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Examining the Impact of Policy Changes on Child Care Subsidy Receipt and Child Care Stability among Low-Income Families with Young Children in Illinois: Quasi-Experimental Design

Background: Child care subsidy programs provide low-income children with access to high-quality care and support parental employment. Since the 1996 welfare reform, it has been an especially important safety net program to support the economic self-sufficiency of low-income families with children. Yet, the receipt of the subsidy tends to be short and sporadic. Further, low-income families often struggle to maintain stability in child care arrangements, which is critical for healthy child development and stable parental employment. In 2005-2008, Illinois implemented a series of major policy changes such as increases in family income eligibility levels and in provider payment rates, yet the impact of these policy changes is understudied.

Research Goals: The main purpose of this project is to examine how state policy changes in child care subsidy affect child care subsidy receipt and child care stability among young children in Illinois. Specific aims are to examine:

1. How policy changes (increases in family income eligibility; increases in provider payment rates; and unionization of home-based providers) affect continuity of child care subsidy receipt.
2. How such policy changes affect stability in child care arrangements.
3. How such policy changes affect families with a history of TANF receipt.

Data: The proposed study will use monthly child care subsidy administrative data from the state of Illinois from 2001 to 2013. The project will create a longitudinal dataset of young children under age three who first received a child care subsidy and follow them through age five.

Methods: The project will employ a quasi-experimental design and create one group of children who experienced the 2005-2008 policy changes (experimental group) and an earlier group of children who did not (control group). Propensity score matching will be employed to compare how the two groups differ in continuity of child care subsidy and stability of child care. The study will also conduct analyses with subsets of the samples with TANF histories, to determine whether the policy changes affected this group differently from the rest of the low-income group.

Opportunities for Collaboration: Three ideas for collaborative research among the Scholars Network are suggested:

1. Which state policy changes in child care subsidies have been effective in increasing family self-sufficiency and stability since the passage of PRWORA?
2. How do family self-sufficiency and stability outcomes of low-income families in each state differ from the national sample of low-income families after the passage of PRWORA? Which states have better outcomes than others?
3. What are the trends of changes in state-level child care policies and other safety net programs across states?

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Engaging Fathers to Promote Family Self-Sufficiency and Stability

Background: Increased, meaningful father involvement in early childhood is a clear and long-standing national priority. Within the context of promoting family self-sufficiency and stability, father involvement is also a crucial contributor to successful outcomes. In light of this, it is highly problematic that father involvement in early childhood settings is lagging behind that of mothers, and the research base on successful intervention approaches is also modest. Policy and program initiatives that fail to account for mechanisms to engage, involve, and retain fathers in efforts to promote stability and self-sufficiency will be missing what should be a cornerstone focus of such approaches.

Research Goals: Prior successfully implemented work on enhancing father involvement will be used to identify effective strategies for equipping fathers and families with the tools to promote stability and self-sufficiency. Specific aims are to:

1. Develop an intervention suitable for promoting family stability and self-sufficiency through targeting fathers.
2. Evaluate the intervention in a randomized, clinical trial.

Data and Methods: A national survey of fathers and mothers of young children will be conducted, using conjoint analysis to identify the specific preferences and potential barriers of father engagement in early childhood settings. Respondents will be asked to make tradeoff decisions similar to those that are made routinely in everyday life. An intervention will be developed based on the survey results and on an existing model to promote father engagement in parenting programs through participation in a father-child recreational program.

In a randomized, clinical trial, 60 fathers will be recruited through a local Head Start program and assigned to the enhanced intervention or a business as usual control group. Outcome measures will include proximal measures of parenting, father-child relationships, indicators of parenting stress and family stability, and father and child mental health. Distal outcomes will include economic outcomes (e.g., monthly salary and child support contributions) and maintenance of gains.

Opportunities for Collaboration: Collaboration with other members of the Scholars Network is suggested to yield actionable ideas about how to support co-parenting; economic contributions to families and children; the promotion of successful child development and educational outcomes; and strategies to promote men's health, wellness, and occupational skills. Also, a battery of cross-site measures could be administered to the sample for the randomized, clinical trial as well as other local samples in communities where the Scholars Network members reside to obtain a large sample of individuals who could answer additional questions related to family self-sufficiency and stability.

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Colleen Heflin, University of Missouri

Family Stability and Material Hardship

Background: Surprisingly, food insecurity in the past five years has remained relatively stable, despite rises in unemployment and decreases in household income. Clearly, some household material needs are being met and others are not, and the underlying processes are unclear. The concept of material hardship expands the subject from just food insecurity to capture whether a household experienced food shortages, had utilities terminated, or had an unmet medical need. However, while the dynamics of poverty are well documented in the literature, much less is known about the dynamics of material hardship.

Research Goals: This research seeks to understand how and why households enter and exit material hardship, the extent to which federal program participation acts as a buffer, and how material hardship, not poverty, affects children and adults over the long-term. Specifically, the research will:

1. Identify how individual-level characteristics (e.g., family type, veteran status) and decisions impact the experience of material hardship.
2. Document how structural determinants at the state level (e.g., use of technology in application procedures) influence individual well-being.
3. Evaluate the consequences of material hardship over the life course (e.g., fertility, college attendance).

Data and Methods: Econometric techniques will be applied to data from the 2008 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and longitudinal data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). Models of material hardship will be developed based on four domains of need: home, medical, bill-paying, and food hardship. Analyses will include descriptive analyses and individual fixed effects models.

Opportunities for Collaboration: Three overarching research questions are proposed that would benefit from collaborative study in the Scholars Network:

1. How has the Great Recession changed the public participation in the social safety net?
2. What are the long-term effects of the Great Recession on the children who experienced significant drops in their household well-being?
3. What are the long-term effects of the Great Recession on adults who experienced significant drops in their household well-being?

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Heather D. Hill, University of Chicago

Promoting Economic Stability Amidst Precarious Employment and Complex Family Structure

Background: For less-educated adults, recent decades have brought growing unpredictability and insecurity in employment and greater instability in family structure. The extent to which safety net programs mitigate or amplify the income instability caused by these changes, while not well understood, is fundamental to future federal, state, and local policy making and program administration. However, evaluating and improving the safety net's ability to promote stability and self-sufficiency requires a better understanding of the longitudinal and dynamic relationships between program rules, program participation, employment outcomes, and family income.

Research Goals: The goal of this project is to identify state policy choices that increase household economic stability over time, either by promoting earnings stability or by supplementing income from earnings. It will examine the stability of household income as a function of specific state program rules for five key safety net programs— TANF, Medicaid/CHIP, SNAP, child care subsidies, and child support. Research questions include:

1. Are there state-level choices in the design and implementation of safety net programs associated with household income (in)stability?
2. If so, are such rules associated with unstable earnings, unstable benefit receipt, or some other mechanism?
3. Are there sub-populations that enjoy more or less stabilizing benefits from safety net programs?

Data: The 2004 and 2008 panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) will be used in this project.

Methods: A difference-in-differences technique will be used to estimate associations between state-level safety net program rules and longitudinal measures of household income stability. Households led by single, less-educated mothers will be compared to married two-parent households with less education. State-level policy choices in the five safety net programs from 2004 to 2012 will be defined and coded using publicly available sources of information. Income stability will be defined using a set of measures that capture the frequency, magnitude, and direction of changes in total household income and its main components, earned income and means-tested income.

Opportunities for Collaboration: Potential collaborative research questions for the Scholars Network are suggested in several topic areas: 1) the bundling of benefits; 2) disconnected families; 3) asset accumulation; and 4) next generation policy experiments.

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Marybeth J. Mattingly, Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire

Understanding Family Stability and the Intergenerational Implications of Work across Place

Background: The Carsey Institute recently conducted a pilot study and early follow-up study that sought to better understand factors influencing stability among vulnerable families residing in rural places. The study described the social services that were available to families, service gaps and resources that might enhance family sufficiency, and the types of support that appear to work best during challenging economic times. Early research from these studies shows that these families rarely encounter a single event that disrupts their lives; rather, struggles with work, health, transportation, and housing are deeply intertwined in day-to-day life and across generations.

Research Goals: This project suggests a twofold approach to better understanding specific dimensions of family stability among those vulnerable to financial and nonfinancial hardships. First, the earlier qualitative studies will be expanded by exploring how people living in two rural New England sites (one with decades of high child poverty, the other without) navigate the challenges and opportunities that are specific to life in nonmetropolitan counties.

Second, stemming from the early research for the first project, a quantitative study will be conducted that explores the impact of parents' stable employment on the likelihood that their children work full time when in young adulthood.

Data and Methods: The first study includes existing data from previous studies and qualitative data from focus groups conducted in local communities. Focus groups will be held with rural social service providers and the families they serve. Transcripts from these focus groups and interviews will be coded and analyzed to identify key themes.

The second study will use data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). Components from the PSID will be linked to build an intergenerational file that connects measures of parents' employment with those of their children. Further, geocoded PSID data will be used to analyze how the community context (for example, county differences in poverty and urbanicity) may moderate the intergenerational effects of stable employment across generations.

Opportunities for Collaboration: Potential for collaborative projects within the Scholars Network is suggested in several areas:

1. Expand the qualitative research from the first study to additional sites;
2. Build on the dataset to be constructed in the second study; and
3. Use administrative data, such as the December supplement to the Current Population Survey, to observe trends in social safety net participation and program spending across states and the effect of these programs on outcomes related to family stability and self-sufficiency, such as material hardship, food insecurity, and employment.

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Jennifer Romich, University of Washington

Income Stability of Families Involved with the Child Welfare System

Background: Recent work has established that about a quarter of families with children removed by the child welfare system are economically disconnected – neither working nor receiving public cash assistance. Changes to welfare and child welfare policy in the late 1990s heighten the risk of economic disconnection and may decrease the rate of reunification. Welfare time limits reduce families' access to cash assistance, increasing the number of families without any income source. During the same period, child welfare reforms limited the time children could remain in out-of-home placement before agencies are required to initiate termination of parental rights.

Research Goals: The proposed work consists of two integrated lines of inquiry that successively broaden and deepen our understanding of economic disconnection and its relationship to family reunification. The first aim is to:

1. Discern patterns of family income dynamics and types of economic disconnection relative to spells of child welfare involvement.
2. Assess the impact of different economic trajectories on family reunification.

The second aim is to identify how child welfare and economic services workers:

1. Identify and perceive disconnected parents.
2. Perceive disconnection as a barrier to family reunification.
3. Evaluate the resources they are able to provide families.
4. Utilize agency policies and perceive coordination across agencies.

Data and Methods: Work to answer the first aim will use a previously created, unique longitudinal database of Washington State administrative data on child welfare program involvement, employment, and cash assistance receipt over the period 1998-2010. Trajectories of family income by source prior to, at, and after the point of child removal will be linked to child welfare permanency outcomes (reunification, adoption, or guardianship).

The approach for the second aim will include reviews of policy and practice documents, visits to child welfare and public assistance offices, interviews with stakeholders inside and outside of the system, and focus groups with front-line workers. Data from these sources will be coded and organized by topics and themes.

Opportunities for Collaboration: One area for potential collaboration by the Scholars Network is using future merged administrative data from the Data Center to examine questions such as whether state TANF policy choices are associated with subsequent employment gains among recipients. The network could also collaborate by conducting wrap-around studies that would extend the content of planned evaluations, such as the Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration (STED) or the Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS) project, to additional topics such as child and adult development, asset accumulation, or health outcomes.

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Jodi Sandfort, Humphrey School, University of Minnesota

Studying Family Self-Sufficiency Program and Policy Implementation: A Multi-Level Approach

Background: Practical knowledge forms the foundation of the operation of the social welfare system in our country, yet scientists know scant information about how it is developed, applied, and altered. While the intervention-based research which OPRE supports, such as research on job search, fatherhood and asset-development, is essential for building knowledge, it is also important for systematic research to look beyond particular interventions and investigate day-today implementation practices in state and local social welfare organizations.

Research Goals: Three main activities will be conducted to establish a foundation for a practice-based examination of social welfare implementation in Minnesota:

1. A meta-analysis of implementation studies focused on interventions for low-income children and families. It will focus on the questions of ‘what policy issues do implementation scholars study?’ and ‘what relevance might this literature have for policy implementation practice?’
2. A policy field analysis examining the major laws, institutions, and networks at the state level.
3. Initiation of in-depth field-work involving observation and interviews of implementation practitioners at the state level. It will explore practices around implementation challenges or quandaries and how they are resolved.

Data and Methods: For the meta-analysis, three sources (the Expanded Social Sciences Citation Index, WorldCat, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses) will be used because of their breadth and interdisciplinary reach. Articles published since 2003 in one of these sources will be assessed according to research approach and methodological rigor, content area, and significant findings.

The program content area for the policy field analysis will be identified in consultation with the Scholars Network. Information will be gathered through publicly-available sources (legislative review, budgets, program reports) and informal interviews with field-level actors.

For the field research, implementers will purposively be identified within the selected field to study in detail. Ethnographic research methods will be utilized, such as participant observation and semistructured and unstructured interviews, to document day-to-day practices. Documented and recorded data will be analyzed through iterative deductive and inductive coding.

Collaborative Goals: General collaborative activities are proposed in multiple areas.

1. Members of the Scholars Network could share information and expertise, such as through learning workshops at network meetings.
2. Individual research can be aligned with the interests of network members.
3. Members can coordinate through efforts like creating multimedia learning materials based on their initial research.

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