
Adolescents in Detroit

Their Own Perceptions of How Welfare and Poverty Affects Their Lives

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In the early stages of research on the impact of welfare reform, most research focused on caseload reduction, employment outcomes, and barriers to employment. Even in research that examined the impact of welfare reform on children, the emphases centered on infants, pre-schoolers, and children at the grade school level. Issues concerning the impact on children in middle childhood and early adolescence were not considered a crucial area for research (1).

As noted in the previous chapter, however, the stage of adolescence requires the accomplishment of many difficult developmental tasks. Hence children in late middle childhood and early adolescence are likely to face significant challenges in the wake of welfare reform (2).

This chapter presents the results of a study that was undertaken to determine how middle school children assess the effects of welfare reform on their daily lives and the lives of their schoolmates. The purpose of the qualitative interviews with the children was:

- (1) to learn the language that children use to describe welfare and how it affects them;
- (2) to learn what children see as changes in their day-to-day lives now that their mothers need to work additional hours; and
- (3) to learn to how children interpret these changes.

The study consisted of thirty interviews with children and their mothers recruited from a middle school in Detroit. The school was an urban, inner city, public, charter middle school with approximately 400 students, who were predominately African American. Although precise statistics were not available, a large percentage of the students participated in the free lunch program. The goals of the study were to learn how children themselves understand and interpret issues surrounding poverty, welfare, and maternal employment.

From the children's perspective, multiple jobs and evening/night hours interfered with the child-parent relationship on both quality and quantity dimensions. The children also reported other consequences, such as grades going down and not getting to school on time. A universal response among the children and the mothers was that mothers should work, but almost all of the children felt that the mother's work should primarily be limited to the period when the children were in school. The children also reported that welfare and poverty were issues about which children were teased and/or ridiculed at school. The children had different perspectives on why this teasing occurred.

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When asked what she felt it was like for other students when their mothers weren't there when they get home from school, one adolescent responded:

“It is bad. Anything can happen. Sometimes they talk about it. They don't feel safe. I wouldn't like it. I would have to stay home with my brother and I would have to do my homework by myself. I think it is better that my mom is with me when I come home from school.”

The adolescents gave complex perspectives on welfare and poverty. When asked whether they knew what welfare or food stamps were, the children tended to respond with short, definitional answers. Probing into how children perceived these programs yielded a different, more complex picture. Children reported that they wouldn't use food stamps; they were well aware of the stigma attached. They reported that they did or would feel separate and different if they used food stamps rather than cash.

The adolescents talked about how welfare and poverty were targets for teasing and ridicule. In the literature on how children are affected by welfare, researchers have paid scant attention to how children are harmed by negative stereotypes of welfare and poverty (3,4). The student informants, however, reported that welfare, poverty and food stamps were areas where children were subject to teasing, ridicule and harassment. The children's comments indicated that students have internalized broader societal prejudices against the use of welfare and food stamps.

The children reported that students made judgements regarding which children were perceived to be poor. They also reported that the use of welfare and food stamps were topics used by students at the school to embarrass and hurt other students. The children stated that students who were the targets tended to react with embarrassment, sadness, or anger. While not all children reported awareness of welfare, food stamps, and poverty as topics for teasing and ridicule, most of the children reported having witnessed or participated in such encounters.

Students reported a range of reactions from the students who were targets of teasing and harassment. One student reported that the students who were the targets of teasing became “embarrassed or sad”. Another student reported that the children who were teased “ignore it, but it is always in the back of their head, like why are they talking about me, I didn't do anything to you.” In another interview, the student said that when students are teased some children “get mad and some of them cry. Others they just ignore it. Most of them get mad and then comment back.”

The adolescents gave their own perspectives on mother's employment. The children consistently responded that mothers should work, but that mother's work schedules should correspond to the child's school schedule. Some children reported that negative changes in their relationships with their mothers had occurred as a result of changes in their mothers' work schedules. These children as well as children who had strong relationships with their mothers both felt that it was optimal when the mother's work schedule allowed her to be at home with her children in the evening and on weekends.

For the most part, none of the children reported difficulties if their mothers were home soon after school ended. These children did not, however, take their mother's presence for granted. All the children, with one exception, placed importance on having a strong and open relationship with their mother. Only one of the older girls, an 8th grader, was happy that her mother worked long hours and/or in the evenings because she had greater independence.

Adolescents voiced the importance of maintaining positive relationships with mothers who are working long hours. In cases where the children's mothers were working, but they had either part-time work or schedules that primarily corresponded with the hours when their children were in school, the children all emphasized the importance of being able to talk with their mothers. They also expressed appreciation for the help they received with their homework and talked about the difficulties that other children may face when these children's mothers are not as available as their own mothers are.

I think it is important to talk to your mom because they have been through so much that you are going through. And they can help you understand why it is happening and stuff like that. (I can talk with my mom) because she is around a lot and nice and understanding. If she wasn't around a lot and I felt uncomfortable about talking with her because she was older, then I would talk with my friends. But we can talk, I like that.

When asked if the child could see any difference in what it is like for other students, whose mothers need to work many hours, she responded:

Sometimes. You can tell they don't get enough attention at home, because when they come to school they want attention. They act funny in front of the class because they want to get attention. Sometimes they will say something funny to get the whole class to laugh and then they get into trouble for speaking. They just want to get attention because they don't get enough at home, because nobody is there for them.

Some adolescents reported difficulties in maintaining a strong relationship with their mothers. From the children's perspective, multiple jobs and evening/night hours tended to interfere with the child-parent relationship on both quality and quantity dimensions. This issue was not universal among the children, but it was reported by several of the children whose mothers were working many hours. The children saw the change in their relationship with their mother as an important outcome of maternal employment. The children also reported other consequences, such as grades going down and not getting to school on time.

One adolescent boy reported the following difficulties and frustrations as resulting from his mother's work schedule:

If my mother didn't work so much, I wouldn't have to watch my little brother and I could be outside more. Also when I have problems with my homework, she isn't here to help me so I have to do it on my own.

If had time to talk with my mom, that would be nice, that would help me. When I do sit down and talk with her, that's if I do, I don't get to tell her what I am thinking and it drives me crazy. She doesn't have time. I think it would be better if she didn't have to work so much. I would have more of a relationship with her.

When she didn't work so much, she used to take us out to the movies on weekends or she would take us to the drive thru, now she is working. She doesn't have time.

On weekends, when his mother also needed to work, one adolescent boy reported that "I stay up all night, I don't ever go to bed."

He also reported that he doesn't spend much time with his mother on weekends, "because during the day she is sleeping because she is working midnights."

When asked why he got up after his mom left for work, he answered: "I don't know, I just feel safer. My grandmother she can't protect us."

Although he felt that her working was "good for her because of the money she is bringing home," he preferred when she worked fewer hours:

"She was home a lot then. It seemed like we had more fun and it seemed like she had less money, but she was home more spending more quality time with us."

One child reported a number of negative consequences that she attributed to her increased responsibilities. "I think I slipped in my grades because I have to watch my brothers and sisters more. My grades were much higher. I don't think it helped with my schoolwork, but financially it helps. My mother works a lot so I have to watch my brothers and sisters while she is working and clean up after them. Plus I get sick a lot so I miss school when I'm sick. I missed a whole week a couple of weeks ago. I get a lot of sore throats and runny nose. ...You have to hurry to run out of the house, hurry to get to school. It is hectic. You are rushing here and rushing there. It's not relaxed like it was before."

Many of the adolescents reported major changes in their responsibilities for caring for younger siblings and for performing household responsibilities. The children with childcare and household responsibilities had mixed reactions. Some resented the extra responsibilities and some did not. Some of the children also reported that they didn't have enough time for themselves. In one case, the child told me that he and his sister would stay home from school occasionally and baby-sit for their infant brother when the baby's childcare was unavailable. Most of the children took part in the school's after school program, with most of these children providing favorable reports. In a couple of cases, however, the children would have preferred to have the option of coming home earlier and not being required to spend the extra hours at school.

Evident in the lives of some of the children was the same time pressure felt by many parents today who are juggling work and family responsibilities. Some children mentioned the constant need to be on the move, moving without pause from one responsibility to another, with the accompanying feeling of never having enough time. Within the interviews, the children were asked about their responsibilities with words such as chores and babysitting. Such words connote helping out and sharing in family responsibilities. However some responses indicated a level of responsibility that extended beyond helping out. In some cases, the extent of the children's responsibilities can be more accurately described as parenting, not babysitting, and household management, not chores.

None of the children expressed any enthusiasm for these responsibilities. In some cases, a sense of resignation and reluctant acceptance was evident. In other cases, the children voiced frustration and resentment. Problems were also reported. Some of the children reported fatigue, difficulties in getting to school on time, and grades going down. They also reported that their child care responsibilities interfered with the time they had available to spend with their own friends. These types of issues tended to emerge in families where the interviewed child had younger siblings and where the mother was working multiple jobs and/or non-traditional hours.

Throughout the interviews, adolescents with younger siblings reported heavy responsibilities for child care and household management. Such responsibilities may present developmental challenges for the children, who may be taking on adult responsibilities at too early an age. Several of the children in this study, who were still only middle school students in the 6th to 8th grade, expressed the same worries and concerns regarding childcare and household management that parents express. Hence more information is needed on the extent to which welfare reform has resulted in mothers undertaking long hours or non-traditional hours of employment in order to provide basic economic necessities for their families.

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