



Children without parents in the TANF caseload: Thinking beyond the child-only label

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ABSTRACT

Child welfare policy has historically emphasized the positive impact relative caregivers can have on foster children. This emphasis coupled with recent changes in the composition of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) caseload has led to interest in child-only, relative caregiver cases. Child-only research, however, ignores cases in which the relative caregiver is also receiving benefits. Using the universe of welfare cases in Maryland in October 2005, this article compares and contrasts the demographic and case characteristics of parental and relative caregiver cases, also analyzing differences between cases with and without an adult receiving benefits. Findings indicate that relative caregivers have service needs that differ from those of parents and that recipient relative caregivers are more disadvantaged than child-only cases.

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1. Introduction

Drastic post-reform reductions in welfare caseloads combined with recent budget shortfalls at the state levels have inspired growing interest in the composition of the active caseload of families receiving cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. TANF block grant amounts have not changed since their creation, resulting in an inability of state TANF programs to expand in response to the recent recession (Pavetti & Schott, 2011). An understanding of the composition of the current caseload, and of subgroups within the current caseload, is central to discussions regarding potential changes to the goals, administration, and funding of the TANF block grant in the context of upcoming reauthorization deadlines. Empirical caseload research is particularly relevant to understanding how the TANF block grant has been used to support various types of families.

Among these various types of families are two groups in which children do not live with and are not cared by their parents. One at-risk group of interest and the focus of recent studies are non-parental child-only cases (for a review, see Anthony, Vu, & Austin, 2008). These families are part of the welfare caseload, but they are often reported separately because many of the welfare-to-work goals and requirements do not apply to them. That is, since the children are the only recipients, the traditional goal of self-sufficiency is inappropriate, and thus an investigation of their needs is critically

needed. A second related group of non-traditional, non-parental TANF cases, “recipient relative caregiver” cases, have received less attention by researchers and policymakers. These are TANF cases in which the adult casehead is caring for related, but not their own, children, and unlike in child-only cases, these adults are included on the grant. They are still often excluded from work participation or time limit requirements as an incentive to keep the child(ren) in their home rather than place the child(ren) in foster care.

The option of kinship care, having a relative care for a child when the parents are unable or unwilling to do so, is considered preferable to foster care with an unrelated guardian (Main, Ehrle, & Geen, 2006). Although relative caregivers are eligible to become licensed foster care providers and be compensated through the child welfare system, many relatives opt out either because they prefer to be independent from the system or because it is often a lengthy and tedious process (Gibbs, Kasten, Bir, Duncan, & Hoover, 2006). Although grants from welfare offices are much smaller, they are easier to obtain and do not have similar oversight or requirements attached to them. The caregiver may also be included in the TANF grant if he or she is financially eligible, and although the grant is then slightly larger than a child-only grant (all else equal), it is often still less than a foster care payment. According to a recent GAO report, the national average TANF child-only grant is \$249 while the average minimum foster care payment is \$511 (USGAO, 2011).

Despite the possible similarities and overlap in many of the needs and situations between these two subgroups of the TANF caseload, the literature is disjointed. Child welfare-based research on relative caregivers includes, by definition, families in which children are with kin, regardless of whether they are receiving assistance through TANF or not. On the other hand, TANF-based research on child-only

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Table 1
TANF case categories.

	Is the casehead a parent to at least one recipient child on the TANF grant?		
	No	Yes	
Is the casehead included as a recipient on the TANF grant?	No Yes	Relative caregiver child-only cases Recipient relative caregiver cases	Parental child-only cases Traditional cases (recipient parental cases)

cases often combines non-parental child-only cases with other types of child-only cases, and ignores recipient relative caregiver cases (Anthony et al., 2008).

This article moves beyond the child-only label and compares outcomes and program utilization among children and caregivers in relative caregiver TANF cases to those in parental TANF cases. In addition, since access to some program elements is contingent on adult TANF receipt, cases are also separated based on whether the case was a child-only case or not. Table 1 describes this categorization of cases by relationship and recipient status. Using several sources of Maryland administrative data, four subgroups of the active TANF caseload are examined: (1) relative caregiver child-only cases; (2) recipient relative caregiver cases; (3) parental child-only cases; and (4) recipient parental cases. Findings contribute to the ongoing discussion regarding children in non-parental households, and provide information to policymakers and program managers serving these families.

2. Background

In contrast to the study's division of the TANF caseload into four groups, most policymakers and program administrators focus on two categories of TANF cases. The first are cases with at least one parent and at least one child on the grant, for whom most work-first policies and programs are targeted. This type of TANF case, which comprises slightly more than half of the national caseload (Office of Family Assistance, 2009), is usually referred to as a traditional welfare case and can be found in the lower right cell in Table 1. The second general category includes the balance of cases, which either include a non-recipient parent or a relative caregiver. Depending on the specific policies of the state in which they are receiving benefits, cases in this second category may or may not be required to participate in work activities. The distinction between these two categories of cases has become more palpable considering the regulations put in place under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA, P.L. 109–171), which raise the bar for performance and accountability of work-first initiatives. For instance, state TANF agencies are carefully considering how to maintain high levels of work participation among their working and otherwise work-eligible parents while also carefully assessing the needs of clients in the balance of the caseload, all with a single pot of resources (Parrott et al., 2007).

Within this latter group of cases, it may be tempting for policymakers and program administrators to overlook child-only cases because they are uniquely excluded from work participation calculations. But the research that has been done thus far on child-only cases suggests it would not be prudent to do so, not only because these cases tend to remain in the caseload longer but also because they include vulnerable children (Anthony et al., 2008; Gibbs et al., 2004). State-level research on the child-only caseload highlights the challenges these families face (Dunifon, Hamilton, Hamilton, & Taylor, 2004; Edelhoch, Liu, & Martin, 2002; Farrell, Fishman, Laud, & Allen, 2000; Speigman, Brown, Bos, Li, & Ortiz, 2011; University of Tennessee, Center for Business & Economic Research, 2006; Wood & Strong, 2002). For example, the results of a New Jersey study indicated that children were in the care of a relative due to parental substance abuse, maltreatment, legal troubles, mental health problems, and death. In addition, although relative caregiver child-only caregivers were better off financially than other types of TANF

caseheads, they were more likely to report poor physical health than caseheads of traditional TANF cases (Wood & Strong, 2002).

Our previous research identified five distinct sub-groups within the child-only population in Maryland: non-parental cases (75.2%), parental SSI cases (21.9%), immigrant parent cases (2.2%), sanctioned parent cases (0.6%) and "other" parental cases (0.2%) (Hetling, Saunders, & Born, 2005). Federal level data from FY2008 show larger proportions of parental SSI (22%), parental sanction (5%), and parental immigration status cases (19%), but caregiver cases are still a large group (33% nonparent caregiver and 12% unknown caregiver) and comprise a notable portion of child-only cases in all states (USGAO, 2011). Although not all of these caregiver placements result from formal CPS findings of abuse or neglect, some portion of these children will have similar risk factors as those growing up in other family foster care arrangements (Billing, Ehrle, & Kortenkamp, 2002; Ehrle, Geen, & Clark, 2001). In Maryland, fully one-half (49.9%) of children in non-parental child-only cases had been involved with child welfare services at some point, compared with three out of ten (30.9%) children in parental child-only cases (Hetling et al., 2005). Despite the nature of their situations, the children in non-parental TANF cases will probably not have access to follow-up services from state child welfare agencies because they are assumed to be in a safe and permanent home. In fact, child welfare best practices increasingly point to relative placements as preferable to other types of out-of-home placements, which could lead to an increase in the number of relative caregiver child-only TANF cases (Main et al., 2006).

At the same time, if the concern is in regards to children living with relatives in child-only cases, then one must consider whether children living with relatives in recipient cases might be in a similar situation, even though they are not included in child-only research. A broader body of literature focused on assessing the needs and strengths of non-parental households in general, regardless of TANF receipt, sheds some light on this issue. In the past fifteen years, the number of children under 18 living with neither of their parents increased by nearly 70% from 1.3 million to 2.2 million and the majority of these children are living with a grandparent.¹ Partly in response to this growth, researchers have begun to investigate how these families are faring on a number of indicators. Their findings have been mixed, showing that single grandparent-headed households are potentially worse off economically compared with other households that include grandparents, parents, and children, but that children living with grandparents and other relatives are potentially better off in terms of permanency and well-being compared with children in nonrelative foster homes (Casper & Bryson, 1998; Ehrle et al., 2001; Rubin et al., 2008). On average, children in kinship care are more likely to be victims of child neglect and to have parents who are substance abusers than children in other types of out-of-home placement (Beeman, Kim, & Bullerdick, 2000; Grogan-Kaylor, 2000; Leslie et al., 2005; The Urban Institute, 2003). They also tend to receive fewer services than children in other types of out-of-home placements (Ehrle et al., 2001; Scannapieco, Hegar, & McAlpine, 1997), and to have longer placements overall (Scannapieco et al., 1997).

¹ Author calculations from Current Population Survey March Supplements in 1992 and 2008 using DataFerrett from the U.S. Census Bureau. The figures exclude children who were also included in subfamilies, children listed as a reference person or a spouse of a reference person, and those not in families.

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