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## Welfare recipients' involvement with child protective services after welfare reform<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This study identifies factors associated with child protective services (CPS) involvement among current and former welfare recipients after welfare reform legislation was passed in the US in 1996.

**Method:** Data come from the Women's Employment Study, a longitudinal study of randomly selected welfare recipients living in a Michigan city in 1997 ( $N = 541$ ). In order to identify risk factors for CPS involvement among current and former welfare recipients, multinomial logit analyses with 29 independent variables were employed on a trichotomous dependent variable: no CPS involvement, investigation only, and supervision by CPS after investigation.

**Results:** The relationship between work and involvement with CPS differs by work experience prior to welfare reform. As the percentage of months working after welfare reform increased, the risk of being investigated by CPS declined among those with prior work experience but the risk increased among those without prior work experience. However, work variables were not significant predictors of supervision by CPS after an initial investigation. Further, race, cohabitation, childhood welfare receipt, having a learning disability, having a large number of children, being newly divorced, living in a high problem neighborhood, and being convicted of a crime were associated with one's probability of being either investigated or supervised by CPS.

**Conclusions:** These findings suggest that employment could have increased the stress levels of current or former welfare recipients without prior work experience to the point where they were prone to minor child rearing mistakes

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that resulted in a CPS investigation, but were not severe enough to warrant opening the case for supervision. Supports should be provided to welfare mothers who are prone to involvement with CPS; expansions in the childcare subsidy and a reduction or delay in work requirements might also help these families.

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## Introduction

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 (P.L. 104-93) ended low-income families' entitlement to cash assistance, and changed the United States' welfare program from an income support to a work-based program. The PRWORA abolished the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) and created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF). The Act imposes a 60-month limit on welfare receipt, requires welfare recipients to work within 24 months of initial enrollment, and allows states to cap benefits if a baby is born while on welfare. The Act also allows states to provide services and incentives that encourage welfare recipients' employment (Corcoran, Danziger, Kalil, & Seefeldt, 2000).

These changes in the welfare system have caused concern among child welfare professionals because a relatively high proportion of children from welfare-reliant families are reported to child protective services (CPS) (Courtney, Piliavin, & Power, 2001; Martin & Lindsey, 2003; Wells & Shafran, 2005). About half of all reported child maltreatment incidents occur in families receiving welfare, more than half of all foster children come from welfare-eligible families, and between 70% and 90% of families receiving in-home support services through CPS receive welfare (Geen, Fender, Leos-Urbel, & Markowitz, 2001; Pelton, 1994).

It is, however, unclear whether and how welfare reform is associated with recipients' involvement with CPS. Furthermore, little is known about the relationship between work and the degree of CPS involvement among those receiving welfare. To fill the gaps in previous research, this study examines the relationship between maternal employment and involvement with CPS among welfare recipients.

## Background

### *Potential effects of welfare reform on involvement with CPS*

Both child advocates and social work researchers anticipated that terminating poor families' entitlement to cash assistance and enforcing strict work requirements would affect child maltreatment in several ways (Hutson, 2001; Ovwigho, Leavitt, & Born, 2003; Slack, 2002; Waldfogel, 2004). First, welfare reform might influence the recipients' involvement with CPS through its effect on income. On the one hand, it was expected that some welfare recipients would lose benefits when they failed to meet work requirements or reached their 60-month time limit. On the other hand, some suggested that welfare reform might increase the income of some welfare recipients through new employment support programs and work incentives. Since income is one of the strongest predictors of child maltreatment (Pelton, 1994; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996; Thomlison, 2004), changes in income might affect welfare recipients' risk of involvement with CPS.

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