



## Young children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors after mothers exit welfare: Comparisons with children of non-welfare mothers



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### A B S T R A C T

Although not part of its stated aims, current welfare legislation is assumed to benefit children through increased parental employment and self-sufficiency. Research findings on the extent to which parental welfare participation improves child well-being are inconclusive. This study investigates the behavioral outcomes of young children whose mothers have received TANF using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (N = 2169). Controlling for maternal demographic characteristics, current financial status, and health risks, we found that the difference between children's externalizing behaviors in families of former TANF recipients relative to children of mothers who had never been on welfare decreased the longer mothers had been off welfare. However, overall, externalizing behaviors were significantly higher among children of former TANF recipients relative to children whose mothers had never received welfare. The findings suggest that ensuring healthy development for children requires long-term supports to help mothers as they transition off welfare.

### 1. Introduction

Twenty years have passed since the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Although providing income support to needy families and children remained the purpose, the strategies to serve that purpose changed from long-term cash assistance to time-limited cash assistance coupled with stringent work requirements (Haskins, 2003; Pavetti, Olson, Pindus, Pernas, & Isaacs, 1996). Millions of single mothers have left TANF for work since 1997 (Loprest, 2011). However, unlike AFDC leavers, whose incomes increased after exiting welfare, the data show that the incomes of TANF leavers declined (Ozawa & Yoon, 2005). According to the research to date on the financial stability of TANF recipients, less than half of employed TANF leavers earned enough to live above the poverty level (Altman & Goldberg, 2008) or received fringe work benefits such as paid sick leave (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Altman & Goldberg, 2008). Furthermore, more than one in five former TANF leavers became unemployed within two years (Loprest, 2011; Wood & Rangarajan, 2003). A large number of TANF leavers stopped receiving other government benefits because of confusion over continued eligibility or other administrative difficulties—although many remained eligible (Loprest, 2003). Overall, studies indicate that financial vulnerability tends to increase when individuals leave welfare (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Loprest & Zedlewski, 2006; Schumacher & Greenberg, 1999; Wood & Rangarajan, 2003). With increased financial

vulnerability, largely due to high job turnover and low employment benefits, a major consequence is that many families who leave TANF are less able to properly provide for their children, thus putting their healthy development at risk (Anderson, Halter, Julnes, & Schultdt, 2000; Blank, 1997; Hildebrandt & Stevens, 2009).

What do previous studies suggest concerning the value of work experience gained by TANF recipients for children's well-being? There is support for both positive and negative impacts on children. According to the optimistic perspective based on human capital theory (Becker, 1964), any work experience gained by welfare-leavers under welfare would help them obtain higher paying jobs, which would allow them to invest extra money in their children and would ultimately have positive impacts on child development. Anderson et al. (2000) and Duncan, Morris, and Rodrigues (2011) found evidence for this. For some, the transition from welfare to work improves maternal self-esteem and sense of control, encourages economically productive daily routines, promotes career advancement, and increases regular earnings. Under these circumstances, children are likely to flourish (Duncan, Gennetian, & Morris, 2007). In contrast, the pessimistic perspective based on dual labor market theory suggests that TANF leavers would likely work in lower-paying jobs with nonstandard work schedules, leaving little resources available for their children (Anderson et al., 2000). Due to lower-level labor market experience, TANF leavers are often relegated to the secondary labor market where they are subject to poor working conditions, unstable employment, little opportunity for promotion, and

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barriers that keep them from entering the high-wage labor market (Dickens & Lang, 1985). As a result, the transition from welfare to work is chaotic, overwhelms parents, forces them to spend most of their income on child care, and reduces mothers' ability to monitor their children (Cherlin, 2004; Duncan et al., 2007; Hildebrandt & Stevens, 2009). Research shows that under these circumstances, welfare leavers experience little improvement in their economic resources and are likely to return to welfare. In this scenario we would expect detrimental consequences (Loprest, 2003).

At stake here are not only immediate effects on early child development, but also significant long-term consequences. It is well-documented that children from lower income households already start at a disadvantage. On average, they have more aggressive, withdrawn, and anxious behavior problems than do more affluent children (Berger, Paxson, & Waldfogel, 2009). Financial stress tends to have more of an impact on externalizing behaviors than on internalizing behaviors, which tend to be more attributed by personal characteristics and emotionally stressful events (Amone-P'Olak et al., 2009; Davis, Sawyer, Lo, Priest, & Wake, 2010; Reiss, 2013). The consequences for healthy development are significant. Externalizing and internalizing behavior problems in early childhood are considered critical predictors of life-course attainments. Children who display behavior problems tend to be less academically motivated and have lower academic achievement (Oades-Sese, Esquivel, Kaliski, & Maniatis, 2011; Wentzel, 1993). They are also more likely to manifest continuing behavior problems (e.g., antisocial behaviors) that persist as they enter school (Campbell, Shaw, & Gilliom, 2000; Moffitt, 1993). Johnson, Kalil, and Dunifon (2009) found that fluctuating work hours and irregular work schedules, in the context of maternal full-time work, increased behavior problems of children after controlling for the child's behavior problems at baseline. The findings suggest that work involvement of low-income mothers who leave welfare may impose some risks on child development.

The extent to which children's behavioral health outcomes are affected by mothers' TANF exit has been analyzed with inconsistent results. For instance, Osborne and Knab (2007) found that young children (at age three) whose mothers left welfare within the past three years and were currently employed were less likely to exhibit behavior problems than were their counterparts whose mothers remained on welfare. On the other hand, an experimental study found that mothers participating in a program offering job training or earnings supplements had a combination of positive, negative, and no effects on their children's behavior (Zaslow et al., 2002). Duncan et al. (2007) evaluated the effects of 13 employment-based welfare and antipoverty programs on young children between ages of 2 and 5. They found significant improvement in academic achievement of young children, with greater positive effects among children in earnings supplement programs. There were, however, no significant changes in parent- and teacher-reported behavior problems. Similarly, other studies have found that welfare exit is neither beneficial nor problematic for behavioral functioning among children in welfare-leaving families (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Dunifon, Kalil, & Danziger, 2003). Given the inconsistent results, the National Research Council concluded that "no strong trends have emerged, either negative or positive" in child development across the years following welfare reform (Smolensky & Gootman, 2003, p. 219).

The inconsistent results across studies may reflect a failure to account for differential impact of length of time since welfare exit as well as differences in specification of models predicting child development. With respect to the children of relatively recent welfare leavers, the adverse impact of welfare loss may outweigh the positive effects as the families face significant life transitions. On the other hand, mothers who have been off welfare for a longer period of time may have successfully adjusted to life without welfare, as some of the mothers obtain more stable and higher-paying jobs. To address some of these issues, our study re-examined the behavioral outcomes of children of mothers on welfare in comparison to mothers who had left welfare by looking at

three post-receipt time intervals while controlling for key child and mother's characteristics. In addition, for insight on the effectiveness of TANF to close the gap between recipients of benefits and non-recipients, we extend comparisons to mothers who have never received welfare. Past research on AFDC indicated that time intervals since welfare exit matters for children's behavioral outcomes. Hofferth, Smith, McLoyd, and Finkelstein (2000) found that children whose mothers had recently come off welfare (within 1 year or less) had more aggressive and withdrawn behavior problems compared with children whose mothers had never received welfare, who had been off welfare for 1–3 years, or who were currently on welfare. We want to investigate similar patterns under TANF. We control for contextual factors related to mother's demographic characteristics, current financial status, and health risks but acknowledge that children may differ on a large range of other factors that we will not account for in the current analysis.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Data and sample

We used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a cohort study conducted jointly by Princeton University and Columbia University. The FFCWS includes data on approximately 4898 children born between 1998 and 2000 (roughly three-quarters of whom were born to unmarried parents) in large cities across the United States (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). The FFCWS used a stratified random sampling design of all U.S. cities with populations of > 200,000 in three stages by randomly selecting 20 cities first, then 75 hospitals within the cities, and finally mothers who gave births within the hospitals (Reichman et al., 2001).

For our study, we used the year five wave of the FFCWS. Between 2003 and 2006, respondents were asked about a wide array of behavioral outcomes as well as in-depth measures of welfare and family financial status. The year five data of the FFCWS in-home longitudinal study included 3001 children (Reichman et al., 2001). The response rate for the five-year wave was 85% for the mother sample. Further details about the FFCWS are available online (<http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/documentation.asp>).

We limited our sample to children whose biological mothers provided information on whether they had ever received TANF assistance (which excludes 439 cases from the sample) and identified as non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, or Hispanic (which excludes a total of 82 cases from the sample). We excluded children whose mothers received TANF assistance before the focal child was born (204 cases). After excluding cases with missing data on our analysis variables (107 cases), the final sample included 2169 child-mother pairs. Our analytic sample included the sub-sample of (a) children whose mothers left welfare within the past five years ( $n = 518$ ), (b) children whose mothers were currently on welfare ( $n = 485$ ), and (c) children whose mothers had never received welfare ( $n = 1166$ ).

### 2.2. Measures

We had two dependent variables: scores on externalizing and scores on internalizing behaviors of four- and five-year-old children from mothers' responses to the *Child Behavior Checklist/4-18* (Achenbach, 1991). The externalizing behavior score is based on 30 questions (e.g., a child is cruel, bullies and shows meanness to others) and the internalizing behavior score consists of 23 questions (e.g., a child complains of loneliness). Mothers rated the child's behavior on a 3-point scale: not true (0), somewhat/sometimes true (1), or very true/often true (2). T-scores of > 63 are considered in the clinical range, indicative of deviant behavior (Achenbach, 1991). Reliability was good for both checklists, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 and 0.75, respectively.

Our primary independent variable was welfare exit status/length of time since exit. We created a categorical variable indicating five

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