

MDRC Child Briefing Summary

Overview

As the reauthorization of TANF approaches, policymakers are looking at the impact of welfare policies on the well being of adolescents and children. On February 27, 2002, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) held a briefing on *How Welfare and Work Policies Affect Children and Adolescents*. During this briefing, researchers from MDRC's Next Generation Project presented new results of studies on the affect of welfare reform policies on children and adolescents.

Study Design

MDRC's Next Generation project conducted random assignment studies of 16 programs in sites across the country. The project team looked at a program group relative to a control group. Some of the studies were started before 1996, but still include current state and local TANF policies on mandatory employment services, earning supplements, and time limits.

Elementary School Age Children

The following were findings in past studies conducted by MDRC:

- Elementary school-age children benefit from programs that increase parents' employment and income.
- Elementary school-age children show few effects from programs that require work but do not increase income.
- One time-limited welfare programs showed few effects on elementary school-age children.

MDRC's new studies looked at children ages 5 to 12 years. During the study surveys were administered to teachers to gage a child's academic progress. Interviews were also conducted with mothers of the children. Based on MDRC's new studies it was found that earlier conclusions still hold up in the long run. After looking at the random assignment studies of 16 programs in sites across the country it was found that benefits to children from programs that increase both employment and income persist through a 4.5 year follow-up. It was also found that mandatory programs that increase parents' employment but not income have few effects on children through a five-year follow-up. A second study of time-limited welfare showed no evidence of harm on elementary school-age children. An earlier time limit program had few effects on children. A new study coupled earnings supplement with time limits showed no evidence of harm to children. This study also showed some positive effects for children. However, there were fewer positive effects than when compared with earnings supplements with no time limit. In terms of policy implications, these results show the link between the TANF program design and a child's well being. Based on the results, the researchers recommended decoupling earnings supplements from time limits. MDRC researchers also recommended considering work supplements such as child care and transportation as "non assistance" and not counting the months working towards time limits.

Adolescents

Based on MDRC's previous studies the following was found:

- There were scattered negative effects of welfare reform programs on adolescents.

MDRC's new studies asked the following key questions:

- What are the effects of welfare and work policies on adolescents?
- Do they last into young adulthood?
- Why are these effects occurring?
- What are the implications for policy?

The new studies looked at adolescents aged 12 to 18 from single parents families. The studies involved maternal reports of schooling outcomes as well as some maternal reports of behavior. Effects were calculated within and across 16 programs. In-depth interviews with families were also conducted. Approximately 6,000 adolescents were involved in the study.

The studies revealed that welfare reform policies, including time limits, mandates, and earning supplements have negative effects on school progress. School progress is measured by achievement and grade repetition. Even very generous earnings supplement programs show negative effects on schooling. However, the effects were small and not consistent across programs. These effects do not include suspension, dropping out, or teen child bearing. There was also little evidence of negative effects for 19 to 21 year olds.

Almost all of the programs included in the study increased employment. However, some programs increased employment without affecting adolescent schooling. In terms of the impact of employment programs on families, there is no evidence that program effects on income are linked to effects on adolescents. However, there is some evidence showing reduced supervision and monitoring when maternal employment increases. In addition, adolescents are taking on adult roles such as taking care of siblings and paid work.

In terms of policy implications, there is a need for more effective strategies to engage low-income youth. There is also a need for expansions in child care access.

Future Studies

MDRC will be looking at the following topics in the future:

- How do effects on children differ for families with different characteristics?
 - By race or ethnicity
 - By ability to keep and sustain employment
- How does childcare affect the well being of young children?

- How do welfare and work policies affect family composition and relationships?