

# Remember the Children

**Mothers Balance Work and  
Child Care under Welfare Reform**



**Growing Up in Poverty Project  
Wave 1 Findings—California, Connecticut, Florida**

---

**University of California, Berkeley and Yale University**

## How are children and mothers faring under welfare reform?

In the summer of 1998 we began to invite single mothers with preschool-age children—all entering new welfare programs—into a four-year study. Our premiere aim is to learn how the upbringing and development of children may be altered by the unprecedented push on their mothers to leave home, find child care, and hold down a job.

This monograph details initial findings that stem from the Wave 1 data. The results are largely descriptive, offering a baseline picture for 948 families spread across three states. Some findings offer early warning signals. For example, we find that many youngsters are being placed in low-quality child care settings. We find high levels of social isolation and clinical depression among many women, sure indicators that their children's early development will be delayed

Welfare reform has brought results. But it's a work in progress. If cash assistance and family support programs are to lift this new generation of children out of poverty, much remains to be done. This report delineates key items for this unfinished agenda.

The Growing Up in Poverty Project is conducted in collaboration with our research partners, Mathematica Policy Research Inc. and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. The Project receives support from nine foundations and government research agencies.

## The Growing Up in Poverty Project

Graduate School of Education—PACE  
University of California, Berkeley 94720  
510-642-7223

Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy  
Yale University, New Haven 06511  
203-432-9931

Additional copies may be ordered from the Berkeley office.  
Wave 1 Report ■ February 2000

# Remember the Children

## Mothers Balance Work and Child Care under Welfare Reform

---

**Growing Up in Poverty Project 2000**  
**Wave 1 Findings—California, Connecticut, Florida**

**Project Co-directors** Bruce Fuller University of California, Berkeley  
Sharon Lynn Kagan Yale University

**Berkeley** Gretchen Caspary, Assistant Project Director  
Nancy Cohen  
Desiree French  
Laura Gascue  
Africa Hands  
James Mensing

**Tampa** Jan McCarthy, Site Coordinator  
Gege Kreischer

**Yale** Jude Carroll, Site Coordinator  
Kristen Cool

**Survey Coordinators** Susan Sprachman, Mathematica Policy Research Inc., Princeton  
Greg Hoerz and Jordan Kolovson, MDRC, New York

---

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Remember the Children

### Delivering on Promises

In 1996 President Clinton added his voice to a growing chorus of policy makers and voters, all pushing to revolutionize America's welfare system. Whether these reformers, almost four years later, have strengthened the lives of poor children remains an open question.

Hopes were high that summer of 1996. Congressional leaders vowed to end the "cycle of welfare dependence" that seemed to entrap poor parents and their children from one generation to the next.

The policy revolutionaries expressed a number of goals. They would shrink the welfare rolls and thereby build stronger families. Working mothers, moving into jobs, would offer stronger role models for their children and greater economic stability for their households. Child care programs would grow in number and quality, supporting youngsters' early development. In short, the reformers aimed to reduce single mothers' welfare dependency and boost children's futures over time.

But is welfare reform delivering on its promises? Can we discern observable effects from these reforms on young children? Does the welfare-to-work imperative alter maternal practices, homes, or child care settings in ways that advance children's well-being? These are the core questions that energize this study.

### Young Children Enter a New Frontier

No one doubts that we have embarked on a grand national experiment. For the first time government is seriously requiring that single mothers with preschool-age children work to qualify for time-limited cash assistance. Women must now juggle the task of raising an infant or toddler with holding down a job.

As a result, about one million additional children now spend their days away from their mothers in



child care. These youngsters are entering their own 40-hour-a-week frontier, being raised by new adults in new settings. What is the quality of their child care? Do these settings advance or impede youngsters' early learning? How do neighborhoods vary in providing organized child care? These are crucial questions if children's well-being is truly our first concern.

### The Growing Up in Poverty Project

During the second half of 1998 our research team, working from Berkeley and Yale, randomly selected 948 single mothers with young children. They live in or near one of five cities: San Francisco or San Jose, California; Manchester or New Haven, Connecticut; and Tampa, Florida. The samples proved to be representative of each area's caseload.

Participating women in California and Florida had been enrolled for six months in new welfare programs. In Connecticut, we compared experimental and control groups 18 months after they had entered the new or old program.

This report details major findings from the first wave of data collection. Our results stem from interviews of the mothers, visits to their child care

providers, both centers and individual caregivers, and assessments of children's early language and social development. The median child was 30 months old when we first interviewed the mother.

### **Economic Incentives, Personal Resources, and Community Context**

Welfare reform rests on the assumption that by altering the economic incentives and moral obligations attached to cash assistance, the lives of women and their children will improve. By setting time limits on cash aid, expanding family supports like child care, and raising tax benefits for the working poor, policy makers hope “to make work pay” and move single mothers from welfare to work.

In this study, we move beyond the simple economics of women's lives to sketch their varied and complex attributes, along with the character of their diverse neighborhoods. We inquire about their households, sources of social support or degree of isolation, and their parenting practices. And for the children, we assess the nature and quality of their new child care settings.

We explore how a neighborhood's infrastructure—especially the availability of organized child care and effective delivery of financial aid—can mediate the direct effect of welfare reform on children.

Presented here are the major findings that emerged from this first wave of maternal interviews and child care assessments. The nine chapters that follow provide details.

### **How Are Children Faring under Welfare Reform?**

■ *Young children are moving into low-quality child care settings as their mothers move from welfare to work.*

This results in part from welfare reform, since single mothers must quickly find a child care provider, often without the financial aid to which they are legally entitled. Our observations of child care settings revealed quite low quality, on average.

But low quality compared to what? Earlier national studies have revealed unevenness in the quality of centers and preschools located in middle-class communities. Comparing our results to this earlier work, we find that children in the new welfare system have entered centers of even lower quality. Educational materials often are scarce, little reading or story telling was observed, and many children typically spend their days with an adult who has only a high school diploma.

The two study sites in California represent important exceptions: center-based programs in San Francisco and Santa Clara County exhibited fairly high quality. This is a glimmer of good news. It demonstrates that well targeted subsidies to centers can improve the quality of care for children on welfare.

This migration of young children into mediocre child care also is driven by the robust economy and demand for semi-skilled workers. The new welfare rules are not solely responsible for this trend. But policy makers must decide whether to address the development of children with the same intensity that they display in moving single mothers swiftly into jobs.

Most participating children were not placed in centers but in home-based care. By this we mean licensed family child care homes or individual kin members or friends (kith and kin), who now qualify for child care vouchers worth up to \$5,000 per year. These home-based providers fell below the average quality level of center-based programs. We observed fewer educational materials, much greater use of television and videos, and unclean facilities.

In short, we find that the welfare-to-work push on single mothers is placing a growing number of children in mediocre and disorganized child care settings. This represents a lost opportunity, for we also have learned in recent years how high-quality child care can effectively boost early learning.

■ *Child care subsidies reach unequal fractions of poor families and encourage the use of unlicensed care.*

The share of women drawing their child care subsidy ranged from just 13% in the Connecticut sample to 50% in Florida. In all three project states, women are eligible for child care aid while on welfare and for at least two years after finding a job.

This low use of subsidies represents a serious breakdown in one key component of welfare reform. It constitutes a strong disincentive to work. Much policy attention has been paid to inadequate take-up rates for Medicaid and food stamps. The situation for child care subsidies, potentially a significant income support, is even worse.

The propensity of women to utilize child care centers, as opposed to kith and kin, is highly correlated with the supply of centers in their neighborhoods. And what's striking is the magnitude of inequality that characterizes the supply of centers among the communities in our study. Disparities in supply range from 42 center slots per 100 young children in Tampa to just 11 enrollment slots per capita in Santa Clara County. With limited supply of licensed child care and scarce knowledge of subsidies, many mothers have few options.

■ *Young children's early learning and development is limited by uneven parenting practices and high rates of maternal depression.*

We found that certain parenting practices, such as reading frequently with one's child, often are absent in homes. In addition, the incidence of severe levels of maternal depression was up to three times higher among participating mothers, compared to the national average.<sup>1</sup>

Maternal depression is troubling for two reasons: it constrains women's employability and reduces their children's odds of thriving. In Connecticut, one in every six women suffered from severe depression. Mothers with preschool-age children experienced higher levels of depression, relative to women with older youngsters.<sup>2</sup> Utilizing a second measure of

what doctors call "depressive symptoms," about half of all participating women in California and Florida displayed emotional difficulties.

Both factors—disengaged parenting and clinical depression—can substantially retard infants' and toddlers' early learning.<sup>3</sup> We detected delays in the language development of participating toddlers in California and Florida, relative to national norms. These gaps are not necessarily attributable to welfare reform *per se*. And no significant differences in child development were found between experimental and control groups in Connecticut.<sup>4</sup>

But it remains unclear how welfare reform's promise of advancing children's life chances will be met until these deeper dynamics are recognized. With many mothers debilitated by mental health problems and a wider range of women not engaged in positive developmental practices at home, how will the welfare-to-work push alone advance children's well-being?

#### How Are Mothers Faring under Welfare Reform?

■ *A sizable share of women are moving into jobs.*

Among all participating women in the three states, about half were working and had selected a child care provider for at least 10 hours of care per week within their initial months of welfare involvement. (Another share had selected child care even though they were not employed.)

From the Connecticut experimental data we see that involvement in Jobs First did encourage a higher rate of employment—a 15% margin among mothers in the new program, above the control group.

Many were pursuing postsecondary training while drawing cash assistance. And we found that maternal education is one of the most consistent predictors of both employment and positive parenting practices, similar to findings from earlier studies.



■ *Wages are low and household economies remain impoverished.*

The median Florida woman, when most recently employed, earned just \$5.45 per hour, yielding a monthly income of \$630. Average hourly wages were higher in California (\$6.36) and Connecticut (\$7.24) before adjusting for the cost of living. These women reported median monthly earnings of \$700 and \$799 in the two states, respectively.

Fragile levels of economic support directly touch the lives of young children. Asked whether they had difficulty buying enough food, 28% of the Florida mothers and 32% of California mothers said often or sometimes.

■ *Levels of economic and social support gained by the women are uneven.*

Just 16% of participating women in Connecticut reported that they lived with an adult who provided economic support for their child, compared to 36% among women in Florida. About one-quarter of all women appear to be socially isolated, rarely seeing other adults. Among sampled women in California, 41% reported that they “feel alone as a parent.”

One fifth of the Florida mothers reported that their household includes one member with an alcohol or drug abuse problem. Such daily sources of stress undercut the family’s stability.

Nor do all mothers feel efficacious about the challenge of raising a young child in poverty. In California, 39% of all women agreed with the statement, “At the end of a long day I find it hard to feel warm and loving toward my child.”

Taken together, these findings suggest that mere manipulation of economic incentives and penalties—the carrots and sticks strategy—may be insufficient. This approach fails to recognize the force of women’s personal resources, levels of social support, and their emotional health.

The uneven availability of child care programs is another case of how the focus on engineered

incentives misses a key point: Beyond economic calculations, these mothers are empowered or trapped by their community’s resources. They benefit from a human hand when extended by local organizations.

### A Cautionary Note

These Wave 1 results offer a first snapshot of how mothers and their young children are faring. The findings should be considered tentative, with emerging patterns to be examined over time. To that end, we are collecting Wave 2 information from the same families, 18 months after Wave 1. A third round is planned after the children enter school.

Caution is warranted in comparing findings across the three Project states. The Connecticut sample was drawn somewhat differently than the California and Florida samples. Participating women differ in their personal characteristics. The sample of women in Connecticut, for instance, is better educated than women in the other two states. We highlight below where between-state differences may be the result of sampling procedures.

### Companion Research

This report is being published alongside two other studies. One is an evaluation of the economic and employment effects of Connecticut’s welfare reforms, authored by Dan Bloom and others at the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) in New York. The second focuses on the health of participating women, especially their mental health, and how such factors help to explain employability and wage rates. It is authored by Sarah Horwitz and Bonnie Kerker at Yale’s School of Public Health.<sup>5</sup>

Together, these analyses begin to inform the pressing questions around how children are faring under welfare reform, by looking into women’s lives and into the new child care settings where their youngsters are being raised.

---

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Section 1 PROJECT AIMS</b> How are children and mothers faring under welfare reform?	<b>7</b>
<b>Section 2 MOTHERS' ATTRIBUTES</b> Who are the women entering new welfare programs?	<b>21</b>
<b>Section 3 STATES AND NEIGHBORHOODS</b> How do job markets, welfare rules, and child care contexts differ?	<b>27</b>
<b>Section 4 HOMES AND PARENTING</b> How well do families function?	<b>41</b>
<b>Section 5 FAMILY ECONOMY</b> How do women get by economically?	<b>51</b>
<b>Section 6 MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH</b> What gaps exist in access to insurance and clinical services?	<b>59</b>
<b>Section 7 WELFARE TO WORK</b> How do women engage new welfare rules and jobs?	<b>65</b>
<b>Section 8 CHILD CARE</b> Where do young children now spend their days?	<b>71</b>
<b>Section 9 EARLY LEARNING</b> How well are children growing and developing?	<b>91</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>107</b>