



The impact of income on reunification among families with children in out-of-home care



JoAnn S. Lee ^{a,*}, Jennifer L. Romich ^b, Ji Young Kang ^b, Jennifer L. Hook ^c, Maureen O. Marcenko ^b

^a George Mason University, Department of Social Work, 4400 University Drive – MSN 1F8, Fairfax, VA 22030, United States

^b University of Washington, School of Social Work, Box 354900, Seattle, WA 98195–4500, United States

^c University of Southern California, Department of Sociology, 851 Downey Way, Hazel Stanley Hall 314, Los Angeles, CA 90089–1059, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 August 2016

Received in revised form 21 September 2016

Accepted 12 October 2016

Available online 13 October 2016

Keywords:

Child welfare

Reunification

Income

ABSTRACT

Income appears to be associated with faster time to family reunification. The observed connection between income and reunification, however, may be causal in nature or the relationship may be an issue of selection, in that other underlying factors explain both income and family safety and stability. We examine the causal role that the source of income plays in reunification. We use administrative data on primary caregivers of children placed in out-of-home care in Washington State from 2000 through 2007 ($N = 15,159$) matched with public economic support and employment data linked by the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Integrated Client Database (ICDB). Using instrumental variable analysis, we estimated the effect of the amount of earnings and the amount of cash benefits on reunification. We used county unemployment rates and county food stamp participation rates as instruments. We find modest and inconsistent results that suggest higher earnings are associated with lower likelihood of reunification. We find no consistent evidence linking cash assistance to reunification.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

For over half of the 402,378 children who were in an out-of-home placement on any given day in 2013, reunification with the child's parent or primary caregiver was the permanency case plan goal (Children's Bureau, 2014). Many of these families are economically poor. The out-of-home placement rate for children living in poverty was 59 per 1000 children in 2011, in comparison to 12.9 per 1000 children in the general population (Pelton, 2015). For parents with children placed out-of-home, being in poverty is associated with slowed time to reunification (Courtney, 1994). Two recent trends in American poverty—income instability and extreme poverty—may be particularly worrisome when considered in light of the demands of the child welfare system. Over the last two decades, Americans' income has grown less stable at all income levels, and increasing instability is particularly concentrated among the lowest earners (Gottschalk & Moffitt, 2009). At the same time, growing concern has focused on families living with extremely low incomes or no formal income at all (Blank, 2007; Loprest, 2003; Ovwigho, Kolupanowich, & Born, 2009; Turner, Danziger, & Seefeldt, 2006; Wood & Rangarajan, 2003). About one-fifth of families with

children in out-of-home placement report that they receive neither income from public assistance nor earnings from employment (Marcenko, Hook, Romich, & Lee, 2012; Wells & Guo, 2004). This article reports on an examination of the relationship between income—both earnings and cash benefits—and subsequent reunification.

The observed connection between poverty and child welfare outcomes such as reunification may be due to a causal connection between low income and maltreatment or it may be due to correlation. Income may play a direct, causal role in reunification through limiting the resources parents have for creating safe environments. For instance, without adequate money for food and housing families are less likely to reunify. Policies that interrupt income or encourage specific sources of income could then change the likelihood of reunification. Alternatively, the relationship may be correlational, where another factor explains both poverty and child risk. For example, if a parent is unable to maintain employment or cash benefits after her child is removed from the home because she is struggling with a substance addiction, this may both challenge her ability to stay employed while also putting her child in jeopardy. If other underlying factors contribute to a lack of income, addressing those other factors could be beneficial for strengthening the family in the long run. Common methodological approaches cannot disentangle causal relationships from these third factor (omitted variable) relationships. In this study, we use an instrumental variable approach to estimate the causal effect of income on reunification.

* Corresponding author at: George Mason University, Department of Social Work, 4400 University Drive – MSN 1F8, Fairfax, VA 22030, United States.

E-mail address: jlee120@gmu.edu (J.S. Lee).

Understanding aspects of income that directly lower the likelihood of reunification can help inform the policy approach that would maximize the likelihood of reunification.

2. Background

Changes to welfare and child welfare policy in the late 1990s have made income more tenuous for child welfare-involved families. Welfare reform was enacted with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, which eliminated the cash assistance program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). As an entitlement program, AFDC was available with few restrictions to all eligible families; in contrast, TANF imposed restrictions including participating in work-related activities for 30 hours per week in most cases and a 60-month lifetime limit for recipients. Under PRWORA, families could lose cash grants if they did not comply with TANF requirements or hit the time limit. A year later, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed. ASFA mandates a court hearing 12 months after child removal and requires states, with some exceptions, to file a termination of parental rights petition in cases in which a child has been in care for 15 of the last 22 months. The combination of welfare time limits and shortened timelines to permanency creates enormous pressures on families and on the child welfare system. In fact, Wells and Guo (2004) found that following welfare reform, a higher percentage of children are neglected, a higher percentage are placed in foster homes, and a higher percentage are in placement for more than a year.

2.1. The causal role of income in reunification

Inadequate income causally reduces the likelihood of reunification if it brings material hardship that renders a family incapable of providing basic necessities to a child. Correlational studies consistent with a causal story indicate that lack of income, poverty, and homelessness are associated with slowed time to reunification (Courtney, 1994; Courtney, McMurtry, & Zinn, 2004; Kortenkamp, Geen, & Stagner, 2004; Wells & Guo, 2003, 2004, 2006). Caregivers with children in out-of-home placement, especially caregivers who report no income, report higher levels of unmet basic needs such as sufficient food, clothing, and a place to live, in comparison to other child welfare-involved families (Marcenko, Lyons, & Courtney, 2011; Marcenko et al., 2012). These unmet basic needs likely jeopardize the caregiver's ability to safely reunify with her children. These caregivers with no income also report lower levels of engagement with the child welfare system, which makes them a harder group of parents for child welfare to serve (Marcenko et al., 2012). When child welfare workers are able to provide services to address these basic needs, it appears that children are less likely to be placed in out-of-home care, and those who are placed are likely to reunify faster (Keegan Eamon & Kopels, 2004).

Alternatively, caregivers in the child welfare system also report high rates of substance abuse, mental health disorders, and domestic violence (Marcenko et al., 2011; Staudt & Cherry, 2009). These factors may reduce the likelihood both of sufficient income and a successful reunification. Furthermore, caregivers who are able to maintain their income from benefits¹ by meeting the necessary welfare requirements may be better situated to reunify with their children than those who struggle to meet those requirements. These caregivers may possess helpful personal or interpersonal characteristics (e.g., more organized

or greater supports) or may lack obstacles to both income and reunification in comparison to mothers who do not have income. Thus, possible omitted variable bias, and not income factors per se, may explain variation in reunification outcomes.

2.2. Aspects of income

Researchers have used event history analysis to examine the association between income and reunification. These studies have operationalized income in a variety of ways, which point to two aspects of income worth examining. First, the potential causal effect of income may be related to the increased monetary resources associated with income. Some studies suggest that any income may increase the likelihood of reunification by ensuring that the caregiver has the means to safely provide for the basic needs of a child. For example, mothers who lose cash assistance reunified more slowly than mothers who maintain benefits (Wells & Guo, 2004, 2006). Similarly, one study found that families with someone working at the time of placement compared to families without someone working at the time of placement reunified more quickly, and those who maintained benefits reunified more quickly than those who lost benefits (Kortenkamp et al., 2004). Furthermore, more than just having income, the amount of income may be related to reunification. Mothers with higher average monthly post-placement income reunified more quickly than mothers with less income (Wells & Guo, 2003, 2004, 2006). These associations between income and reunification may suggest that increased monetary resources improve the likelihood of reunification, although these existing studies fail to address unobserved differences between caregivers who maintain more income and those who lose income.

Second, more than just amount of income, different sources of income—whether earnings or benefits—may affect the likelihood of reunification differently. Sustaining income from employment versus sustaining income from benefits pose different demands and challenges for caregivers. Welfare and child welfare offices may coordinate case plans, and welfare offices may be able to be responsive to the demands of the child welfare case plan, increasing the likelihood of reunification (Ehrle, Scarcella, & Geen, 2004). If coordination does not occur, however, scheduling conflicts between TANF and child welfare requirements may arise since mandated activities for both programs typically occur during the standard work week.

Income from employment may reduce the likelihood of reunification. Although, employment may provide greater time flexibility if workers can shift to evening or weekend schedules, but many low-wage workers have little control over their scheduled work hours (Lambert, Fugiel, & Henly, 2014). Many parents involved in the child welfare system are low-wage workers, occupying “bad” jobs (Kalleberg, 2011) characterized by low autonomy, few benefits, and high precarity. Employers may be less likely than welfare offices to be responsive to the demands of a child welfare case plan, or a caregiver may not want to inform their employer of their child welfare involvement. Employed parents may have to choose between work and court appearances, mandated services, or visitations occurring during the work day. Furthermore, a mother who is employed must provide adequate childcare in her absence, which may also reduce the likelihood of reunification. Many mothers moving from welfare to work report unstable patchworks of childcare, and often rely on informal care arrangements, leaving their children with family members, boyfriends, or even leaving older children unsupervised (Scott, London, & Hurst, 2005; Williams & Boushey, 2010). These unstable patchworks of childcare may contribute to a lower likelihood of reunification.

Evidence suggests that while income from benefits may facilitate reunification, earnings may not. Earnings from work generally require time away from the home, whereas benefit receipt may not. Research has found that mothers with a higher percentage of income from employment post-placement reunified more slowly than mothers with a lower percentage of income from employment (Wells & Guo, 2003,

¹ Some states have enacted a concurrent benefits policy, where caregivers can continue to receive TANF for up to 180 days if the child welfare worker confirms that the child(ren) are expected to return home within the timeframe. Additionally, caregivers may continue to receive SSI, whether through their own SSI or that of other children who may remain in the home.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4936326>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4936326>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)