

Jane Waldfogel's article "Welfare reform and the child welfare system," in the October 04 issue of Children and Youth Services Review is a balanced and authoritative summary of the research to date regarding the effects of welfare reform on child welfare. Waldfogel acknowledges that "it is still too soon, and our measures may be too imprecise, to tell what the impact of welfare reform has been or will be in the longer run." This is, in itself, a surprising comment from a scholar who (like many others) expected welfare reform to have dramatic effects on child welfare systems.

Waldfogel provides a useful summary of welfare reform which (she notes) in many states began prior to the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 which replaced AFDC with TANF. In addition, "TANF did not come into effect nationwide in August 1996 when PRWORA was enacted." "Instead the effective date for TANF varies state by state," with some states not beginning implementation until January 1998. Therefore, according to Waldfogel, "We cannot gauge the effects of welfare reform by simply comparing outcomes before and after the enactment of TANF in 1996." Waldfogel also asserts that states have implemented welfare reform in very different ways, e.g. states vary in work requirements, time limits, sanctions and lids on family earnings.

One possibility which Waldfogel considers is that welfare reform's effects on state child welfare systems might vary by the "toughness" of a state's TANF rules, e.g., the "tougher" a state's TANF rules the greater the increase in numbers of children in foster care. Waldfogel claims that 1998 -2000 data is "suggestive" of such a relationship but that researchers must wait for more years of data to prove or disprove this hypothesis.

Waldfogel concludes that it is still impossible to tell whether welfare reform has had an effect on CPS reports or substantiations. Nationally, the number of children in out of home care increased steadily during the 1990s followed by modest declines in these numbers in 2001-2. Waldfogel notes that foster care caseload changes varied greatly among states in the late 90s and 2000 -01, the last years for which reliable foster care data is available. During 1998 -2000, 30 states experienced increases in out of home care numbers while 19 states and the District of Columbia experienced decreases or no change in these numbers. AFSA was implemented in 1997 which may have increased exits from out of home care in most states.

One study (Bitler, Gelbach and Holmes, 2002) conducted in Michigan found that welfare reform has had less of an effect on the numbers of children in foster care than on the number of children living with persons other than their parents, but without child welfare involvement. This is a surprising and interesting finding regarding the possible effects of welfare reform on unofficial kinship care rates. Two well designed studies (Wells and Guo, 2000 and 2004) in Illinois have found that the time to reunification for children

placed out of the home is directly effected by a family's income. Parents who lose welfare benefits and/or obtain low paying jobs following the placement of their children take longer to achieve reunification.

One major reason that scholars have had difficulty in clarifying the effects of welfare reform on child welfare is that these effects are not uniform. Some parents leave welfare and find jobs which raise their income. Children in these families appear to benefit developmentally from the increase in family income. Other parents lose welfare and find low paying jobs or remain unemployed. Children in families with decreased family income or welfare level incomes do not appear to benefit from parents being forced into the job market.

Waldfoegel comments that "There have been many surprises in the effects of welfare reform to date." "The caseload declines, and the employment increases, have been much larger than anyone anticipated at the time the reform began." "The effects on family incomes have been surprising too -- with many families seeing improvements in their incomes, although not families at the bottom of the income distribution." "There have been surprises as well in the outcomes for children -- with some apparently positive or benign effects for school age children but some indications of adverse effects for adolescents." "Contrary to what most analysts (including this one) projected, welfare reform has not led to increases in the numbers of children being reported to the child welfare system or substantiated for maltreatment." "There are, however, some red flags -- some evidence of adverse effects of welfare reform on child welfare involvement." "The strongest evidence concerns links between welfare reform and children living in out of home care, but we are hampered in analyzing these links by the few years of data available post -welfare reform."

"We have a lot yet to learn about welfare reform and the child welfare system," Waldfoegel asserts.