Responding to changing family organization

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The original language in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 stresses the importance of designing public policy that encourages both parents to meet their responsibilities to their children. The work requirements in the legislation reflect the idea that mothers, as well as fathers, have a responsibility to support their children financially by working for wages, rather than relying on public benefits. PRWORA's efforts to increase child support enforcement and establish paternity for children born outside marriage reflect the idea that all parents—including fathers not married to the mothers of their children and parents not living with their children—share financial responsibility. These elements of recent welfare reform may be seen as responses to important changes in family organization. In this article we review some of these changes and the potential policy responses, and suggest some implications for reauthorization of PRWORA.[1]

We believe public policy must account for and respond to changes in family organization in order to be effective. Ideally, such policies will also support the formation and maintenance of stable two-parent families. However, efforts to meet the needs of vulnerable children will often simultaneously reduce the economic disincentive to end a marriage or to bear a child outside marriage. We argue that when a conflict exists, the primary goal of policy should be to reduce economic vulnerability, rather than to change the incentives in an effort to discourage the formation of single-parent families.

How has family organization changed?

In 1970, 42 percent of all families included an employed father, a homemaker mother, and children.[2] By 2000, only 16 percent of families fitted this model.[3] Although recent evidence suggests some trends may be leveling off, a variety of changes in marriage patterns and in marital and nonmarital childbearing, as well as substantial increases in women's employment, have contributed to a dramatic long-term reshaping of family organization.

Increases in divorce and declines in marriage and marital fertility have led to more children living with only one parent, generally their mother. Divorce rates rose dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s and have remained high. At the same time, more individuals are waiting to older ages to marry, or are not marrying at all, thus increasing the period during which women are at risk of a nonmarital birth. By the late 1990s, 26 percent of white children, 41 percent of Hispanic children, and 69 percent of black children were born to unmarried mothers.[4] Although this proportion has leveled off in recent years, more than one-fourth of children lived with only one parent in 2000 (in 1970 only12 percent did so), and 84 percent of these lived with their mother (see Figure 1). Because children living in single-mother families are more than five times as likely to be poor as children living with a married couple, these changes are closely tied to the need for economic support policies.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of children living in mother-only or father-only families. But this traditional distinction does not fully capture the increasing complexity of family forms. A growing proportion of the children in husband-wife families are living with a parent and a stepparent.[5] In addition, cohabitation has increased substantially in the last 25 years.[6] Recent estimates show that about 40 percent of nonmarital births are births to cohabiting parents, up from 29 percent ten years earlier. Moreover, most children born to single, noncohabiting mothers will live with their mother and a cohabitor before age 16.[7] Many will also live with grandparents or other relatives. Clearly, the traditional simple distinctions shown in Figure 1 miss a substantial (and increasing) amount of complexity in children's lives.

These changes in family structure have coincided with substantial growth in the labor force participation and earnings of mothers—especially mothers of young children. Between 1972 and 1999 the percentage of mothers of children under age six who worked for pay at some point in the year grew from 43 to 69 percent for married women, and from 56 to 74 percent for single women. These changes in employment mitigated the impoverishing effects of family structure changes and may also have set the stage for welfare reform efforts that required mothers to work for pay.

How has policy responded?

For decades, some critics blamed the welfare system for changes in family organization, and suggested that policy can and should be designed to positively influence marriage and family formation decisions. Charles Murray and others argued that because the basic cash assistance program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), was available only to single-parent

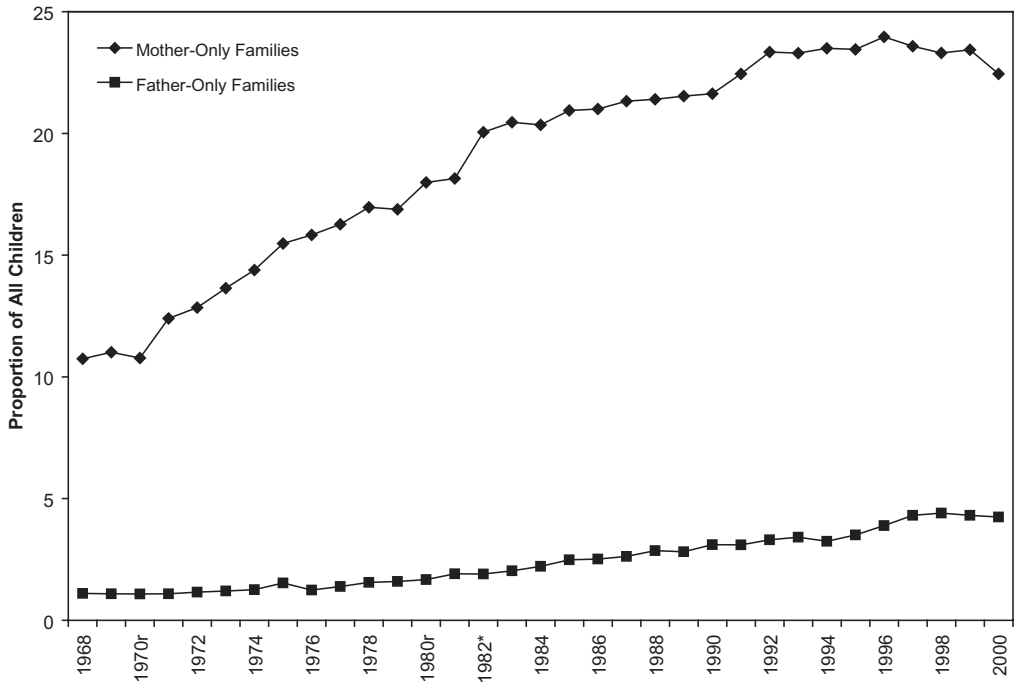

Figure 1. Children's living arrangements, 1968–2000.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Time Series, Table CH-1, "Living Arrangements of Children."

families, the welfare system encouraged separation, divorce, and nonmarital childbearing.[8] The suggestions were that some couples facing financial difficulty would split in order to get financial assistance, that some wives would be more likely to leave their husbands if there was a source of income available to them, and that some women would have a child and/or not marry because income was available only when they were single.

Even though the empirical evidence suggests that welfare policy has had at most a modest effect on nonmarital fertility, PRWORA responded to the widespread criticisms of the existing welfare system with provisions designed to encourage marriage and discourage nonmarital childbearing.[9] It required states to design plans that would meet these priorities, provided extra funding for the five states that do the most toward reducing nonmarital births (without increasing abortion rates), and provided funds for abstinence education.

Another response to the increase in the number of children who spend at least some time living with only one parent has been child support policy reforms. Over the past 30 years a variety of policy changes have been aimed at increasing the probability that children living with one parent will receive financial support from the nonresident parent as well. States have been required to adopt numerical formulae to be used in setting the amount of child support orders, to provide for the automatic withholding of child support payments from the wages of nonresident parents, and to participate in registries of newly hired employees and other programs designed to improve child support enforcement. Because of the increase in nonmarital births, paternity establishment, a necessary first step in issuing a child support order, has also received substantial attention.

Many of these efforts in child support and paternity are, of course, relevant for families outside the welfare system, but special attention has been focused on families receiving public assistance. Some policymakers have been particularly concerned that the public was providing economic support in the place of an "absent" father who was presumed to be shirking his duty. Thus, much of the early impetus for child support reforms grew out of the desire to require fathers to provide for their economically vulnerable children. This history helps explain the government's policy of retaining child support paid on behalf of resident-parent families who received cash assistance from the state. In most states, these dollars were used in part to pay for the administrative expenses of the child support system and in part to offset the costs of cash assistance.

By 1984, states were required by national policy to pass through to the family the first $50 per month of child support paid on behalf of mothers receiving welfare, and they could not consider this amount as income in calculating benefits—they were, in other words, to disregard it. This policy, which was designed to improve the incentives for parents to cooperate with the child support enforcement system, remained in place until PRWORA was passed. Under that law, states were given flexibility to reduce or eliminate the amount of child support to be

passed through to the resident parent and to determine the amount to be disregarded as income.

Changes in work requirements for mothers receiving cash assistance can also be seen as reflecting new patterns of family organization. Cash welfare was originally designed to provide a substitute for the economic support of an absent father; most mothers were not expected to work outside the home. Recent reforms, however, have increasingly been aimed at moving mothers from welfare to work. These changes are consistent with the view that it is not necessary for mothers, even those with young children, to remain outside the paid labor force. The Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988 included provisions for training, work supports such as extended child care and health insurance subsidies, and participation requirements. However, PRWORA work requirements are more stringent than those of the FSA. The required participation rates are higher, fewer activities qualify, and fewer categories of participants are exempt.

The increased labor force participation of mothers has prompted greater attention to the cost, availability, and quality of child care. The federal income tax code has included a tax credit to reimburse a portion of expenditures on child care since 1954. Because this credit is not refundable, it has provided no assistance to low-income working families (those whose incomes are so low that they do not pay income taxes). There were also several small programs that provided child care assistance to low-income families, each with its own eligibility limits, and all with fixed funding, leading to a confusing array of programs that were not funded sufficiently to meet the need. PRWORA merged several of these smaller programs into a single Child Care and Development Block Grant in the hope that states would simplify the child care subsidy system (although still not guaranteeing full funding). Some states, like Wisconsin, took this next step, and guaranteed child care subsidies to any low-income family using approved care.

Finally, there have been several changes within the tax system in response to the increased emphasis on work. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a program for low-income working parents, has been increased dramatically in the last 15 years. The tax system has also seen changes targeted at different family types. The income tax system has different tax schedules for married couples, for heads of households (primarily single-parent families), and for single individuals. There have been substantial concerns about "marriage penalties" within the tax system. Marriage penalties arise in many cases because the income tax system is designed to be progressive (those with higher incomes owe a higher percentage of their incomes). This means that many pairs of unmarried individuals who both have income would face higher taxes if they were to marry. Moreover, because the EITC declines with additional earnings above a certain level, many pairs of unmarried individuals who are both working would get less in EITC as a married couple. Changes in the tax law in 2001 have increased the amount of EITC available to married couples, but other parts of these "marriage penalties" remain.

Looking to the future

Although it is early to assess the implications, recent analysis suggests changes in some of the trends contributing to declines in traditional family forms. The long-term decline in the proportion of children living in husband-wife families has stopped, and may even have turned around, especially for children of color and children in low-income families. For example, the proportion of black non-Hispanic children living with married parents declined from 40.5 percent in 1985 to 34.8 percent in 1995, but then increased to 38.9 percent in 2000.[10] Over the same period, cohabitation rates have continued to increase, contributing to the growth in the proportion of children living with two adults. The most recent data also show a small decrease in labor force participation among mothers with children born in the last year.[11]

Whether recent shifts will persist, and the extent to which they may be due to changes in the economy, policy, or norms, remain open questions. Regardless, policy initiatives that aim to support poor families need to be reevaluated to ensure that they take into account the complexity and instability of family forms in the United States today.

Many children today are born to what can be considered "fragile families," which, for a variety of reasons, may be particularly susceptible to dissolution. Early results from an ongoing study of these fragile families, with mostly young parents, suggest that the parents are often unmarried yet are committed to their child and to each other at the time of the birth; about half live together, and four out of five are romantically involved. Yet in many cases in which the parents are living together, especially those in which the mother is receiving cash assistance, one parent (typically the father) is required to pay child support to the other (or to the state).[12] Thus current child support enforcement policy may have unintended negative consequences that increase the stress on already vulnerable families and may be counterproductive in the long run.

Child support policy is struggling to respond to complex family forms not only with regard to who pays but also with regard to the guidelines that establish how much is paid, and to whom. Some state child support guidelines have different provisions for nonresident parents who have had children with multiple partners, parents whose children live with them a significant amount (but not the greater part) of the time, and parents who have one child living with them and another child living with their ex-partner. In other states, the existence and the amount of a child support order in such situations are left to the discretion of the court. As complex family forms become

more common, states may want to consider firming their policies on appropriate order amounts, rather than leaving them to the potential inequities involved in a highly discretionary system. Moreover, federal efforts to monitor and evaluate alternative state policies for child support in complex family forms will be important.

Despite the challenges of complex and dynamic family structure, establishing paternity and requiring nonresident parents to support their children financially are increasingly important goals in a context in which welfare is time-limited and work is required of most single parents. Although some nonresident parents are unable to pay significant support, estimates suggest that much more can be achieved, and that when child support is paid, it often makes an important contribution to family income.[13]

One strategy that deserves serious consideration in the reauthorization process is an increase in the amount of child support that states disregard in determining benefit levels. After PRWORA granted states greater flexibility in setting pass-through and disregard policies, Wisconsin, alone among the states, determined that all current child support paid on behalf of welfare recipients should be passed on to the family and should be disregarded in calculating their cash welfare benefits. An experimental evaluation of this policy suggests that it increases child support received by low-income families, and the total support collected, without substantially increasing government costs (see text box on p. 91). The results also suggest that families new to the welfare and child support system were particularly responsive to the change, and that governments' short-term savings from retaining child support may be small relative to the loss of later support to families that face time-limited public assistance. This points to the need to consider a shift in the goals of the child support enforcement system from reducing welfare costs to enhancing the economic self-sufficiency of single-parent families.

Another strategy may be to focus on increasing the job skills of nonresident fathers. Many nonresident fathers have low education and inconsistent employment histories that suggest they will face challenges in supporting their children financially. Much child support policy has assumed that the only problem with nonpayment was related to an *unwillingness* to pay support, and its response has been to make the penalties for nonpayment more and more stringent. Recent research suggests that part of the problem may be an *inability* to pay support, rather than an unwillingness.[14]

Although child support can be an important element in the postwelfare income package, earnings are clearly the key. Yet it is now clear that many welfare participants face substantial barriers to employment.[15] Most also have young children—32 percent of TANF participants have a child under 3, and 54 percent have a child under 6.[16] Employment rates for mothers of young children have risen dramatically, but full-time, full-year employment is still not the norm, and mothers without many job skills will face major obstacles in providing adequately for their families. Subsidized child care will be a key support, as will be subsidized health insurance.[17]

In this article we have focused on the need to evaluate policy options recognizing the reality of changing family structure. As we noted earlier, some analysts and policymakers have argued for designing policies to *change* family structure, for example, to promote two-parent families and reduce nonmarital births. In some cases, programs previously restricted to single parents have been expanded to two-parent families, to reduce or eliminate the disincentive to marriage. Given the economic vulnerability of single-parent families and evidence of the advantages of two-parent families even if we take income into account, it makes sense to expand benefit eligibility to two-parent families.[18]

Yet single-parent households are particularly vulnerable to poverty and other disadvantages, and meeting the needs of children in these families will, almost by definition, reduce the economic disincentive to divorce or nonmarital childbearing. David Ellwood termed this dilemma the "Assistance – Family Structure conundrum."[19] Even such widely supported policies as child support enforcement have been criticized as facilitating alternatives to marriage—though child support involves parental, rather than public, support of children, and increased child support has both incentive and disincentive effects.[20] When a conflict exists, should the primary goal of policy be to reduce economic vulnerability, or to change incentives so as to discourage the formation of single-parent families? The empirical evidence suggests that family formation patterns are not easily shaped by policy.[21] Even if changes in family organization may be slowing, the fundamental reorganization of the past 40 years will not be undone. Thus, we believe future policy must continue to respond to the changes in family organization, providing the supports necessary for all parents and an adequate safety net for those families in need. ■

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[1]The authors thank Wendell Primus for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

[2]This section draws from M. Cancian and D. Reed, "Changes in Family Structure: Implications for Poverty and Related Policy," in *Understanding Poverty*, ed. S. Danziger and R. Haveman (New York: Harvard University Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 2002), unless otherwise cited.

[3]U.S. Department of Labor, "Employment Characteristics of Families in 2000," USDOL News Release 01-103, April 19, 2001, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Washington, DC.

[4]Note that nonmarital birthrates have increased for whites, but have fallen for blacks; National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics Reports 48, no. 3 and 47, no. 18, on the World Wide Web at < http://www.cdc.gov/nchs >; see discussion in Cancian and Reed, "Changes in Family Structure."

The Child Support Demonstration Evaluation

Wisconsin's TANF program, Wisconsin Works (W-2), combines relatively stringent work requirements with a uniquely generous approach to child support: for most participating mothers, any child support paid on behalf of their children is passed through to them and is disregarded in calculating their W-2 cash payments. To evaluate the impact of this policy, it was implemented as a random-assignment experiment. Most W-2 participants received all child support paid, but a randomly selected control group received a reduced amount. Because assignment to the experimental (full pass-through) and control (partial pass-through) groups was random, any differences in outcomes between the two groups can be attributed to the difference in the treatment of child support.

The Child Support Demonstration Evaluation (CSDE) was designed to evaluate a variety of effects of this new approach to child support, beginning with the direct effects on child support paid and received. The study also measures potential secondary effects—on mothers' and fathers' employment and earnings, on parents' interactions, and on the well-being of their children. These effects were evaluated using state administrative records and a survey of W-2 families, covering outcomes in 1998 and 1999.

The experimental evaluation showed that the full pass-through had significant effects. In 1998, mothers eligible for it received about $150 dollars more in child support than did those in the control group. Differences in the amounts of child support received by mothers are due in large part to the mechanical effect of the full pass-through. However, there were also significant increases in the percentage of nonresident fathers paying child support. In the full sample, 52 percent of fathers of children in the experimental group and 50 percent of fathers of children in the control group paid child support in 1998. Among those more likely to be new to the child support and welfare systems, however, the differences were more substantial: in cases where the mother had not received AFDC in the two years before she entered W-2, 58 percent of fathers with children in the experimental group paid child support in 1998, compared to 48 percent of fathers with children in the control group. These differences remained significant and in many cases increased in 1999. Finally, there were also significantly higher rates of paternity establishment for those in the experimental group in 1998, though not in 1999.

The experimental analyses showed substantial, though less consistent, evidence of secondary effects. As hypothesized, an increase in child support received reduced the need for cash payments in 1998; there were significant and larger differences between experimental and control families among those mothers who initially received a W-2 cash payment and among mothers with a history of higher child support amounts.

There were significant differences in some of the components of government costs, but no difference in total measured government costs. In particular, although more child support was passed through to those in the experimental group, not all of this was at the expense of the government, since some consisted of additional support that would not have been paid in the absence of the full pass-through. More important, the reform also generated savings in other areas, especially W-2 cash payments.

The full results of the CSDE Phase 1 experimental evaluation are reported in D. Meyer and M. Cancian, with additional authors, *The Child Support Demonstration Evaluation: Summary of Experimental Impacts*, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2001. Reports from the project can be found on the IRP World Wide Web site at http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp/csde/phase1-tocs.htm. Complementary nonexperimental evaluations of child support disregard policy will be released in Spring, 2002.

[5]L. Bumpass, R. Raley, and J. Sweet, "The Changing Character of Stepfamilies: Implications of Cohabitation and Nonmarital Childbearing," *Demography* 32 (1995): 425–36.

[6]Although there is some uncertainty over the precise increase because of limitations in the data, all estimates show substantial increases; see L. Casper, P. Cohen, and T. Simmons, "How Does POSSLQ Measure Up? Historical Estimates of Cohabitation," U.S. Census Bureau Population Division Working Paper 36, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC, 1999.

[7]L. Bumpass and H.-H. Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the United States," *Population Studies*, 54 (2000): 29–41.

[8]For an example of the critical view of the previous welfare system, see C. Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). Some two-parent families have been eligible for benefits in some states if the child was "deprived of parental support" because a parent was unemployed (AFDC-UP) or disabled. But the AFDC-UP program always had very strict eligibility criteria and was quite small, both in dollars expended and in the number of families receiving benefits. AFDC-UP was available in only about half the states until 1988, when the Family Support Act required all states to have a program; even then, however, states were not required to make it available year-round.

[9]R. Moffitt, "The Effect of Welfare on Marriage and Fertility," in *Welfare, the Family, and Reproductive Behavior*, ed. R. Moffitt (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1998), pp. 50–97; R. Moffitt and M. Ver Ploeg, eds., *Evaluating Welfare Reform in an Era of Transition* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2001).

[10]These figures are based on the Current Population Survey. See the article in this *Focus* by Fremstad and Primus.

[11]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population, Historical Tables, Table H5, available on the Census Web site at < http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/fertility/tabH5.pdf >.

[12]See the article in this *Focus* by Garfinkel and McLanahan; also D. Meyer, L. Bumpass, L. Wimer, and D. Pate, *Cohabitation and Child Support*, Final Report to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1997.

[13]E. Sorensen and C. Zibman, "To What Extent Do Children Benefit from Child Support?" Assessing the New Federalism Discussion Paper 99-11, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2000; D. Meyer and M. Cancian, with additional authors, *The Child Support Demonstration Evaluation: Summary of Experimental Impacts*, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2001.

[14]J. Bartfeld and D. Meyer, "Child Support among W-2 Participants," in *W-2 Child Support Demonstration Evaluation, Phase 1: Final Report*, Volume II*: The Well-Being of W-2 Families*, ed. D. Meyer and M. Cancian, Report to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, April 2001; D. Meyer and M. Cancian, "Can the Nonresident Fathers of Children Receiving TANF Provide More Child Support?" unpublished report, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2001; Sorensen and Zibman, "To What Extent Do Children Benefit from Child Support."

[15]See the article by Danziger and Seefeldt in this *Focus*.

[16]U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, *Characteristics and Financial Circumstances of TANF Recipients: Fiscal Year 1999*. Available on the Department's Web site at < http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/opre/characteristics/fy99/analysis.htm >.

[17]M. Cancian, "The Rhetoric and Reality of Work Based Welfare Reform," *Social Work* 46, no. 4 (2001): 309–14. See also the article by Wolfe and Vandell in this *Focus*.

[18]S. McLanahan and G. Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[19]D. Ellwood, *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

[20]A policy regime in which child support is high and strictly enforced should increase the incentives to leave for those who expect to receive physical custody of the children and decrease them for those who do not expect to receive custody. Research on this topic includes L. Nixon, "The Effect of Child Support Enforcement on Marital Dissolution," *Journal of Human Resources* 32 (1997):159–81, and D.E Bloom, C. Conrad, and C. Miller, "Child Support and Father's Remarriage and Fertility," in *Fathers Under Fire: The Revolution in Child Support Enforcement*, ed. I. Garfinkel, S. McLanahan, D. Meyer, and J. Seltzer (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998).

[21]It is early to judge the impact of PRWORA, but current empirical evidence suggests that this round of welfare reform also will have only a modest impact on family structure; see H. Peters, R. Plotnick, and S.-O. Jeong, "How Will Welfare Reform Affect Childbearing and Family Structure Decisions?" IRP Discussion Paper 1239-01, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2001.

Unwed parents: Myths, realities, and policymaking

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In the United States today, nearly one-third of all births occur outside marriage.[1] Such children are much more likely to be poor and much less likely to get either time or money from their fathers than are children born within marriage. Because poverty and father absence have negative effects on children's prospects in life, communities cannot be indifferent to the growing numbers of children living in poor single-parent families.[2] Remedies, however, are not so easily determined.

The primary response of policymakers to growing public concern about the rise of nonmarital births has been to pass laws that make it more difficult for unmarried fathers to abandon their children and for unmarried mothers to raise their children alone. Since the 1980s, the federal government has steadily expanded and strengthened the legal and administrative machinery to establish legal paternity and enforce payment of child support. Most recently, the 1996 welfare laws explicitly aimed to reinforce marital and parental responsibilities at the same time as they radically overhauled the structure of cash assistance.

Underlying this new legal and regulatory environment is the widely held assumption that children would be better off if their parents lived together and were more involved in their lives. Yet the media have often presented negative stereotypes of unmarried families, sometimes depicting children of such parents as the products of casual sexual liaisons. In fact, we know very little about the characteristics and capabilities of men who father children outside of marriage, and even less about their relationships with the mothers of their children, and there are conflicting views of these relationships.

To what extent are these relationships exploitive or hostile, fueled by the disparate needs of young men and women? Do a substantial number of unmarried fathers have mental health problems or abuse drugs or alcohol, and are they likely physically to abuse their children and the children's mothers? Do mothers often refuse to marry or live with the fathers of their children because the fathers are unreliable breadwinners or because they have serious drug and alcohol problems? Do men disengage from children whom they are unable to support as a way of minimizing their own sense of failure? Or do young couples start out with high hopes for maintaining a stable relationship, only to find that they cannot meet their own or their partner's expectations?[3]

Getting the facts straight about unmarried parents' relationships is critical for understanding the potential impact of the child support and welfare laws on effective programs and policies. Policies will be more effective if they are tailored to actual rather than presumed parental relationships; whether well or poorly designed, they also have the potential to influence those relationships. If parents are truly indifferent to one another, it makes sense to design programs that treat them as separate individuals. If parents are involved in a close relationship of some kind, it may be preferable to treat them as a family unit, capitalizing on their existing commitment to strengthen the relationship and improve the likelihood that it will endure. If substantial numbers of unmarried fathers have mental health or substance abuse problems or are prone to violence, then programs need to be designed very differently from programs that aim to redress educational or employment deficits.

The Fragile Families Study

In an effort to learn more about unmarried parents and their children in the United States, we are following a group of nearly 5,000 children, identified in hospitals at the time of their birth, in 20 cities across the United States. Our families are representative of all nonmarital births in the United States in cities with populations over 200,000.[4] We plan to follow the children and their parents for four years. Telephone interviews will be conducted with both mothers and fathers when children are 12, 30, and 48 months old, to ask about children's health and development, as well as parents' own health and economic well-being, parenting styles, child care arrangements, and access to and use of community resources. In addition, in-home assessments of children's health and well-being will be conducted when the children are 30 and 48 months old.

By tracking children through infancy and early childhood, we can distinguish differences that are present soon after birth from those that evolve over time. We will gain new information about unmarried fathers and their attitudes and actions toward their children. And we can hope to gain greater understanding of the effects of very different policy environments and labor market conditions, now that many reforms are being designed and implemented locally.

We use the term "fragile families" for these unmarried parents and their children to underscore the fact that they are families, and that they have a higher risk of poverty and family dissolution than traditional families. We seek to answer a set of related questions:

- What are the conditions and capabilities of new unmarried parents, especially fathers? How many hold steady jobs? How many want to be involved in raising their children?
- What is the nature of parents' relationships, and how stable are they? What factors strengthen—or weaken—the relationship between new unmarried parents?
- How do public policies affect the behaviors and living arrangements of these families? In particular, what are the long-term consequences of new welfare regulations, stronger paternity establishment and stricter child support enforcement, and changes in health care and child care financing and delivery?
- How do the capabilities and relationships of the parents and public policies affect child development and well-being?

Here is what we have learned from our initial analysis.

Parents' characteristics and capabilities

The typical unmarried mother is in her early twenties. Only 11 percent of mothers in our sample were under 18, and 17 percent were 30 or older.[5] More than half have other children. Almost one-third are Hispanic, 51 percent are non-Hispanic black, and 17 percent are non-Hispanic white or some other ethnicity. Fewer than 20 percent are immigrants, and 88 percent claim some religious affiliation. (But only 18 percent of mothers and 14 percent of fathers said they attended religious services at least once a week.)

Fathers' demographic characteristics (as reported by the mothers) rather closely match those of their partners. On average, fathers are about three years older. Despite much recent public concern about teenage mothers being involved with older men, we found that the proportion is quite small; only 10 percent had partners eight or more years older. Approximately 30 percent of unmarried fathers in our sample have been incarcerated—a circumstance that bodes poorly for their future capacity to support a family.[6]

Lack of education is a serious problem for both mothers and fathers: over a third lack even a high school diploma. Only 31 percent of mothers and 26 percent of fathers in our study have any education beyond high school. For a small but not insignificant proportion of these parents (3 percent of mothers and 5 percent of fathers), drug or alcohol problems interfered with work or personal relationships in the last year. These figures are probably too low, since parents may be reluctant to admit to themselves or to report that they have a problem. In two cities where we examined mothers' medical records, the data indicate that the percentage of mothers who have problems with drugs and/or alcohol is about twice the reported rate, which is still pretty low. Substance abuse problems are likely to affect parents' ability to support their families and to parent their children.

Relationships within fragile families

Our primary finding is clear: The great majority of unwed parents are committed to each other and to their children at the time of the birth.

One of the most striking findings is the high rate of cohabitation among this group of new unmarried parents. Half of all mothers were living with the father of their child when the child was born; another 33 percent were romantically involved, though not cohabiting. Nine percent were "just friends," and only 8 percent had little or no contact with the father. Only 1 percent reported the father as unknown.

At birth, the majority of unmarried parents had high hopes for the future of their relationship. Nearly three-quarters of the mothers said that the chances they would marry the baby's father were "fifty-fifty" or better. The overwhelming majority of mothers wanted the father to be involved in raising the child.

Questions about fathers' roles—how and to what extent fathers are and should be involved in their children's lives—are currently at the core of intense policy debates. The Fragile Families Study seeks a greater understanding of new parents' perceptions of what it means to be a father.

We investigated several aspects of fathers' involvement; what we found strongly indicates that unmarried fathers are by no means indifferent to their children. In the first place, about 83 percent of mothers (and 91 percent of fathers) said that the father contributed financially during the pregnancy, and similar percentages reported that he contributed in other ways (for example, by providing transportation). Eighty-four percent of mothers and 93 percent of fathers said that the father's name would be on the child's birth certificate, and almost as many said that the child would take the father's surname.

A common core of beliefs about marriage and childbearing is important to the successful negotiation of parental relationships. The majority of both mothers and fathers believed marriage to be beneficial for children and agreed about the qualities that contribute to a successful marriage. Unmarried parents reported that two crucial elements for a successful marriage are that the father has

Table 1
Durability of Parents' Relationships

	12–18 Months after Birth (% in each category)				
			Not Cohabiting		
At Birth	Married	Cohabiting	Romantic	Friends	No Contact
Married	96	0	0	0	0
Cohabiting	12	62	8	10	7
Not Cohabiting					
Romantic	4	15	34	25	21
Friends	0	5	5	62	27
No contact	1	4	5	17	73

Notes: Results are based on an interim data file from 12-month interviews in 20 cities. Table does not include respondents who indicated the father was deceased. A comparison group of married parents is being followed in each city. Percentages in the first three rows do not sum to 100 percent since some mothers have divorced or legally separated since baseline; in the fourth row the discrepancy is due to rounding.

a steady job (reported by approximately 90 percent of both parents) and that both parents are emotionally mature (reported by 85 percent of both parents). For 18 percent of mothers and 19 percent of fathers, "spending time together" was a major bone of contention in the relationship, closely followed by "money."

When asked to define a "good father," both men and women gave highest priority to "showing love and affection" (rated most important by 65 percent of mothers and 49 percent of fathers). "Providing financial support" came next, though it was rated as "most important" by far fewer parents than the quality of "showing love and affection" (12 percent of both men and women rated this quality "most important"). "Teaching the child about life" and "providing direct care" were rather differently rated by women and men (9 versus 19 percent and 5 versus 12 percent, respectively). "Serving as an authority figure" was considered unimportant by both parents.

The Fragile Families data suggest that violence is rare among new unwed parents. Only 5 percent of mothers reported being hit or slapped by the fathers during the past year. As was the case for substance abuse, mothers are likely to underreport the incidence of violence, especially if they are still romantically involved with the fathers. Indeed, 12 percent of mothers who were no longer in contact with the fathers reported incidences of violent behavior. In addition, about 30 percent of all mothers reported some emotional abuse, which may be a precursor to physical abuse.[7]

Despite high hopes and good intentions, early findings indicate that only about 17 percent of the new parents had married by the time the child was 12–18 months old (Table 1). Nonetheless, nearly three-quarters of the parents living together at the birth were still together, married or cohabiting, over a year later.

Parents' access to public and private resources

Again, our main finding is clear: Most unmarried parents are poorly equipped to support themselves and their children.

Average earnings are very low in this group (see Table 2), and poverty is widespread (Figure 1). Virtually all the fathers had worked at some time during the past year, but employment patterns were clearly unstable: nearly three out of ten were unemployed in the week before the interview, at a time when the economy was booming and the national unemployment rate was dropping from 4.5 to 4 percent. Among the mothers, 16 percent had not worked at all in the year before their babies were born. Among those who did work and reported earnings, nearly half earned less than $10,000 a year.

Average household income is substantially higher than earnings (Table 2); nearly half of the mothers and 61 percent of fathers reported incomes of over $20,000 a year. The difference between mothers' earnings and their incomes reflects the fact that over half of new unmarried mothers were cohabiting or living with another adult.

Government support is important to a substantial minority of unmarried mothers. During the year before their babies were born, 39 percent received welfare, food stamps, or public assistance, 23 percent received some type of housing subsidy, and 8 percent received other government transfers (unemployment insurance, worker's compensation, disability, or social security). The proportion receiving government assistance was even higher for women who had another child—51 percent of them had received welfare or food stamps. For 71 percent of the children, health insurance came through Medicaid; another 22 percent had private insurance.

Table 2
Parents' Access to Resources

Resource	Mothers	Fathers
Total Earnings in Past 12 Months (% of those reporting any earnings)		
Under $5,000	40	19
$5,000–$9,999	8	13
$10,000–$19,999	26	33
$20,000 and over	16	35
Total Household Income in Past 12 Months (% of those reporting any income)		
Under $5,000	18	8
$5,000–$19,999	36	31
$20,000–$49,999	35	43
$50,000 and over	11	18
Kin Resources (% receiving during mother's pregnancy)		
Financial assistance	52	24
A place to live	42	26
Child care assistance	24	—
Consider family a source of potential help	95	92
N	2,670	2,047

Note: 15 percent of mothers reported earnings but not the amount; 27 percent of mothers and 25 percent of fathers did not report total household income, mostly stating that they "did not know."

We found that, in general, many of the parents were quite uninformed about new welfare rules and regulations regarding work requirements and time limits for assistance. Approximately 60 percent of mothers and 70 percent of fathers did not know how long a woman is eligible for assistance or whether there were work requirements. Parents were, in contrast, much better informed about the procedures for establishing paternity.

How are the children doing?

At this stage in the study, we can offer a few baseline findings on the children's health and well-being. Our general conclusion: Most unmarried mothers are healthy and bear healthy children.

Two-thirds of mothers reported themselves to be in good or excellent health. But 21 percent of them reported smoking during their pregnancy, over 20 percent had no prenatal care in the first trimester, and 11 percent had babies born below normal weight (the national average is 7.6 percent, but that figure includes marital and nonmarital births). Low birthweight is an important indicator of children's current and future health status.

Mothers covered by Medicaid were less likely to receive prenatal care during the first trimester than mothers with private health insurance, but by the end of the second trimester of pregnancy, fully 96 percent of unmarried mothers had received prenatal care.

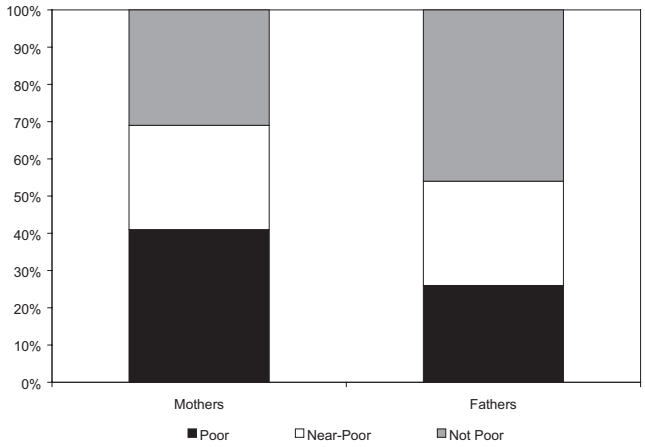

Figure 1. Poverty among unwed parents in the Fragile Families Study.

Source: *National Report* of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, August 2001, Figure 3.

As a way of measuring the resources that will be available to the child in the near future, we asked the unmarried mothers with whom the baby was going to live. Going home meant very different things for different babies: 47 percent are expected to live with both parents, 31 percent with the mother alone, and 22 percent with the mother and another adult.

Policy implications

Early findings from the Fragile Families Study have important implications for public policy. Because these new parents are unmarried, they are automatically affected by child support policies. Because a large proportion of these couples have low earnings capacity, welfare policy is also likely to play a major role in shaping their future as a family.

Our findings underscore the precarious socioeconomic circumstances of many unmarried parents, but they also hold out hope. At birth, we find, the overwhelming majority of parents still have a level of commitment and optimism that makes for high motivation. The "magic moment" of birth is a good time to offer services to unwed parents. Services that attempt to strengthen these couples' relationships, including those that promote marriage, are consistent with the expressed values and hopes of the parents. Services that treat the mother and father as a couple, and that begin at birth in the hospital, may be particularly effective, especially where fathers are concerned.[8] Explaining the value of marriage and providing help to parents in negotiating relationships may help to promote marriage and cohabitation among fragile families, but large gains are unlikely to be achieved without an increase in the capabilities of parents to support a family and a reduction in marriage and cohabitation penalties in our tax and transfer policies. In the reauthoriza-

tion of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, categorical discrimination against two-parent families should be forbidden, the portion of the father's income counted in determining eligibility and benefits should be reduced below 100 percent, and employment and training services should be made available to fathers as well as mothers.

But no matter how successful such promarriage policies are, a substantial proportion of unmarried parents will live apart, and welfare and child support policies that address the needs of those parents need to be carefully tailored so that they increase, rather than discourage, fathers' involvement with their children and increase rather than decrease the resources of single mothers. To these ends, child support policies need to be modified to eliminate onerous and unenforceable child support obligations on low-income fathers and to encourage very poor fathers to pay what they can by matching their payments with federal funds, much as the EITC supplements earnings. ■

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[1]The proportions are higher among minority populations, reaching 40 percent among Hispanics and 70 percent among African Americans. In this respect, the United States is not unique—European countries have also seen a steep rise in nonmarital births—but there are some crucial differences. European parents of nonmarital children are mostly cohabiting, and the children are much less likely to be poor than are U.S. children born outside marriage.

[2]S. McLanahan and G. Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); G. Duncan and J. Brooks-Gunn, eds., *Consequences of Growing Up Poor* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997).

[3]Examples of these and other arguments can be found in E. Anderson, "Sex Codes and Family Life among Poor Inner-City Youths," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 501 (1989): 59–78; K. Edin and L. Lein, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation,1997); E. Liebow, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co.,1967).

[4]The data in this article are drawn from the *National Report* of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, August 2001. It is available on the Web site of the study at < http://crcw.princeton.edu >. We were able to interview only 75 percent of unmarried fathers. Compared to the average unmarried father, the men in our sample are more strongly attached to the mothers of their children than the men we were unable to interview, and are likely to differ in other ways as well. Anticipating this problem, we asked all mothers some questions about children's fathers so that we would be able to compare fathers who participated in the study with those who did not.

[5]Because of restrictions in many of the hospitals, we were not able to interview all mothers who were under age 18 and were otherwise eligible, without permission from the baby's maternal grandparents. Young teen parents are included in the survey when hospitals requested that they be interviewed.

[6]Data on incarceration history are collected during the 12-month interviews, presently being conducted. Results are based on interim data from the ongoing data collection in 20 cities.

[7]Results on indicators of emotional abuse are obtained during the 12-month interviews, presently being conducted. Results are based on interim data from the ongoing data collection in 20 cities.

[8]The Parents' Fair Share Program, a demonstration program that was designed to improve the human capital, earnings, and involvement with children of unemployed noncustodial fathers of children on welfare, had limited success, but the assistance came long after the romantic relationship with the mother had ended. See, for example, F. Doolittle, V. Knox, C. Miller, and S. Rowser, *Building Opportunities, Enforcing Obligations: Implementation and Interim Impacts of Parents' Fair Share*, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, New York, 1998.

Assessing the influence of welfare reform on child welfare systems

Kristen Shook Slack

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The enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) raised two questions in particular for child welfare policymakers and practitioners: Would the policy elements included in PRWORA affect the well-being of low-income children and families? Would such effects, in turn, alter the demands upon the services of child welfare systems? Despite a flurry of recent research on the effects of welfare reform on child and family outcomes, clear answers to these questions have yet to emerge. In this article, I summarize the issues that arise when we try to assess the impact of welfare reform on child maltreatment, highlight some key research findings, and suggest several issues that we need to consider in the debate over reauthorizing PRWORA.

How PRWORA may affect child welfare systems

Why should child welfare systems be affected by welfare reform policies?

The answer is that a link between the service populations of the public assistance and child welfare systems has been well documented. More than half of the children who enter substitute care are from families which have relied on welfare benefits in the recent past, and comparisons between families involved in the child welfare system and families that are not suggest that the former group has higher rates of welfare use.[1]

Poverty has been repeatedly linked to child welfare. The rates of reported as well as suspected child maltreatment are higher among families with incomes below the federal poverty line, and higher rates of child maltreatment, on average, are reported in communities with a greater proportion of families living below the poverty line.[2] Although the nature of these relationships has not always been clear, it nevertheless seems plausible that changes in one system serving clients with low incomes will have repercussions for other systems predominantly serving clients with low incomes.

Which PRWORA policies could influence child welfare systems?

Specific elements of PRWORA could significantly affect the dynamics of welfare and child welfare systems. First, several features may influence the level of monthly income available to families: time limits on the receipt of cash welfare benefits under the main cash welfare program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); increased reliance on sanctions (i.e., reductions and terminations in benefits stemming from failure to work or to meet other requirements in state TANF plans); state "family cap" policies that allow no increase in the TANF grant if more children are born; and lifetime bans on TANF receipt for persons convicted of certain drug-related felonies. Many families that experience reductions in cash welfare assistance will be able to find other sources of income to fill the gap. Those who meet family income needs through employment, help from friends and relatives, or other supplemental income sources may not witness serious consequences for the safety and well-being of their children. But for some families, reductions in cash benefits will impose economic hardships that could increase the risk of child maltreatment.

Second, employment is mandatory for most TANF recipients. As more caregivers enter the work force or engage in other "worklike" activities (e.g., community service or job training), levels of parental supervision and the nature of child care arrangements may change for many families. To the extent that such changes present a greater threat to children's safety, we may see an increase in allegations of "inadequate supervision" and neglect by parents, and of abuse involving nonparental caregivers. If changes under PRWORA actually enhance the quality of care and supervision available to children from low-income families, however, we may witness a decline in reports of child maltreatment.

Third, with the passage of PRWORA, the eligibility determination process for Medicaid was decoupled from that for cash welfare benefits. Although this policy change was not intended to reduce health insurance coverage among TANF-eligible families, there is some evidence that such a reduction has, in fact, occurred, even though many families remain eligible for Medicaid benefits.[3]

If children's health deteriorates to the threshold for medical neglect because health conditions are untreated or undertreated or because the children do not receive preventive care, family involvement with the child welfare system may rise. But if uninsured children have less

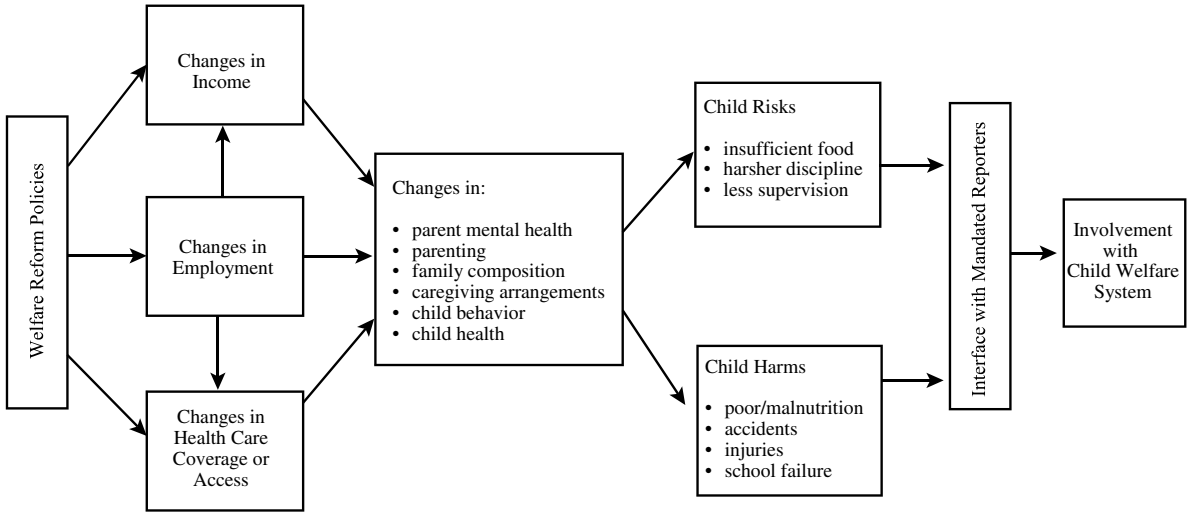

Figure 1. Potential links between welfare reform and child protection systems.

contact with medical professionals, medical neglect might be detected less often, even if its incidence has increased.

Figure 1 illustrates the roles of income, employment, and health care coverage in children's risk of involvement with the child welfare system. It is important to keep in mind that any effects of welfare reform on the demand for child welfare services do not necessarily reflect the trends in child maltreatment, because the components of welfare reform that may affect child well-being may simultaneously affect whether families will be reported to child welfare systems. As with health, declines in general well-being may be masked by declines in the *detection* of risks and harms to children. For this reason, the effects of welfare reform on child and family well-being must be assessed in conjunction with its effects on child welfare systems.

What could happen to the child welfare caseload?

Figure 2 shows the number of welfare recipients (caregivers and children) nationwide, and the number of child victims of substantiated maltreatment over the course of the 1990s. The disproportionate sizes of these two populations make it clear that even small increases in the involvement of welfare families with the child welfare system could lead to severe pressures on that system.[4]

Although the welfare caseload and the rate of child victimization began to shrink around the same time, just before the passage of PRWORA, this does not necessarily mean that fewer child maltreatment reports are a *result* of welfare reform, because a third factor, such as a strong economy, could be responsible for both declines. This particular effect is especially troublesome when we try to assess changes in the cash welfare and child welfare systems, since both are likely to be very sensitive to macroeconomic trends. Nor can we know for certain, from aggregated data, whether the relationship between declines in the welfare caseload and in child victimization rates also means that families that leave welfare are less likely to be reported to child welfare systems, particularly if welfare policies have any effect on the detection of maltreatment.

Difficulties in assessing the effects of PRWORA on child welfare systems

Before highlighting the recent research findings on this topic, it is useful to consider what is involved in studying the connection between welfare reform and child maltreatment and to examine the implications of the various study designs being used in this research.

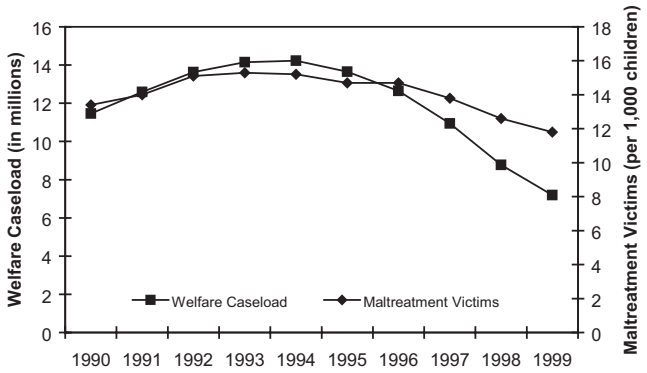

Figure 2. Trends in welfare caseload size and child maltreatment victimization, 1990–1999. Data are from Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System.

What "outcomes" should we monitor?

A substantial amount of child maltreatment research relies on administrative records of abuse and neglect reports for "measures" of maltreatment. Because changes in the demands upon child welfare systems may not directly correspond with fluctuations in actual risks and harms to children, it is critical to develop and use measures of maltreatment that are not derived from administrative indicators if we are truly to understand the effects of welfare reform.

Very few measures of abuse and neglect have been incorporated into the large-scale surveys characteristic of many welfare reform research initiatives. This is not due to oversight or lack of interest, however. Such measures are simply in very short supply. The validated measures that do exist are designed to assess only physical abuse, are intended for samples already involved in the child welfare system, or require extensive training to administer because of the subjective nature of their coding schemes. In addition, there are ethical issues (e.g., whether to report families to child welfare systems when maltreatment is recognized by a survey interviewer), which place constraints on researchers interested in applying such measures in child abuse and neglect research.

The paucity of other measurement tools often leads researchers who wish to study maltreatment to rely on administrative data. Even these measures are not easily accessible to researchers, since many states either restrict access to these data, or do not have data management systems that make it easy to extract the data. When studies involve multiple states, these problems are compounded by state variation in child abuse and neglect reporting laws and differences in child welfare practice philosophies. Initiatives for developing measures of child maltreatment that can be used in larger prospective studies are underway. Some of these efforts are already embedded in current research on welfare reform and child welfare. One source of this work is the Federal Child Neglect Research Consortium, which is composed of research teams funded by the National Institutes of Health to study child neglect, a surprisingly understudied form of maltreatment although it is more prevalent than physical and sexual abuse.

To understand the phenomenon of child maltreatment, measures are required which assess multiple forms of maltreatment and a spectrum of outcomes ranging from mild risk to severe harm. Several coding schemes have been developed which conceptualize maltreatment in this way, such as the National Incidence Studies of child abuse and neglect,[5] and the Barnett, Manly, and Cicchetti classification system.[6] However, the former scheme has been applied only to cross-sectional samples and relies on community "sentinels" (who have familiarity with families at risk of abuse and neglect) as the primary source of data. The latter has been applied only to samples of families, or to case records of families that have been involved in the child welfare system. Both designs limit our ability to understand the risk and precipitating factors that explain abuse and neglect—a particular problem for those interested in understanding the effects of welfare reform on child maltreatment.

What is the relevant time period for assessing this relationship?

Any assessment of welfare reform's impact on child welfare systems should obviously begin at least in the mid-1990s before passage and implementation of PRWORA policies. Using such a starting point, several trend studies relying on welfare and child protection administrative data have been conducted or are currently underway.[7] But only limited inferences can be made from aggregated trend data, as discussed in relation to Figure 2. States were implementing reforms before, during, and after the passage of PRWORA in welfare and in child welfare systems, and state rates of caseload decline and/or growth in both systems are different. Sorting out the relative contributions of particular reforms to child welfare trends is, therefore, not easy.

Another solution is to track a group of individuals or families (using administrative data, survey data, or both) beginning before welfare reform, and to monitor the timing of their transitions off and on welfare and health insurance and in and out of work, in relation to any intervention by the child welfare system. This approach overcomes some of the problems inherent in analyses with aggregated data. It also ensures that the group followed resembles the population of welfare recipients prior to welfare reform, since the post-welfare-reform population is likely to look quite different.[8] But to be able to account for potentially confounding factors such as a family's predisposing characteristics, we need a broad array of measures related to both welfare receipt and child welfare risk. Such measures are often absent from administrative data, increasing the likelihood of bias stemming from factors that have been left out of consideration. Moreover, nearly every major survey designed to address the effects of welfare reform on families has either failed to establish a link between the survey data and child welfare administrative data, or was implemented after the passage of PRWORA.[9]

Which children and families constitute the "population at risk"?

Should we be monitoring children or families in our assessments of welfare reform's effects on child welfare systems? There are certain benefits to using children as the "unit of analysis," since multiple children from the same family may have different types and levels of risk for maltreatment. To understand involvement with the child welfare system, however, the family may be a more appropriate unit of analysis, since many of the reasons

families come to the attention of the child welfare system are related to the behaviors of a caregiver.[10]

Among welfare families, "leavers" are only one group, although they are of special interest to welfare policymakers because of the uncertainty surrounding their outcomes. Studies that focus on current recipients of welfare will oversample long-term recipients who may be less and less representative of the welfare population over time.

New or first-time welfare recipients, like long-term recipients, still represent a select group of eligible individuals. Samples selected from a population of applicants for welfare can help reduce this bias, since individuals who are denied benefits or who do not follow through on their applications may also be affected by welfare reform policies, as may other eligible families who for various reasons do not apply for assistance. It is important to understand how child welfare risk for these low-income groups is affected by reforms, as well. Finally, the risk of involvement with the child welfare system among the general population could be indirectly affected by welfare reforms. For example, if reforms significantly reduce the involvement of groups traditionally overrepresented in child welfare systems (e.g., low-income families or welfare recipients), more resources might be redirected toward services for families with less severe cases of maltreatment.

Because child maltreatment is a relatively rare event, sample size is an important issue in studies of abuse and neglect. Even within populations where child protection intervention is known to be more likely, including low-income and welfare recipient families, very few experience so high a degree of risk or harm. The third National Incidence Study of child abuse and neglect (NIS-3) estimated an incidence of 23.1 to 41.9 per 1,000 children within the general U.S. population (using a conservative standard of harm and a more liberal standard of risk, respectively.)[11] Among children from families earning less than $15,000, the overall incidence of maltreatment rises to 47.0 per 1,000 under the "harm" standard and to 95.9 per 1,000 under the "risk" standard. These numbers make it more difficult for researchers studying child maltreatment, including study of "within-group" variation in maltreatment among certain subgroups (e.g., low-income families), because their sample sizes are often too small to capture many instances of abuse and neglect. Moreover, the estimates above reflect "actual" maltreatment as opposed to cases in which the child welfare system has been involved. Incidence rates will be even smaller in studies that examine formal child welfare cases.

Findings related to welfare reform and child welfare

The brief overview presented in Table 1 summarizes some of the findings regarding the welfare policy correlates of family involvement with the child welfare system. I have particularly selected results of multivariate analyses which control for other risk factors.[12]

What do we know?

The "design characteristics" column of Table 1 makes it clear that researchers assessing the connection between welfare and child welfare are doing so in very different ways. Although most research to date has assessed trends in the dynamics between public assistance and child welfare involvement, the populations researchers have examined are different; they include states, entrants to the welfare system, and children reported to the child welfare system.

Trends in reporting of maltreatment following welfare reform were different for different regions, though this difference may be an artifact of the study samples chosen. A study of child entrants to welfare in Illinois found that substantiated reports decreased after welfare reform legislation was passed (Goerge and Lee). Another study in Ohio that examined all children who became involved with the child welfare system (irrespective of previous welfare receipt) found an increase in the number of reports, more serious reports, and foster care placements from 1995 to 1998 (Wells, Guo, and Li).

In multivariate analyses reported in Table 1, poverty and welfare use (defined as welfare benefit level, welfare receipt, and/or length of time receiving welfare) were found to be positively associated with child maltreatment reports, substantiated reports, and/or foster care placements (see the studies by Paxson and Waldfogel, Goerge and Lee, and Needell and colleagues). States that adopted more stringent welfare policies (e.g., full grant sanctions, shorter time limits, and immediate work requirements) were more likely to show increases in out-of-home care (Paxson and Waldfogel).

Of the three studies involving in-person surveys, one, conducted prior to welfare reform, demonstrated that declines in welfare income were associated with an increased risk of child welfare intervention among unemployed respondents (Shook). The extent to which employment operated as a protective factor varied among the studies (Courtney, Piliavin, and Powers; Slack and colleagues). These distinct findings could relate to methodological shortcomings (e.g., Shook's survey had a low response rate and may therefore not be comparable to the other two investigations), differences in populations (Courtney and colleagues relied on welfare applicants, the other two studies on current welfare recipients), or differences in the research model (e.g., control variables in the studies were different and so were the measures of children's involvement with the child welfare system).

Consistent with findings from the trend studies described earlier, Slack and colleagues found that welfare receipt

Table 1
Welfare Reform and Child Welfare Systems: Selected Studies

Study	Design Characteristics	Main Findings
	Trend Studies	
C. Paxson and J. Waldfogel "Work, Welfare, and Child Maltreatment," Working Paper, Princeton University, February 2000. C. Paxson and J. Waldfogel "Welfare Reforms, Family Resources, and Child Maltreatment," In *The Incentives of Government Programs and the Well-Being of Families,* ed. B. Meyer and G. Duncan. Joint Center for Poverty Research, 2001.	State-level data from 1990 to 1998 on reports and substantiated reports of maltreatment, out-of-home placements, census data on socioeconomic characteristics of families, and welfare policies Fixed-effects methods used to adjust for unobserved state characteristics Controls for each year to address "history" effects	Increases in poverty rates were associated with increases in child maltreatment reports. Lower welfare benefits were associated with more child neglect reports, and more children in substitute care. Increases in fractions of children with absent fathers and working mothers, and with greater fractions of children with two working parents, were related to increases in child welfare involvement. The adoption of waivers prior to welfare reform was associated with small declines in physical and sexual abuse. Prior to welfare reform, states incorporating full family grant sanctions, immediate work requirements, and shorter lifetime limits had higher rates of maltreatment reports and/or substitute care populations.
R. M. Goerge and B. J. Lee "Changes in Social Program Participation in the 1990s: Initial Findings from Illinois," Working Paper, Joint Center for Poverty Research, 2000.	Administrative data on Illinois children who were first-time AFDC/TANF recipients in each year from 1991 to 1998 Examined substantiated abuse and neglect report and foster care placement rates for each entry cohort up to the end of 1998 Examined the changes in the rate patterns before and after welfare reform by using AFDC/TANF "entry" years	Between 1994 and 1996 child maltreatment substantiation rates remained constant; the rate decreased by 10% for the 1997 cohort, with no apparent increase for the 1998 cohort. Of those children who entered AFDC/TANF, children were more likely to have substantiated abuse/neglect reports while on AFDC/TANF than when they were not receiving aid. Also, children from higher-poverty communities were more likely to have a substantiated report than children from less impoverished communities. Children in an active AFDC/TANF case were twice as likely as children in inactive AFDC/TANF cases to enter foster care. Living in a higher-poverty community was also associated with an increased likelihood of foster care placement.
B. Needell, S. Cuccaro-Alamin, A. Brookhart, and S. Lee "Transitions from AFDC to Child Welfare in California," *Children and Youth Services Review* 9/10 (1999): 815–41.	Administrative data on California children entering AFDC in each year from 1990 to 1995 Child welfare involvement (reports, investigations, case openings, and foster care placements) during this time period	Children from single-parent cases had an increased risk of child welfare events. The length of time on AFDC was associated with increased risk of child welfare involvement. Breaks in Medicaid insurance coverage were associated with increased risks for reports, investigations, and case openings.
K. Wells, S. Guo, and F. Li *Impact of Welfare Reform on Foster Care and Child Welfare in Cuyahoga County, Ohio.* (Interim Report.) Case Western Reserve University, 2000.	Administrative data on children reported to the child welfare system from 1995 to 1998	From 1995 to 1998, there were increases in the number of reports, the number of more serious reports, the number of neglect reports, and in the number of children reported per 10,000. For the same time period, there were increases in the number of substantiated reports of maltreatment, in the number of foster care placements, and in the proportion of children referred to foster care. Increases in monthly maltreatment reports were associated with decreases in the welfare caseloads in the same month.

In-Person Surveys		
Shook, K. "Does the Loss of Welfare Income Increase the Risk of Involvement with the Child Welfare System?" *Children and Youth Services Review* 9/10 (1999): 781–814.	Survey data on 1995 current welfare recipients in Chicago, linked with administrative data on family-level welfare and child welfare involvement	Reduced welfare income during periods of unemployment increased the likelihood of having a substantiated report or case opening within a 14-month period following sample selection. This relationship was partially mediated by economic hardship.
K. S. Slack, J. Holl, B. J. Lee, L. Altenbernd, M. McDaniel, and A. B. Stevens "Child Protection Intervention in the Context of Welfare Reform," Working Paper, University of Wisconsin–Madison, School of Social Work, 2001.	Survey data on 1998 current TANF recipients in nine Illinois counties, linked with administrative data on family-level welfare and child welfare involvement	Respondents who received welfare in the previous month had an increased risk of a child maltreatment report, particularly indicated reports, within a 14-month period following the initial interview. Respondents with one or more children lacking health insurance coverage had a significantly increased risk of having an indicated maltreatment report.
M. Courtney, I. Piliavin, and P. Powers "Involvement of TANF Applicants with Child Protective Services," Discussion Paper 1229-01, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2001.	Survey data on 1999 TANF applicants in Milwaukee County, linked with administrative data on family-level welfare and child welfare involvement	Employment was a protective factor for child maltreatment reports during a 16-month period following the initial survey. Economic hardships increased the risk of having a maltreatment report.
Experimental Studies		
D. J. Fein and W. S. Lee *The ABC Evaluation: Impacts of Welfare Reform on Child Maltreatment.* Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates Inc., 2000.	Pre-welfare-reform (1995–1996) experimental evaluation of Delaware's welfare program, A Better Chance (ABC), which contains policies characteristic of PRWORA Only single-parent cases were involved in the evaluation	ABC increased the proportion of families with a substantiated neglect report in the first and third year of follow-up, but no statistically significant differences related to other forms of maltreatment. For some subgroups, ABC was associated with small decreases in physical and emotional abuse.
"Stakeholder" Studies		
R. Geen, L. Fender, J. Leos-Urbel, and T. Markowitz "Welfare Reform's Effect on Child Welfare Caseloads," Discussion Paper, Urban Institute, 2001.	In-depth case studies with welfare and child welfare stakeholders in multiple states and localities in 1997, with a follow-up in 1999	Respondents have not witnessed increases in child welfare caseloads that they attribute to welfare reform; however, they have observed adverse effects on families involved with both systems. Most felt that it is "too early to tell," since many families have not yet reached their time limits on TANF assistance.

was associated with an increased risk of involvement with the child welfare system. In Milwaukee County, there were no statistically significant differences between applicants who did not end up receiving welfare benefits and other groups of welfare recipients (Courtney and colleagues). Gaps in health insurance coverage were associated with an increased risk of child welfare intervention (Slack and colleagues, Needell and colleagues).

Perhaps the most powerful study to date on this topic is the experimental evaluation of Delaware's prereform welfare waiver demonstration, A Better Chance (Fein and Lee). In their evaluation, the proportion of families for which child neglect was substantiated was higher in the "treatment" group than in the group receiving traditional welfare services. Since neglect is the form of child maltreatment most associated with poverty and economic hardship, it is, arguably, the type of maltreatment most likely to be influenced by welfare reforms.[13]

The final study included in Table 1 involved interviews with "key child welfare stakeholders" in multiple regions (Geen and colleagues). Although this investigation did not find evidence that child welfare systems have been adversely affected by welfare reform, the resounding message these researchers heard from respondents was that it is "too early to tell"—a statement reiterated by most of the research teams in this overview. Nearly every study involving post-welfare-reform analyses cautioned that welfare reform has not yet been put to the test, given the positive trends in the economy during the early years following the passage of PRWORA.

What do we still need to know?

It does not yet seem possible to tell a coherent story about welfare reform and child welfare based on the early findings. This question is simply too important to stop asking, however. Several of the research investigations described in Table 1 are in their early phases, and other investigations are planned or underway. If the efforts of researchers interested in the effects of welfare reform on child endangerment and on child and family well-being more generally can be better coordinated and communicated, a more developed understanding of the connection between welfare reform and child welfare will undoubtedly emerge.

Recommendations

Shore up existing "safety nets" by increasing levels and flexibility of prevention funding

Because it is too early to know whether welfare reform will have serious consequences for child welfare systems, there are specific steps that we can take to ensure that the "front end" of child welfare is well positioned to deal with increased pressure from families experiencing hardship.[14]

Recommendations from experts include:

- reauthorizing the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program in the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF), in conjunction with a substantially increased budget;
- uncapping Emergency Assistance dollars (currently folded into TANF block grants), and then committing a substantial level of resources to this program;
- significantly increasing ACF's Social Services Block Grant (SSBG), which was reduced under PRWORA, and allowing federal reimbursements for SSBG funds to rise with inflation.

Since the research findings above suggest that families with different degrees of connection to the welfare system face risks to the welfare of their children, strategies should be developed for making prevention and support services widely available to families potentially affected by PRWORA reforms.

Support the implementation and continuation of longitudinal studies addressing child well-being

We are only recently witnessing a downturn in the U.S. economy. In conjunction with the social and political events of recent months, it is difficult to predict what will happen to both welfare and child welfare systems. Although welfare caseloads declined steadily during the 1990s, past evidence suggests that a rise in unemployment will likely lead to a rise in welfare assistance caseloads.[15] The historical overlap between welfare and child welfare systems suggests that we could begin seeing a similar trend in the latter system.

Since many of the effects of welfare reform and changes in the economy may not be immediate, it is critical to invest in longer-term studies of current and former welfare recipients, and of low-income families in general. It is also important to refine our measures of child maltreatment for assessing child well-being in the context of welfare research. If clearer and more consistent definitions of maltreatment can be applied in empirical investigations, particularly in prospective studies, we will greatly enhance our understanding of the etiology of maltreatment and be better able to sort out the differential effects of welfare reform on the risks of child maltreatment and child welfare intervention.

Support federal waiver demonstrations that relax TANF requirements and provide additional supports for certain families

At some point, "welfare reform" will simply become "welfare" in the vernacular. We are no longer able to implement rigorous experimental evaluations of PRWORA's impact, since the reforms are already in place. However, we are able to consider experimental studies that mirror the waiver demonstrations preceding PRWORA. In an era of more restrictive welfare policies,

what benefits emerge when certain TANF requirements are relaxed for families struggling to make ends meet? What advantages might be produced for families given more intensive support services *to specifically enhance child and family well-being* (and not simply labor force attachment)? As we learn more about which families face the greatest risk for child maltreatment and child welfare intervention, and which families are least successful in the welfare-to-work transition, we should be able to target initiatives such as these very effectively. ■

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[1]K. Shook, "Assessing the Consequences of Welfare Reform for Child Welfare," *Poverty Research News* (Joint Center for Poverty Research) 2, no. 1 (1998): 8–12; A. Russell and C. Trainor, *Trends in Child Abuse and Neglect: A National Perspective* (Denver, CO: American Humane Association, 1984); E. Jones and R. McCurdy, "The Links Between Types of Maltreatment and Demographic Characteristics of Children," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 16, no. 2 (1992): 201–15.

[2]U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, *Child Maltreatment 1998: Reports from the States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System*, Washington, DC, 2000; A. Sedlak and D. Broadhurst, *Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, Final Report*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Washington, DC, 1996; C. Coulton, J. Korbin, M. Su, and J. Chow, "Community Level Factors and Child Maltreatment Rates," *Child Development* 66 (1995): 1262–76; B. Drake and S. Pandey, "Understanding the Relationship between Neighborhood Poverty and Specific Types of Maltreatment," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 20 (1996): 1003–18.

[3]M. Ellwood and L. Ku, "Welfare and Immigration Reforms: Unintended Side Effects for Medicaid," *Health Affairs* 1713 (1998): 137–51.

[4]Shook, "Assessing the Consequences of Welfare Reform for Child Welfare"; D. Fein and W. Lee, *The ABC Evaluation: Impacts of Welfare Reform on Child Maltreatment*, Abt Associates Inc., Cambridge, MA, 2000.

[5]Sedlak and Broadhurst, *Third National Incidence Study*.

[6]D. Barnett, J. Manly, and D. Cicchetti, "Defining Child Maltreatment: The Interface between Policy and Research," in *Child Abuse, Child Development, and Social Policy: Advances in Applied Developmental Psychology, Vol. 8*, ed. D. Cicchetti and S. Toth (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1993).

[7]C. Paxson and J. Waldfogel, "Work, Welfare, and Child Maltreatment," Working Paper, Princeton University, February 2000; C. Paxson and J. Waldfogel, "Welfare Reforms, Family Resources, and Child Maltreatment," in *The Incentives of Government Programs and the Well-Being of Families*, ed. B. Meyer and G. Duncan (Evanston, IL: Joint Center for Poverty Research, 2001); R. Goerge and B. Lee, "Changes in Social Program Participation in the 1990s: Initial Findings from Illinois," Working Paper, Joint Center for Poverty Research, Evanston, IL, 2000.

[8]The "timing" issue also depends on the research question. If the goal is to assess the *impact* of welfare reform, then a prereform sample is required. However, such a sample will, over time, be less characteristic of the group of current TANF recipients. If the goal is to understand the current welfare context and its effects on families, a postreform sample may be more appropriate.

[9]There are important confidentiality issues in any research involving linkages between survey data and administrative data. These are a critical point to consider in the design phase of studies that address family and child well-being, since it is often very difficult to obtain informed consent from study participants for access to administrative data at a later stage of a study (e.g., because of attrition).

[10]Fein and Lee, *The ABC Evaluation*.

[11]Sedlak and Broadhurst, *Third National Incidence Study*.

[12]A new report synthesizing much of this research is R. Hutson, *Red Flags: Research Raises Concerns about the Impact of "Welfare Reform" on Child Maltreatment*, Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington, DC, 2001.

[13]Sedlak and Broadhurst, *Third National Incidence Study*.

[14]R. Bess, J. Leos-Urbel, and R. Geen, *The Cost of Protecting Vulnerable Children II: What Has Changed since 1996?* Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2001; M. Courtney, "The Costs of Child Protection in the Context of Welfare Reform," *The Future of Children* 8, no. 1 (1998): 88–103.

[15]N. Bernstein, "Reliance on Welfare Windfall May Prove Costly for State and City, Report Warns," *New York Times*, July 31, 2001.

Child care for low-income working families

Barbara Wolfe and Deborah Lowe Vandell

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In the United States today, over 60 percent of children under four, and around half of children two years old or younger, are in regularly scheduled child care outside their homes. These numbers reflect swift and radical changes in American family life—as recently as 1970, barely 30 percent of children under five were in child care—and signal, in part, the entry of large numbers of women with children into the labor force.[1]

The sea change in American mothers' roles was acknowledged in the 1996 welfare legislation, which imposed work requirements on single mothers, even with very young children, who apply for assistance. But in spelling out the mother's obligation to work, most state governments have also accepted, as a corollary, the government's obligation to provide work supports. The most important of these has been child care. Again, change has been rapid and substantial. Between 1995 and 2000, for example, spending for child care rose, on average, from around 14 percent to 38 percent of state welfare budgets in the seven midwestern states that belong to the Welfare Peer Assistance Network (see the WELPAN article in this *Focus*).

In fiscal year 2000, U.S. states expended a total of $8 billion for child care. Over $6 billion of that amount came from the federal government, including $5.1 billion from the Child Care and Development Fund and $1 billion in direct spending under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. These funds are used to assist low-income families, families on TANF, and those moving off assistance to pay for child care, through vouchers or direct payments to providers, so that they can work or attend training and education programs.

The substantial increases in public expenditure have taken place in a rather ad hoc and piecemeal fashion, as both federal and state governments have scrambled to adjust to the newly restructured world of social assistance, without coherent national child care policies to guide them.[2] Devolution of responsibility to state and local government is, of course, central to the federal welfare reform law, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. But at all levels of government, policymakers must justify the continuance of large expenditures of government funds. And to guide the effective deployment of such funds, they require clear answers to some important and very specific questions about nonparental child care. These questions include: (1) does high-quality child care improve child developmental outcomes, (2) does high-quality child care impact parental employment, (3) is there a case for public investment in improving child care, and (4) what might be done to provide higher-quality child care?

Does high-quality child care improve child developmental outcomes?

One reason for providing public funds is that high-quality child care supports or enhances developmental outcomes for children who are at risk because of poverty. From the 1960s on, the federal government has become an influential presence in the child care arena. Head Start, for example, extended preschool services to poor families, and various federal subsidy programs for child care were established. Evaluations of a small cluster of early childhood interventions offer evidence that enriched and intensive child care programs for low-income, "high-risk" preschool children have potentially powerful and long-lasting effects. The best-known are the Carolina Abecedarian Project, the Perry Preschool Project, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers.[3] Children who participated in the Chicago centers, a large-scale public project involving thousands of children in the poorest Chicago neighborhoods, had better math and reading scores year after year. By age 20 they were more likely to have completed high school and to have lower rates of juvenile criminal activity than children not in the program.

These early intervention projects were not viewed by their designers as child care, but as educational programs. High-quality child care, however, may serve as an educational intervention. There is a substantial body of child care research during the past 20 years that has found higher-quality care to be associated with better cognitive, language, and social development for children, and lower-quality care with poorer outcomes in these areas.

The studies measured child care quality in two main ways. The first is by actually observing what happens in child care settings—children's interactions with caregivers and other children, particular activities such as language stimulation, and health and safety measures. These features are described as indicators of *process quality*, which is scored by widely accepted rating scales. The second set of indicators measures the *structural characteristics* of the child care setting and the quality of

the caregivers: the size of the group of children, the ratio of children to adult caregivers, and the formal education and training of the caregivers.

In the short term, while children are in care, both types of measures are related to how well children do. Taking into account both the gender of the child and family factors, researchers find that children appear happier, have closer and more secure attachments to their caregivers, and perform better on cognitive and language tests in settings where process quality is higher, that is, where activities are developmentally appropriate and caregivers are emotionally supportive and responsive to their needs. In contrast, poor process quality appears to predict heightened behavioral problems.

Structural quality is also related to children's performance. Children in classrooms with lower child:adult ratios were better able to understand, initiate, and participate in conversations, had better general knowledge, were more cooperative, and in their interactions with each other showed much less hostility and conflict than in settings where there were more children to each adult. On average, preschoolers are in general more ready for school when their caregivers are better educated and trained—they perform better on standard tests, have better language skills, and are more persistent in completing tasks.

Researchers also have considered longer-term associations between high-quality child care and children's language skills and social development. In the NICHD Study of Early Child Care, process quality during the first 4.5 years was related to children's expressive and receptive language skills at age four and a half. The Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study found that children enrolled in higher-quality child care as preschoolers displayed better math skills through second grade; the effect was greater for the children of less-educated mothers.[4]

Are these associations large enough to be meaningful? The NICHD study suggests that they are, but its parallel analysis of developmental effects associated with the home environment offers useful perspective. For three-year-olds and four-and-a-half-year-olds, developmental outcomes associated with the home environment are roughly twice as great as the effects associated with child care quality. For young children, it appears, the family remains the most important determinant of development.

Does high-quality child care affect parental employment?

A second rationale for public support is the evidence that high-quality child care affects parents' employment. Evidence on the relationship between child care quality and employment is limited, but it suggests that, among low-income women, high-quality care may increase the likelihood and stability of employment and hours of work. Mothers in the Infant Health and Development Program, an intervention program providing center-based care for low-birthweight infants, were significantly more likely to be working than mothers in the control group, and the effect was greater for less-educated than for better-educated women.

There is complementary evidence of the negative effects of poor-quality care on employment: nearly a third of teenaged mothers participating in one experiment, the Teenage Parent Demonstration, reported that unsatisfactory quality of child care had led them to stop working or to change hours and activities.[5]

Is there a case for public investment in improving child care?

In making a decision about whether additional public investments are warranted, policymakers should consider if high-quality care is the norm or the exception. Because there are no nationally representative studies, we must rely upon suggestive evidence from multisite studies. Perhaps the best available evidence of *process quality* comes from the NICHD study, which conducted observations in over 600 nonmaternal child care settings of all kinds (grandparents, in-home care, child care homes, and centers). Extrapolating their findings to a national sample of American families, researchers estimated that, among child care settings for children younger than three, 8 percent were poor, 53 percent fair, 30 percent good, and 9 percent excellent—in other words, not terrible, but not outstanding, and plenty of room for improvement.

The quality of child care can also be estimated by the extent to which states adhere to age-based guidelines, such as those established by professional organizations like the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Public Health Association. Only three states, for example, mandate the recommended 3:1 infant:adult ratio. Some states are at substantial odds with the standards; eight states permit an infant:adult ratio of 6:1. Overall, there is much variability among states. For example, recommended state child:staff ratios for four-year-olds range from 6:1 to 20:1.[6]

The education and training of caregivers also varies considerably. In 1990, 34 percent of regulated home child care providers had no schooling beyond high school and only about two-thirds had received any in-service training. In contrast, nearly half of caregivers in centers had completed college and 90 percent had received at least 10 hours of in-service training.[7]

Over the 1990s, there appears to have been some decline in the educational background and training of child care

staff in the centers. The NICHD study found that only about two-thirds of caregivers for infants and toddlers had more than a high school diploma, and just over half had received specialized training during the preceding year. The decline may be related to the generally low wages in the child care field. These did not improve during the 1990s. Teachers averaged between $13,125 and $18,988 for full-week, full-year employment, assistant teachers only $6–$7 an hour. In 1997, 27 percent of teachers and 39 percent of assistants said that they had left their jobs in the previous year, and 20 percent of centers reported losing half or more of their staff.[8]

These figures suggest that child care needs to be improved. Can improvement occur by letting the marketplace provide the solutions?

In the child care sector, there are two primary reasons that the market is unlikely to do so. The first is lack of information. In part because the market is made up of many small providers, it is difficult for parents to compare quality, cost, and availability of care, and they are often unsure how to evaluate the information they do acquire. Considerations of convenience, time, and access mean that parents may limit their search to small geographic areas; these problems are particularly acute for low-income families and for those who need care for odd-hours employment.

The second reason that the market fails is what economists call "externalities" (effects beyond the primary consumers). The benefits of high-quality care accrue to society generally, as well as to parents and children. These benefits include lower costs for elementary and later schooling, as children enter school better prepared; less crime, as juvenile delinquency diminishes; and increased productivity and lower need for social services, as working parents (and their employers) face fewer absences and disruptions occasioned by child care problems. The family and social costs of poor-quality, unsafe, and unhealthy child care are apparent.

Government intervention may also be justified on the grounds of equity and equality of opportunity. This is especially important today, in view of the necessity for most low-income single parents to work. There are two primary issues here. First, if high-quality child care improves cognitive ability, school readiness, and social behavior, children in poor families should be given the same opportunity to benefit as children in well-off families. Parents with limited earnings cannot afford high-quality care. Unless financial help is forthcoming, they may have to use poor-quality care, including multiple and unstable arrangements that may put their children's safety at risk, increase family stress, and reduce children's readiness for school.

Second, low-income parents' choices of child care are constrained by the structure of the low-wage labor market, which fits very poorly with the structure of more formal child care options. Almost half of working-poor parents work on a rotating or changing schedule. Those employed through temporary agencies and in unskilled or low-wage service jobs typically work irregular and unpredictable hours. More than a fourth of working-class mothers in the National Child Care Survey worked weekends. Yet only 10 percent of centers and 6 percent of family day care homes provide weekend care. These circumstances, again, may make it necessary for parents to patch together child care using multiple providers, sometimes of lower quality than they would prefer.[9] Because the demand for high-quality care is too low, pay for child care workers is very low, and better-trained providers will tend to seek employment in other spheres.

These arguments in favor of an active government role, both as provider and funder of services, are not so very different from the arguments for a government role in elementary and secondary schooling. These are mandatory, and are provided or subsidized by the public sector. Market failure and constraints on choices by low-income families both justify a similar public-sector intervention to improve the quality of young child care, which otherwise finds itself in a downward spiral.

What might be done to improve the quality of child care?

Potential public-sector interventions for improving the quality of child care can take many forms. They include provision of information, licensing requirements, placement activities, training programs for providers, subsidies to child care workers, tax credits for lower-to-middle-income families, and even direct provision of care. In the longer run, research continues to be necessary to identify the most effective ways to improve the quality of care; these may differ for children from different backgrounds.

The minimum role of the public sector is that of provider of information on available services and their characteristics, on the costs of care and education, and on the training of providers. Many states need to strengthen minimum standards, and states might create certification and incentive programs for providers who meet certain requirements.

A more ambitious role for the state involves provision of training programs and training subsidies, either for child care providers or for those entering the field of early childhood education. There is a long tradition of such subsidy programs when shortages are anticipated; examples include nursing and medical education. Other possibilities include college loan forgiveness programs for those who spend a period of time as a child care provider after obtaining a degree. Programs to raise sala-

ries would certainly increase the pool of qualified providers, as is suggested by the fact that higher-paying centers have lower staff turnover. Tax credits to parents, subsidy programs, and direct payment to providers might all achieve this goal. Turnover among providers might be reduced by paying bonuses for a specified number of years of service.

Models for programs to improve child care quality exist. Here are two examples:

- In 1993, the state of North Carolina began a broad-based community initiative, Smart Start, a partnership among state government, local communities, service providers, and families.[10] On the basis of competitive review, 12 county partnerships, comprising over 180 child care centers, received funds for new and improved child care services. Surveys in 1994 and 1996 demonstrated that, on average, centers engaged in about five different improvement activities, which included training workshops, on-site consultation or technical assistance, purchase of new equipment and educational materials and the establishment of lending libraries, improvement of services for children with disabilities, transportation aid, higher subsidy rates, and subsidy increases if the provider met higher standards. The program significantly improved quality in the centers that participated. In 1994, only 14 percent of centers were rated as "good-quality"; in 1996, 25 percent were. And these improvements were linked to the cognitive, language, and social skills of children in participating centers.
- The federal Department of Labor offers a child care apprenticeship program in West Virginia that includes 4,000 hours of supervised on-the-job training and 300 hours of classroom instruction. Apprentices earn while training and receive incremental wage increases as their skills and knowledge increase. Employers report almost no turnover among these apprentice providers, who report themselves highly satisfied with their careers.[11]

How widespread, and effective, are subsidies to parents and providers? In 1999, about 1.5 million children in poor families, around 10 percent of those said to be eligible, were receiving child care subsidies. Federal law permits children living in families with up to 85 percent of median income to receive such subsidies, but states have set the bar lower. Eligibility, access, and outreach vary among the states, and so do take-up rates. Yet there is clear evidence that families do respond to available subsidies, and the arrangement they most frequently choose is center-based child care.[12] The profile of arrangements used by low-income parents receiving subsidies is strikingly different from that of all low-income families.

The form in which the subsidy is administered makes a difference. If low-income families received reimbursement 30–60 days after they had paid their child care obligations, their patterns of use resembled those of unsubsidized families. In contrast, families that received subsidies through programs that either directly paid providers or enabled families to pay when fees were due were much more likely to use center-based and formal family day care arrangements. Nor does the evidence suggest that subsidized children were receiving lower-quality care than that received by higher-income, fee-paying children.[13]

More ambitiously, we ask: How might we construct a program of universal child care for preschool children of working parents? Such a program could expand existing prekindergarten programs to a full day and include after-school care, combining direct provision through local school districts, existing community-based programs, and vouchers that would be accepted by certified providers. Part of the costs of this care would be offset by eliminating tax credits and current government subsidies for three- and four-year-olds. States and local communities would decide on the details of care, and financing would be shared across all levels of government. For toddlers, coordinated, high-quality care might also include family child care networks. For infants, the high cost of nonparental care suggests the possibility of subsidies for a parental leave program that might allow a mother or father to stay home to care for an infant during the first year. Models of such programs exist within other nations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The cost of improving quality

What levels of investment might be necessary to improve the quality of child care in the United States? Several studies of the cost of improving structural quality shed some light on the relationship between quality and cost. Two studies using data from a 1989 survey of 265 accredited early childhood education centers were able to estimate the costs associated with changing the child:adult ratio, the size of the group, and staff characteristics (education, experience, and turnover rate).[14] Researchers found that:

1. Decreasing the average child:adult ratio by one is associated with increased costs of roughly 4.5 percent. If the average center, with 50 children and an average annual per-child cost of $6,500, were to reduce the child:staff ratio from 11:1 to 10:1, the annual cost per child would increase by about $306.
2. A one-year increase in the average educational level of the staff is associated with a 3.4 percent increase in total costs, including a 5.8 percent increase in wages.
3. A one-year increase in average staff experience is associated with a reduction in costs of 0.6 percent, even including a 2.3 percent increase in the wage bill.

4. Finally, the effect of high staff turnover is clear: the departure of an additional 20 percent of a center's teaching staff increases costs by 6.8 percent.

These data are 12 years old. Moreover, they include only accredited centers in the Midwest and South, accepting children aged four and five, and results may not be applicable to unaccredited centers. But somewhat more recent data collected in 1993–94 from 401 child care centers in four states also indicate statistically significant relationships between cost and quality.[15] Increasing center quality by 25 percent (from mediocre to good) is associated with about a 10 percent increase in total variable costs—approximately $346 per child per year.[16] Given an average center size, in this study, of 60 children, total costs would increase by about $20,700 per year.

Despite their limited representation, these studies provide us with a useful starting point. But research incorporating more current and nationally representative data will clearly be important to evaluating public policy strategies to improve the quality of child care. And none of these studies includes the investment that is likely to be the least expensive approach to improving quality: caregiver training, including in-service training. Common sense and existing evidence alike suggest that better-trained caretakers provide higher-quality care, but we are at present unable to attach any kind of cost estimate to such training.

The evidence is strong that "experiences starting at birth shape a child's personality, social skills, and self-esteem, and these are all factors in children's success in preschool and beyond."[17] This perception, along with the greatly increased time that children, especially children of low-income mothers, are spending in child care, makes the issue of investing in quality child care all the more important. Since society has decided that low-income single mothers should be in the workplace, and society has expressed a willingness to subsidize child care, the question remains whether the dollars are being spent most effectively in terms of the children who are being cared for. The studies reviewed here suggest there are substantial avenues for improvement of care and for more effective expenditures. ■

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[1]National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, ed. J. Shonkoff and D. Phillips (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Healthy Child Care America: Blueprint for Action*, Washington, DC, 1996.

It is important, however, to put these statistics in perspective. Even as the numbers of working women have grown, child care has remained very much a family matter. Care of children by other family members, especially grandparents but sometimes also older siblings, plays a large and continuing role. In 1965, around half of working, ever-married, low-income women relied on relatives to care for young children. In 1999, a study of participants in Wisconsin's welfare program, Wisconsin Works, found that about the same percentage of women in the program were relying on relatives to care for their young children. See B. Wolfe and S. Scrivner, "Child Care Use and Quality among a Low-Income Population," unpublished paper, Institute for Research on Poverty, 2001.

[2]According to a recent issue of *The Future of Children*, for example, the United States has almost no policies aimed specifically at supporting families as they nurture infants and toddlers. *Caring for Infants and Toddlers, The Future of Children* 11, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2001), on the David and Lucile Packard Foundation World Wide Web site, < http://www.futureofchildren.org/pubs-info2825/pubs-info.htm?doc_id=79324 >

[3]C. Ramey, F. Campbell, and C. Blair, "Enhancing the Life Course for High-Risk Children: Results from the Abecedarian Project," in *Social Programs That Really Work*, ed. J. Crane (New York: Sage Publishing, 1998); L. Schweinhart, H. Barnes, D. Weikart, and others, *Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 27* (Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press, 1993); A. Reynolds, J. Temple, D. Robertson, and E. Mann, "Long-Term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest: A 15-year Follow-up of Low-Income Children in Public Schools," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285, no. 18 (May 9, 2001): 2378–80.

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[8]Vandell and Wolfe, *Child Care Quality*, Table 12; M. Whitebook, C. Howes, and D. Phillips, *Worthy Work, Unlivable Wages: The National Child Care Staffing Study, 1988–1997*, Center for the Child Care Workforce, Washington, DC, 1998.

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[10]D. Bryant, K. Maxwell, and M. Burchinal, "Effects of a Community Initiative on the Quality of Child Care," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 14 (1999): 449–64.

[11]U.S. Department of Labor, *Meeting the Needs of Today's Workforce: Child Care Best Practices*, Washington, DC, 1998, on the Web at < http://www.dol.gov/dol/wb/public/childcare/child3.pdf >

[12]Phillips, *Child Care for Low-Income Families.* Among the various kinds of nonparental child care, the emphasis has changed somewhat (see Wolfe and Scrivner, "Child Care Use and Quality"). In 1965, only 3.8 percent of poor mothers used child care centers or professionals; nearly a quarter used a sitter or some kind of informal family care. In contrast, over a third of poor Wisconsin mothers (that is, mothers with

Income Volatility and Implications for Food Assistance Programs
IRP/ERS Conference, May 2002

The Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison, and the Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, will sponsor a research conference to be held in Washington, DC, on May 2–3, 2002.

A goal of means testing is to maximize the coverage of benefits to eligible recipients while minimizing the leakage of benefits to those not in the targeted group. As eligibility requirements become more precisely defined or strictly enforced, leakage is reduced but administrative costs and participant burden increase. For programs requiring a large amount of documentation, some eligible recipients may decide that the costs associated with benefit receipt are too high. These tradeoffs are present in all means-tested transfer programs. The focus of the conference is on how income volatility affects these tradeoffs for domestic food assistance programs. Participants and papers to be presented are listed below.

This invitation-only conference is organized by John Karl Scholz and James P. Ziliak on behalf of IRP, and Dean Jolliffe and Craig Gundersen on behalf of ERS. For further information: Betty Evanson, phone 608 262-6358; e-mail: evanson@ssc.wisc.edu.

Income Instability and Food Stamp Use
Stephanie Aaronson, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System

WIC Participation
Marianne Bitler, Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco and RAND; *Janet Currie*, UCLA; *John Karl Scholz*, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Income Volatility and Consumption Inequality
Richard Blundell, University College, London, and Institute for Fiscal Studies

Job and Earnings Instability: Consequences for Transfer Program Use
John Fitzgerald, Bowdoin College

The Evolution of Food Stamps in Consumption Stabilization
Craig Gundersen, Economic Research Service; *James P. Ziliak*, University of Oregon

Short Recertification Periods in the U.S. Food Stamp Program: Causes and Consequences
Nader S. Kabbani and *Parke E. Wilde*, Economic Research Service

Measuring Levels and Changes in Well-Being for the Poor Using Income and Consumption
Bruce D. Meyer and *James X. Sullivan*, Northwestern University

Welfare Dynamics and Transfer Program Participation: Evidence from the Three-City Study
Robert Moffitt, Johns Hopkins University

Gateways into the Food Stamp Program
Aaron Yelowitz, University of Kentucky

incomes below the poverty line) were using child care centers in 1999, and only about 6 percent were using sitters or family care. Those using child care centers were more likely to receive full-year subsidies than those using other forms of care.

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[15]S. Helburn and others, *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers. Public Report*, Center for Research on Economic and Social Policy, University of Colorado, Denver, 1995.

[16]Variable costs are the costs of running a center—personnel costs, food, etc. Fixed costs include, e.g., costs for buildings. For child care, the bulk of costs must be variable costs.

[17]The comment is by Mary Larner, editor of *Caring for Infants and Toddlers, The Future of Children* 11, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2001). It appears on the Packard Foundation's Web site (see note 2, above).

Early childhood interventions: Knowledge, practice, and policy

Arthur J. Reynolds

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Over 35 years ago, the planning committee for Project Head Start issued a report that served as the foundation for our country's first federal preschool program. This February 1965 report explained that

> successful programs of this type must be comprehensive, involving activities generally associated with the fields of health, social services and education. . . . the program must focus on the problems of child and parent and . . . these activities need to be carefully integrated with programs for the school years.[1]

This forward-looking statement is still the vision for early childhood interventions, which today are seen as one of the most effective ways to prevent learning difficulties and to promote healthy development and well-being, especially among low-income children. Preschool programs are a centerpiece of many school and social reforms, and expenditures for them are likely to increase beyond the $15 billion now devoted annually to federal and state programs.[2] The main attraction of early childhood interventions is their potential for prevention and their cost-effectiveness, especially when compared to the well-known limits of remediation and treatment.

For this article, early childhood intervention is broadly defined as the provision of some combination of educational, family, health, and social services during any of the first eight years of life to children who face socioenvironmental disadvantages or developmental disabilities and thus are at risk of poor outcomes. Research on early childhood intervention is one of the most vibrant areas of inquiry in child development, spanning the fields of psychology, education, human development, nursing, pediatrics, and social welfare. Because the knowledge base is large, multidisciplinary, and fractured, a discussion of key advances and underdeveloped areas may help integrate emerging themes for a new era in education and human services policy.

The effectiveness of early childhood intervention: What we know

There have been three major advances in our knowledge about early childhood interventions over the past decade.

First, we know that a wide variety of programs have beneficial short- and long-term effects on child development. In the short term, children in well-implemented intervention programs consistently show higher levels of cognitive development, early school achievement, and motivation than children who do not participate. They are less likely to be held back or to need special education services during the elementary grades and, in the long term, they are more likely to finish school and to do better academically. Some studies have found that participating children have lower rates of antisocial behavior, delinquency, and crime and a better record of employment and economic success in adulthood than children who have not been in the programs. Participation also appears to be related to better nutrition, preventive health care, and family functioning.[3]

These positive effects generally hold for both model and large-scale programs. Nevertheless, the quality of large-scale programs continues to be uneven, and the evidence that they have longer-term effects on educational attainment, antisocial behavior, and adult outcomes is much weaker than the evidence for model programs. This is especially the case for Head Start.[4]

Second, both the timing and duration of intervention matter. The most effective programs are those that begin during the first three years of life, continue for multiple years, and provide support to families.[5] It is not surprising that this is so. Early entry provides greater opportunities to intervene before learning difficulties develop and at a time when children's cognitive, language, and motor skills are changing rapidly. Studies of two long-term programs, the Carolina Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Child-Parent Center (CPC) Program, reinforce the advantages of early participation: children who participated only in the preschool program did better and needed fewer remedial services than children who participated only in the school-age interventions. Moreover, in both programs, the largest effects accrued to children whose participation continued to second or third grade, confirming a basic premise of many developmental theories, that the duration of an intervention can matter at least as much as its timing.[6]

Third, a major developmental mechanism driving the long-term effects of early intervention is the cognitive and scholastic advantage that children in the programs experience. In other words, children's developed abilities, enhanced by participating in these programs, generate cumulative advantages: better classroom adjustment and school commitment, and less likelihood of grade retention, special education placement, and school mobility.[7]

Questions for a new age of intervention research

Despite the advances in our understanding of early childhood intervention programs, we still have no answers to many questions that were raised as early as the 1970s.[8] In particular:

1. What are the causal mechanisms and pathways through which different early childhood interventions promote long-term success?
2. For whom are existing programs most effective? Which program features are most associated with success?
3. What are the effects of contemporary public programs over time? Can confidence in research findings be strengthened to support policy decisions?

Many questions regarding the precise roles played by characteristics of the child, the family, and the program in determining children's outcomes are far from settled. Studies of the comparative effects of program curricula have also been limited mostly to model programs and children in poverty. Finally, a clear need exists for more and better evidence of the longer-term effects of large-scale and public programs, especially considering how diverse they are today.[9]

There are two reasons for our limited understanding of the mechanisms through which early intervention achieves its effects. First, investments in research and evaluation have been and continue to be low. In 1996, Head Start spent one-third of 1 percent of its federal expenditure on research and evaluation. This percentage is nearly identical to that allocated for all educational and social programs for children and youth in the United States.[10] In contrast, in the sectors of transportation, energy, and biomedical science, 2 to 3 percent of total expenditures are devoted to research and development, a rate 6 to 10 times greater than for social programs.

A second reason has been the predominant perspective in evaluation methodology, which has emphasized the main effects and internal validity of programs, and has tended to neglect study of moderating and mediating mechanisms and of ways in which successful features of a program can be replicated in other areas or with other population groups. Recently, however, theory-driven approaches have contributed to a greater appreciation of the value of explanatory and multiple methodologies in evaluation research.[11] One such approach, Confirmatory Program Evaluation, allows researchers to arrive at a better understanding of how social and educational programs achieve their effects.[12]

The advantages of Confirmatory Program Evaluation

In a theory-driven impact evaluation, researchers examine the explicit theory underlying the program to establish an a priori model of how the program *should* exert its influence. By comparing the empirical findings with the expectations for the program, the research seeks to reduce uncertainty about the causes of particular effects.

In a confirmatory evaluation, researchers might typically (1) specify a program theory and process that are expected to affect outcomes, (2) identify and measure outcomes for indexing the largest and smallest effects of participation, (3) collect data on causal mechanisms and on key background factors, (4) estimate the main effects of program participation and differential effects by relevant subgroups, (5) investigate the gradient, specificity, consistency, and coherence of the relationship between features of the program and its outcomes, with an emphasis on testing causal mechanisms, and (6) interpret the pattern of findings in such a way as to make it easier to generalize them and use them to improve the program.

Three key questions addressed in Confirmatory Program Evaluation are:

1. Is participation in the program independently and consistently associated with key outcomes?
2. What are the processes or pathways through which participation leads to children's outcomes?
3. Do the effects that we estimate depend on particular attributes of the child or the family, or on particular program components?

Using a confirmatory evaluation approach, an evaluator can explicate or test the size of the program effect; the program outcomes that yield the largest as well as the smallest effects; the consistency of effects across subgroups, models, and analyses; the causal mechanisms or pathways through which the estimated effects are manifested; and the factors that may influence how children are selected into the program and how well it is implemented. Confirmatory Program Evaluation is thus a cost-effective approach to answering questions about programs in circumstances where traditional random-assignment experimental methods are not feasible.

Examples from the Chicago Longitudinal Study

The capacity of Confirmatory Program Evaluation to answer complex questions about the effectiveness of large-scale, public, social and educational programs can be demonstrated from the Chicago Longitudinal Study, an extensive, ongoing study of a large-scale early childhood intervention, the CPC Program in Chicago public schools.[13] The examples in this article address three major questions about the effectiveness of CPC: (1) What are the pathways through which the program exerts long-term effects on children's development? (2) Who is benefitting most from participation? (3) How consistent are the estimated effects?

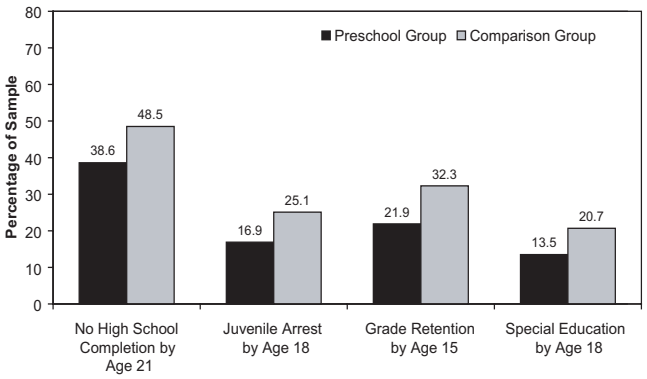

Figure 1. CPC preschool participation and four indicators of well-being at ages 18–20.

The Chicago Longitudinal Study includes 989 low-income, mostly African American children who entered the program in preschool and finished kindergarten in 1986 and 550 children from similarly disadvantaged neighborhoods who participated in an alternative all-day kindergarten program in the Chicago schools (this was the "treatment as usual" at the time). The groups were well matched according to their eligibility for intervention, family socioeconomic status, gender, and race and ethnicity. At age 20 (in 2000), 1,281 children (83 percent of the original sample) remained active in the study.

The CPC program is a center-based early intervention that provides comprehensive educational and family-support services to economically disadvantaged children from preschool to the early elementary grades (0 to 6 years). The central goal of the program is "to reach the child and parent early, develop language skills and self-confidence, and to demonstrate that these children, if given a chance, can meet successfully all the demands of today's technological, urban society."[14]

CPC is the second oldest federally funded preschool program (after Head Start) and the oldest extended childhood intervention. Each CPC site is under the direction of a head teacher and is located near or in an elementary school. For children, the program offers a structured and diverse set of language-based instructional activities, including field trips, that are designed to promote academic and social success. CPC also supports a multifaceted parent program that includes participating in parent-room activities, volunteering in the classroom, attending school events, and enrolling in educational courses for personal development, all under the supervision of a Parent-Resource Teacher. Outreach activities coordinated by a School-Community Representative include resource mobilization, home visitation, and enrollment of children most in need. Finally, a comprehensive school-age program from first to third grade supports children's transition to elementary school through reduced class sizes, teacher aides in each class, extra instructional supplies, and coordination of instructional activities, staff development, and parent-program activities organized by a Curriculum–Parent Resource Teacher.

Overall, there is clear evidence that CPC has been both successful and cost-effective. Consistently, measures of participation in the program have been significantly associated with key indicators that CPC is meeting its goals. For example, children who participated in the preschool program were, by ages 18–20, 29 percent more likely than the comparison group to have completed school, and had a 33 percent lower rate of juvenile arrest and a 40 percent lower rate of special education placement and grade retention (Figure 1). The length of children's participation in the program was also associated with significantly lower rates of grade retention, special education, and arrest for violent offenses.[15] The preschool program provided a return to society of $7.10 per dollar invested by increasing economic well-being and tax revenues, and by reducing public expenditures for remedial education, criminal justice treatment, and crime victims. The extended intervention program (4 to 6 years of participation) provided a return to society of $6.09, and the school-age program a return of $1.66, for each dollar invested.

1. Pathways of program effects

Figure 2 depicts the pathways through which early childhood intervention programs may be expected to promote social competence in adolescents. Out of the five primary hypotheses concerning these pathways, the Chicago Longitudinal Study has provided solid empirical evidence for three—cognitive advantage, school support, and family support.[16]

Table 1 examines the pathways by which two program indicators, preschool participation and length of time in the program, influence two long-term outcomes, school achievement at age 14 and the likelihood of school dropout before age 19. For school achievement, the cognitive advantage hypothesis contributes the most to the explanation of CPC effects, accounting for 21 percent of the total effects of preschool participation and almost 60 percent of the indirect effects of years in the program. Preschool participants started kindergarten more ready to learn than children who did not participate; this advantage directly carried over to later school achievement, above and beyond the effects of other intervening variables and apparently diffused throughout the schooling process, for example, by promoting positive classroom adjustment.[17]

Table 1 also shows that the cognitive readiness of preschool participants worked in conjunction with school quality, defined as the number of years children attended schools in which relatively high proportions of students scored at or above the national achievement norms. Moreover, preschool participants were more likely to have parents who participated in school activities after

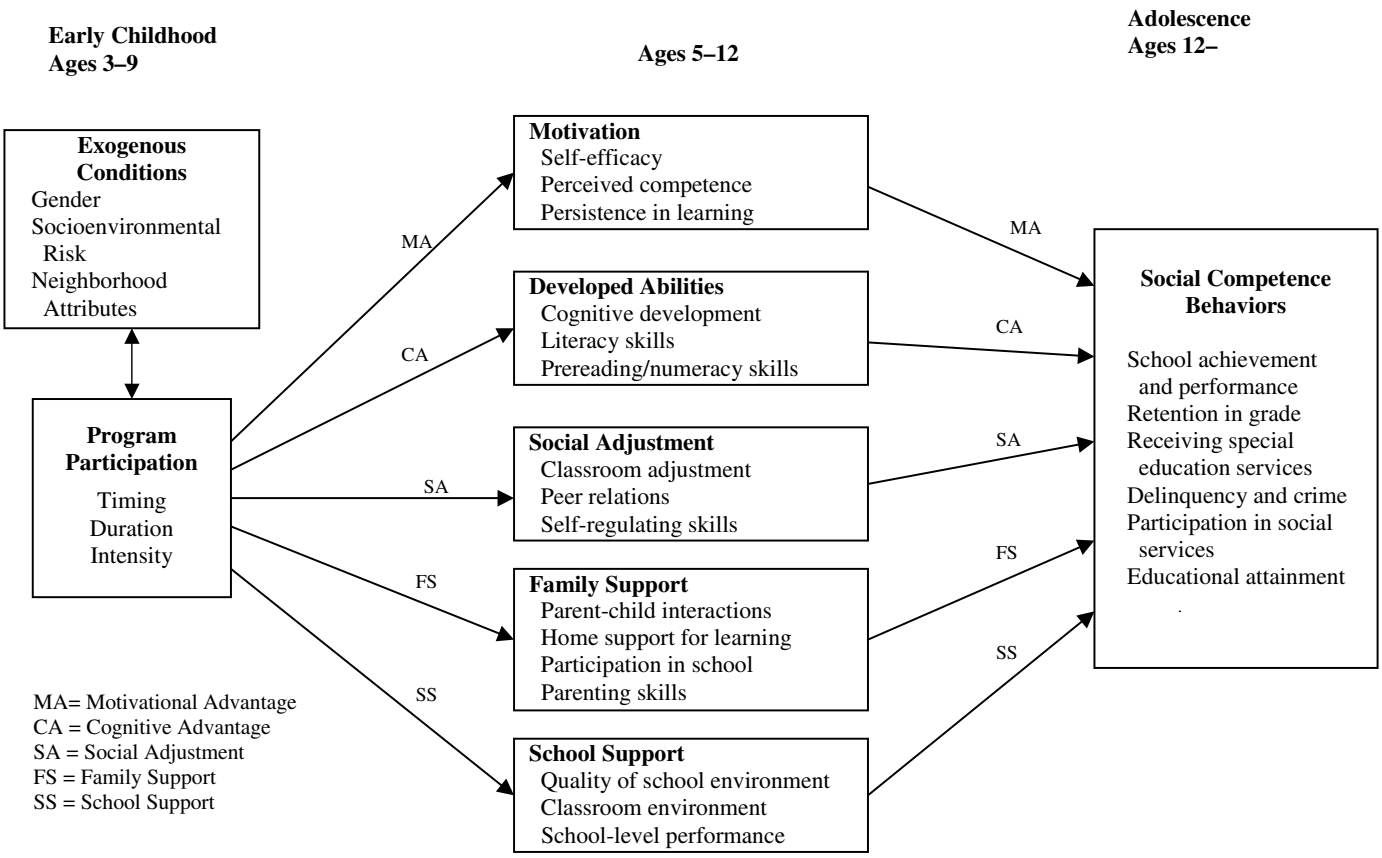

Figure 2. Alternative pathways leading to social competence: Explaining the effects of early childhood intervention.

the end of the program; this participation independently contributed to school achievement in adolescence. The length of time that children participated in CPC produced a similar pattern of influences.

The importance of particular pathways may vary, depending on the outcome being measured. In Column 2 of Table 1, high-school dropout becomes the object of interest, rather than academic achievement at age 14. Here, the cognitive advantage, school support, and family support hypotheses all made substantial contributions to the total indirect effects of program participation.

2. For whom are intervention services most effective?

Because of the compensatory nature of early interventions, it is often believed that children and families at the greatest level of risk should benefit more from participation than those at lesser risk. But until recently, few studies have systematically investigated the interactions between the program and the characteristics of the child (e.g., gender and race or ethnicity) or the family (e.g., socioeconomic status), and no consistent findings have emerged.[18]

The Chicago Longitudinal Study investigated the differential effects of program participation for an assemblage of child, family, and program-related variables: (i) gender, (ii) parents' education, (iii) the number of risk factors that the child experienced, (iv) neighborhood poverty surrounding the centers, (v) parents' participation in school, and (vi) the instructional approach in preschool.

Our study suggests that some of these characteristics did moderate CPC's effects on a number of program outcomes.[19] Children from the highest-poverty neighborhoods (those in which over 60 percent of children came from low-income families) appear to have benefitted more than children who attended programs in lower-poverty neighborhoods. This was especially true for reading and math achievement. There was some indication that boys benefitted more from preschool whereas girls benefitted more from follow-on intervention. The extent of the parents' involvement in the child's school did not appear to influence the effects of program participation.

Interestingly, different preschool curriculum approaches did not lead to consistent differences across outcomes. For example, children who participated in centers implementing a more structured, basic skills approach (teacher-oriented) had higher achievement test scores and lower rates of grade retention at age 14 but not at age 15.

3. Presence and consistency of estimated effects in large-scale programs

In the quasiexperimental and nonexperimental designs that are frequently utilized in studies of large-scale programs, it is particularly important to test the sensitivity of

Table 1
Total Indirect Effects of Two Program Indicators

Key Pathways	Age 14 School Achievement	Age 19 High-School Dropout
A. Preschool Participation[a]	.17	-.13
Percentage of indirect effect due to:		
Cognitive advantage	21	8
Family support	8	6
Cog. adv. and school support	11	7
Cog. adv. and social adjustment	9	—
School support	—	12
Cog. adv. and retention	—	7
B. Years of Total Participation[a]	.26	-.14
Percentage of indirect effect due to:		
Cognitive advantage	59	36
Family support	5	10
School support	7	14
Cog. adv. and school support	4	—
Cog. adv. and retention	—	6

[a]Regression coefficients representing the total influence of preschool participation and years of total participation on these two outcomes (values of .10 or higher are typically considered meaningful).

the results to the way in which the research model is specified and to the analytic methods.

In the Chicago Longitudinal Study, we analyzed the effects of preschool participation and duration of program participation on adolescent school achievement and grade retention under four sequential model specifications: (i) the unadjusted mean difference between participating and nonparticipating groups of children, and this base model adjusted in turn for (ii) the sex of the child and the environmental risk (e.g., the number of family risk factors, such as low parental education), (iii) parents' participation in school, and (iv) attributes of the school site.

Encouragingly, both preschool participation and years of total program participation were significantly associated with children's outcomes under all the models we specified. Preschool participation was associated with a 5- to 7-percentage-point advantage in reading achievement, and an 8- to 10-percentage-point reduction in the rate of grade retention. Each additional year of participation in the program was associated with a 2- to 3-percentage-point advantage in achievement and a 3- to 4-percentage-point reduction in grade retention.[20]

This consistent evidence of beneficial program effects reaffirms the view that quasiexperimental designs, if properly managed, can lead to conclusions consistent with or approximating those of classic random-assignment experiments. The keys to a properly managed quasiexperimental study seem to be that (i) the groups are reasonably well matched, (ii) they come from similar populations, (iii) the process by which people are selected for the program is well known, and (iv) findings are robust under alternative specifications of the model.

Other unanswered questions and issues

Other questions about early childhood interventions should also be addressed. One is the efficacy of new and emerging state and local programs—the fastest growing area of the early intervention field. Another issue is methodological: how best to design studies that include samples of sufficient size and variation in key attributes, program characteristics (for example, curriculum approaches or parents' involvement), and neighborhood conditions.

Some specific, program-related questions are: What is the optimal number of years of preschool for most children? Is one year of preschool at age 4 as effective as two years beginning at age 3? In federal and state programs, is full-day preschool better for children than half-day preschool? Likewise, what are the merits and demerits of half-day, extended-day, and full-day kindergarten programs, respectively? What are the crucial environmental supports that have to be in place to maintain or enhance the performance advantages with which participating children enter school? Does improved coordination between early childhood centers and public schools increase the effectiveness of such programs for children?

There are, also, many questions related to the largest intervention program of all, Head Start. For example: How does day-care quality and participation affect children's readiness for Head Start? Is the effect of participation in Head Start greater for children who were enrolled in Early Head Start? Are Early Head Start parents more likely to participate in Head Start or other programs?

Investments in research and evaluation that approximate those devoted to energy, transportation, and biomedicine would help significantly to advance our knowledge in these and other areas. The National Science and Technology Council, in 1997, pointed out that only 2.8 percent of all federal research and development expenditure goes to research on children.[21] Yet this amount was "aimed at understanding the growth and development of 30 percent of the nation's population—over 80 million children and adolescents under age 21" (p. 2). Matched with the growing interest in child development and social policy, greater resources for research and evaluation on early childhood intervention and other social programs may have substantial long-term payoffs.

Conclusions

The last four decades have seen significant advances in the knowledge and practice of early childhood interventions. We know more about the difficulties of implementing these programs well and about the magnitude and persistence of program effects. In the future, we should give high priority to answering questions about which

children and families benefit most—and least—from these and other interventions, about the environmental conditions and pathways that shape long-term effects, and about the program elements that are best suited for children with different attributes.

We have, however, more sophisticated and cost-effective ways to answer these questions than we had in the past, and more systematic procedures for probing links between participation in an intervention and its outcomes. Using such tools, we are able to address specific questions not considered in previous studies and so increase our knowledge of the effects of investments in early childhood development for a new age of programs and policies for children, families, and society. ■

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[2]National Science and Technology Council, *Investing in Our Future: A National Research Initiative for America's Children for the 21st Century*, Executive Office of the President, Office of Science and Technology Policy, Committee on Fundamental Science, and the Committee on Health, Safety, and Food, Washington, DC, April 1997.

[3]For general reviews, see W. Barnett and S. Boocock, eds., *Early Care and Education for Children in Poverty* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998); *Long-Term Outcomes of Early Childhood Programs*, *The Future of Children* 5, no. 3 (1995); M. Guralnick, ed., *The Effectiveness of Early Intervention* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes, 1997); L. Karoly, P. Greenwood, S. Everingham, J. Hoube, M. Kilburn, and others, *Investing in Our Children: What We Know and Don't Know about the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions,* RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 1998.

[4]The number of controlled studies with long-term follow-up is relatively small. See, e.g., W. Barnett, "Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Cognitive and School Outcomes," *The Future of Children* 5, no. 3 (1995): 25–50; U.S. General Accounting Office, *Head Start: Research Provides Little Information on Impact of Current Program*, Report GAO/HEHS-97-59,Washington, DC, 1997.

[5]C. Ramey and S. Ramey, "Early Intervention and Early Experience," *American Psychologist* 53 (1998): 109–20; H. Yoshikawa, "Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Social Outcomes and Delinquency," *The Future of Children* 5, no. 3 (1995): 51–75.

[6]U. Bronfenbrenner and P. Morris, "Ecological Processes of Development," in *Handbook of Child Psychology: Theoretical Issues*, ed. W. Damon (New York: Wiley, 1998), 1: 993–1028; Ramey and Ramey, "Early Intervention and Early Experience."

[7]Cognitive advantage hypotheses were empirically demonstrated in the 1980s; more recent studies following children into adulthood and examining contemporary large-scale programs have reinforced the validity of these hypotheses. See, for example, Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, *As the Twig Is Bent . . . Lasting Effects of Preschool Programs* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1983); L. Schweinhart, H. Barnes, and D. Weikart, *Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 27* (Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1993); A. Reynolds, N. Mavrogenes, N. Bezruczko, and M. Hagemann, "Cognitive and Family-Support Mediators of Preschool Effectiveness: A Confirmatory Analysis," *Child Development* 67 (1996): 1119–40.

[8]These questions emerged in the wake of the Westinghouse report on Head Start. See V. Cicirelli and others, *The Impact of Head Start,* Westinghouse Learning Corporation and Ohio University, Athens, OH, 1969.

[9]Of the 15 reviews of the effects of early childhood intervention published from 1983 to 1997, almost all discussed model programs rather than large-scale programs. For an overview, see A. Reynolds, E. Mann, W. Miedel, and P. Smokowski, "The State of Early Childhood Intervention: Effectiveness, Myths and Realities, New Directions," *Focus* 19, no. 1(1997): 3–11.

[10]National Science and Technology Council, *Investing in Our Future*.

[11]Compare, e.g., the approaches of D. Campbell and J. Stanley, *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966) and L. Cronbach, *Designing Evaluations for Educational and Social Programs* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982). On theory-driven approaches in general, see H. Chen, *Theory-Driven Evaluations* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990).

[12]A. Reynolds, "Confirmatory Program Evaluation: A Method for Strengthening Causal Inference," *American Journal of Evaluation*, 17(1998): 21–35.

[13]A. Reynolds, *Success in Early Intervention: The Chicago Child-Parent Centers* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

[14]See N. Naisbitt, "Child-Parent Education Centers, ESEA Title I, Activity I," unpublished report, Chicago, IL, 1968.

[15]A. Reynolds, J. Temple, D. Robertson, and E. Mann, "Executive Summary," *Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Center Program*, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2001; available on the Chicago Longitudinal Study Web site, < http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cls/cbaexecsum4.html >.

[16]Schweinhart, Barnes, and Weikart, *Significant Benefits*; Reynolds, *Success in Early Intervention*.

[17]School achievement at age 14 was defined by the indicators of reading comprehension and math achievement scores of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). Cognitive advantage was measured by performance on the school readiness battery of the ITBS at age 5.

[18]Barnett, "Long-Term Effects."

[19]Reynolds, *Success in Early Intervention*.

[20]Reynolds, *Success in Early Intervention*; A. Reynolds and J. Temple, "Quasi-Experimental Estimates of the Effects of a Preschool Intervention: Psychometric and Econometric Comparisons," *Evaluation Review* 19(1995): 347–73.

[21]National Science and Technology Council, *Investing in Our Future*.

Strengthening families: An agenda for TANF reauthorization

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The debate over the role of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in strengthening families and promoting marriage may be among the liveliest of the reauthorization debates.[1] It coincides with the emergence of new evidence showing that "family formation" trends have taken a positive turn. In the 1990s, teen pregnancy rates fell, nonmarital birth rates stabilized, and the percentage of children living with two parents increased. This article reviews the current political debate, summarizes recent trends, and provides recommendations for improving the TANF block grant and related programs to strengthen families and increase the number of children in stable two-parent families, without disadvantaging or stigmatizing single-parent families.

The current debate

Arguing that states have done too little to advance TANF's family formation goals, some conservatives have called for placing marriage at the top of the TANF reauthorization agenda. Representative Wally Herger, the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee's Human Resources Subcommittee, has said: "During the first phrase of welfare reform, we made sure we were putting people to work. I believe that now is the time to stress the importance of marriage."[2] Progressive voices, as well as organizations representing the interests of states, have been much more cautious. Although there is general agreement among these groups on the importance of marriage, there is greater skepticism about the extent to which government should be involved in the business of directly promoting marriage, a concern shared by some conservatives. Even among progressives, however, there is substantial agreement on a set of policy measures that would advance family formation goals, such as those aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy, ensuring that child support payments go directly to low-income children, and enhancing the employment prospects of young parents and potential parents.

Robert Rector and Patrick Fagan of the Heritage Foundation have made the most forceful arguments for placing marriage at the top of the reauthorization agenda. Rector proposes earmarking at least 10 percent of all federal TANF funds (about $1.6 billion per year) for specific "promarriage activities" such as school-based marriage education programs, public advertising campaigns, marriage mentoring programs, promarriage counseling during pregnancy, and "community-wide marriage policies."[3] In addition, Rector and Fagan have proposed setting up a new federal Office of Marriage Initiatives that would be funded in part by transferring some funds from child support and family planning programs. Wade Horn, when president of the National Fatherhood Initiative, proposed that Congress require states to indicate in their state plans how they would use TANF funds to encourage marriage and specify that "the intent of the 1996 law was to promote marriage, not cohabitation or visits by nonresident parents."[4] All three of these conservative commentators would also eliminate or reduce what they view as widespread marriage penalties in existing means-tested programs (see box, p. 119).

In contrast, others have argued for a strategy that focuses more on reducing teenage pregnancy, supporting "fragile families," whether married or unmarried, and increasing the career prospects of low-income fathers. Both Daniel Lichter and Belle Sawhill have argued that preventing out-of-wedlock and teen childbearing offers the most effective route to meeting TANF's family formation goals.[5] In a recent policy brief, Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel, and Ronald Mincy propose a comprehensive set of strategies, including services to strengthen fragile families.[6]

Recent trends

This debate comes at the same time as important "family formation" trends have taken a positive turn. For most of the last half of the twentieth century, nonmarital birth rates trended upward at a steady pace. This increase, combined with declines in marriage and marital stability, had a dramatic impact on family structure. Between 1960 and 1995, the percentage of children living with only one parent more than doubled, from about 12 percent to 27 percent. More recently, however, many of these trends have either stabilized or reversed direction.

- The teen birth rate—the number of births for every 1,000 young women aged 15–19—has fallen significantly since the early 1990s.[7] After peaking at 62 in 1991—the highest rate since the early 1970s—the rate declined each subsequent year. In 2000, the rate was 48.7, the lowest level ever reported for the United States. The black teen birth rate fell by 20 percent, from 110.8 in the first half of the 1990s to 88.4 in the second.

Are Marriage Penalties a Significant Problem?

Policy changes that would reduce "marriage penalties" in tax and social welfare programs figure prominently in some proposals to strengthen family formation. But there is little evidence to suggest that marriage penalties as conventionally understood have had a negative effect on marriage rates. For example, most recent research on the effects of the EITC on marriage and family formation finds no or only very limited evidence that EITC marriage penalties have had an effect on marriage rates.[1]

The tax system includes marriage bonuses for some families and marriage penalties for others, depending on the employment status and earning levels of the parents. The social welfare system, in contrast, does not present significant marriage penalties for couples with a biological child in common when the added costs of maintaining two separate households and other factors are considered.[2]

Safety net programs such as TANF cash assistance programs, the Food Stamp Program, housing, and Medicaid make no distinction between married and unmarried parents who live together with their children. The income of both parents is counted when determining eligibility for and level of benefits in these programs, regardless of the marital status of parents who live in the same household with their children. In states that impose stricter eligibility requirements on two-parent families, these rules are applied to both cohabiting and married-couple two-parent families. *Thus, there is no eligibility "penalty" if a cohabiting couple decides to marry*.

In fact, there are generally strong incentives for a couple with a child in common to live together, rather than apart. In a state that does not impose additional eligibility restrictions on two-parent families, neither parent is likely to be "better off" financially if the parents decide not to live together. Two separate households must now be maintained. The child and the custodial parent—who must pay for housing costs with just one income—may be more likely to qualify for means-tested benefits because of the loss of income that often occurs when a parent leaves the home. These benefits, however, generally will not leave the family with higher disposable income than when both parents were together. Finally, the noncustodial parent—in addition to paying his or her housing costs—must pay child support to the custodial parent. In short, neither parent generally has a financial incentive to separate.

Marriage penalties can exist in other situations—notably when a custodial parent marries someone other than the child's biological parent. In this case, the social welfare system may "deem" some income from the stepparent to the custodial parent and child when determining some types of benefits. Such deeming would not occur if the adults cohabited rather than married. (Food stamp benefits, however, are not affected by the decision to cohabit rather than marry, since these benefits are based on total household income.) Because marriage penalties do not present a serious problem in the case of parents with a child "in common," such arguments should not be used to justify providing enhanced benefits or preferential treatment to two-parent families or to reduce assistance to single-parent families.

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[1]See, e.g., D. Ellwood, "The Impact of the Earned Income Tax Credit and Social Policy Reforms on Work, Marriage, and Living Arrangements," *National Tax Journal* 53 (December 2000): 1063–1106.

[2]For a fuller discussion of these issues, see W. Primus and J. Beeson, "Safety Net Programs, Marriage and Cohabitation," paper presented at a conference, Just Living Together: Implications for Children, Families, and Social Policy, October 30–31, 2000, at Pennsylvania State University.

- The nonmarital birth rate—the number of births for every 1,000 unmarried women of childbearing age—also declined, albeit at a less dramatic pace than the teen birth rate. The nonmarital birth rate increased from 43.8 in 1990 to 46.9 in 1994, but then declined in each subsequent year, except 1998. By 1999, the rate had returned to its 1990 level.[8]
- Between 1995 and 2000, the number of children living with single mothers fell by slightly over one million, and the percentage of children living in single-mother families declined by 1.5 percentage points. The drop was larger among lower-income children: the percentage of lower-income children (roughly the poorest two-fifths of children) living with single mothers declined by 3.9 percentage points between 1995 and 2000, to 32.7 percent. Furthermore, the proportion of lower-income children living with married parents rose by 2.2 percentage points over the same period. Although these changes in children's living arrangements seem generally positive, it is not yet possible to conclude that they have had additional effects on child well-being or on the quality of family relationships.[9]

Policy may have played some role in these changes, but it seems unlikely that welfare policy changes were the driving factor. The downward trend in teen pregnancy and the flattening-out of nonmarital birth rates started before enactment of the 1996 welfare law. Although the decline

in the share of children living with married parents probably began to reverse in 1995 or 1996, thus more closely coinciding with the passage of the welfare law, there is little evidence that welfare changes were primarily responsible for this trend. For example, states that implemented so-called "family cap" policies, which deny incremental benefit increases to additional children born to TANF recipients, or that imposed stringent sanction and time-limit policies saw no larger increases in the share of young children living with married mothers between 1995 and 2001 than did states without these policies.[10] Given the timing of the changes and the limited evidence of a strong welfare link, it seems likely that a range of factors, including growing incomes, changing social and cultural norms, the strengthening of the child support enforcement system, the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit and other work supports, and other welfare reform efforts have all affected family formation decisions.

Marriage and social policy

Marriage clearly offers economic benefits for children. It is not surprising that children in married families—which have two potential earners—have much lower poverty rates than children living with single parents. Somewhat more notable, however, is that married families are less likely to be poor than cohabiting couples—which also have two potential earners—even after controlling for certain other factors likely to affect poverty status, including race, education, age of parents, and number and age of children. Moreover, there is some evidence that marriage may help buffer the impact of poverty. Poor married families appear to be less likely to miss meals or to fail to pay housing-related costs than other poor families, including poor cohabiting couples.[11]

The bulk of the evidence also suggests that growing up with both biological parents has positive effects on child well-being, independent of income. Although most children raised by single mothers do quite well, all else being equal the absence of a biological father appears to increase the risk of negative outcomes for children, including lower educational attainment, increased likelihood of teenage childbearing, and diminished early labor force attachment. Research does not show, however, that marriage *per se* has an independent effect on child well-being; children in stepparent families do no better on various measures of child well-being than children in single-parent families. And we know relatively little at this point about whether children who grow up with two unmarried biological parents fare differently from children who grow up with two married biological parents.[12]

Although marriage potentially offers both economic and developmental benefits for children, there are reasons to be cautious about the manner in which government policy attempts to affect marriage decisions, lest marriage promotion activities end up encouraging unstable or high-conflict unions. It may be especially difficult to ensure stable unions when the partners are young or for mothers who have already had a child prior to marriage—risk factors which are quite common among the disadvantaged population served by TANF. Several studies have shown that women who marry at younger ages, especially women who marry in their teens, have less stable marriages than women who marry at older ages.[13] A marriage that ends in divorce may leave an already disadvantaged woman worse off than if she had never married in the first place. A study using data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth finds that about one-third of women who married after having a first child out of wedlock were divorced at the time of the survey. Notably, the study finds that these women were worse off economically compared to similar unwed women who did not marry.[14]

Domestic violence is also a serious concern in many relationships. Several studies have found that 15–30 percent of welfare recipients have been recent victims of domestic abuse. And although domestic violence rates are higher among cohabiting couples than among married couples, it remains unclear whether this is because something about the institution of marriage itself has a dampening effect on domestic violence, or because of selection processes into and out of marriage and cohabitation.[15]

Even if we were able to address the quality of relationships, little is known about what kinds of policies and programs could produce increases in marriage rates. We do not know if the activities for which some have proposed earmarking TANF funds—school-based marriage-education programs, public advertising campaigns, marriage mentoring programs, promarriage counseling during pregnancy, and community-wide marriage policies—are actually effective in increasing marriage rates and marital stability. Only one of the strategies mentioned above, premarital education, appears to have been carefully studied, and its effectiveness remains far from clear.[16]

The strongest evidence that social programs can have a positive impact on marriage rates of disadvantaged individuals comes not from a program that overtly sought to influence marriage decisions, but rather from a large-scale welfare reform demonstration program, the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). MFIP provided generous financial incentives and grant increases for both single and two-parent families, regardless of their marital status, and also eliminated restrictive rules that limited participation by two-parent families. MFIP reduced poverty rates and increased marriage rates for both single-parent and two-parent families. Married two-parent families were more likely to remain married—67 percent of MFIP two-parent families were married and living together after three years compared to 48 percent of AFDC control group two-parent families. Single-parent families were somewhat more likely to marry—10.6 percent of single parents who received MFIP were mar-

ried and living with a spouse after three years compared to 7 percent of single parents in a control group. There is no consensus on why MFIP increased marriage rates, but reductions in financial strain for two-parent families in MFIP may have reduced sources of marital stress and instability, according to the researchers who studied the experiment.[17]

Supporting marriage and strengthening families: An agenda for TANF reauthorization

Essential elements of an agenda to improve child well-being and strengthen families include:

- a safety net that does not discriminate against two-parent families and ensures that more two-parent families who are eligible for benefits receive them,
- a strong child support enforcement system that increases the financial well-being of children,
- programs to help low-income fathers meet their financial and parenting responsibilities,
- initiatives that further decrease teen pregnancies, and
- a research agenda that would develop a knowledge base on which to build successful programs in these areas.

This agenda should not be pursued at the expense of single-parent families (for example, by cutting benefits for single-parent families or instituting program preferences for two-parent families) or in lieu of making further improvements in the current welfare system for single-parent families.

Providing supports to two-parent families

As the MFIP findings suggest, programs that provide income support and employment services may help low-income, two-parent families stay together by making them more economically secure. Unfortunately, few state welfare programs provide financial incentives for work that match those that were provided in the MFIP pilot program, although states have made notable advances in this regard; almost every state now provides more generous work incentives than were available under AFDC. But poor two-parent families receive food stamps and TANF cash assistance at less than half the rate of poor single-parent families. Although the disparities in TANF may be partially attributable to more rigid two-parent eligibility restrictions in some states, the problem clearly involves more than formal policy barriers. It seems likely that many poor two-parent families do not know that they may be eligible for benefits or are reluctant to participate. And states appear to have done little to increase the knowledge of potential program eligibility among two-parent families.

There are several areas in which policies can be improved to provide additional support for two-parent families:

- States should not be permitted to discriminate against two-parent families in establishing eligibility for benefits and services under TANF.
- The separate work participation rate for two-parent families should be eliminated. The current rate—under which 90 percent of two-parent families must be participating in work activities—may create a disincentive for states to serve such families.
- States should be required to forgive child support debt owed to the state if a low-income, separated couple marries or remarries and to hold child support debt owed to the state in abeyance when a separated couple with children reunites but does not marry.
- Low-income parents—in both single- and two-parent families—should have access to public health insurance. This could be done by expanding the size of state allotments in the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and giving states the flexibility to use the new funds to extend Medicaid and SCHIP coverage to the uninsured parents of children eligible for those programs.

Child support enforcement

A strong child support enforcement system can help improve child well-being and strengthen families. The article in this *Focus* by Cancian and Meyer discusses the interactions between welfare reforms of recent decades and child support reforms, examining the experimental evidence regarding policies for recovering welfare costs from payments by noncustodial parents. In light of this evidence, we make two primary recommendations:

- Families who leave TANF and are owed past-due child support should have first claim on all child support payments made by noncustodial parents. Congress made substantial progress on this front in the 1996 welfare law, but child support collected through the interception of federal tax refunds by the Internal Revenue Service is still retained by the federal government and the states to pay off any unreimbursed costs of providing assistance to the family. Eliminating this exception would provide about $750 million a year to children.
- Child support paid by noncustodial parents of children receiving TANF should go directly to the child rather than being retained by the state. States should be encouraged to disregard at least a portion of the payment in calculating the family's welfare grant. Where child support is disregarded, states should not have to remit any share of the support to the federal government. As early results from demonstration projects in Vermont and Wisconsin show, child support pass-though and disregard policies can have a positive effect on both the number of fathers who pay child support and the average amount of support paid by fathers.[18]

Assistance for low-income noncustodial fathers

Even with an improved child support system, many low-income fathers do not pay child support regularly.[19] Although some fathers are simply unwilling, many fathers want to be involved in their children's lives but face considerable barriers. Fathers of poor children are often poor themselves and have limited ability to pay significant amounts of child support. The most disadvantaged low-income fathers are similar in many respects to disadvantaged low-income single mothers: they often are young, lack high school diplomas and work skills, and have limited work experience.[20] Many also struggle to cope with substance abuse, legal problems, job discrimination, and lack of affordable transportation and housing. Although a growing number of states and cities are providing services to low-income fathers, these efforts remain quite limited. These problems are exacerbated by child support policies that often are not designed with low-income fathers in mind. Child support obligations, including birthing costs paid by Medicaid, fees, interest charges, and required additional payments toward past child support debt may exceed the amount they are realistically able to pay (even though the child support award may fall short of what it costs to raise a child).[21]

The federal government should provide states with incentives to extend employment and other necessary services to low-income fathers, while addressing other limitations in the way the child support system works with low-income fathers. States also should be encouraged to adopt and test new approaches to subsidizing the payment of support by low-income fathers.

- States should be given some credit toward meeting their TANF work participation rate for low-income fathers of TANF children who are engaged in TANF work activities or pay a sufficient amount of child support. This would provide an incentive for states to extend employment services to more low-income fathers and increase child support collections for low-income children. A state would not be eligible for the credit if the number of mothers receiving employment services declined or there was other evidence that resources were being diverted from low-income mothers.
- States should be given one-time federal grants to review their child support policies and develop programmatic recommendations to extend employment and parenting services to low-income fathers. As part of the review process, states should develop child support policies that prevent the build-up of unmanageable child support debt. States also should be encouraged to address child support and employment issues in a comprehensive and integrated fashion across a broad array of state programs—child support, employment, criminal justice programs—and to implement programs that match or otherwise subsidize the payment of child support by low-income parents, just as the Earned Income Tax Credit rewards low-wage work for families with children.[22]
- States should have the option to extend access to federally funded health care coverage to low-income nonresident parents on the same basis as coverage is available to low-income resident parents.

Reducing teen pregnancy

Though the teen birth rate fell in the United States in the 1990s, it is still higher than in any other industrialized democracy. Children born to teenage parents—whether they are married or unmarried—are at a greater risk of growing up without the benefits of living with two parents. Teenage pregnancy leads to a host of problems that are best prevented rather than addressed after they arise.

A growing body of rigorously conducted research points to specific programs that have been shown to reduce teen pregnancy and childbearing. For example, a random assignment multisite evaluation found that young teens enrolled in the Children's Aid Society–Carrera Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program were 46 percent less likely than teens in a control group to become pregnant or give birth.[23] This intensive program included both youth development and reproductive health components. Funding should be provided to states to replicate this and other effective programs and evaluate new initiatives. As described in more detail below, Congress should establish a research and development fund for this purpose.

Congress also should give states broader flexibility in how they use abstinence education funds, because the few studies of abstinence-only programs that have been completed to date do not show any reductions in sexual behavior or contraceptive use.[24]

Research agenda

There is substantial interest in developing programs that further reduce nonmarital births, foster and strengthen healthy two-parent families, and increase the proportion of children cared for by both parents. Some have argued that TANF funds should be earmarked for marriage promotion activities. Based on the evidence available, however, too little is known about policies and programs that will produce desirable results in this area to warrant such a federal mandate.

Further research in these areas is critical to developing a base of knowledge on which to build successful programs. States are unlikely to do substantial research in this area on their own without federal support and assistance. To support and systematize research in the states, a Family and Child Well-Being Research and Development Fund should be established, using monies previously allocated to the out-of-wedlock bonus, to encourage the replication of proven policies and to conduct research on programs designed to enhance the well-being

of families and children.[25] The Secretary of Health and Human Services, with recommendations from a panel of welfare administrators and experts from a range of disciplines, could use this fund to provide technical assistance or to competitively fund evaluations of demonstration projects that would be submitted by states or localities.

Finally, the ability of states to implement a policy agenda that supports marriage and strengthens families will depend in large measure on the availability of sufficient resources. Congress should provide states with the TANF block grant funding necessary to continue their existing commitments and to expand efforts in the other areas detailed here. ■

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[1]This paper benefitted from ongoing discussions with staff of the Center on Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and draws in part from an earlier working paper on family formation coauthored by Theodora Ooms of CLASP and Shawn Fremstad.

[2]M. Twohey, "Getting Hitched to Promoting Marriage," *National Journal*, March 24, 2001.

[3]According to Rector, "[t]hese funds should be allocated directly by the federal government, or, to a lesser extent, through the state governments." R. Rector, "Using Welfare Reform to Strengthen Marriage," *American Experiment Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 63–67.

[4]Wade Horn, "Wedding Bell Blues: Marriage and Welfare Reform," *Brookings Review* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 39–42. Horn is now Assistant Secretary for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services.

[5]D. Lichter, *Marriage as Public Policy*, Progressive Policy Institute, Washington, DC, September 10, 2001; I. Sawhill, *What Can Be Done to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Out-of-Wedlock Births?*, Policy Brief no. 8, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, October 2001.

[6]See the article in this *Focus* by Garfinkel and McLanahan, and also S. McLanahan, I. Garfinkel, and R. Mincy, *Fragile Families, Welfare Reform, and Marriage*, Policy Brief no. 10, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, November 2001.

[7]*CTS Facts at a Glance,* Child Trends*,* Washington, DC, August 2001.

[8]National trends in nonmarital birth rates from 1988–89 through 1993 are affected by substantial underreporting of births in Michigan and Texas. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, nonmarital births would have peaked at an earlier point in the 1990s if these states had accurately reported them. S. Ventura and C. Bachrach, *Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940–99,* National Vital Statistics Report 48, no. 16, National Center for Health Statistics, October 18, 2000.

[9]W. Primus, *Child Living Arrangements by Race and Income: A Supplementary Analysis*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), January 2002. There is at least one troubling trend in this area. Data from the National Survey of America's Families suggest that between 1997 and 1999, there was a small but statistically significant increase in the percentage of children living with neither of their biological parents. G. Acs and S. Nelson, *"Honey, I'm Home." Changes in Living Arrangements in the Late 1990s*, New Federalism: National Survey of America's Families no. B-38, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, June 2001.

[10]R. Bavier, *Recent Increases in the Share of Young Children with Married Mothers*, unpublished paper, Office of Management and Budget, Washington, DC, December 21, 2001. In fact, Bavier finds that the increase in the share of young children living with married mothers was actually larger in states that did not have especially rigorous sanction and time-limit policies than in the 17 states that did.

[11]R. Lerman, "Marriage as a Protective Force against Economic Hardship," October 2001, paper presented at 23rd Annual Research Conference of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, Washington, DC, November 1–3, 2001.

[12]See S. McLanahan and J. Teitler, *The Consequences of Father Absence*, Office of Population Research, Princeton University, September 1997; S. McLanahan, "Parent Absence or Poverty: Which Matters More?" in *The Consequences of Growing Up Poor*, ed. G. Duncan and J. Brooks-Gunn (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999); W. Manning, "The Implications of Cohabitation for Children's Well-Being," paper presented at the conference, Just Living Together: Implications for Children, Families, and Social Policy, October 30–31, 2000, at Pennsylvania State University.

[13]See, e.g., J. Larson and T. Holman, "Premarital Predictors of Marital Quality and Stability," *Family Relations* 43, no. 2 (1994): 228–38.

[14]D. Lichter, D. Graefe, and J. Brown, "Is Marriage a Panacea? Union Formation among Economically-Disadvantaged Unwed Mothers," paper presented at the annual meetings of the Population Association of America, April 2001. The authors do not speculate about the reasons. It may be that unwed mothers who marry work less during the marriage or are less likely to pursue additional education or training while married compared to unwed mothers who do not marry.

[15]R. Tolman and J. Raphael, "A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence," *Journal of Social Issues* 56 (2000): 655–81; C. Kenney and S. McLanahan, "Are Cohabiting Relationships More Violent than Marriages?" Working Paper 2001-2, Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University, June 2001.

[16]One study finds no difference in marital outcomes between couples who have participated in premarital education and those who have not; K. Sullivan and T. Bradbury, "Are Premarital Prevention Programs Reaching Couples at Risk for Marital Dysfunction?" *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 65(1997): 24–30. There is some evidence that the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) reduced divorce rates over a five-year period in a few sites, but methodological concerns leave the findings open to interpretation. For a discussion of this and related research, see S. Stanley, "Making a Case for Premarital Education," *Family Relations* 50 (2001): 272–80.

[17]V. Knox, C. Miller, and L. Gennetian, *Reforming Welfare and Rewarding Work: Final Report on the Minnesota Family Investment Program,* Summary Report, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, New York, September 2000.

[18]Written testimony of Vicki Turetsky, Senior Staff Attorney, CLASP, before the Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, Senate Finance Committee, October 11, 2001.

[19]Although we generally use the term "fathers" to refer to nonresident parents, the policies proposed here would apply equally to male and female nonresident parents.

[20]E. Sorensen and C. Zibman, *A Look at Poor Dads Who Don't Pay Child Support*, Assessing the New Federalism no. 00-07, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, September 2000.

[21]P. Roberts, *An Ounce of Prevention and a Pound of Cure: Developing State Policies on the Payment of Child Support Arrears by Low Income Parents*, CLASP, Washington, DC, May 2001.

[22]For a fuller discussion of this concept, see W. Primus and K. Daugirdas, *Improving Child Well-Being by Focusing on Low-Income Noncustodial Parents in Maryland*, CBPP, Washington, DC, September 2000.

[23]D. Kirby, *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy*, National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, Washington, DC, May 2001.

[24]For background on the federal abstinence education program, see J. Levin-Epstein, *Abstinence-unless-Married Education*, CLASP, March 1999, and *Reauthorization Issues: Abstinence Education*, CLASP, Washington, DC, November 2001.

[25]The out-of-wedlock bonus provided $100 million a year to be split among up to five states that had the greatest reductions in out-of-wedlock pregnancies while also reducing abortion rates.