

"Involvement of TANF Applicant Families with Child Welfare Services," by Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Irving Piliavin and Andrew Zinn, Social Service Review, March 05, reports the findings of a study of 1,075 parents residing in Milwaukee who applied for assistance to Wisconsin Works (W-2), Wisconsin's TANF program, between March and August 1999. This study examined CPS investigations of these families and foster care placements of children in these families from 1989 through September 2001.

The authors comment that "Milwaukee is a laboratory for the State of Wisconsin's efforts to reform both its welfare and child welfare programs." "Both reforms rely on significant privatization of services that were, for the most part, previously provided by the county." However, child welfare reform included a state takeover of the county's child welfare system which, according to the authors, was undertaken reluctantly in response to court challenges "alleging serious problems in the existing child welfare system in Milwaukee County."

The authors note that declines in Wisconsin's welfare caseload preceded similar declines in other states by several years, e.g., AFDC caseloads in Wisconsin declined 44% between January 1993 and January 1997. "From September 1997 to June 1999, the number of families receiving cash assistance under W-2 declined by 75 percent." Declines in Wisconsin's welfare caseloads between 1993 and 1999 were among the largest in the country; "Only three states had greater percentage decreases than Wisconsin..."

This study found high rates of child welfare involvement in this sample of W-2 families. "Altogether, 47 percent of the sampled respondents were the subject of at least one CPS investigation between June 1989 and September 2001." Almost a quarter of the families were investigated between March - August 1999 and September 2001 and almost 40% of families with child welfare involvement prior to March 1999 experienced at least one additional CPS investigation by September 2001.

In addition, "15% had one or more children placed in out-of-home care between June 1989 and September 2001;" "nearly 12 percent had at least one child in a court ordered placement between the wave -1 interview (1999) and September 2001."

The authors comment that this rate of child welfare involvement is much higher than found in comparable studies done in other states and is higher than the rate for 1996 AFDC applicants in Wisconsin. This study found that factors increasing the likelihood of CPS investigation included having more than one child in the home, having at least one child living out of the home, having a prior history of welfare involvement, parental substance abuse and mental health problems, a higher level of parental stress and having a family member with a disability that limited the parent's perceived ability to

work. "... recent work history and higher earnings are associated with a decreased likelihood of CPS investigation, whereas more economic hardships are associated with an increased likelihood."

"Not surprisingly, the best predictor of future CPS involvement is a previous investigation." Families with CPS involvement prior to the researchers' wave -1 interview in 1999 were three times more likely to be investigated during the 2 year follow up period.

"Having worked at some point in the 12 months prior to the interview lowers the estimated hazard of CPS investigation (hazard ratio equals .71)." "Given that the (explanatory) model controls for earnings, one is left to wonder why attachment to work, in and of itself, might have this effect."

The authors state that "The study provides no support for the idea that receipt of cash itself, or loss of cash assistance due to sanctions, affects the likelihood of involvement with child welfare authorities through effects on economic well-being." When controlling for a variety of factors, "no statistically significant relationships between cash assistance or sanctions and CPS investigations emerge." "Nor does the study provide support for the idea that involvement in welfare programs per se subjects families to added scrutiny or increases the likelihood that the family will be reported to CPS."

This study found a large increase (36-40%) in child welfare involvement of TANF families in Milwaukee compared to AFDC families in the same county prior to welfare reform. The authors consider alternative explanations for this increase, but clearly favor the idea that "the almost unparalleled reductions in public assistance caseloads in Wisconsin, both before and after the implementation of W-2, may have resulted in an applicant pool that is, on average, much more troubled than were entry cohorts of years past."

The authors comment that "applicants who received cash assistance were no more or less likely to end up investigated by CPS authorities after they applied for TANF than were those who received only noncash benefits, such as food stamps or childcare assistance, or those receiving no assistance at all," a finding which suggests that prevention strategies should be focused on TANF applicants as a whole, not just on those parents receiving cash benefits. The authors believe that the overlap between TANF recipients and child welfare clients "is large enough that the functioning of either service system could conceivably have a significant effect on the other's success in achieving its mission."

Finally, "It may be that welfare reform in Wisconsin has dramatically reduced the cash assistance caseload but left a welfare applicant population that is very service needy." TANF programs may be a good setting for voluntary services which can assist families with their psychosocial problems before child welfare involvement is required, these authors believe.