

The Impact of Welfare Reform on Parents' Ability to Care for Their Children's Health

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ABSTRACT

Objectives. Most of the national policy debate regarding welfare assumed that if middle-income mothers could balance work while caring for their children's health and development, mothers leaving welfare for work should be able to do so as well. Yet, previous research has not examined the conditions faced by mothers leaving welfare for work.

Methods. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, this study examined the availability of benefits that working parents commonly use to meet the health and developmental needs of their children: paid sick leave, vacation leave, and flexible hours.

Results. In comparison with mothers who had never received welfare, mothers who had been on Aid to Families with Dependent Children were more likely to be caring for at least 1 child with a chronic condition (37% vs 21%, respectively). Yet, they were more likely to lack sick leave for the entire time they worked (36% vs 20%) and less likely to receive other paid leave or flexibility.

Conclusions. If current welfare recipients face similar conditions when they return to work, many will face working conditions that make it difficult or impossible to succeed in the labor force at the same time as meeting their children's health and developmental needs. (*Am J Public Health.* 1999;89:502-505)

In August 1996, the United States Congress passed the most sweeping changes in welfare policy that have taken place in the last 60 years.¹ Those changes ended the federal guarantee of income support for single mothers and their children living in poverty. The legislation replaced that guarantee with block grants to states, time limits, and work requirements for both food stamps and income support. Policymakers and researchers have raised concerns about the availability of work opportunities for those with the educational levels and job skills of parents currently receiving welfare.²⁻⁸ Nonetheless, under the new law the majority of welfare recipients will be required to find work within 2 years. Recipients may not receive income support for more than 5 years during their lifetime, and states are granted authority to impose shorter time limits.⁹

The overwhelming majority of the public debate regarding welfare reform—at both the federal level and the state level—assumed that parents leaving welfare for work would face conditions similar to those faced by parents already in the workforce. It was argued that because middle-income mothers can work without apparent harm to their children, the poor should be able to do the same. The goal of this article is to empirically examine the question of whether parents leaving welfare for work face significantly different nonfinancial barriers to caring for their children's health and well-being than those faced by other parents.

While a great deal of attention has been paid to the important financial barriers parents living in poverty will face when they balance work and caring for their children, inadequate attention has been paid to important nonfinancial barriers they may also face. Meeting children's health and developmental needs requires time off from work to accompany children to well-child or illness-related medical appointments, to care for sick children at home when necessary, and to have

children with learning difficulties or behavioral problems evaluated, among many other responsibilities.¹⁰ In 1 of every 4 families, caring for sick children involves work disruptions or finding substitute care for 3 or more weeks each year.¹¹

Under welfare reform, parents' availability will be determined by workplace conditions. Availability of paid leave and flexible schedules is particularly important in determining whether parents can meet their children's health needs. Parents may use paid sick leave to care for their children when the children are sick and need to stay at home or see a doctor.^{11,12} They may use paid vacation leave to meet their children's routine health and developmental needs, or use it as a partial substitute for paid sick leave to meet their children's sick care needs. (Vacation leave serves only as a partial substitute because the advance notice required for such leave may limit its usefulness in the care of sick children.) When parents work at jobs that have flexible schedules, they are more likely to be able to take time off from work to care for their children when health or developmental problems arise.

This study examined whether parents leaving welfare for work have job benefits that are likely to enable them to meet the routine health, developmental, and sick day needs of their children. The paid sick leave, vacation leave, and schedule flexibility available to parents leaving welfare for work were examined over 5 years in a national sample.

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Methods

Analyses Conducted

We initially examined how frequently parents were caring for children with asthma and how frequently parents were caring for children with any chronic condition whose care was likely to place greater demands on them. The frequency of asthma was assessed both because it is the most common chronic childhood condition and because of the frequency with which children with asthma need health care. In assessments of all chronic health conditions, a child was considered to have such a condition if the parent described the child as having activity limitations or receiving regular medical care for the chronic condition.¹³

Next, we examined the extent to which parents leaving welfare for work had at least 1 benefit or working condition that would facilitate their meeting their children's health care and developmental needs during the 5-year period from 1990 to 1994. Specifically, we examined how commonly parents who have been on welfare found jobs in which they had paid sick leave, paid vacation leave, or flexible schedules. The quantity of available leave was also examined.

Finally, we studied the number of parents who found themselves at double or multiple jeopardy during the 5-year period. Parents were defined as being at double jeopardy if they lacked both paid sick leave and paid vacation leave, because they would have no leave with which to meet their children's health and developmental needs. Parents were defined as being at multiple jeopardy if they lacked paid sick leave, lacked paid vacation leave, and lacked flexibility in the jobs they found.

Because the overwhelming majority of working parents who had received welfare were women, working women who had never received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) were used as the comparison group for working women who had received AFDC. In addition to comparing working conditions for women who had received AFDC with working conditions for

those never on AFDC, we compared the conditions faced by women who had received AFDC for more than 24 months and the conditions faced by women who had received AFDC for 24 months or less. (In this article, the term "welfare" is used to refer to the federal program that provides income support to families living in poverty. In the years before 1996, the income support program was titled Aid to Families with Dependent Children.)

Sampling weights were used. A Pearson χ^2 test was used in examining significant differences in proportions. Tests of significance were adjusted for the use of weights and for design effects resulting from the survey sampling method.

Data Source

We analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which consists of a nationally representative probability sample of 11 406 civilian men and women who were aged 14 to 21 years when they were first surveyed in 1979.¹⁴ Respondents have been interviewed annually since 1979; female respondents have been interviewed and observed with their children biannually between 1986 and the present. Poor and minority populations were oversampled. Multistage, stratified area sampling was used to select the civilian respondents.

Sample

Only mothers who worked at least 20 hours per week were examined, because only these workers were asked in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth about paid leave and flexibility. (Eighty-nine percent of mothers in our sample who had no history of welfare use worked at least 20 hours per week, as did 93% of mothers in the sample who had received welfare in the past.) Working conditions from 1990 to 1994 were examined. Of the 2261 working mothers included in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 736 had received welfare between 1979 and 1994, and 1525 had never been on welfare.

Results

Caretaking Burden

In regard to having children with special health needs, mothers who had been on AFDC were significantly more likely than mothers who had never been on AFDC to have at least 1 child with asthma ($P < .001$) and at least 1 child with a chronic condition ($P < .001$) for whom they need time to care. Fourteen percent of working mothers who were on AFDC for more than 2 years and 11% who were on AFDC for 2 years or less had a child with asthma, as compared with 7% of mothers who were never on AFDC ($P < .001$). Forty-one percent of mothers who were on AFDC for more than 2 years and 32% who were on AFDC for 2 years or less had at least 1 child with a chronic condition whose health and development needs had to be addressed; the corresponding rate for mothers who had never been on AFDC was 21% ($P < .001$). Those mothers who were on AFDC the longest were the most likely to have a child with a chronic condition ($P < .001$).

Availability and Amount of Paid Sick Leave

Although mothers who returned to work from welfare were significantly more likely than mothers who had never received AFDC to have children with chronic conditions to care for; yet, they were more likely to lack paid sick leave (see Table 1). Thirty-six percent of mothers who returned to work from welfare lacked sick leave the entire time they worked, in comparison with 20% of mothers who had never received AFDC ($P < .001$). Fifty-eight percent of mothers who returned to work from welfare, as opposed to 34% of working mothers who had never been on AFDC, received paid sick leave for less than half of the time they worked ($P < .001$).

Those returning to work from welfare received fewer days of paid sick leave when they did receive such leave. Less than 14% of mothers who returned to work from welfare received more than 10 days of paid sick

TABLE 1—Percentages of Employed Mothers Who Consistently Had Benefits Between 1990 and 1994

	Never on AFDC	1–24 Months on AFDC	More Than 24 Months on AFDC	P
Had sick leave entire time working	51.3	27.9	21.4	<.001
Had vacation leave entire time working	61.3	44.0	38.2	<.001
Had flexible schedule entire time working	30.1	16.3	18.6	<.001
Had sick leave and vacation leave entire time working	45.9	24.2	19.0	<.001
Had sick leave, vacation leave, and flexibility entire time working	15.1	6.2	5.2	<.001

leave, as compared with 27% of mothers who had never received AFDC ($P < .001$).

Availability and Amount of Paid Vacation Leave

Mothers who had received AFDC were also significantly more likely than mothers who had never received AFDC to lack paid vacation leave when they worked ($P < .001$). Only 41% of mothers returning to work from welfare, as opposed to 61% of working mothers who had never received AFDC, received paid vacation leave the entire time they worked (see Table 1). Twenty percent of mothers returning to work from welfare did not receive paid vacation leave during any of the time they worked, as compared with 14% of working mothers who had never received AFDC ($P < .001$).

When they did receive paid vacation leave, mothers returning to work from welfare received significantly fewer days of vacation leave than mothers who had never been on AFDC. While more than 1 in 3 mothers who had never been on AFDC in the past received more than 2 weeks of paid vacation leave, fewer than 1 in 6 mothers who had been on AFDC for more than 2 years received that much paid vacation leave ($P < .001$).

Flexibility

Mothers who had received AFDC were significantly less likely to have a flexible schedule ($P < .001$). Only 18% of mothers who had received welfare consistently found jobs that provided them with flexible schedules; the corresponding rate for mothers who had never received AFDC was 30%. Fifty-seven percent of past welfare recipients found jobs that provided flexible schedules for less than half of the time they worked ($P < .001$).

Double and Multiple Jeopardy

Mothers who had received AFDC were significantly more likely to lack both paid

sick leave and vacation leave than mothers who had never received AFDC. While nearly 68% of mothers who had never received AFDC always had some type of paid leave, only 45% of mothers who had received AFDC had paid sick or vacation leave for the entire time they worked (between 1990 and 1994) ($P < .001$).

Those mothers who lacked scheduling flexibility in addition to lacking paid sick and vacation leave faced the most problematic working conditions in regard to meeting their children's needs. Although more than 1 in 4 mothers who had received AFDC for more than 2 years and 1 in 6 mothers who had received AFDC for 2 years or less lacked flexible schedules and paid leave for the majority of the time they worked, fewer than 1 in 10 mothers who had never received AFDC lacked all 3 benefits for the majority of the time they worked ($P < .001$) (see Table 2).

Discussion

The nature and quality of time parents spend with children, as well as the availability of parental time, have been shown to be critical to children's health and development.¹⁵⁻²³ Parents' availability to help care for their children when they are sick has been shown to contribute to children's speed of recovery as well as their overall mental and physical health.²⁴⁻³³ This study demonstrates that mothers leaving welfare for work have less paid leave and flexibility in their jobs.

Seventy-six percent of mothers who returned to work from AFDC lacked sick leave for some of the time they worked, and 58% lacked sick leave for more than half of the time they worked. Fewer than 1 in 5 past welfare recipients had a flexible schedule for the entire time that they were employed when they returned to work.

The worse working conditions faced by mothers who had been on welfare in the past were probably due to the fact that, on average, they had lower levels of education.^{34,35} It is likely that these mothers, being in a worse

position to compete for jobs, often had no choice but to accept jobs with poor working conditions, including part-time positions lacking benefits.

Parents working at jobs without paid leave or flexibility who take time off to meet a child's health needs lose wages at best and, at worst, can lose their jobs. When children are sick and their working single mothers have no paid sick leave, no paid vacation leave, no job flexibility, and limited social supports and cannot afford to pay for substitute care, the mothers' choices are few. They can send sick children to school, leave them home alone, leave them in the care of other children, or take unpaid leave. For parents earning close to the minimum wage, as is the case with many families exiting welfare for work, taking unpaid leave can drop the family income below the poverty level. When children with common infectious diseases are sent to school or child care, they contribute to the spread of communicable diseases in these settings.³⁶⁻⁴⁷ When sick children stay home alone or are placed in the care of other children, they often do not receive the care they need.

It is important to note that mothers returning to work under welfare reform mandates may face worse working conditions than did the mothers in this study. As noted, we examined the working conditions of mothers who had returned to work from welfare voluntarily. They are a self-selected group that, on average, is better educated and has more job skills than mothers who have not left welfare.^{34,35} They have been in a better position to compete for jobs, for benefits such as paid leave, and for working conditions, such as a flexible schedule, that facilitate balancing work and family. Even if current welfare recipients, when they are required to return to work, face conditions similar to those faced by the welfare recipients in this study who returned to work voluntarily, more than 3 million of the parents leaving welfare under the 1996 legislation will face working conditions that make it difficult or impossible to succeed in the workplace while caring well for their children's health and developmental needs.

TABLE 2—Percentages of Employed Mothers Facing Double or Multiple Jeopardy Between 1990 and 1994

	Never on AFDC	1-24 Months on AFDC	More Than 24 Months on AFDC	P
Lacked both sick and vacation leave some of working years	32.4	51.0	58.0	<.001
Lacked both sick and vacation leave more than half of working years	20.7	32.6	39.5	<.001
Lacked both sick and vacation leave entire time working	11.1	15.4	21.9	<.001
Lacked sick leave, vacation leave, and flexibility some of working years	16.4	36.5	42.3	<.001
Lacked sick leave, vacation leave, and flexibility more than half of working years	8.1	16.4	26.3	<.001
Lacked sick leave, vacation leave, and flexibility entire time working	4.1	8.1	10.9	<.001

Solutions exist. The worse working conditions faced by past welfare recipients could be partially addressed by helping them attain the education and job skills they need to compete for better jobs with better benefits. Paid leave could be guaranteed to all families through family leave insurance in a manner similar to that in which disability insurance is currently provided. Public opinion polls have shown that such family leave insurance is supported by 79% of Americans.⁴⁸

Current policies are likely to force many parents leaving welfare to choose between meeting their children's health needs and keeping a job their family needs to survive. That cost is too high for children and for society. □

Contributors

S. J. Heymann planned the study, conceived the data analyses, supervised data analysis, and wrote the manuscript. A. Earle conducted the data analyses and contributed to the writing and revision of the paper.

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