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# Executive Summary

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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).

## *Key Findings*

### *Across Challenging Terrain: Adolescents and Welfare Reform*

**Recent experimental evaluations of welfare-to-work programs suggest that the adolescents are negatively affected when their parents participate in welfare-to-work programs.**

**Based on data from the national Survey of Program Dynamics, when mothers were sanctioned, adolescents were more likely to be expelled from school, their level of engagement in criminal activity increased, they damaged property more frequently and were more likely to steal something worth less than \$50 in the past year.**

**In Michigan, an estimated one in four adolescents does not complete high school. The risk of not graduating from high school is higher for adolescents in low income than in higher income households.**

This *Michigan Family Impact Seminars Briefing Report, Across Challenging Terrain: Adolescents and Welfare Reform*, focuses on the issue of how welfare reform has affected adolescents. The policy researchers who contributed to this briefing report recognized that a lack of attention to adolescence may be short-sighted. They argued that we must recognize and examine the challenges that adolescents confront as they attempt to traverse the very challenging and changing terrain, which now confronts them and their families under the sweeping changes that occurred with the introduction of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 (1,2).

*Across Challenging Terrain: Adolescents and Welfare Reform* brings together the results from a wide range of research studies—experimental designs, large national surveys, surveys in Michigan, and smaller qualitative studies conducted in Detroit with the adolescents themselves. The presenters at the seminar held on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2003--Martha Zaslow, Jerrold Brandell, and Jane Zehnder-Merrell--are national and Michigan scholars and leaders in advancing our knowledge and practice base concerning adolescent development, adolescents and welfare reform, and the situation of Michigan adolescents. Additional contributors to the report include Eileen Trzcinski, Deborah Smith and Lynda Ferro.

Major highlights from the report include a discussion of the negative effects on adolescents that were observed in three large-scale experimentally-based evaluations of welfare-to-work programs. In *Welfare Reform's Impact on Adolescents: Early Warning Signs*, Brooks, Hair, and Zaslow describe these negative impacts and explore the possible explanations for these unexpected findings in light of available data and the research literature on child development.

In *Adolescents and Welfare Reform: Psychological Dynamics and Empirical Findings*, Trzcinski and Brandell report on the results from a large scale national survey. This study also finds negative effects for adolescents on a wide range of outcome measures, including school outcomes, status offense/criminal behavioral outcomes, and substance use outcomes. The authors also discuss how the conflicts that adolescents face as they attempt to deal with psychological issues surrounding separation and identity formation can be exacerbated if the parents become or are perceived as becoming less available to their adolescents during this critical period of psychological development.

### ***Key Policy Recommendations***

**Target efforts to decrease the number of changes in adolescents' lives when their parents move from welfare-to-work.**

**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.**

**Strengthen families by providing them with more economic security and provide greater support to their communities.**

**Develop policy alternatives that increase the economic security of families who work.**

In the next article, *Adolescents in Detroit: Their Own Perceptions of How Welfare and Poverty Affects Their Lives*, Trzcinski presents results from a series of interviews conducted with young adolescents in Detroit. She found the adolescents' own stories and narratives reinforce many of the concerns and findings outlined in the experimental designs and survey results on the effects of welfare reform on adolescents.

In *Adolescents and Welfare Reform in Michigan*, Jane Zehnder-Merrell highlights a number of key findings regarding trends for adolescents. While a number of key indicators have shown major improvements for Michigan adolescents, such as downtrends in teen birthrates and juvenile arrests, one critical indicator has moved in the negative direction. Compared with ten years ago, Michigan adolescents are now less likely to graduate from high school. A risk factor for negative outcomes continues to be lack of economic resources for the adolescent's family.

Additional contributions by Deborah Smith and Lynda Ferro provide an overview of the how adolescents are affected by welfare reform, an extensive resource list, and a list of programs that demonstrate policy options for designing welfare strategies that benefit rather than harm children.