

PUTTING CHILDREN'S WELFARE FIRST

A Comment on "Family Security: Supporting Parents' Employment and Children's Development"

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By many accounts, welfare reform has been a success. Since the passage of the historic welfare reform legislation, welfare rolls have declined by 63 percent, down from 4.41 million families in 1996 to 1.66 million families today.¹ Indeed, fewer families are on welfare today than any time since 1969; as a proportion of the population, the caseload is now at its lowest since 1954.² Moreover, millions of Americans moved from the cash welfare rolls into work and productive employment. Among never-married mothers, the group mostly likely to be on cash welfare, full-time employment increased from 49.3 percent in 1997 to 62.0 percent in 2006.³ And child support collections nearly doubled during this same period.⁴

All good news, to be sure. Nevertheless, as Shelley Waters Boots, Jennifer Macomber, and Anna Danziger remind us, while acknowledging its successes, we cannot forget that an even more important purpose of welfare reform is—or at least ought to be—to enhance the well-being of children living in low-income families. Indeed, as its very name suggests, the original intent of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, the forerunner of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), was to support the positive development of vulnerable children. So, on that score, how has welfare reform performed?

On the positive side of the ledger, since enactment of welfare reform, the child poverty rate has declined from 20.5 percent in 1996 to 17.4 percent in 2006. Today, 1.6 million fewer children live in poverty than a decade ago (DeNavas Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2007).

Such a dramatic reduction in child poverty is no small accomplishment. However, most research to date that has examined the impact of welfare reform on noneconomic outcomes for children has found either no effects or modestly positive effects. For example, in a review of the effects of welfare-to-work programs on children and youth, Pamela Morris, Virginia Knox, and Lisa A. Gennetian (2002) found that welfare policies

that increased both parental employment and household income improved the school achievement of elementary school-age children, but programs that only increased parental employment, without accompanying increases in household income, did not. For adolescents, the same review found that policies that increased parental employment had negative effects on their school achievement but no effects on suspensions, school completion, dropout rates, or adolescent childbearing.

So, it seems that welfare reform has benefited children, generally, by reducing the overall child poverty rate, but with little evidence of significantly improved outcomes on other measures of child well-being. It appears that if we are serious about improving the well-being of children, we must do more than simply hope that when parents obtain jobs and the family's economic circumstances improve, those benefits automatically translate into improved developmental outcomes for their children.

The question, of course, is what “more” should be done to improve the life circumstances of children in low-income households. Boots, Macomber, and Danziger offer a number of interesting ideas. Certainly there is much to commend in efforts to increase the availability and affordability of child care, the accessibility of parental time off, and the number of children enrolled in Early Head Start and Head Start. But while acknowledging the importance of family structure to child well-being, the authors stop short of advocating public policies to strengthen family structure itself, such as efforts to support responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage.

It is important at the onset to acknowledge that programs that seek to increase the positive involvement of fathers in the lives of their children and to help couples form and sustain healthy marriages should not be a substitute for other approaches to improve the well-being of children, including those advocated by Boots, Macomber, and Danziger. Nor should such policies trap anyone in an abusive relationship. Domestic violence is a terrible problem that deserves our constant vigilance. But given the now-overwhelming empirical evidence that children who grow up in an intact, two-parent family with both biological parents present have better outcomes on a host of developmental variables, one way—not the only way, certainly, but one way—to enhance the well-being of children is for public policy to encourage responsible fatherhood and help couples form and sustain low-conflict, healthy marriages.

This, of course, is not really new. The late U. S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said, “The principal objective of American government at every level should be to see that children are born into intact families and that they remain so.”⁵ Indeed, the historic 1996 welfare reform legislation set goals to reduce out-of-wedlock childrearing and to strengthen the two-parent family. And, most recently, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 included \$150 million to fund new programs to promote healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood.

As a consequence, the federal government is now conducting research and demonstration projects to encourage healthy marriages that focused on three priorities: (1) programs geared to the more than half of all unmarried parents who at the time their child is born out of wedlock are in an exclusive romantic relationship and actively contemplating getting married; (2) programs that seek to increase access to marriage education for low-income couples who are already married; and (3) community-wide initiatives that seek to help couples form and sustain healthy marriages, including healthy relationship education for youth, premarital education for those contemplating marriage, marriage enrichment for the already married, and interventions for those experiencing marital difficulties. The federal government also is funding a number of research and demonstration projects aimed at increasing positive father involvement in the lives of children.

The jury is still out as to whether these approaches will, in fact, improve the well-being of children. And, of course, many other public policy approaches should be tried—and tested—as well. Healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs are not a panacea for children. But neither are welfare-to-work programs, Head Start/Early Head Start, universal child care, or parental leave policies.

Rather, children and families need support in various ways. No single approach or public policy can be expected by itself to ensure every child's need for stability, good health, and a nurturing environment. Indeed, even with unlimited resources, government alone cannot achieve this result. For at the end of the day, this is primarily the work of families and communities. But government certainly has a contribution to make, and it should go about making it.

Notes

- ¹ Data from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.
- ² Unpublished data from U.S. Department of Human Services, Administration on Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.
- ³ Data from U.S. Census Bureau.
- ⁴ Data from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement.
- ⁵ Meet the Press interview, September 19, 1993.

References

- DeNavas-Walt, Carmen, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica Smith. 2007. "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States." Current Population Report P60-233. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Morris, Pamela, Virginia Knox, and Lisa A. Gennetian. 2002. "Welfare Policies Matter for Children and Youth: Lessons for TANF Reauthorization." New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation.