



Child, parent, and family predictors of child welfare services involvement among TANF applicant families

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Abstract

Data from the Milwaukee TANF Applicant Study were used to identify parent, family, and child-specific predictors of child welfare services involvement among 1075 families that applied for TANF assistance in 1999. Child-specific measures related to a randomly selected focal child from each applicant family were collected. Thirty-eight percent of the families were investigated for child maltreatment and 11% of the focal children were placed in out-of-home care between the 1999 TANF applications and the end of 2005. Prior child welfare services involvement and economic hardships were significant predictors of both child maltreatment investigations and out-of-home care placements. However, neither outcome was related to child-specific attributes nor behaviors once parent and family characteristics were taken into account. These findings suggest that TANF agencies are serving a population that needs help balancing family and work responsibilities.

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1. Introduction

Previous studies have examined the relationship between participation in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and involvement with child welfare services. Although some studies have found that TANF participation increases the risk of child welfare services involvement (Goerge & Lee, 2000; Ovwigho, Leavitt, & Born, 2003; Slack et al., 2003), at least one study did not (Courtney, Dworsky, Piliavin, & Zinn, 2005). In part, inconsistent findings may be due to differences in the specific populations studied (e.g., TANF applicants,

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TANF entrants, or TANF leavers), the child welfare outcomes measured (e.g., investigations of child maltreatment, substantiated reports, or out-of-home care placements), and the timing or duration of the observation period.

Most of these studies have examined relationships between child welfare services involvement and parent or family characteristics. Perhaps the most consistent finding to emerge from this research is that the best predictor of future involvement with child welfare services is past involvement (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Ovwigho et al., 2003; Slack et al., 2003). Other factors that have been found to predict child welfare services involvement include parent's age (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Ovwigho et al., 2003), number of children (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Ovwigho et al., 2003; Slack et al., 2003), employment (Courtney et al., 2005; Slack et al., 2003), race and ethnicity (Goerge & Lee, 2000; Slack et al., 2003), and economic hardships (Courtney et al., 2005; Slack et al., 2003).

By contrast, the role of children's characteristics has received much less attention. This is not because children's characteristics are thought to be unimportant. The possibility that child attributes and behaviors place some children at greater risk of maltreatment or placement in out-of-home care is not a new idea. More than two decades ago, Kadushin and Martin (1981) discussed the "child's contribution to abuse" and described abuse as an "interactional" event, although these authors caution that children should not be viewed as responsible for their abuse. Subsequent research also showed that certain attributes or behaviors may increase a child's risk of experiencing maltreatment or being placed in foster care. For example, some evidence suggests that children with disabilities are more likely to be maltreated than their nondisabled peers (Crosse, Kaye, & Ratnofsky, 1993; Schilling & Schinke, 1984; Sidebotham, Heron, & the ALSPAC Study Team, 2003; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000; Valentine, 1990). Other studies indicate that the risk of being maltreated varies by child gender and age (Mraovick & Wilson, 1999). Researchers have also found that low birth weight and birth abnormalities are associated with an increased likelihood that an infant will be removed from home (Needell & Barth, 1998; Wulczyn, 1994).

Given that there are both empirical and theoretical reasons to examine the relationship between child characteristics and child welfare services involvement, why have so few researchers done so? One reason is that some studies use only administrative data (e.g., Goerge & Lee, 2000; Ovwigho et al., 2003), which generally provide little more than a child's name, gender, date of birth, and Social Security number. Other studies that combine survey and administrative data have examined associations between child characteristics and child welfare system involvement. For example, McDaniel and Slack (2005) showed that having a child suspended or expelled from school more than doubled the risk that a family would be investigated for child maltreatment. Slack et al. (2003) also explored whether having a child with a "physical, learning, behavioral, or mental condition that limits regular activities" was associated with the risk of being investigated by child protective services, but did not find evidence of an association. Importantly, these studies treated the family as the unit of analysis, and did not examine whether a particular child was reported as being a victim of maltreatment, or whether a particular child was removed from home and placed in foster care.

The purpose of this analysis is to begin to address this gap between theory and research in the child welfare literature. Like earlier studies, we use a combination of survey and administrative data to examine the relationship between TANF program participation and child welfare services involvement. However, we use data collected about one randomly selected focal child to examine whether child-specific characteristics can predict child welfare services involvement after parent and family characteristics have been taken into account. We also observe child welfare services involvement over a longer period of time (64 to 70 months) than did the earlier studies.

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