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# West Coast Poverty Center

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

A Partnership of the SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK, the DANIEL J. EVANS SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
and the COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

## DIALOGUES on Research and Policy

### Dialogues on Poverty among Researchers, Policymakers and Practitioners

The West Coast Poverty Center's DIALOGUES Projects bridge the worlds of academic research and real-world practice by bringing together researchers and seasoned policy practitioners to consider the implications of research on critical poverty issues. This fourth issue of DIALOGUES features research about the link between economic disconnection and involvement with the child welfare system, and the responses of policy practitioners in Washington State and Washington, D.C.

The West Coast Poverty Center at the University of Washington supports new research on causes, consequences, and effective policy responses to poverty. More information about the West Coast Poverty Center and the DIALOGUES Projects is available from our website: [wpc.washington.edu](http://wpc.washington.edu)



Partners for Our Children is committed to improving the lives of Washington State foster children through rigorous research, analysis and evidence-based information. The organization, founded in 2007, is a collaborative effort of the University of Washington School of Social Work, Washington State Department of Social and Health Services and private funders.

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## Economically Disconnected Families and the Child Welfare System

**FAMILIES** in the child welfare system often face barriers to meeting their basic needs as well as to being able to retain or regain custody of their children. While some of these barriers, such as substance abuse, mental health problems, or limited income, could be addressed through employment or social service receipt, emerging research suggests that a substantial share of child welfare-involved families seems to be grappling with these issues without any connection to employment or some of the major social service programs. With support from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families, researchers from Partners for Our Children and the West Coast Poverty Center examined data from a survey of child welfare-involved parents in Washington State to measure the extent and nature of "economic disconnection" among these families and to explore the relationship between disconnection and engagement in child welfare services. This brief explores their findings. We begin with a brief overview of what is known about economic disconnection. We then present findings from the Washington State survey about how many child-welfare involved families are economically disconnected and how these families' economic circumstances and their patterns of engagement with the child welfare system compare with those of families who are connected to the labor market or social services. We end with a summary of the reactions of policymakers and practitioners to this research as well as their suggestions for extending the work in the future.

### What is Economic Disconnection?

There is a growing body of research studying families who are "economically disconnected," or who "are disconnected from the labor market and government cash assistance programs" (Acs & Loprest, 2004). Families can be economically connected through employment or through the receipt of cash benefits from TANF or SSI; economic disconnection is defined as the absence of either of these types of income (Loprest, 2003; Ovwigho et al., 2009; Turner et al., 2006; Wood & Rangarajan, 2003). In the absence of a documented source of income, it is unclear how these families make ends meet. Some seemingly disconnected caregivers may earn income in the secondary economy, which is not captured by administrative data (Cleaveland, 2007), but this is unlikely to explain the extent of disconnection researchers are finding.

Much of this research has focused on two main populations: welfare leavers and low-income single mothers (Blank & Kovak, 2007; Blank, 2007; Loprest, 2003; Ovwigho, Kolupanowich, & Born, 2009; Rangarajan & Wood, 2000; Turner, Danziger, & Seefeldt, 2006). Among these populations, estimates of economic disconnection range between 13 and 25 percent (depending on the data source, measure used, and population being studied).

Among the various factors found to contribute to disconnection, existing research highlights the roles that employment difficulties and welfare sanctions play in initiating spells of economic disconnection. Disconnected families generally have greater barriers to employment including having a learning disability, a physical or mental health limitation, an ill or disabled family member to care for, a drug or alcohol problem, no child care, no transportation, no car or driver's license, or an inability to find a job (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Blank, 2007;

This Dialogue is based on "Economically Disconnected Families Involved with Child Welfare Services in Washington State" by Jennifer L. Hook, JoAnn S. Lee, Maureen O. Marcenko, and Jennifer L. Romich. The full paper is available online at: [http://www.partnersforourchildren.org/pocweb/userfiles/EconDisc%20Discussion%20Paper\\_6.17.11.pdf](http://www.partnersforourchildren.org/pocweb/userfiles/EconDisc%20Discussion%20Paper_6.17.11.pdf)

Turner et al., 2006; Zedlewski et al. 2003). Disconnected families also experience barriers to benefit receipt. Many are disconnected because of sanctions, because TANF is a “hassle” or because of personal pride (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Wood & Rangarajan, 2003; Zedlewski et al. 2003).

### Economic Disconnection and Child Welfare

Economic disconnection can pose special problems for child welfare-involved families. The placement of children in out-of-home care may precipitate disconnection when, for example, parents lose their eligibility for TANF when children are removed from the home. Alternatively, economic disconnection may precede involvement with the child welfare system, contributing to the conditions necessitating child welfare involvement. However, even though economically poor families are overrepresented in the child welfare system, there has been very little research on economic disconnection among child welfare involved parents (for an exception, see Kortenkamp et al., 2004).

Parent engagement in child welfare services has received increased attention. In addition to the potential behavioral benefits that accrue to parents who fully invest in child welfare services (e.g., improved parenting), engagement is an important factor because it has been shown to predict family reunification (Marcenko et al., 2011). Although we are not aware of research exploring the relationship between poverty and engagement in child welfare services, there is data to support that poor families reunify more slowly (Wells & Guo, 2003). Research is needed to better understand the relationship between economic disconnection and child welfare engagement, as an opportunity to improve outcomes for families.

### NEW FINDINGS: Economic Disconnection among Child Welfare-Involved Families in Washington State

To explore the extent of disconnection among child welfare-involved families and the relationship between disconnection and parental engagement, researchers from Partners for Our Children and the West Coast Poverty Center analyzed data from 806 caregivers, ages 18 to 65, who were interviewed in the Washington Statewide Survey

of Child Welfare Involved Parents, hereafter referred to as the “Parent Survey.” The Parent Survey conducted face-to-face interviews with primary caregivers who had a child welfare case opened for in-home or out-of-home services in the past 30 to 120 days (as of July 1, 2008). The child welfare agency’s administrative database was used to select the sample. Interviews were conducted between July and December 2008. For additional information about the Washington Statewide Survey of Child Welfare Involved Parents, visit <http://www.partnersforourchildren.org/knowledge-center>

### Measuring Economic Disconnection in the Parent Survey

The researchers defined economically disconnected families as those who reported that they currently did not receive cash benefits (including TANF, GA, and SSI), did not receive income through employment or UI, and did not appear to be supported by a partner. Using this definition, 20% (n = 152) of the parents in the survey were economically disconnected (see Figure 1).

Although there is variability in how economic disconnection is defined (Blank, 2007; Loprest 2003; Ovwigho et al., 2009; Turner et al., 2006; Wood & Rangarajan, 2003; Zedlewski et al., 2003), this definition follows existing convention in the welfare recipient/leavers studies as closely as possible given the limitations of the survey data. Although the researchers collected information on receipt of food stamps and housing subsidies, they did not include these in defining our groups since other studies do not consider these in-kind benefits. The researchers also do not include child support as a source of economic connection. Although an important source of income for poor families, only 35% of poor mothers receive support at an average of \$3,399 per year (Sorensen, 2010).

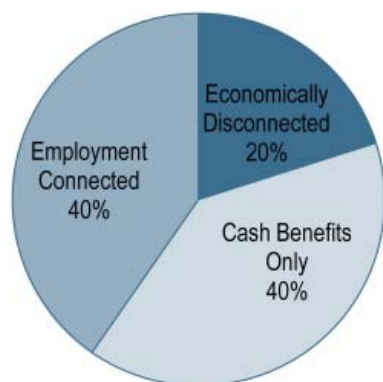
The researchers categorized the remaining parents into two groups: those who reported only receiving cash, non-employment-related benefits (TANF, GA, and/or SSI), and those who reported any employment-related income (employment, UI, and/or partner-supported). The researchers refer to the former group as “benefits-only” and the latter as “employment-connected.” The benefits-only group comprised 39.5% (n = 306) of the parents surveyed, and the employment-connected group comprised 40.9% (n = 317) of the parents surveyed.

Because the survey did not have a specific question about partner support, the researchers considered any married or cohabiting caregiver with a reported prior year’s gross household income of \$20,000 or greater to be employment supported. The researchers believe that it is probable that these individuals are receiving income through their partners.

### Differences between Economically Disconnected Families and Economically Connected Families

To compare the circumstances and experiences of these

Figure 1. Economic Connectedness



groups of parents, the researchers initially examined differences between groups through bivariate analyses. The researchers looked for statistically significant differences between the economically disconnected group and the two comparison groups (employment-connected and benefits-only). The researchers examined differences in: demographics, household characteristics (including children with special needs), financial hardship, non-monetary forms of financial assistance, chronic stressors (i.e., long-term risk factors for child maltreatment), service receipt and need, and parent engagement.

As noted, the researchers found that 20% of the families were economically disconnected, reporting no employment or public cash assistance. Their analysis reveals several patterns that differentiate economically disconnected caregivers from those who receive benefits or are connected to employment. Disconnected caregivers are younger and had children at younger ages than more connected households. Most are under age 30. They are more likely to have children in out-of-home placements as opposed to receiving in-home services. The disconnected caregivers are more likely to say they get aid from their social networks than the other two groups (see Figure 2). Close to half report financial help from friends or family and more than one out of five currently lives with friends or family.

In terms of economic and physical well-being, disconnected caregivers are worse off than employment-connected caregivers. Compared to those with paying jobs, the economically disconnected report greater material hardship, more unmet needs (see Figure 3), and higher levels of drug and alcohol use. Disconnected caregivers and benefits recipients report similar levels of hardship, but the disconnected caregivers report higher levels of unmet needs regarding assistance on basic economic and medical needs. Eighty-four percent of economically disconnected caregivers report an unmet basic need, including over 40% reporting an unmet need for help finding a place to live, obtaining medical services, finding and keeping a job, applying for aid, and obtaining a GED or other credentials. In each of these categories disconnected caregivers report more unmet needs than benefits-only or employment-connected caregivers.

Disconnected caregivers and benefits-connected caregivers reported similar levels of depression and anxiety while employment connected caregivers reported significantly lower rates of each.

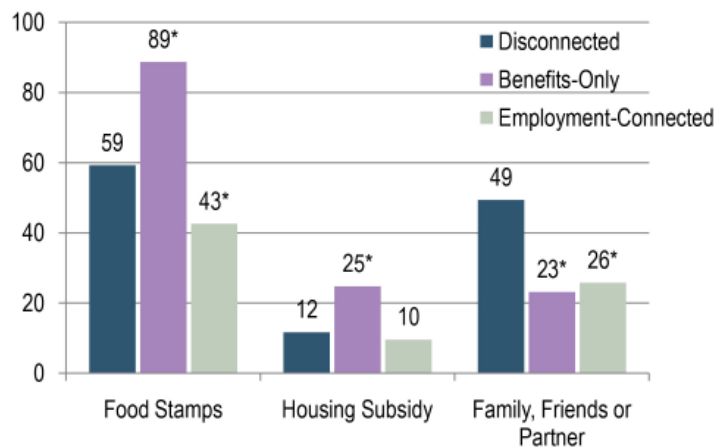
In relying on data collected at one point in time, the researchers cannot distinguish whether these patterns describe caregivers more likely to be economically disconnected regardless of child welfare involvement or whether the process of child welfare involvement leads to particular types of disconnection. On one hand, caregivers who can neither sustain employment nor successfully claim benefits may have difficulties providing adequate environments for their children. On the other hand, the researchers may be observing caregivers who were economically connected through their children but lost connection when their children were removed from the household because cash assistance from TANF and child SSI is contingent on having children in the household.

Similarly, the levels of reported assistance from friends and family may mean that private, not public, assistance is sustaining these apparently disconnected caregivers. Perhaps these younger caregivers have not yet exhausted their support networks. On the other hand, facing barriers to seeking or losing public assistance may increase efforts to seek private support. The researchers are unable to distinguish whether the informal economic support means that these seemingly disconnected caregivers are also supporting themselves through illegal activities.

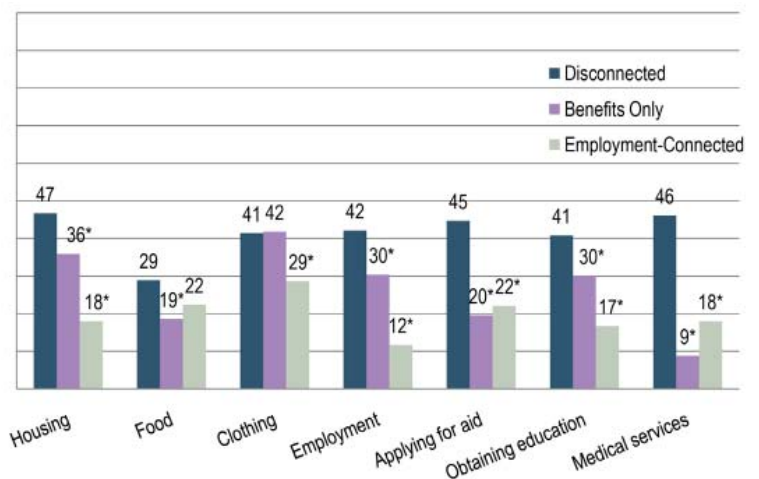
Disconnected caregivers report lower parental engagement than other caregivers. The researchers tested the relationship between economic disconnection and caregiver engagement (defined as the level of parents' investment in working with Child Protective Services (CPS) and their expected benefits from that investment) while controlling for basic demographic characteristics (such as age, race, and education), chronic risk factors (such as drug abuse and depression), and whether a child was placed in out-of-home care. Even when controlling for these factors, economically disconnected caregivers report lower levels of engagement than the other groups.

These results suggest that economically disconnected

**Figure 2. Benefit Receipt**



**Figure 3. Percent Reporting Selected Unmet Needs**



caregivers are less engaged with child welfare services than either those receiving benefits or those who are employed. They are also more likely to have children out-of-the-home, which is in itself, related to low-er parental engagement. Additionally, disconnected caregivers report substantial unmet basic needs, which suggests that social workers may encounter unique barriers when working with this group. Assisting parents in obtaining any benefits they might be eligible for could improve their ability to provide for themselves

and their children and may increase their level of engagement with child welfare services. Meeting the complex needs of child welfare involved families is best achieved through close collaboration among an array of service providers. Our findings suggest that coordination between economic services and child welfare presents an important opportunity to meet the most pressing needs of families, reduce disconnection, and increase parental engagement. Additional work is needed to examine the most promising avenues for strengthened

## DIALOGUE: Practitioners and Policy Makers Respond

### DIALOGUE Participants

#### Researchers

**Jennifer Hook**, Research Scientist, Partners for Our Children

**Maureen Marcenko**, Associate Professor of Social Work, Partners for our Children

**Jennifer Romich**, Associate Professor of Social Work, WCPC Associate Director

#### Policy Practitioners

**MaryLee Allen**, Director for Child Welfare & Mental Health with the Children's Defense Fund

**Jon Gould**, Deputy Director of the Children's Alliance

**Connie Lambert-Eckel**, Deputy Regional Administrator for the Division of Child and Family Services, Region I

**David Stillman**, Assistant Secretary for the Economic Services Administration, WA State Department of Social and Health Services

West Coast Poverty Center, UW

**Shannon Harper**, WCPC Research Director

**IN DECEMBER 2011**, the West Coast Poverty Center invited a group of national and state policymakers and practitioners to join a conversation with researchers Jennifer Hook, Maureen Marcenko, and Jennifer Romich about their findings about economic disconnection among families in the child welfare system (see box above for participants). Highlights from the discussion follow, organized around some broad themes and issues that emerged from the conversation.

1) What are some of the challenges facing child welfare-involved families who are also economically disconnected?

As seen in the research, respondents noted that child welfare-involved families face several potential obstacles. For example, MaryLee Allen of the Children's Defense Fund highlighted the fact that many of these families tend to be young when they become parents; have low levels of education, which can hurt their employment prospects; and end up living in poverty or at very low incomes, with resulting housing and other difficulties, which add additional challenges and stresses to their lives as they struggle to raise children.

Allen also recognized that some of these families may be dealing with substance abuse and family violence, and unaddressed mental health problems, some of the persistent barriers that other systems (e.g., TANF, behavioral health) have not been able to deal with sufficiently. For many of these families, a lack of income may be a root cause of many related problems, but the related problems also often need to be addressed.

The other respondents agreed that the characteristics and hardships the researchers' found in the Parent Survey sample generally resonated with their experiences working with families involved in the child welfare system and that the issue of economic disconnection might be a useful way of thinking about interventions to improve child welfare outcomes.

2) What are the implications of this study for advocates' and agencies' work with families in the child welfare system?

Respondents noted challenges to receiving child welfare services that stem from administrative rules that vary both over time and across programs. Jon Gould of the Children's Alliance noted that recent changes to the TANF system may have affected eligibility and take-up of benefits. Additional investigation is needed to see how these and other rule changes make it difficult for families to be confident about their eligibility for benefits at any given point in time. This confusion may contribute to both disconnection from benefits and a lack of engagement with child welfare services.

In terms of coordination across systems, David Stillman of DSHS (Economic Services) underscored various sources of tension inherent in receiving benefits from different agencies, including conflicting rules and conflicting incentives across administrative units and a lack of clarity about which agency is ultimately responsible for a family's well-being. Requirements from the different programs are "competing for...attention" from parents involved in multiple systems.

Respondents noted that efforts to address some of these concerns are already underway at DSHS. The agency is consolidating different administrations to simplify the process of receiving multiple services and a new safety framework that attempts to couple reunification of families with additional support services to promote safety and stability. David Stillman also noted a recent recommendation that DSHS focus on "engagement that matters" in its welfare program rather than just on participation rates. This shift in focus could allow DSHS to provide additional services to families

to stabilize their situations before requiring participation in TANF work activities. More generally, it might mean that DSHS could try to monitor parental engagement across multiple systems/programs to catch and address potential disconnection.

3) How would these findings differ if this study was replicated today?

This study was fielded in mid- to late-2008. Several respondents noted that they believe that there would be additional families who are struggling because of changes in the economic, political, and administrative climate in the intervening years. For example, Connie Lambert-Eckel of DSHS (Children's Administration) believes that the incidence and severity of child abuse and neglect cases may have increased as a result of the ongoing effects of the 2007-2009 recession. Jon Gould noted that rule changes in TANF eligibility and the elimination of programs since the survey may have resulted in additional families that might be disconnected from benefits. MaryLee Allen also noted that the incidence of poverty, unemployment, and vulnerability have increased substantially since the study was fielded, and especially among young families, raising the good possibility that the researchers would find higher rates of disconnection among a similar sample today.

Jon Gould also wondered whether the researchers' finding that there were no differences by race, gender, or marital status between economically disconnected parents and benefits-connected parents would hold in the current economic climate. Given the differential impact of the recession on men and women and different racial groups, he suspected that there might be disparities in who is economically disconnected today.

4) What additional information would help the researchers better understand these families' situations?

Respondents had a number of suggestions for further exploration of various subgroups of child welfare-involved families. Jon Gould encouraged the researchers to pay additional attention to the age of the children in these families, not just the ages of the parents, noting that younger children may suffer more from adverse events than older children. Connie Lambert-Eckel suggested incorporating more information about the length of time children are out of the home and the impact of these differences on families' chances of reunification.

Respondents noted various options that might help the researchers get a more complete picture of respondents' financial circumstances. Jon Gould and David Stillman suggested that collecting information about assets and debt among survey respondents would be useful for determining how families might be coping with disconnection. As they noted, these families may be facing additional liabilities (e.g., legal financial obligations from incarceration). Similarly, Connie Lambert-Eckel was interested in additional information about partner support in these families. David Stillman added that previous research has identified even modest income from child support as playing an important role in the financial situations of low-income

families. He suggested that the researchers include child support as an income source of interest in future extensions of the current study, considering it both as a source of income and a type of formal economic connection.

Respondents were also interested in more information about the possibility that economically disconnected families might be involved in illegal activities. Gathering additional information about families' economic situations could help address this issue.

Other suggestions for extending the current research included making the survey longitudinal and focusing more on service provision. Connie Lambert-Eckel raised the issue of repeat instances of child abuse and neglect and the child welfare system's difficulty in providing ongoing services to prevent recidivism. From the child welfare agency perspective, this inability to provide services stems from families' ineligibility for services in the absence of a child welfare case. From the broader perspective of the social safety net, there are also potential gaps in eligibility for services, which some of the economically disconnected families may be experiencing. MaryLee Allen noted that there is little known nationally about the services that families and children receive during or after their period of involvement with the child welfare system. She also suggested paying attention to the timing of when families became economically disconnected to determine whether this preceded or followed involvement with the child welfare system.

A final suggestion involved taking into account differences in parents' locations and the resulting gaps in access to services. Connie Lambert-Eckel also noted that there might be differences in rates and predictors of economic disconnection among families being served by different types of benefits offices: in smaller, rural offices with greater coordination across programs and services, families may be less likely to face disconnection, but may be less likely to have access to needed services. Families served by larger, urban offices may have access to a broader range of services, but may experience less coordination across their various benefits. If that is the case, disconnection may be driven by different factors, but it might have similar effects on parents' levels of engagement.

## NEXT STEPS

The West Coast Poverty Center and Partners for Our Children are currently undertaking additional research using administrative data on caregivers involved with child welfare to examine economic connections before, during, and after involvement with child welfare. Multiple years of administrative data will allow us to examine the fluidity between these groups and the ordering of events. This research will shed light on the extent to which disconnection predates child welfare involvement or precipitates disconnection. Answering these questions will provide a more complete base of knowledge for intervention.

For references or to read the full paper on which this Dialogue is based, see [http://www.partnersforourchildren.org/pocweb/userfiles/EconDisc%20Discussion%20Paper\\_6.17.11.pdf](http://www.partnersforourchildren.org/pocweb/userfiles/EconDisc%20Discussion%20Paper_6.17.11.pdf)

# DIALOGUES on Research and Policy

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DIALOGUES on Research and Policy, January 2012

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This fourth issue of DIALOGUES features work by Jennifer Hook, Maureen Marcenko, and Jennifer Romich on economic disconnection among families involved in the child welfare system in Washington State, along with comments from policy practitioners on the implications for their work.

**INSIDE:**

- What is Economic Disconnection?
- Economic Disconnection Among Child Welfare-Involved Families in Washington State
- Differences between Economically Disconnected and Economically Connected Families
- Practitioners and Policymakers Respond

**ON THE WEB:**

For more information on this Dialogue and on economic disconnection and child welfare, visit our website, [wpc.washington.edu](http://wpc.washington.edu).