



Economically Disconnected Families and The Child Welfare System: Understanding the Link Between Poverty and Parent Engagement

KEY MESSAGES

- About 20% of child-welfare involved parents report being disconnected from employment and benefit income. These parents report greater unmet needs for many types of assistance, including housing and medical care.
- Coordination between economic services and child welfare presents an important opportunity to meet the most pressing needs of very vulnerable families.

Background

Keeping children safe at home is a primary goal of the child welfare system. When children must be removed from their birth families for their protection, the first objective is to achieve reunification as safely as possible. In order to maintain the children safely in their home or to reunify them with their families, the child welfare agency offers a wide array of services to address safety concerns in the home and resolve the case. The parents' level of engagement with these services is an important component in the ultimate success of the case.

POC's [previous research](#) of parents involved in the child welfare system showed that the majority of parents were contending with multiple challenges, including mental health concerns, substance abuse, and early trauma, as well as limited employment and income. From this research, POC and West Coast Poverty Center conducted further analysis that helps us to understand the extreme poverty faced by a particularly vulnerable set of families in the child welfare system – those who are “economically disconnected” – and how this impacts the parent’s engagement with child welfare services. Economically disconnected is defined as being disconnected from both employment and cash assistance from the government (Acs & Loprest, 2004). This is an important focus because evidence suggests that parents’ economic connection is related to case outcomes. Families who lose welfare after the child is removed have a lower rate of reunification (Kortenkamp, Geen, & Stagner, 2004).

The Findings

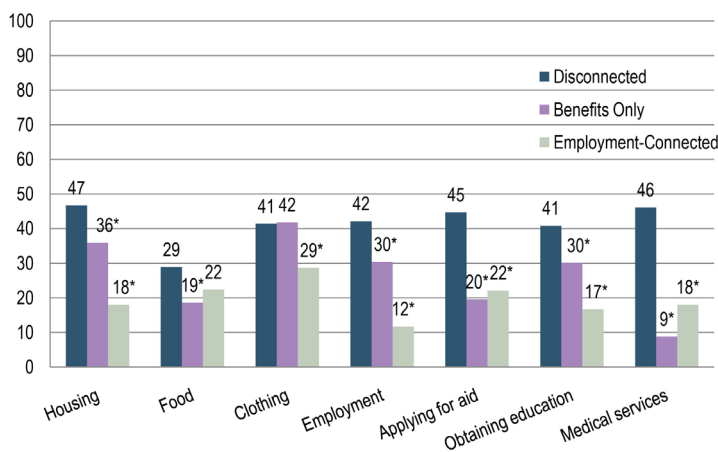
We found that 20% of the families were economically disconnected, reporting no employment or cash assistance. Forty percent of families were receiving cash benefits but reporting no employment (benefits only). Another 40% of families were receiving employment-related income from the primary caregivers’ job or their partners’ job (employment connected). A closer look at the benefits-only group reveals a mixed source of income. Of the benefits-only group, almost two-thirds receive TANF, almost half receive SSI, and one-quarter receive General Assistance (GA). About 25% of the employment-connected group also report income through government benefits.

Who are the economically disconnected caregivers?

Our analysis reveals several patterns that differentiate economically disconnected caregivers from those who receive benefits, or those who either have paying jobs or whose partners have jobs. These 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 their children placed in foster care as opposed to receiving in-home services. The disconnected caregivers are more likely to say they get aid from their social networks. Close to half report financial help from friends or family and

more than one out of five currently lives with friends or family. Compared to those with paying jobs, the economically disconnected report greater material hardship, more unmet needs, and higher levels of drug and alcohol use. Disconnected caregivers and benefits recipients report similar levels of financial hardship (for example lacking money to buy clothing or shoes, pay rent or mortgage, cover an important bill, or buy enough food) but the disconnected caregivers report that they are worse off regarding assistance on basic economic and medical needs. Eighty-four percent of economically disconnected caregivers report unmet basic need, and 40% of these families report an unmet need in assistance in : finding a place to live, obtaining medical services, finding and keeping a job, applying for aid, and obtaining a GED or other credentials.

Percent reporting selected unmet needs



Note: * indicates different from disconnected group (statistical significance $p < .05$)

Are economically disconnected caregivers less engaged with child welfare?

We examined parents' investment in – and expected benefit from – working with child welfare services (or “buy-in”) and found that disconnected caregivers report lower parental engagement than other caregivers. And when we looked more closely at the relationship between economic disconnection and engagement, we found that even when controlling for basic demographic characteristics (such as age, race, and education), and chronic risk factors (such as drug abuse and depression), and whether a child was placed in out-of-home care, economically disconnected caregivers report lower engagement. This is important because studies show that buy-in is related to workers' recommendation for reunification (Holland, 2000).

How can we explain these patterns?

This study relies on data collected at one point in time, so we cannot say whether these patterns describe caregivers

who are more likely to be economically disconnected or whether the process of being involved in the child welfare system leads to particular types of disconnection. It could be that caregivers who can neither sustain employment nor successfully claim benefits have difficulties providing adequate environments for their children. Or it might be that we are observing caregivers who were receiving benefits through their children but lost connection when their children were removed from the household because cash assistance from TANF and child SSI are contingent on having children in the household (or expecting reunification within 180 days).

It is possible that these apparently disconnected caregivers are getting by on private, not public, assistance and have not yet exhausted their private support networks. Another explanation could be that these families experience real barriers to seeking or obtaining public assistance or have lost eligibility and are forced to make increased efforts to seek private support in order to get by. This study does not provide us with any additional understanding of the nature of that informal economic support.

What does this mean for practice and policy?

Clearly, economically disconnected caregivers are less engaged with the child welfare system than either those receiving benefits or those who are employed. They are also more likely to have children in out-of-home placement, which is in itself related to lower parental engagement (see the full discussion paper at partnersforourchildren.org/knowledge-center). Additionally, disconnected caregivers report substantial unmet basic needs. It easy to understand that social workers encounter unique barriers when working with this group of families.

Poverty is an enduring characteristic of parents involved with the child welfare system. This work suggests that it is important for workers to know if families are receiving benefits and, if they are not, finding assistance for families to apply for and obtain any benefits that they may eligible for. Helping parents to get 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. During the period of data collection, policy changed in Washington State to extend from 90 to 180 days the time a parent can continue to receive TANF if children are absent from home and expected to return within 180 days (WAC 388-454-0015, August 2008). Additional investigation

is needed to see how the waiver process is being used across the state. Additionally child welfare workers and the courts need to be attentive to the impact that the lack of basic needs has on the ability of any family to meet the expectations of services that are intended to assist them to reunify with their children.

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 very vulnerable families, for example, by helping families to access all the supports for which they are eligible. It will take a broad client-centered approach

to respond to the needs of these families adequately. Additional work is needed to examine the most promising avenues for strengthened coordination.

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.

We hope that multiple years of administrative data will allow us to shed additional light on the extent to which disconnection is a chronic problem that pre-dates child welfare involvement, and to what extent involvement precipitates disconnection. Answering these questions will help inform policy and practice.

This information is taken from "Economically Disconnected Families Involved with Child Welfare Services in Washington State," by Jennifer L. Hook, PhD., JoAnn S. Lee, MSW, and Maureen O. Marcenko, PhD., Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington, and Jennifer L. Romich, PhD., West Coast Poverty Center, University of Washington. For more information, please contact info@partnersforourchildren.org

Jennifer L. Hook, PhD., is a Research Scientist at POC. Her research focuses on the influence of public policy on family processes, with a particular interest in parents' time with children. She also serves as a Research Affiliate at the Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology at the University of Washington.

JoAnn Lee, MSW, is a doctoral student at the University of Washington School of Social Work. Her focus is on what happens to youths who age out of the foster-care system as well as youths in the juvenile justice system who experience contact with multiple child welfare and legal systems.

Maureen O. Marcenko, PhD., is a Research Fellow at POC and the University of Washington School of Social Work. Her focus is on the well-being of vulnerable children and families, with an emphasis on the development and testing of intervention techniques within the child welfare system.

Jennifer L. Romich, PhD., faculty affiliate at the West Coast Poverty Center and an Associate Professor, School of Social Work, combines the disciplines of economics and human development in her research on employment, family processes and use of tax and social benefits by low-income families. Her current work focuses on intrafamilial resource exchanges and the structure of marginal taxation facing low-income workers.

The West Coast Poverty Center at the University of Washington serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and effective approaches to reducing it in the West Coast states. Founded in 2005 with core funding by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (OASPE), the Center draws affiliates from the UW Schools of Social Work, Public Affairs, and Arts and Sciences.

The US Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families funded this research through a grant to the University of Washington West Coast Poverty Center.