
Welfare Reform's Impact on Adolescents: Early Warning Signs

Jennifer L. Brooks, Elizabeth C. Hair, and Martha J. Zaslow

With the passage of the 1996 welfare reform law, numerous commentators expressed concern about what “ending welfare as we know it” would mean for the young children of welfare recipients. These children, after all, would be experiencing significant changes in their everyday lives as their mothers, who had relied on public assistance to support their families, entered or prepared to enter the work force. However, little concern was expressed about how the adolescent children of welfare recipients might fare as a result of the changes ushered in by the historic new legislation. Despite the expectation that older children would be relatively less affected by welfare reform than their younger counterparts, recent experimental evaluations of welfare-to-work programs suggest that the adolescent sons and daughters in welfare households are indeed affected when their parents are assigned to participate in these programs. What’s more, it seems that these young people may be negatively affected by this participation.

What were the initial expectations?

The debate around and passage of welfare reform in 1996 led many to wonder how poor children and families would make out under the new law, which had an increased emphasis on work, increased support for working families, and time limits for welfare receipt. Experts on children and families expected that children who were not yet of school age would be most affected by the new work requirements for their parents (1). Those following welfare reform gave limited attention to how older children of adult recipients would be affected by the new law. A few individuals emphasized that adolescents would benefit from having an employed parent as a role model or that they would be harmed by the lack of supervision resulting from parental employment (2). Others focused mainly on how teen parents on welfare might be affected by the new law, and not on the law’s impact on adolescents who lived with a parent or parents who received welfare benefits.

What unanticipated results occurred?

Recent research calls into question the initial expectations that older children would be relatively unaffected by welfare reform. We looked at data from three rigorous experimental evaluations of welfare-to-work programs conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. Though established before the 1996 welfare reform law, these programs included some of the law’s key components. Thus, the programs can be viewed as precursors to welfare-to-work initiatives implemented under the new welfare law. In these studies, the adolescent children of parents enrolled in each program were compared with a control group of adolescents in welfare households in which parents were not enrolled.

The debate around and passage of welfare reform in 1996 led many to wonder how poor children and families would make out under the new law, which had an increased emphasis on work, increased support for working families, and time limits for welfare receipt.

Recent experimental evaluations of welfare-to-work programs suggest that the adolescent sons and daughters in welfare households are indeed affected when their parents are assigned to participate in these programs.

The Canadian Self-Sufficiency Project (3) --Welfare recipients were randomly selected to participate in this program (for the sake of evaluating the program) or to be in a control group that received benefits under Canada's traditional public assistance program. Those in the Self-Sufficiency Project had a year to decide if they wanted to leave Canada's traditional welfare assistance program and participate in a three-year welfare-to work program. Those participating in the program received a substantial amount of income to supplement their earnings if they worked at least 30 hours a week.

The Minnesota Family Investment Program (4) --Welfare recipients who were randomly selected to participate in this program were required to participate in at least 30 hours of employment or training services once they had been on welfare for a period of 24 months. (The sample was divided into those who had already been on welfare for 24 months at the start of the program and those who had not). Those who did not meet these participation requirements were sanctioned. The program allowed participants to keep many more of their welfare dollars when they went to work, provided their Food Stamps allotment in the form of a check, provided child care supplements paid directly to the provider, and helped with transportation and other work-related expenses.

The Florida Family Transition Program (5)--Welfare recipients who were randomly selected to participate in this program were required to participate in employment or training for at least 30 hours a week, with threat of sanction for those who did not. The program allowed participants to keep a modest amount of their welfare benefits when working, and provided intensified case management as well as an additional year of transitional child care once recipients had left welfare. The program also involved a time limit on the receipt of cash assistance, with a limit of two or three years, depending upon the recipients' prior history of welfare receipt.

In the Florida Family Transition Program, an increase in arrests, convictions, and involvement with police was found among adolescents in one particular group of families – those headed by mothers who had worked more and spent less time on welfare at the start of the program.

What are the specific findings about affects on adolescents?

Compared with adolescents in each study's control group:

- Adolescents with parents enrolled in the Canadian Self-Sufficiency Project (3) showed increases in smoking, drinking, drug use, and delinquent activity; increases in the likelihood that teachers called home about their school behavior; and decreases in school achievement.
- Adolescents with parents enrolled in the Minnesota Family Investment Project (4, 6) also showed a decline in school achievement. Their parents were also more likely to receive calls from teachers about their adolescent's school behavior, although this occurred only among families who had recently entered the welfare system when the program started.
- Adolescents with parents enrolled in the Florida Family Transition Program (5) not only showed a decline in school achievement but also were more likely to be suspended from school. Even more troubling, an increase in arrests, convictions, and involvement with police was found among adolescents in one particular group of families – those headed by mothers who had worked more and spent less time on welfare at the start of the program.

We need to keep three important qualifications in mind. First, the effects documented in these studies are not dramatic in size. Second, none of the programs had negative impacts on all aspects of adolescent behavior that were examined. Third, some of the most serious findings occurred only among certain families, such as those on welfare for shorter periods of time or with more work history. Still, there are compelling reasons to pay careful attention to these findings. They occur across all three programs. Finally, they occur in areas that are important for adolescents' future.

What are the possible explanations?

Hypothesis 1: An erosion in the quality of adolescent-parent relationships.

Parents assigned to these programs may be parenting their adolescents less effectively, either as a result of their employment per se or through such factors as increased stress and decreased energy.

What the evaluations found: Parents enrolled in the Canadian program reported an increase in their use of harsh parenting directed at older adolescents (ages 15-18). Parents who had only recently begun receiving welfare at the start of the Minnesota program reported increases in their use of harsh parenting directed at younger children. None of these programs affected parents' use of warm parenting, such as showing affection or praise, with their children.

Hypothesis 2: A decline in parental monitoring. These programs may leave parents with less time and energy to monitor their adolescents' behavior. This decreased monitoring may account for some of the increases in problematic behavior we see among young people with parents assigned to participate in welfare-to-work programs.

What the evaluations found: Two of the three programs had an effect on parental monitoring, although only one of these impacts was in the expected direction. Enrollment in the Florida program led to a slight *decrease* in parents' supervision of younger children. This was seen primarily in the group of families whose mothers had worked more and spent less time on welfare at the start of the study –the same group for whom the most severe impacts on adolescents (e.g., contact with police, arrests) were found. However, monitoring in these evaluations was examined only for younger children, not adolescents, so our ability to gauge how these programs affect this behavior is very limited.

Hypothesis 3: A shift in adolescents' roles within their families. Adolescents in families that are making the transition from welfare-to-work may be more likely to assume adult-like roles, assisting their parents in critical ways within their households. Increasing adolescents' level of responsibility in this way may be a deliberate step that families take in order to adapt to the new circumstances that they face as a result of welfare-to-work programs. Still, this shift may have negative consequences for some adolescents.

What the evaluations found: Adolescents in the Canadian program were performing household chores (including sibling care) slightly more frequently than adolescents whose parents were not assigned to the program, suggesting that their parents were perhaps relying on them more to help out with family tasks. Further, these adolescents were more likely to be working 20 hours or more a week, perhaps indicating that they were contributing economically to their families or had greater autonomy in their lives outside of the family (7). This relatively heavy workload could be significant, since some research has suggested that this level of employment among adolescents may lead to increased problematic behaviors, such as drinking and delinquent activities, as well as to lower school achievement (8). Further, the evaluation of the Florida program shows that participation in the program increases the likelihood that younger children in these families were cared for by a sibling.

Adolescents in families that are making the transition from welfare-to-work may be more likely to assume adult-like roles, assisting their parents in critical ways within their households.

The evaluation of the Florida program shows that participation in the program increases the likelihood that younger children in these families were cared for by a sibling.

Just as more than one explanation needs to be considered for the recent findings on adolescents, more than one approach may need to be taken to support adolescent development in the context of welfare reform.

A key consideration for policy makers as the reauthorization of welfare reform gets under way will be how to support both the positive development of adolescents in families receiving welfare and the economic self-sufficiency of their parents.

What are the implications for policy?

In light of our analysis of the research findings, policy makers might want to consider a number of complementary approaches to lessen the potentially negative effects of welfare reform on adolescent children of adult welfare recipients:

- Target efforts to decrease the number of changes in adolescents' lives when their parents move from welfare-to-work. This might involve allowing parents greater flexibility (without fear of being sanctioned for noncompliance) to choose jobs that would not leave them dependent upon, or without supervision for, their adolescents.
- Establish more after-school programs for adolescents to increase the degree to which they are engaged in "productive" activities when unsupervised by their parents.
- Provide better access to and financial support for child care for younger children to minimize the degree to which parents are turning to their adolescents to care for their younger siblings.
- Reduce the number of hours that adolescents work, an approach that should perhaps be considered in light of families' need for adolescents' financial contributions.
- Provide guidance to parents about the issue of levels of responsibility and autonomy for adolescent children, with the goal of decreasing situations involving very extensive reliance on adolescents to help their families.

For such recommendations to be effective, they should be informed by a realistic understanding of the circumstances facing many families as they move from welfare-to-work. Clearly, further research is needed to confirm the negative effects of welfare-to-work programs on adolescents and to establish the causes of these effects. The remedies are not likely to be simple.

This chapter suggests that we need to extend our focus beyond issues of how parents supervise and relate to their adolescents. We also need to be concerned about the degree to which adolescents are taking on "adult-like" roles to assist their families. Adolescents are not adults, and taking on adult roles prematurely or too extensively may be harmful to some. At the same time, there is a growing recognition that adolescents' contributions are often critical to the day-to-day functioning of families as they make the sometimes-difficult transition from welfare-to-work. Just as more than one explanation needs to be considered for the recent findings on adolescents, more than one approach may need to be taken to support adolescent development in the context of welfare reform. Indeed, different families may benefit from different approaches or a combination of approaches. A key consideration for policymakers as the reauthorization of welfare reform gets under way will be how to support both the positive development of adolescents in families receiving welfare and the economic self-sufficiency of their parents.

Excerpted from Welfare Reform's Impact on Adolescents: Early Warning Signs
By Jennifer L. Brooks, Ph.D., Elizabeth C. Hair, Ph.D., and Martha J. Zaslow, Ph.D.
July 2001, *Child Trends Research Brief*, www.childtrends.org