

Effects of Welfare on Families

Research Synthesis Paper: [How Broken Families Rob Children of their Chance for Future Prosperity](#)

1. Recipients of Welfare

Married couples are less likely to receive welfare.¹⁾ Family intactness has a negative influence on what fraction of an area's households receives food stamps²⁾ as well as on an area's average TANF and state welfare transfers per 25- to 54-year-old female.³⁾⁴⁾ Children from single-mother families, intact cohabiting families, and (biological father or mother) cohabiting stepfamilies are significantly more likely than children from married families to receive most forms of welfare, including AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children, now Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), food stamps, and Medicaid.⁵⁾ Intact married families are less likely to have participated in the Food Stamp Program (now SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) than cohabiting couples.⁶⁾ Family intactness has a negative influence on an area's average Social Security Disability Income transfer per 25- to 54-year-old individual.⁷⁾⁸⁾ Family intactness also has a negative influence on an area's average Supplemental Security Income transfer per 25- to 54-year-old male or female.⁹⁾¹⁰⁾

Three-fourths of all women applying for welfare benefits do so because of a disruption of marriage.¹¹⁾ Understandably, mothers who are employed at the time of divorce are much less likely to become welfare recipients than are mothers who do not work. And mothers who are not employed in the workforce at the time of divorce are as close to going on welfare as are single mothers who lose their jobs.¹²⁾ Divorce is the main factor in determining the length of "poverty spells,"¹³⁾ particularly for women whose pre-divorce family income was in the bottom half of the income distribution.¹⁴⁾ Over 75 percent of those who have out-of-wedlock births in their teens will be on welfare within five years.¹⁵⁾ These women comprise more than half of all mothers on welfare.¹⁶⁾

1.1 Single Mothers

Many single mothers receive government aid in the form of welfare. More than 75 percent of single teenage mothers receive welfare within five years of giving birth.¹⁷⁾ Forty percent of nonteenage single mothers are poor, and nearly 60 percent rely on food stamps or cash welfare payments after the birth of their child.¹⁸⁾ Single mothers generally remain impoverished longer than divorced mothers. Whereas divorced mothers who receive welfare do so for three to four years, the always-single mother is less likely to stop receiving welfare and takes longer to exit poverty.¹⁹⁾

Receiving welfare may actually decrease women's employment, a potential path out of poverty. Women are less likely to be employed in states with high levels of welfare benefits.²⁰⁾ Findings from an experiment conducted by the U.S. Office of Income Security Policy show that female heads-of-households responded to income guarantees by significantly reducing their work effort.²¹⁾

Welfare benefits also correlate with a decrease in the marriage rate, diminishing another path out of poverty. A \$100 increase in monthly welfare benefits for single mothers decreases a woman's likelihood of marrying by 2.5- 5 percentage points.²²⁾ According to one study, 80 percent of single parents who entered into select welfare programs remained single two to four years after first receiving payments.²³⁾ In particular, receiving benefits from the AFDC welfare program corresponds

with a 5 percent reduction in the marriage rate.²⁴⁾

2. Welfare's Impact on the Number of Hours Worked

Welfare payments have had a predictable if pernicious effect on the overall response of recipients to marriage as well as work.²⁵⁾ According to former Congressional Budget Office Director June O'Neill:

Denver Income Maintenance Experiment²⁶⁾ show that female heads of families responded to income guarantees by significantly reducing their work effort. Other studies have found that women are less likely to work in states with high levels of AFDC benefits.²⁷⁾

Historically, O'Neill found, higher welfare benefit levels have had dramatic negative effects on the behavior of young men, especially young African-American males, by reducing their participation in the workforce and increasing the likelihood that they will father a child or children out of wedlock.²⁸⁾ Sheldon Danziger, professor at the School of Social Policy at the University of Michigan, concluded in 1986 that because only one third of the poor were expected to work, most poor households would not benefit from an improved economy.²⁹⁾ Thus, even when the national economy improved, welfare families who were disconnected from a market-based economy remained stuck in poverty because their income was not connected to the number of hours worked or to a rise in the hourly value of their labor that is commonly connected with a more robust economy.

3. The Value of Effort

If the level of education and the number of hours worked are important to a child's future income, the acquisition of a positive work ethic is vital. If a child's parents already espouse a belief in effort, the child has a much better chance of believing in the positive results of effort.

For some time, social scientists have presented "personal effort believers" as typically successful, competent, and emotionally stable people. Their opposites are "external pressure believers," who tend not to make long-term plans or to think of ways to control or change their circumstances since they do not believe their efforts will really matter. The latter group generally is far less successful.³⁰⁾

Martin Seligman, professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and president of the American Psychological Association, is world renowned for his work on changing external pressure believers into personal effort believers and on learned optimism and learned helplessness. His work on "Learned Efficacy/Learned Optimism" shows that the coaching children receive from their parents and teachers as they tackle the early and tougher tasks of life has everything to do with deep-seated beliefs they acquire regarding effort (beyond their own awareness).³¹⁾

Learned helplessness also can be acquired in the early years,³²⁾ with such beliefs frequently having taken hold by age six.³³⁾ Many of the children who are external pressure believers jeopardize their economic future in adolescence by dropping out of school or getting pregnant before marriage.³⁴⁾

The presence or absence of a belief in effort, then, has much to do with poverty or attaining a desired income level. Middle-class children are more likely to pick up belief in effort from their parents and teachers. Children raised on welfare, in many cases, have the opposite experience.³⁵⁾ The longer a person is on welfare, the greater the erosion of the belief in effort.³⁶⁾ Some welfare recipients report

that they are aware of the bad effects welfare has on attitudes within their families, but having a low belief in their own abilities, they see few viable alternatives.³⁷⁾ In other words, they lose confidence. As the research cited above shows, parents' achievement in the marketplace leads to achievement by their children in the schoolroom. The earlier the parents pass on a belief in effort, the longer and deeper the educational and economic benefits to the child will be.

¹⁾ Daphne Hernandez and Kathleen M. Ziol-Guest, "Income Volatility and Family Structure Patterns: Association with Stability and Change in Food Stamp Program Participation," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 30, no. 4 (2009): 366. As cited in Patrick F. Fagan, Andrew J. Kidd, and Henry Potrykus, "Marriage and Economic Well-Being: The Economy of the Family Rises or Falls with Marriage," (May 2011). Available at <http://marri.frc.org/get.cfm?i=RS11E03>. Accessed 20 July 2011.

²⁾ , ⁴⁾ , ⁵⁾ , ⁸⁾ , ¹⁰⁾ Henry Potrykus and Patrick Fagan, "U.S. Social Policy Dependence on the Family, Derived from the Index of Belonging," (2013) available at <http://marri.us/policy-2013>.

³⁾ Specifically, family intactness has a *very precisely determinable, negative influence* on what fraction of an area's households receives food stamps as well as on an area's average TANF and state welfare transfers per 25- to 54-year-old female.

Precision has no formal meaning. It indicates how clearly determinable (distinguishable from zero) an influence on an outcome is. Precision is comparable to standard deviation. Low/ no precision indicates a high standard of deviation in which data points spread over a large range of value, signifying that the influence of one variable over another is relatively uncertain. High precision indicates a low standard of deviation in which data points hover around the mean, signifying that the influence of one variable over another is relatively certain. For further elaboration see "[Marriage and Economic Well-Being: The Economy of the Family Rises or Falls with Marriage](#)"

⁶⁾ Daphne Hernandez and Kathleen M. Ziol-Guest, "Income Volatility and Family Structure Patterns: Association with Stability and Change in Food Stamp Program Participation," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 30, no. 4 (2009): 366.

⁷⁾ Specifically, Family intactness has a *precisely determinable, negative influence* on an area's average Social Security Disability Income transfer per 25- to 54-year-old individual. For further elaboration see "[U.S. Social Policy Dependence on the Family, Derived from the Index of Belonging](#)"

⁹⁾ Specifically, Family intactness has a *very precisely determinable, negative influence* on an area's average Supplemental Security Income transfer per 25- to 54-year-old male or female. For further elaboration see "[U.S. Social Policy Dependence on the Family, Derived from the Index of Belonging](#)"

¹¹⁾ OECD, *Factors Affecting the Labor Force Participation of Lone Mothers in the United States*.

¹²⁾ Philip K. Robins, "Child Support, Welfare Dependency, and Poverty," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (September 1986), pp. 768-786.

¹³⁾ , ¹⁹⁾ Julia Heath, "Determinants of Spells of Poverty Following Divorce," *Review of Social Economy* 49 (1992): 305-315.

¹⁴⁾ , ³³⁾ Greg J. Duncan, Martha S. Hill, and Saul D. Hoffman, "Welfare Dependence Within and Across Generations," *Science*, Vol. 239, No. 4839 (January 1988), pp. 467-471.

¹⁵⁾ J. Jacobson and R. Maynard, "Unwed Mothers and Long-Term Dependency," Paper presented at American Enterprise Institute Conference on Welfare Reform, September 1995.

¹⁶⁾ K. A. Moore, D. R. Morrison, C. Blumenthal, M. L. Daly, and R. Bennett, "Data on Teenage Childbearing in the United States," *ChildTrends*, January 1993.

¹⁷⁾ J. Jacobson and R. Maynard, "Unwed Mothers and Long-Term Dependency" (paper presented at the Addressing Illegitimacy: Welfare Reform Options for Congress conference at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, D.C., September 11, 1995).

¹⁸⁾ N.G. Bennett, D.E. Bloom, and C.K. Miller, "The Influence of Nonmarital Childbearing on Formation of First Marriages," *Demography* 32 (1995): 47-62.

²⁰⁾ J. O'Neill, "Transfers and poverty: Cause and/or effect?" *Cato Journal* 6, no.1 (1996): 55-76. Greg J. Duncan, W. Jean Yeung, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Judith R. Smith, "How much does childhood poverty affect the life chances of children?" *American Sociological Review* 63 (1998): 406-423.

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- ²⁶⁾ U.S. Office of Income Security Policy, 1983
- ²⁷⁾ June O'Neill, "Transfers and Poverty: Cause and/or Effect?" *Cato Journal*, Vol. 6, No.1 (Spring/Summer 1986), pp. 55-76.
- ²⁸⁾ Ann M. Hill and June O'Neill, *Underclass Behaviors in the United States: Measurement and Analysis of Determinants*, Baruch College, City University of New York, August 1993.
- ²⁹⁾ Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, "Do Rising Tides Lift All Boats? The Impact of Secular and Cyclical Changes on Poverty," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (May 1986), pp. 405-410.
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- ³¹⁾ See Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Knopf, 1991).
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- ³⁶⁾ Susan J. Popkin, "Welfare: Views from the Bottom," *Social Problems*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (February 1990), pp. 64-79. See also Glick, "Transgenerational Welfare Dependency."
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