
Adolescent Outcomes and Welfare Reform: Psychological Dynamics and Empirical Results

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In this chapter, we present empirical analyses and theoretical arguments that demonstrate why and to what extent children in late middle childhood and early adolescence are likely to face significant challenges in the wake of welfare reform. Our arguments are based on the premise that adolescence is a developmental epoch characterized by rapid physical, intellectual, and socioemotional growth and change, which is frequently accompanied by turbulence, perplexity, and confusion.

This research examined potential effects of welfare reform on children in late childhood through adolescence. The research used the 1999 U.S. Bureau of the Census Survey of Program Dynamics to examine the links between outcomes for adolescents, source of income, mother's employment, and welfare reform. Specifically, the research examined how poverty status and family welfare receipt during middle childhood interact with current poverty status and welfare receipt during adolescence to influence a range of outcomes for adolescents.

Data from the 1992 and 1993 longitudinal panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation were matched with data from the 1997 and 1998 interviewing years of the Survey of Program Dynamics (1,2). The time period of the SIPP panels precedes the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). Hence the dataset allowed analyses of periods prior to and after the implementation of PRWORA.

The analyses consisted of an examination of whether and to what extent adolescent outcome variables are affected by:

1. Income level in the period from middle childhood to early/late adolescence
2. Income insufficiency in early/late adolescence as proxied by food insufficiency that affects the child
3. Patterns of AFDC/TANF and Food Stamp receipt in middle childhood to early/late adolescence
4. The reason why mothers left AFDC/TANF
5. Labor force participation of the mother/parent in middle childhood to early/late adolescence
6. Demographic variables.

Adolescent outcome variables were based both on self-reports by the adolescents and parental reports. These outcomes were classified into seven different groups:

1. School outcomes
2. Health and behavioral outcomes
3. Status offense/criminal behavioral outcomes
4. Substance use outcomes
5. Sexual activity
6. After school activities
7. Parental supervision/level of knowledge about friends and schools.

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What were the effects of maternal employment on adolescent outcomes?

Current full-time employment was never associated with more positive outcomes for adolescents, except in the case of whether the adolescent is disabled. When mothers of the adolescents worked full-time work in the 1998 SPD, adolescents reported that their parents had less knowledge about their friends and activities and that their parents had less knowledge about their school activities. Parents who worked full-time reported that they were less likely to set rules for television viewing. They were also less likely to report that their adolescents attended classes for gifted children.

Full-time work in middle childhood, as measured by number of periods that a mother/parent worked full-time during the SIPP panel, was also associated with negative outcomes for adolescents. As the number of periods that the mother/parent worked full-time increased, the following outcomes were more likely to be negative:

1. Adolescent's attitude toward school
2. Adolescent has behavioral or emotional problem
3. Adolescent stole something less than \$50 in the past year
4. Adolescent used cigarettes at least once, regularly at any time, and regularly in the past 30 days
5. Adolescent used hard drugs at least once
6. Adolescent used hard drugs in the last 30 days
7. Adolescent had sexual intercourse at least once.

Here it is also important to emphasize that any negative effects of employment stem from the intensity of employment, not from the existence of maternal employment.

When mothers were sanctioned:

- *Adolescents were more likely to be expelled from school*
- *Adolescent's level of engagement in criminal activity increased*
- *Adolescents damaged property more frequently*
- *Adolescents were more likely to steal something worth less than \$50 in the past year.*

What were the effects of leaving welfare, particularly in the case where the mother was sanctioned?

When mothers were sanctioned, the following negative outcomes were observed:

1. Adolescents were more likely to be expelled from school
2. Adolescent's level of engagement in criminal activity increased
3. Adolescents damaged property more frequently
4. Adolescents were more likely to steal something worth less than \$50 in the past year.

These results do not imply causation, of course. Families for whom welfare benefits are cut-off may face a wide range of difficulties. Whatever the dynamics, however, the results do suggest that the affected families may need more assistance, not less.

What were the effects of food insufficiency?

When income insufficiency is severe enough to affect the adequacy of an adolescent's diet, the adolescent is affected on a number of important outcomes. Results from other studies, such as Loprest (3) suggest that many current and past welfare participants do face food insufficiency. In cases where the parent reported that food insufficiency occurred, adolescents were more likely to:

- have been expelled from school,
- have a negative attitude toward school,
- be in special education,
- have run away from home, and
- consume alcohol.

How can these effects be understood in terms of adolescent development?

Adolescence is a major developmental stage characterized by rapid physical, intellectual, and socioemotional growth and change. This stage is frequently accompanied by turbulence, perplexity, and confusion. The appearance of secondary sexual characteristics in both genders, the onset of menarche in girls and the corresponding physiological growth in boys are biological events that mark the transition from late childhood to early adolescence.

Such physical changes are associated with equally significant internal changes, the conflicts to which they may give rise, and various efforts at adaptation. The complexity of this developmental phase is further underscored by neurocognitive changes in adolescence that make possible the capacity for abstract reasoning and logic.

A corresponding decline in the primacy of primary process thinking, or what some in psychoanalytic developmental psychology have termed the language of play, occurs as the adolescent's intellectual prowess is emerging. Important changes occur in developmental domains as the sense of personal morality, development of the ego, and internalized object relations. Another significant task of development is the firming up of one's personal identity, referred to by some developmentalists as the adolescent's sense of self.

Adolescents and Their Parents. Relationships occurring within the adolescent's family tend both to shape and to reflect many of the changes mentioned above. One theoretical position suggests that the reemergence of the separation-individuation matrix, with its attendant struggles over autonomy, is a hallmark of adolescent development (4). Arguments over the adolescent's ceaseless and varied demands for independence, both explicit and implicit, become the daily essence of family life, with differing opinions in regard to the contravention of parental rules and proscriptions threatening at times to replace all other forms of dialogue between adolescent and parent.

Adolescents, it is often suggested, are not unlike toddlers in several important respects. They wish to deny their parents a role of continuing importance in their lives, thereby ensuring the expansion of their radius of interpersonal relationships, and yet, this very denial arouses anxiety. "This process produces intense feelings of ambivalence as they also need parents to be available -- assisting them by listening, containing, setting boundaries, and limits, and providing a structured family" to which they may return for help when necessary (Jarvis, p. 118, 5). A further parallel exists in the adolescent's struggle with frustrations and disappointments, which may result in a sense of personal inadequacy, humiliation, or shame.

In the face of the adolescent's endless provocations, the parent's ability and availability to serve as a "container" for the adolescent's fears and anxieties becomes crucial because the experience of containment ultimately allows for the modification, management, and transformation of such troubling feelings and reactions.

Although parental influence may not be nearly as intensive in the day-to-day lives of adolescents as it is for infants and toddlers, earlier developmental injuries and failures may become telescoped to later development. This, in turn, may lead to a range of problems and clinical symptoms that can become further exacerbated by environmental limitations or parental inadequacies.

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Why will parental absence or lack of availability affect adolescents?

Adolescents continue to be engaged in a variety of developmental tasks. Are such tasks complicated by dramatic shifts in parental availability, changes that for example, might occur at the same time as the need of both parents or of the only parent in single parent families to obtain employment outside the home? Assuming that not all adolescents will be able to successfully negotiate these developmental hurdles, which adolescents are most likely to be at-risk? To what degree does family income level appear to influence poor outcomes related to both parents' or the only parent's deployment in the work force? These are but a few questions deserving of consideration.

The entrance of the mother into the labor force as a child enters adolescence or the movement from part-time to full-time employment may in some cases add to the burden of anxiety an adolescent is already feeling. In such circumstances, liberation may be misperceived as an abandonment. These changes in parental employment may be interpreted as proof that the rules have been suspended, parental injunctions against unacceptable behavior lifted, and so on. Of course, one might argue against the likelihood of such phenomena in families where preadolescent developmental experiences have been robust, family life has been stable, and certain environmental concerns (e.g., neighborhood crime) do not exist.

Before the advent of welfare reform, past research was unclear on this question. Zaslow and Emig (6), Moore and Driscoll (7), and Young (8) found that maternal employment tended to have either neutral or positive impacts on children in low income families. Other researchers found that mother's employment and positive outcomes for children depended on type and stability of employment (9).

More recent research on welfare reform, such as the findings reported here and in the previous chapter by Brooks, Hair, and Zaslow (10) strongly suggest that adolescents in low income households do sometimes face difficulties as their mothers return to or increase their employment. Such difficulties are more severe when negative consequences from the mother's employment are not offset by gains in income. Overall, the consistency of theory and empirical results strongly suggests it is time to reconsider any complacency concerning adolescents and welfare reform and to look more seriously at how and to what extent adolescents are being negatively affected by welfare reform.

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