, childcare, working and increased emotional support to parents.*

*Living in low-income families seems to be contributing to educational difficulties for Michigan's young teens. To assist adolescents emotionally and behaviorally, Michigan's families need to be strengthened financially.*

### **Why do welfare-to-work programs have harmful effects on adolescents?**

There are several theories that explain why welfare-to-work programs may result in these negative effects on adolescents. One theory is related to adolescent employment. If parents go to work, their incomes may be lower than their income while on welfare (2). Many families may send their teenagers into the workforce to assist in meeting the family's financial needs. While most believe that some employment can be beneficial for teenagers, it is believed that the negative effects are related to teens' working more than 20 hours per week (7,8).

It has also been suggested that adolescent development is less sensitive to economics and finances and more influenced by parenting skills. Less parental supervision may lead adolescents to believe that rules have been suspended (3). A decrease in parental monitoring may lead to an increase in delinquent behavior and a decline in school achievement (4). In addition, researchers hypothesize that teenagers whose parents enter the workforce may experience a shift in their adolescent roles. The adolescents usually will be given increased responsibility, including an increase in chores, childcare, working and increased emotional support to parents (3,4).

Developmentally, adolescents normally are attempting to separate from their parents. This separation can cause anxiety. For teens to make a successful transition to adulthood, parents need to be "containers" for teens' anxiety and fears. If parents are less available due to their employment, teen anxiety can increase (3).

### **What do we know about adolescents and welfare in Michigan?**

Michigan has seen some improvements for adolescents during the past decade, including lower teen birth rates and a decrease in juvenile arrests (9). However, young adolescents in Michigan are having increased difficulties in middle school, and the rate of graduating from high school is decreasing (9). Living in low-income families seems to be contributing to these educational difficulties. To assist adolescents emotionally and behaviorally, Michigan's families need to be strengthened financially. Currently, the Family Independence Program (FIP), Michigan's cash assistance program, has high eligibility requirements. Even if a family is eligible for FIP assistance and has employment, the monthly income per family is not enough to meet the family's basic needs (8). This issue is exacerbated by the fact that low-income families tend to pay more for goods and services than higher income families (10).

### **What can policymakers in Michigan do?**

Although much of the research so far has reported negative effects for adolescents whose parents transition from welfare-to-work, this research is still preliminary. It would be unwise for policymakers to make any final decisions. However, policymakers can:

1. Continue rigorous research into the effects of welfare-to-work programs and time-limited sanctions on young and older adolescents.
2. Strengthen families by providing them with more economic security and providing greater support to their communities.