When Low-Income Mothers Go to Work: Implications for Children

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Abstract

When mothers who have depended on welfare become employed, the change affects not only welfare budgets and the women themselves, but the daily lives of the children who make up two-thirds of the welfare population. This article is the first of a set of three that consider what we know—and do not know—about the likely effects that a mother’s moving from welfare to work will have on her children.

This article gives an overview of research studies conducted from the late 1960s to the present that consider how maternal employment affects children in low-income families. The efforts of these families to juggle working and child rearing have received far less attention than those of middle-class or professional families. Most studies that do focus on low-income groups indicate that children are seldom harmed when their mothers work, and many have improved outcomes, especially in terms of cognitive development. The authors caution, however, that all the working mothers studied thus far entered employment voluntarily, so their experiences may be more favorable than the experiences of families who may be forced off welfare and into jobs. Child outcome research that focuses directly on the families who will be affected by welfare reform is currently unavailable.

The two subsequent articles (by Parcel and Menaghan and by Moore and Driscoll) continue with the themes raised in this overview and examine in depth specific questions policymakers should ask as they anticipate the effects that moving mothers into low-wage jobs may have on the development of children: How does a parent’s going to work outside the home affect family life? And how do children who were once supported by public assistance fare after their mothers become employed?

With the enactment in 1996 of sweeping welfare reform legislation, states gained extraordinary authority to determine the nature and scope of their welfare programs, including the length of time a family may receive welfare (up to the five-year limit in the federal law) and the extent of the educational, training, and child care services that will be available to families as they make the transition from welfare to work. The changes that will emerge in states as a result of federal welfare reform will
obviously have implications for children. This article addresses how the movement of mothers into employment may affect children.

Several thoughtfully designed and carefully executed evaluations of the effects on children of mothers’ participation in welfare-to-work programs are now under way. These studies randomly assign welfare families to be subject to, or free of, the requirements of programs designed to encourage mothers’ employment. The studies will yield information about implications for children when welfare mothers (regardless of their motivations or background characteristics) are required to work or prepare for work. Unfortunately, the results from these studies will not all be available in time to influence decisions about new state welfare programs. Until these important studies are complete, policymakers must look for guidance to an existing body of research on the implications of maternal employment for children in low-income families.

Maternal Employment

In reviewing current research, it is important to bear in mind that existing studies look almost exclusively at families in which mothers voluntarily sought and gained employment. (Most existing and proposed welfare-to-work programs are not voluntary; they require mothers to participate in education, training, job search, or employment activities.) Mothers who voluntarily gain employment differ in many important ways from mothers who do not. For example, on average, the former have more education and higher cognitive scores—characteristics that directly influence both children’s development and mothers’ employment patterns. Differences in child outcomes that are found in these studies may therefore show the effects of preexisting differences in mothers that predispose some toward employment, rather than the effects of employment itself.

With that caveat, then, this article reviews research on the implications of maternal employment for children in low-income families. The research on maternal employment across all population groups has sought answers to four major questions. This article examines each of these questions in turn, focusing specifically on low-income families.

1. Is maternal employment harmful to children?
2. Do the implications that maternal employment appears to have for children actually reflect differences between families that predispose some mothers to work?
3. Are child outcomes affected by the mother’s job conditions?
4. Do outcomes differ depending on the age of the child when the mother goes to work?

As this article documents, researchers conclude with increasing certainty that maternal employment itself, rather than variables generally associated with it (like the mother’s education or psychological outlook), contributes to improved child outcomes in low-income families. However, conditions such as low wages, poor working conditions, and perhaps work that begins during the child’s first year of life can undermine the generally positive effects of maternal employment on children in low-income families.
Positive or Negative Implications

Most of the studies of the implications of maternal employment for children have focused on middle-income families. In general, these studies have not found a consistent picture of negative implications across all children. Some studies have documented problems for middle-class boys, while others have noted benefits for girls and for children generally when mothers are satisfied in their employment roles. These findings suggested that the implications of maternal employment differ for key subgroups, leading researchers to focus on specific groups, low-income families among them.

When low-income families are studied separately, the results are fairly consistent. With a few notable exceptions, discussed later in this article, maternal employment among low-income families has generally had either positive or neutral implications for children’s development. For instance, a study of Head Start students in the late 1960s found that children who scored well on a verbal test were more likely than their peers to have mothers who were employed outside of the home. Another early study looked at children’s development in light of maternal employment and a range of other family factors, such as whether there was a father in the home, crowding in the household, and number of children in the family. Like the Head Start study, this study found positive child outcomes associated with maternal employment. For example, in families in which the mother worked and a father was present, children did better in early measures of height and weight and had more advanced language development. The height and weight outcomes suggest that the additional income from the mother’s employment may have helped the family meet such basic needs as obtaining food.

Preexisting Differences Between Families

Early studies like these simply compared children whose mothers were employed with those whose mothers were not, and the studies generally showed better intellectual, social, and emotional outcomes for low-income children of employed mothers. Later studies investigated whether factors other than the mother’s employment—such as higher levels of education or a more positive psychological outlook among employed mothers—might be the real reason for these better outcomes. Thus, researchers have tried to identify and account for these other factors that might affect child outcomes to ensure that they were actually measuring the implications of maternal employment—and nothing else—for child outcomes. The majority of these studies also reported better outcomes for children in low-income families whose mothers were employed.

For instance, one researcher studied outcomes for three groups of children 10 to 12 years old, all being raised by single mothers and attending inner-city public schools. The groups did not differ significantly in maternal education or family size, although household income was higher for families with employed mothers. Mothers were categorized as having been employed full time, part time, or not at all since the child entered school. The nonemployed mothers in the sample received Aid to Families with Dependent Children and described themselves as preferring to stay at home. Children of mothers employed full and part time, compared to those in families with a mother who was not employed, had higher self-esteem and perceived that their families were more cohesive and organized. Daughters of mothers employed full time had higher grade point averages than other children, and they described their families as placing a higher priority on independence and achievement.

Because the groups that were compared in this study looked the same with respect to mother’s education and family size, the researcher could safely conclude that differences in child outcomes could not be attributed to these factors. However, as the researchers themselves point out, the study did not take into account the group difference in family income or possible unmeasured psychological factors that might distinguish employed mothers from nonemployed mothers. Thus, the possibility remained open that these factors, rather than the fact of maternal employment, may have been driving the improved child outcomes.
Fortunately, another study the same year attempted to account for a broader range of factors that might potentially affect child outcomes in low-income families. This study controlled for mothers’ mental aptitude, self-esteem, traditional values, poverty, and marital status; and the quality of the home environment—any of which may predispose mothers to employment, or be associated with their employment. In this study, the children of mothers who worked during the child’s first three years had higher math achievement scores in the second grade, even when these other factors that might contribute to improved outcomes were taken into account. Mothers who were recently employed had children with higher reading achievement and receptive vocabulary scores. Maternal employment did not appear to influence the occurrence of child behavior problems. The researchers concluded that, “it appeared that children from low-income families benefitted from maternal employment,” particularly with regard to cognitive development.

Effects of Job Conditions
But does this conclusion hold regardless of the conditions of a mother’s employment? All employment is not the same. Wages obviously differ across jobs, even across jobs involving equivalent work. Hours of work also vary across jobs, as does the regularity of work schedules. Some jobs are challenging, enjoyable, and stimulating, while others are monotonous or repetitious.

Early studies comparing children whose low-income mothers were all employed documented that full-time work and better jobs were associated with more optimal child outcomes than were part-time work and less stimulating jobs. For example, one researcher found that fifth graders from a poor neighborhood in North Philadelphia were better adjusted, had higher IQ scores, and saw their mothers as more consistent with discipline when their mothers were employed full time rather than part time. Another study found parallels between the job requirements of black, inner-city mothers and the academic behavior of their children between the ages of 10 and 17. When mothers reported greater job demands, their preadolescent and adolescent children fulfilled a higher proportion of homework assignments. When the mothers’ skills were more fully utilized in their jobs, their children had higher math achievement scores.

Specific features of parents’ jobs may influence the types of behavior that parents value and encourage in their children. For instance, research suggests that parents in jobs that are repetitive and unstimulating and offer little opportunity for self-direction emphasize obedience as a child-rearing value. By contrast, when jobs involve greater variety, stimulation, and self-direction, parents more often tend to reason when disciplining their children and tend to expect their children to internalize adult norms. Wage levels may also play an important role in child outcomes, as shown by research discussed in the articles by Parcel and Menaghan and by Moore and Driscoll in this journal issue.

Over the past two decades, increasingly sophisticated study designs have yielded greater certainty that maternal employment contributes to improved child outcomes in low-income families, independent of the influence of preexisting characteristics of the mother. Evidently, however, those generally positive effects of maternal employment on children can be jeopardized by very low wages and poor working conditions.

Early Employment
During the last several years, researchers have paid considerable attention to the possible significance of the timing of the mother’s employment, but findings at this stage remain mixed and incomplete. Some studies have shown that early maternal employment (that is, within a child’s first year) has negative implications for children in families of various income levels. Other studies, however, have not shown this pattern for low-income children. These conflicting findings regarding maternal employment in a child’s first year of life constitute an important exception to the overall pattern of neutral or positive associations and highlight a critical area for additional study.

Conclusion
As this brief review demonstrates, researchers have fairly consistently found that, among low-income families, maternal employment has positive implications for children—or at the very least, it has few deleterious implications if begun after infancy. Furthermore,
research suggests that favorable working conditions and higher wages among employed low-income mothers have positive implications for their children.

Those concerned about the effects on children of mothers’ participation in mandatory welfare-to-work programs may be encouraged by this conclusion, but they should bear in mind the important caveat at the beginning of this article. The studies discussed here have looked at mothers who voluntarily gained employment, and these mothers are different in important ways from mothers who do not, of their own volition, acquire jobs. Studies are now under way to assess the effects on children of mandatory participation by their mothers in welfare-to-work programs. These studies will reveal whether child outcomes under such circumstances are favorable.1-6

A limitation of existing studies of the implications of maternal employment for children in low-income families is that they do not distinguish between mothers who have a history of welfare receipt and those who are “working poor.” The implications of maternal employment for children may well differ depending on a family’s welfare history, just as they appear to differ according to family structure. Research should concentrate on children whose mothers have been single mothers with differing welfare histories.

Finally, recent research suggests the need to go beyond the simple distinction of whether or not a mother is employed to consider the circumstances of her employment. For welfare mothers, it is possible (some would say likely) that mandatory transitions to employment will result in work that pays very low wages, is sporadic or involves nontraditional hours, and is repetitive and unstimulating—all conditions that are likely to undermine the positive implications of maternal employment for children. Of the three job characteristics considered so far by researchers—wages, hours, and complexity—wages appear most amenable to policy initiatives. Policymakers may therefore want to give serious consideration to various mechanisms for supplementing the wages of mothers as they move from welfare to work.

6. Data on child effects are still being collected and analyzed for the JOBS Child Outcomes Study, directed by Child Trends, Inc., which examines the impact on young children of the federal JOBS program, a mandatory welfare-to-work program also discussed in the article by Blank and Blum in this journal issue. See note no. 2, Moore, Zaslow, Coiro, et al., and note no. 3, Zaslow, Moore, Morrison, and Coiro.


22. See note no. 8, Vandell and Ramanan, p. 946.


