Part IV

Challenges to Implementing and Studying Welfare Reforms

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Chapter 8

Children and Welfare Reform

Exploring the Intersection of Social Research and Policymaking

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"Study: Welfare Reform Benefits Children" was the headline of the news story published nationwide during the second week of January, 2001. Based on an early report from a comprehensive national study of the effects of welfare reform on children, the article reported that when parents worked and received supplementary income support, low-income children attained higher school achievement, improved health, and exhibited fewer behavior problems compared with children in families with conventional welfare assistance. The benefits of employment and income assistance were interactive—employment alone was not as beneficial to children—suggesting, according to the report, that children gain most by the example of adult effort and self-discipline provided by a working parent together with the reduced stress and aid afforded by extra family income.

This news story, and the national attention it received, indicates why research evaluating the impact of welfare reform on children is so timely. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which inaugurated sweeping reforms in the nature of welfare in 1996, is due to be reauthorized by Congress in the fall of 2002. PRWORA has been applauded by its supporters as providing the incentives and sanctions required to create unprecedented decreases in welfare caseloads, while also providing the states with enhanced funding for welfare benefits and a variety of discretionary supplementary services. These will

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undoubtedly be important considerations in Congressional debate over the reauthorization of PRWORA during the next year. But what about the children? Children constitute the overwhelming majority of welfare recipients, but PRWORA was primarily designed to reduce adult welfare dependency. Welfare reform is not successful, however, if the impressive decreases in welfare caseloads are purchased at a cost to the well-being of lower-income children. This makes evaluation studies of the effects of welfare reform on children especially important to the reauthorization debate.

There is another reason why consideration of this research is timely. Readers of the news report were likely unaware that the conclusion "welfare reform benefits children" was based on studies of welfare reform efforts begun before the 1996 reforms. The study authors acknowledged that since 1996, states have adopted a far wider range of welfare reform strategies under PRWORA than those examined in their research. Thus applying the insights of currently-available research to the contemporary landscape of welfare reform is tricky, and although many investigations of welfare reform efforts initiated since 1996 are currently underway, few substantive findings are likely to be available when Congressional discussions of PRWORA reauthorization begin. Furthermore, the challenges of effectively evaluating the consequences of PRWORA for children and youth are formidable not only because of the varieties of statewide welfare strategies but also because of the diverse direct and indirect effects of program reforms on children and their families, the changing developmental needs of children and youth, and the complexities of conducting large-scale program evaluation studies. At the same time that it is essential to understand how welfare reform affects children's development, therefore, the available knowledge is limited and the difficulties of obtaining relevant information are formidable. This constitutes a challenging ethical dilemma.

What can social researchers say to legislators who are concerned about the effects of welfare reform on children? In view of the importance of the topic, and the desire of policymakers for straightforward answers, how can scientists provide conclusions that are appropriate to the strengths and limitations of existing knowledge? How can the changing landscape of new insights—and unanswered questions—from current research contribute most helpfully to the policymaking debate over the reauthorization of PRWORA? How should new research concerning the effects of welfare reform on children be designed to provide the best answers to policymakers? And what role should scientists assume for the thoughtful and responsible dissemination of their research to the media, and to public and policymaking communities?

These questions suggest that the challenges of studying the effects of welfare reform on children are not only conceptual and technical, but are also problems of values and ethics for social researchers. They concern how to provide information relevant to policymaking that does not overstate the meaning and significance of current research findings, and which recognizes the questions for which researchers have no answers as well as those for which they do. These challenges are the focus of this chapter that explores the intersection of social research and policy reform. In the pages that follow, we consider (a) how aspects of welfare reform can potentially influence children's development, (b) the role of social research as "usable knowledge" to policymakers on topics like welfare reform, and (c) in light of these considerations, design and methodological considerations in research intended to create usable knowledge, and the role of researchers in communicating this knowledge to the public and policymakers.

How Are Children Affected by Welfare Reform?

Many of the PRWORA reforms in federal assistance to lower-income families are well-known. By replacing the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) entitlement and Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) education and job training programs with a block grant program called Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), PRWORA established temporary assistance during the transition to work as the guiding philosophy underlying welfare. The enduring entitlement to federal financial assistance was eliminated, and education and jobs training were deemphasized in favor of quickly moving welfare recipients to work. Under PRWORA, adult recipients can receive assistance for no more than 5 years and are required to work while receiving TANF funds. The states are afforded considerable flexibility in implementing these provisions. Although the federal legislation establishes strict requirements concerning the proportion of TANF recipients who must participate in work activities, for example, states may set lifetime limits on welfare assistance shorter than the 5-year federal maximum (or longer, if state funds alone are used), are permitted to design their own policies to create work incentives (such as increased earnings disregards) or sanctions for failure to work, and can use TANF funds to develop better support systems for low-income families. To an unprecedented extent, therefore, there are now emerging 50 statewide welfare programs with distinctive requirements and characteristics.

These features of welfare reform have been the focus of concern, and research inquiry, about their consequences for children. But there are other provisions of PRWORA that are also relevant to children and youth

(see Collins & Aber, 1997; Knitzer, Yoshikawa, Cauthen, & Aber, 2000; Zaslow, Tout, Smith, & Moore, 1998). These include (a) strengthened requirements for establishing paternity in nonmarital births and ensuring support from a noncustodial minor parent, (b) caps on family benefits if a parent has additional children while receiving assistance, (c) the requirement that teen parents receiving TANF live with adult supervision, (d) changes in eligibility guidelines for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) that reduces the eligibility of children with learning disabilities and behavioral disorders, and (e) provisions for child care assistance that are meant to facilitate parents' reentry into the workforce. Each of these provisions is also relevant to the experience of lower-income children.

The most significant effects of welfare reform are, however, its work incentives through work mandates, time limits, and increased earnings disregards. How might these affect children? There are a number of possible ways (Collins & Aber, 1997; Duncan & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). First, and most directly, parental work changes the conditions of family life (Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, 2000). Infants and young children who might formerly have received maternal care at home now spend a considerable proportion of daily time in out-of-home care, whether with a relative or babysitter, family day-care provider, or in a child care center. School-age children and adolescents may be unsupervised after school or enrolled in an after-school program. The quality of substitute care influences the effects of parental work on children's development, and parental work is also moderated by how extended family contribute to child care. The parent's hours of employment, job stability, and the availability of health and other benefits also affect the impact of work on children. And, of course, children are affected by parents' wage income, which must be considered in relation to (a) other sources of family income (e.g., from a marital partner, child support payments, SSI, food stamps), (b) child-care, transportation, clothing, and other work-related expenses, and (c) lost preworking levels of TANF support. The source and reliability of income and changes in family income over time may be as important as the impact of overall levels of family income on children, especially when they are young.

Second, indirect effects on children and youth derive from the impact of work on parental well-being. Work can have complex effects on adults, contributing to enhanced self-esteem, hope, and sense of competence on one hand, or frustration and discouragement on the other. A job can be a stress-buffer (especially when it affords positive new social contacts and enhances job skills) or a stressor (especially when work is demeaning or it is difficult to juggle job responsibilities with family needs). The nature of the job, and prospects for future advancement, are some of the determinants

of how work affects the well-being of lower-income adults. For this reason, work also complexly influences parenting (McLoyd, 1989). Parental discipline practices, warmth and responsiveness, cognitive stimulation, and supervision of offspring are each affected by the influence of work on parents' time and energy, motivation, and levels of stress or satisfaction. Thus contrary to the best hopes of welfare reform advocates or the direst worries of its critics, work participation itself is likely to have complex implications for lower-income children because it has complicated effects on their parents.

Finally, adult work also has indirect influences on children's experience outside the home (Parke & Buriel, 1998). The association between family income and neighborhood and school quality is one example. Another is how parental work shapes child-care needs and income determines its quality. Employment also affects children's broader social experiences because parents are gatekeepers to the neighborhood and community by providing access to sports and recreational activities, lessons, after-school programs, and contact with other families. These influences are also complex: working parents may have the added income to afford community opportunities for offspring, for example, but more limited time to transport, supervise, or contribute to these activities. More broadly, parental employment affects children's access to medical care, human services, and other community resources. Indeed, one of the significant consequences of PRWORA reform has been the dissociation of welfare assistance from other supports that were earlier connected to welfare, such as health insurance and food stamps. There is considerable concern that many families leaving TANF retain eligibility for food stamps and Medicaid, but do not receive these benefits for undetermined reasons (Knitzer et al., 2000). This is especially disconcerting because most jobs for lower-income workers offer poor or nonexistent health insurance coverage.

It is also important to consider *how* children might be affected when their parents return to work. Intellectual growth and school achievement, social and emotional adjustment, physical health and preventive health care, and problem behavior (or its absence) are among the potential outcomes of parental work profiled above. The impact of work on children's goals and aspirations might also be one of its most important influences. Above all, however, the impact of parental work depends on the child's age. The effects on infant and preschoolers depend, for example, on how employment affects a parent's nurturance and well-being, quality of child care, and the predictability of daily routines. By contrast, the impact on adolescents is based on how parental supervision, family income, and future opportunities are affected by the parent's job. The impact of parental work is thus developmentally variable. Just as the diversity of family

circumstances makes it inappropriate to discuss how "families" are inclusively affected by welfare reform, children's changing developmental needs make the impact on "children" of welfare reform an unduly generalized concept. Welfare reform will affect different families, and children of different ages and characteristics, in different ways.

Taken together, when we consider the direct and indirect ways that children can be affected by parental work requirements, it becomes clear how much the rhetoric surrounding welfare reform has simplified its potential impact. Children are unlikely to be uniformly inspired to greater achievement by a working parent's model of self-discipline, nor to be consistently undermined by a stressed lower-income parent's loss of income support, as the advocates and critics of welfare reform have long argued. Instead, the effects of welfare reform are more likely to be complex, contingent on specific program provisions, and particular to the circumstances of specific subgroups of families and the needs of children at each developmental stage. For the same reason, it is unlikely that studies of welfare reform will yield such simple, straightforward conclusions as "*Welfare Reform Benefits Children*". Instead, researchers must attune their empirical inquiry to the multidimensional moderators of the effects of welfare reform on children, and the complex developmental outcomes they may influence. Indeed, conceptualizing the complex, contingent effects of welfare reform on children may be one of the more important contributions of social research to welfare policymaking, especially if policymakers begin with simplified expectations of the impact of welfare reform.

Social Research and "Usable Knowledge"

One reason for studying the effects of welfare reform on children is thus to compare the empirical realities of TANF against the expectations accompanying the passage of PRWORA in 1996. It is important to know whether children have been helped as significantly, or harmed as deeply, as the advocates and critics of welfare reform have argued. Assuming that the reforms of 1996 are not found to be an unequivocal success or an unqualified failure, but rather a mixture of gains and losses for some families and children, such research can inform future changes in TANF. By understanding the effects of welfare reform on children it becomes possible to alter future welfare policies to better promote children's healthy development.

This illustrates one of the most important applications of social research to policymaking: to generate potential solutions to social problems (Thompson, 1993; Weiss, 1978, 1987). In the case of welfare reform, the

problem is how to increase adult workforce participation while enhancing the benefits (and reducing the detriments) of these policies to lower-income children. As earlier noted, this kind of policy-relevant problem-solving social research is difficult because of the complexities of the policy initiatives (e.g., diverse welfare reform programs with different statewide characteristics and requirements), the multidimensional influences on human behavior (such as child development) that may result, and the complex connections between policy and behavior (e.g., the multiple ways that children can be influenced by parental work requirements). This means that most social research oriented toward solving social problems will offer incomplete answers—although even incomplete answers can nevertheless inform policy reform (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979).

There are, however, other ways that social research is relevant to public policy. Besides *problem-solving*, social research is helpful in *describing* the nature of social problems (Thompson, 1993). Social research is already revealing some of the unexpected outcomes of welfare reform for children. One illustration is the discovery that a significant proportion of children have serious academic, health, or behavioral problems, even when their families are participating in benefit programs that otherwise improve family life, and that maternal mental health problems also remain high in many families (Duncan & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). These descriptions of the contemporary conditions of welfare assistance suggest that even when welfare reform programs are functioning well, lower-income children and their families still require significant assistance. This knowledge, in turn, is also relevant to the reauthorization debate.

Another way that social research is relevant to public policy is through how social problems are *conceptualized* (Thompson, 1993). Research on the impact of welfare reform on children is interpreted in light of the concepts, conclusions, and theories of social science that have become absorbed into public understanding of human behavior (Caplan, 1979; Weiss, 1987). Many ideas from social research are relevant to interpreting research findings concerning the effects of mandated parental work on children's development, such as consequences of parental stress on child-rearing, the importance of extrafamilial child care quality and neighborhood quality, and the interaction of changing developmental needs with the effects of work on parenting practices. These ways of conceptualizing children's lives have important implications for considering how future changes in welfare policy might further alter children's life experience. At times, social research can contribute to new conceptualizations of public problems, such as the discovery that poverty in early childhood may be more harmful than at later stages of development (Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998). Thus social research findings that are not directly relevant to

welfare reform nevertheless become part of the interpretive framework by which policymakers and the public weigh, evaluate, and consider alternative policy proposals and their implications.

As problem-solving, description, or conceptualization of social problems, social research can potentially constitute "usable knowledge" to policymakers (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). Usable knowledge is information that contributes substantively to the development, evaluation, and/or prioritization of policy alternatives. Such knowledge can derive, in addition to research findings, from current news reports, expressions of public value preferences (such as opinion surveys), the views of opinion leaders and public figures, other policy priorities, and many other sources. Social research has a special role in policy assessment, however, because of its perceived objectivity and scientific integrity that can cause research conclusions to have considerable influence. As Lindblom and Cohen (1979) note, however, a considerable amount of social resesarch is not "usable knowledge" because it is not effectively designed to address the questions that are most important to policy analysis, even though social researchers may believe that it should be relevant. Sometimes social research is not usable to policymakers because the questions it addresses are too abstract and generalized, the populations studied are not germane to policy problems, findings are not sufficiently strong or reliable or, less often, because the research is intentionally designed to advance a particular view.

In recent years, federal and private funding agencies have made special efforts to enhance the policy relevance of funded research on important public issues. With respect to the impact of welfare reform on children, waivers under welfare legislation have permitted states to evaluate the effects of specific features of state welfare implementation, such as time limits and earned income disregard. Moreover, several federal and state agencies, in partnership with private foundations, have funded systematic outcome studies through contracts or competitive research grants to ensure that important questions concerning the effects of welfare programs are addressed. Although the interests and priorities of funding agencies can, at times, narrow or constrain the policy-relevant issues that investigators can examine, these efforts of program officers also provide significant incentives to the generation of "usable knowledge."

Nevertheless, care is needed when applying social research findings to policy problems. Research studies can only approximate the complexity and breadth of implementation of large-scale policy initiatives, and thus the generalization of research conclusions requires careful thought. Policy-oriented researchers rarely have the luxury of basic scientists to replicate and confirm the reliability of their conclusions by conducting multiple studies on a common problem, and thus their conclusions may be specific

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to particular samples or methodologies. In addition, research conclusions usually yield answers that provoke more questions, requiring further investigation to clarify the initial findings. If a study shows, for example, that children's school achievement is higher with one welfare reform program than others, it is important to recognize when the research does, or does not, provide information about why this occurs, whether it depends on mediating influences (like parental stimulation or access to after-school programs), and whether this benefit is generalizable to most lower-income children. These interpretive cautions depend, to a considerable extent, on research design: experimental studies yield more confident conclusions than nonexperimental studies, for example, and large-scale studies using multiple sites and samples are stronger than small-scale projects. But the creation of usable knowledge from social research on welfare reform is also a matter of the thoughtful interpretation and application of research findings because of the limitations that inhere in the research process itself (Thompson & Nelson, 2001).

Creating usable knowledge from social research findings also requires an intimate understanding of the public problems to which the research is applied, the concerns and interests of policymakers and the public, and potential misinterpretations of research findings that might occur. In this way, research findings can be contextualized to the circumstances of children and families to which they are applied, as well as the broader considerations entailed in public policy. Creating usable knowledge also requires identifying the unanswered questions posed by research findings as well as the questions that are answered, since both are important to clarifying the state of knowledge relevant to a policy problem. Researchers must also honestly appraise the personal values and policy preferences that might bias, however inadvertently, the researcher's personal interpretation of the findings. Finally, creating usable knowledge from social research requires the skills of communicating clearly to interested constituencies outside of the academy in a manner that informs but also guards against misinterpretations and misapplications.

Designing Policy-Relevant Research on the Effects of Welfare Reform

Social research becomes usable knowledge because the objectivity and integrity of the scientific method carries considerable weight for the public and policymakers. This means that social researchers have influence but also responsibility in carefully conveying their work to others. This is especially true because of the technology of research design. Planning social

research inevitably includes making choices between alternative methods, procedures, and measures that contribute simultaneously to the unique strengths, and interpretive limitations, of research findings. Almost every decision concerning population sampling, selection of measures and informants, comparison groups, settings, and statistical analyses is intended to strengthen the research design. But because of the inevitable trade-offs in time, expense, and labor on which these methodological decisions are based, the same choices also mean that findings may be limited in their generalizability, in the range of conditions that are compared, in the depth of information yielded by certain measures, or in other important ways. This is a fact of life of contemporary research, but it adds to the responsibility of social researchers to convey their conclusions in ways that are appropriate to the strengths and limitations of the research they conduct. This is especially so because these methodological considerations are not readily understood by either the public or policymakers, who trust researchers to make wise choices and to interpret complex findings to them understandably, but also accurately.

To illustrate, in this section we consider the design of research on the effects of welfare reform on children, and the methodological choices that influence how the results of these studies should be interpreted. We also consider some of the ethical dimensions of research design with respect to participants.

Sources of Relevant Data

The most carefully designed, useful large-scale investigations of the effects of welfare reform on children enlist several types of data because investigators recognize that each has unique benefits, and limitations, in understanding child outcomes.

Administrative Data. *Administrative data* are ordinarily gathered in the conduct of public programs. These can include information from welfare program case files, unemployment insurance records, unearned income credit data, public health records or other sources that provide information such as the benefits received by recipient families, the numbers of families reaching eligibility limits or being sanctioned, or the number of adults with jobs. With respect to children, administrative data can be used to assess the number of children with significant health-related problems, children in special education programs, and other data. Administrative data generally provide a broad, inclusive portrayal of the effects of welfare reform and, within the general trends they identify, different research approaches are needed to elucidate these findings.

Ordinarily, administrative data can be obtained without the knowledge of research participants because these data are intended to track large-scale population trends related to the effects of welfare reform, and thus consent is not needed when these data cannot identify individuals by name. However, social researchers are increasingly integrating administrative databases from various agencies, matched to participant identification, to coordinate information from different sources related to the effects of program participation. Because these data can be identified for specific individuals, this practice raises important questions concerning participant consent and confidentiality and the need for clear interagency guidelines concerning information access and security (see Committee on National Statistics, 2000).

Economic Cost-Benefit Data. *Economic cost-benefit data* are used to evaluate welfare program alternatives in terms of their costs in relation to the benefits obtained—both to recipient families and to the public in general. One of the enduring dilemmas of cost-benefit analyses is how to appropriately quantify the noneconomic costs incurred, as well as the benefits obtained, from evaluated programs. This is an especially important challenge for studies of the cost-effectiveness of welfare reform because many of the costs (and benefits) of program participation are likely to be difficult to quantify.

Like administrative data, economic data focus on population groups rather than individuals so they do not invoke most human subjects protections. However, it is important to recognize that participant-specific data may be gathered on costs and outcomes of program participation in the process of data collection. Thus problems of participant consent and confidentiality may apply also when economic cost-benefit data are used, and program evaluators must be conscientious about respecting privacy and confidentiality rights of program participants (see Drummond, O'Brien, Stoddart, & Torrance, 1997).

Process Data. *Process data* are for evaluating the day-to-day operation of the program and the delivery of services to recipients. These data are typically obtained from interviews and surveys with service providers, and can be particularly useful for assessing variability in program implementation and impact in different jurisdictions, enforcement of requirements and sanctions, practical obstacles that exist to service delivery, and related issues.

Impact Data. *Impact data* are used for assessing the effects of welfare by gathering relevant outcome measures of child and family functioning

in relation to alternative combinations of welfare services. These data are most directly relevant to understanding whether welfare reform programs accomplish their goals (although administrative data can be used for this purpose also). There are several types of data that may be collected to assess program impact. These include *surveys* of program participants (e.g., concerning job participation and family experience), focused *interviews* with a small number of representative informants, and (more rarely) direct *observations* of program participants, including children.

Investigators can gather data concerning the child's well-being from parents, teachers, and (less commonly) use direct interviews and observations with children or observations of parent-child interaction. These measures vary in the costs of time and labor required to obtain them, which means that more detailed, direct, and in-depth assessments are obtained most rarely and on the smallest number of research participants, even though these assessments are likely to be most informative. These measures also vary in their ethical dimensions. Informed consent and assurances of the confidentiality of research data are mandatory provisions in research of this kind, especially where children are concerned (Thompson, 1990), and are especially important when information is gathered in the course of an impact study that could compromise participants' eligibility for benefits or put them at risk in other ways.

Gathering impact data concerning children can be challenging. Some of the child outcomes of particular importance to evaluating the impact of welfare reform are among the most difficult to measure, such as the changes in children's self-esteem and sense of competence from having a parent who works. Although measures of children's health or intellectual functioning can be obtained relatively easily using standardized assessments, evaluating the social and emotional functioning of children is generally difficult in large-scale research, especially when young children are concerned, because easily-used, validated measures are not always available. Because of this, many investigators rely on parent or teacher assessments to evaluate these features of child behavior, although adult informants may be biased or insensitive to subtle dimensions of child functioning. Partly for these reasons, DHHS and several private foundations have cosponsored the Project on State-Level Child Outcomes, which will contribute to the refinement of indicators of child health and well-being and incorporate them into state-level assessments of welfare reform consequences. This collaborative project should contribute significantly to improving the quality of child outcome assessments in studies of the effects of welfare reform.

Ethnographic Field Data. *Ethnographic field data* focus on how welfare reform affects the neighborhoods and communities in which families

live. These data can be especially important for understanding the influences of neighborhood resources and social support on parental access to employment, welfare services, job training, and other forms of assistance, and how welfare services affect community life. The effects of neighborhood resources on children and youth can also be studied, such as the availability of adequate child care and after-school care, school quality, community recreational activities, and local affordable health care, and how these are related to parents' work. By viewing welfare reform not only in the context of family life but also the communities in which families live, ethnographic field data can help explain why different families benefit or not from welfare services, how neighborhood cultures affect service delivery, why families often do not receive added benefits for which they are eligible, the coordination (or lack of integration) of services for lower-income families, and what happens to families who leave TANF. The ethical dimensions of this research can be complex because although, like economic cost-benefit analyses and administrative data, ethnographic field studies are concerned with broad-level influences from welfare reform, individuals and their families are often directly identified through their participation in field research, and consequently issues of informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of data must be taken very seriously.

Each of these sources of data for assessing the effects of welfare reform on children have unique strengths and liabilities. Taken alone, each provides limited understanding of how and why children and families are affected by PROWRA requirements. Impact studies may yield valuable descriptive information about child outcomes, for example, requiring ethnographic field research to explain why these outcomes occur, and the family circumstances that mediate or moderate them. Consequently, by combining information across different data streams, researchers can best surmount the limitations of each approach and derive the most usable conclusions. Because few, if any, large-scale studies are capable of exploiting each of these alternative data sources, it is thus also necessary to integrate findings across multiple studies, and studies that use compatible measures and procedures make it easier to accomplish this.

Measurement and Analytic Considerations

The best research designs yield the most confident conclusions for policy. The gold standard for program evaluation research would require the random assignment of welfare-eligible families into one of several alternative program models. Each of these programs would be designed in

experimental fashion to enable comparisons between programs that vary in specific ways, with the goal of identifying the combination of program features that have specific effects on recipient families. This research would be conducted across multiple geographical sites, and with systematically diverse samples, to permit the broadest generalizations from the findings. Although the real world of statewide welfare reform initiatives usually does not permit the realization of this ideal research design, alternative research approaches are more interpretively problematic because of difficulties in determining specifically *why* recipient families fare as they do. This is true when, for example, welfare reform effects are nonexperimentally evaluated in state-by-state comparisons of preexisting program variations, or in trends in family well-being over time as welfare reforms are implemented, and when families are not randomly assigned to different program models. But the difficulties of achieving the gold standard for evaluation studies because of the practicalities of service delivery systems illustrates one of the challenges of conducting policy-relevant research in this field.

There are other important methodological and analytical questions that must also be considered when thoughtfully interpreting research findings:

Welfare reform compared to what? Under the federal waivers granted states in welfare legislation prior to 1996, and also in PRWORA, state agencies can conduct systematic studies examining the effects of alternative welfare reform strategies, provided that these studies include a control group of recipients receiving services under earlier welfare policies. Thus these studies compare various welfare reform approaches with "traditional" welfare. However, many studies are inconsistent with this approach, comparing welfare reform approaches with either a very impoverished service plan for the control group (which can make almost any reform approach appear successful), or with comparison groups receiving various forms of intermediate-level services (which can occur when agency officials do not want to disadvantage recipient families in the control group). In either case, the "effects" of welfare reform must be viewed carefully in relation to the comparison/control groups included in the research design.

This is especially important because the well-being of the families in evaluation studies depends on the assistance they receive. Although random assignment to experimental and control groups means that families have a 50% chance of receiving enhanced services compared to the norm, it still means that some families receive more limited welfare assistance than others in comparable circumstances, which is inconsistent with standards

of distributive justice. Research of this kind is important, however, and this is why it is exempt from federal human subjects protections because it evaluates public benefits or services with the approval of agency officials (see 45 CFR 46.101(b)(5)). However, it is important for program evaluators ensure that all families who participate in research, regardless of their group assignment, still receive services that are suitable to their needs while also permitting comparisons with families in other program groups.

What are the important child outcomes? The appropriate selection of outcome measures is one of the most important features of well-designed evaluation research. Our earlier discussion of the impact of welfare reform on children and youth highlight different aspects of well-being that may be promoted or hindered by parental work requirements. However, as earlier noted, certain outcomes (such as health and intellectual functioning) may be far easier and cost-effective to study than others (such as self-esteem and relationships with parents). Investigators may be unable to include the optimal range of outcome measures or the most relevant assessments of child well-being because it is costly or problematic to do so, and thus it is important to consider whether the outcome measures chosen are well-suited to the anticipated program impacts.

Furthermore, because the effects of parental work are developmentally variable, different constellations of outcomes will be relevant to studies of children of different ages. There is evidence, for example, that for adolescents the more important indicators of welfare reform effects include school-related misbehavior, delinquency, and drinking in light of the effects of parental working on adult supervision. By contrast, health, cognitive achievement, and emotional functioning are more significant outcomes at younger ages (Duncan & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). In each case, the selection of appropriate child outcome measures must take into consideration the developmental needs of the children under study.

Are relevant mediating and moderating variables included? It is also important to consider whether the various influences likely to mediate (or moderate) child outcomes are appropriately measured. There are a variety of intervening influences noted earlier that may be relevant to understanding the effects of mandated job participation, including family life (such as the quality of substitute care, hours of employment, and family income), parent well-being (e.g., stress, self-esteem) and caregiving (e.g., discipline, warmth, supervision), as well as neighborhood life (such as access to community resources). To the extent that investigators expect that welfare reform has predictable effects on children because of its influences on parents, family or neighborhood life, these influences should be assessed in order to examine their relevance to child outcomes. This is crucial because research on the effects of welfare reform should not only indicate

how children are affected, but also *why.* Without examining mediating and moderating influences, it is difficult to know whether child outcomes arise from the effects of job participation on parental behavior, family resources, or for other unpredicted reasons.

Are transitional processes examined? The guiding orientation of welfare reform is that welfare should be temporary as adults move back into the workforce. Temporary income assistance is consistent with the fact that family income tends to fluctuate over time, especially when families have young children (Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, 2000). Consequently, changes in family functioning that accompany transitions to and from welfare assistance may be especially important for understanding the effects of welfare reform on children and their parents. This is especially important because these transitions are likely to be accompanied by significant changes in broader features of family life (e.g., substitute care, parental time use, benefits) and parental well-being (e.g., stress, hopefulness) that directly affect children. Appropriate attention to transitional processes requires longitudinal studies of very different design, however, than those that are common in the evaluation of welfare reform.

Is the emphasis on averages or variability in program impact? The findings of social research typically focus on average impact in order to efficiently summarize group outcomes. But in studies of welfare reform, the variability in program impact may be equally important. Conclusions that focus only on group averages risk neglecting attention to subgroups of families who are distinctive because of their special vulnerabilities, risks, or needs. These include families who are sanctioned or who reach their lifetime eligibility for welfare assistance, families with intractable socioeconomic disadvantage, and parents with enduring constraints in their capacities for employment because of physical disabilities, mental health difficulties, substance abuse, or other problems. Investigators should orient their analyses toward these, and other, subgroups of welfare recipients because the impact of welfare reform requirements could be much different for these high-risk families, and the children in them, than for other families. This requires strategies for the analysis of data that use baseline data to identify and distinguish relevant high-risk groups, and analytical approaches emphasizing variability in impact rather than group averages alone.

How strong are the outcomes of welfare reform? In most social research, investigators focus on statistical significance tests that identify results that are unlikely to be due to chance alone. But it is also important to study the overall *patterns* of findings and their strength. When a welfare reform program is expected to benefit children in several different ways and only one of these expected outcomes is influenced by program participation, is

the most appropriate conclusion that welfare reform benefits children, or that it has negligible consequences? Researchers typically emphasize the positive or negative findings of their studies and devote less attention to unconfirmed predictions. But in research on the consequences of welfare, noneffects are as important to policy reform as are significant influences, especially when effects were predicted to occur, and thoughtful interpreters of these studies will attend to each.

Likewise, it is common for social researchers to emphasize statistically significant outcomes in determining how welfare reform influences child well-being. These are important, but in large-scale studies statistical significance can be easily achieved when the actual impact of programs is fairly weak. Instead, assessments of program impact should more appropriately focus on measures of effect size that are not as influenced by the scale of the study, and which are more suitable to estimating how strongly outcomes are influenced by program participation.

What Do We Know? What Can We Say?

Research on the effects of welfare reform for children is still in its infancy, yet the policy context of the reauthorization debate heightens the urgency for researchers to provide information that is usable for public policymakers. In this context, the most usable knowledge that social researchers can offer are not conclusions that are highly premature, but are instead based on a balanced judgment of what is known and unknown in light of the strengths and limitations of existing knowledge. While explaining why simple, global conclusions (such as "Welfare Reform Benefits Children") are not yet possible, researchers can draw on the impact studies inaugurated in the pre-PRWORA era, together with current descriptive data of family impact and the rich literatures on child and family development to offer the policy community an initial glimpse of how welfare reform *might* be affecting children and youth. Taken together, these suggest that (a) neither the worst fears of the critics of welfare reform, nor the most hopeful expectations of its admirers, seem to be confirmed, but that (b) a significant proportion of children remain at risk in families receiving even the most generous benefits of welfare reform and (c) the maintenance and coordination of services for which families are eligible is an enduring concern (Duncan & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). But the unanswered, important questions of welfare reform effects far exceed what is currently known. Fortunately, there are a number of extremely thoughtfully-conceived, well-designed studies currently underway that are likely to provide more substantive information in the years to come.

Beyond this, social researchers may also generate usable knowledge as they help policymakers ask the right questions concerning the effects of welfare reform on children and youth. Many of the complex considerations discussed above—such as concern with mediating and moderating influences, effect sizes, appropriately-designed control groups, and suitable child outcomes—are not readily comprehended by most public policymakers, nor by the public. Nor are the nature of child outcomes easily interpreted (e.g., what does a score of 3.1 mean on a parenting warmth scale?). In this respect, social researchers need to draw on their skills as educators to provoke a broader understanding of the complexities of studying and understanding welfare reform, drawing on prior expectations and cultural assumptions of human behavior and building on them to help policymakers, and the public, pose the more difficult but ultimately more appropriate questions about children's needs. In contributing to a more appropriate, yet more complex conceptualization of influences on children, for example, investigators can draw attention to the intimate connections between parental and child well-being, the significance of extrafamilial influences (ranging from child care quality to after-school supervision to the coordination of services), and the importance of appreciating the changing developmental challenges and opportunities of each stage of growth. This is not an easy task, but in doing so, inquiry into the effects of welfare reform on children provides an avenue to a more thoughtful, much-needed understanding of the experience of lower-income children in economic difficulty.

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