

Supporting Low-Income Families: State Variations in Child Care Subsidies and TANF Policies and Children's Developmental Ecologies

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Project Description

Using two nationally-representative longitudinal datasets, the overarching goal of this project is to comprehensively examining the ways in which TANF (Temporary Aid for Needy Families) and child care subsidy policies influence low-income children. In particular, the project will examine contextual pathways that link state-level policy decisions to the development of low-income children. The first goal of the project focuses on understanding how variations in both child care subsidy and TANF policies influence the likelihood that an eligible family will receive benefits. The second goal is to understand how receipt of the benefits influences low-income children's development; through its influence on the proximal contexts they experience—namely, their child care setting and their family environment. Lastly, we will explore across these two aims to provide a better understanding of how variations in state policies alter the potential associations between benefit receipt, children's developmental contexts, and ultimately, their developmental outcomes in both the short- and long-term.

Research Questions

- Do variations in states' CCDF (Child Care Development Fund) and TANF policies influence the likelihood of a low-income family receiving benefits?
- Is receipt of TANF and/or child care subsidies associated with short-term (whether children attend high-quality child care, whether parents are engaged in education and employment, family wellbeing and parenting at child age 3 or 4) and longer-term (parental education and employment and child academic and behavior outcomes at child at 5 and 9) outcomes?

- Are the associations between TANF and/or subsidy receipt and the long-term outcomes are mediated by the short-term outcomes?
- Are the associations between receipt of a child care subsidy or TANF benefit and child care quality, parent employment and education, and parenting behaviors impacted by specific, malleable characteristics of the policy?

Sample

Two family-level datasets and state-level data that we will compile from multiple sources. Importantly, restricted versions of both of these datasets provide geographic information that will allow families to be matched to information about the state they reside in. The first family-level dataset, is Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, a longitudinal birth cohort study of 4,898 children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 U.S. cities. The second family-level dataset is Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort, which was initiated by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), was designed to follow a representative sample of children born in the U.S. in 2001.

Methods

To determine how the variation in state policies influence the likelihood of receiving benefits, will estimate a series of logistic regression models where receipt is the focal dependent variable, state policy characteristics are the focal independent variables, and a number of state- and family-level characteristics are included as covariates.

To investigate how receipt of TANF and child care subsidies influence short- and longer-term outcomes in children and families, we will estimate a series of multiple regression model with adjusted standard errors and the full list of family-level

covariates. Certain outcomes (e.g., type of child care setting) are not continuous and thus, multinomial or standard logistic models will be employed.

We will use path analysis to examine whether the intermediate outcomes mediate relations between benefit receipt and long-term parent and child outcomes.

Progress Update

The primary activities that are in progress are preparing the Fragile Families data for analysis and the building of a new database that combines variations in state-level TANF and child care subsidy policies. At the meeting, we will discuss the state-level policy variables to be examined, and how they vary across families in the Fragile Families data.

Implications for policy/practice

The proposed work will provide essential information to policymakers regarding the impact of child care subsidies and TANF the policies surrounding these policies on low-income children and families. Through understanding the complex pathways through which these policies and benefits can improve or hinder optimal child development and family functioning, policymakers will be better able to make decisions about future policies, reforms to current policies, and changes to the implementation of current policies. This proposal pays particular care to decisions that policymakers and practitioners at both state- and local-levels are grappling with in current times.

Implications for research

The proposed work will enhance the potential for future researchers to combine state-level policy data with information on individual families in states. The database created as part of the project will combine comprehensive information from multiple sources and will include previously unexamined policy variables. Additionally, the analyses conducted in this project will provide future researchers with new strategies in this endeavor.

For more information

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