

The Role of Child Support and Earnings in Texas Welfare and Poverty Dynamics

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Background

Federal and state welfare reforms of the 1990s have been declared an enormous success by policymakers at all levels, as well as the general public, based on two undisputed facts. First, welfare caseloads declined markedly over much of this decade all across the country (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). And, second, employment levels for current and former welfare recipients increased substantially over the same period (e.g., Bishop, 1998, Mueser et al., 2001). However, this success has come into question recently, in part because those who leave welfare frequently have very low earnings and are likely to return to welfare (Tweedie et al., 1999). Employment instability may be one of the most important proximate causes of the poor earnings trajectories faced by welfare recipients and other low-skilled workers (e.g., Gladden and Taber, 2000; Holzer and LaLonde, 2000).

Most welfare reform research to date has focused on only one of the parents involved in the welfare system, the custodial parent (CP), typically the mother who is or has been on welfare. The non-custodial parent (NCP), typically the father of the dependents in question, has received both inadequate attention from policymakers and researchers and insufficient assistance from the existing array of programs. This is hardly a new phenomenon, but it has become ever more important as policymakers have placed greater emphasis on self-reliance. Welfare reforms of the late 1980s and the 1990s at the federal and state level directed NCPs to take a more active role in supporting their families. Child support enforcement and personal responsibility agreements mandating cooperation with paternity and child support collection are just a few of the ways this interest has been manifested. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (the Personal Responsibility Act or PRA) of 1996 certainly increased the stress given to such approaches, even as it mandated time limits on welfare receipt. The Welfare-to-Work Grants Program authorized by the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 (as amended) also prioritized NCPs for workforce services.

In several states—in particular, Massachusetts (Luttrell, 1996), Wisconsin (Meyer, 1993), and Texas (Schexnayder et al. 1998)—researchers initiated studies of NCPs and the role of child support in welfare and to a lesser extent poverty dynamics. Researchers in Texas also examined the effect of workforce referrals in inducing the payment of child support (O’Shea et al., 2001).

Beyond demonstrating the feasibility of linking administrative records to support NCP-related research, this early research suggested that welfare and poverty outcomes varied significantly with differences in state welfare policies, including welfare benefit levels and treatment of labor market earnings (i.e., “earnings disregards”). In addition, Huang et al. (2002) conducted a recent national study of the role of child support in welfare exits and re-entries, using National Longitudinal Survey (NLS)-Youth data from the period 1979-1996. All of these studies of the effects of enhanced child support enforcement on welfare and poverty dynamics address the period *before* the reforms of the mid-1990s became effective.

Collecting additional child support from NCPs and ensuring that it reaches custodial parents are highly desirable from the individual’s, taxpayers’ and society’s perspectives. However, in high-benefit states (e.g., Massachusetts, Wisconsin) with favorable earnings treatment, added child support did little to contribute to welfare exits but led to significant positive effects on poverty rates (Luttrell, 1996; Meyer, 1993). In Texas, which has among the lowest welfare benefits in the nation—a maximum of only \$204/month in TANF benefits for a 3-person family and even less in the 1990s, additional child support was found to be as much as *three times more important* than the caretaker’s own earnings in inducing welfare exits and reducing recidivism, but did not contribute significantly to moving families out of poverty (Schexnayder et al. 1998).

The only national study of these issues by Huang et al. (2002) focused on young welfare mothers (n=1,068) and found that both the level of child support payments and the strength of state child support enforcement led to significantly higher welfare exits and lower re-entries in the pre-TANF era, effects that were substantially greater than those of other unearned income. The national study did not address the effects of child support payments or enforcement on poverty outcomes.

Researchers in Texas recently completed a study of the effects of various factors on welfare outcomes focusing on welfare leavers and divertees in the period *following* welfare reform, using quantitative analysis of linked administrative records (plus some analysis of combined quantitative and qualitative data), and qualitative analysis of interviews with leavers and divertees (Schexnayder et al. 2002). Two cohorts were studied: the first from April 1998 to

June 1999, and the second from July to September 2000. Researchers did not analyze the experiences of the *entire* welfare population, but addressed just these two important subgroups. This study produced findings for welfare leavers that were very similar to the earlier pre-reform era Texas study of recipients as a whole. Between 6 and 7 percent of TANF leavers in the two cohorts received child support in the six months prior to exit, while 10 to 13.5 percent were receiving it six months after exit. They noted that “child support payments rarely, if ever, made the difference between being in poverty or not” (p. 47). This was the case both because child support payments were irregular, and, when made, modest in size relative to household budgetary needs. Receiving more child support was associated with a statistically significant increase in the probability of exiting TANF, as well as a significantly lower post-TANF employment rate. And, finally, regression analysis of the combined administrative and survey data on TANF leavers suggested that every \$100 in child support received was associated with a statistically significant 6 percentage point reduction in the TANF re-entry rate, an effect *more than 4 times larger* than that of caretakers’ own wages in the exit month.

Thus, the available research offers ambiguous results on the role of NCP earnings and child support in promoting exits from welfare and poverty and reducing welfare recidivism. The studies focused mainly on pre-reform periods, leaving considerable room for further research. In the current paper, we report on additional research on the role of child support and both custodial and non-custodial parent earnings in Texas welfare and poverty dynamics in the post-reform era.¹

Data

The analysis presented here focuses on a statewide cohort of TANF recipients receiving benefits anywhere in Texas in the last quarter of 1997. It identifies the non-custodial parents (NCPs) associated with their child support cases (on which the TANF recipient is the custodial parent, or CP), and tracks both parents’ earnings, TANF, and poverty outcomes for two years afterwards. Our cohort of welfare recipients consists of all primary caretakers in households

¹ Originally, we had intended to conduct this analysis in several of the participating ADARE project states. However, gaining access to and successfully linking NCP and child support collections data with welfare and labor market data for these analyses was only possible in Texas.

receiving cash assistance as part of the single-parent family TANF program between October and December 1997.

Welfare receipt data are drawn from state administrative data files maintained by the Texas Department of Human Services (DHS). Data for NCPs, including demographics, payment history, and other variables, are drawn from administrative files maintained by the state Title IV-D agency under the Social Security Act. In Texas, NCP data are secured from the Child Support Division of the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), the designated IV-D agency. Note that welfare cases may be associated with more than one NCP record, since women may have had children with more than one father.²

Employment and earnings data are drawn from Unemployment Insurance (UI) wage records collected by the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) as part of the federal/state UI program. Total quarterly earnings for all individuals working in employment covered by Unemployment Insurance in the state are available on this file.³ In addition, the four-digit Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code is provided for employers. We also included supplemental employment and earnings data from other states for these NCPs from the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH). The absence of out-of-state employment data was a significant limitation in earlier Texas research. While more than 6 percent of a sample of NCP cases had non-Texas addresses, it was not possible to determine how many were employed out of state (Schexnayder et al., 1998, p. 17). Supplementing 1998-1999 UI wage records with NDNH data for Texas NCPs, statewide, resulted in increases of 17 percent in employment and 28 percent in earnings. Accessing such data appears to make a difference in observed labor market outcomes for NCPs.

Workforce development participation data were also derived from individual-level Choices, Job Training Partnership Act, and Workforce Investment Act participation records maintained by TWC. Also included from TWC sources were time-varying county-level unemployment rates, employment growth rates, and measures of population density (urban, suburban, rural) based on whether each county is in a large, small, or no MSA. Data were also

² In a statewide sample of Texas NCPs in the mid-1990s, the mean number of opened child support cases per welfare caretaker was between 1.35 and 1.54 (Schexnayder et al., 1998, p. 17).

³ Key exclusions include self employment, employment with religious institutions, and railroads, among others.

gathered from the U.S. Census Bureau for determining poverty rates based on the number of adults and children in the family, and from the Bureau of Labor Statistics the Consumer Price Index for all urban consumers (CPI-U) was used to adjust all dollar amounts to constant, year 2000 dollars.

Analysis

Longitudinal datasets consisting of person-quarter records were constructed in order to track outcomes of all 305,623 members of the TANF cohort as well as their associated NCPs for eight quarters following 1997Q4. For all caretakers who received TANF for at least one month of any quarter in this period, we used a Markov approach (e.g., Boskin & Nold, 1975) to model exit from TANF for the entire subsequent quarter. We also modeled exit from poverty status using the same method. In each case, the regression included only those person-quarters eligible to make the transition (i.e., those on TANF for TANF exit, and those in poverty for poverty exit).

Descriptive statistics on predictors used in the TANF exit regression are listed in Table 1. The same set of measures was used to predict entry into poverty status, as well as in the exit equations below. Similar patterns in the descriptive statistics (not shown) were observed for a different subset of person-quarter observations consisting of those eligible to make the transition out of poverty.

Table 1: Means for predictors available to TANF exit regression

Variable Description	Mean	S.D.
Custodial parent age	33.7	12.33
Custodial parent gender is male	3.1%	.17
Custodial parent race is black	38.9%	.49
Custodial parent race is hispanic	39.8%	.49
CP TANF receipt history	83.1%	.26
Non-custodial parent age	32.1	8.56
Non-custodial parent race is black	40.9%	.49
Non-custodial parent race is hispanic	40.2%	.49
Non-custodial parent race is white	19.2%	.39
Age of youngest child	6.1	4.85

Variable Description	Mean	S.D.
Age of oldest child	8.2	5.29
Child born in previous year	9.5%	.29
Some children born out of wedlock	15.2%	.36
All children born out of wedlock	58.1%	.49
Percent of time CP in recent workforce development	6.4%	.16
NCP in any recent workforce development	.4%	.06
Percent of time NCP in recent workforce development	.4%	.04
CP wage	\$550	1371.88
CP wage history	\$480	1107.64
NCP wage	\$1812	2954.01
NCP wage history	\$1440	2166.83
CP has open child support case	93.0%	.26
CP has multiple open child support cases	11.4%	.32
CP has child support order	36.5%	.48
Total child support collections forwarded to CP	\$25	110.31
Any child support collections	12.5%	.33
Any child support intercept collections	2.1%	.14
Capias (warrant) out for arrest of NCP	.4%	.07
Any prior capias (warrant) issued for arrest of NCP	.4%	.06
Any recent paternity establishments	1.4%	.12
Any paternity establishments	3.3%	.18
Urban county	72.1%	.45
Rural county	19.4%	.40
Employment growth rate	2.0%	2.57
Unemployment rate	6.1%	4.25

Due to the large number of regressors available in the longitudinal administrative database, stepwise logistic regression procedures were used to predict changes of status. Thus, only those variables with statistically significant ($p < .001$) parameter estimates are listed in the following tables.

Results

Exits from TANF and poverty

For quarters in which they received TANF benefits, 13.6 percent of custodial parents exited from and stayed off of TANF for the entire subsequent quarter. Their odds of escaping

poverty were lower, however. In those quarters in which their wage income plus TANF benefits and child support receipt were insufficient to lift them above the poverty level, only 4.3 percent of CPs were able to escape poverty for the subsequent quarter.

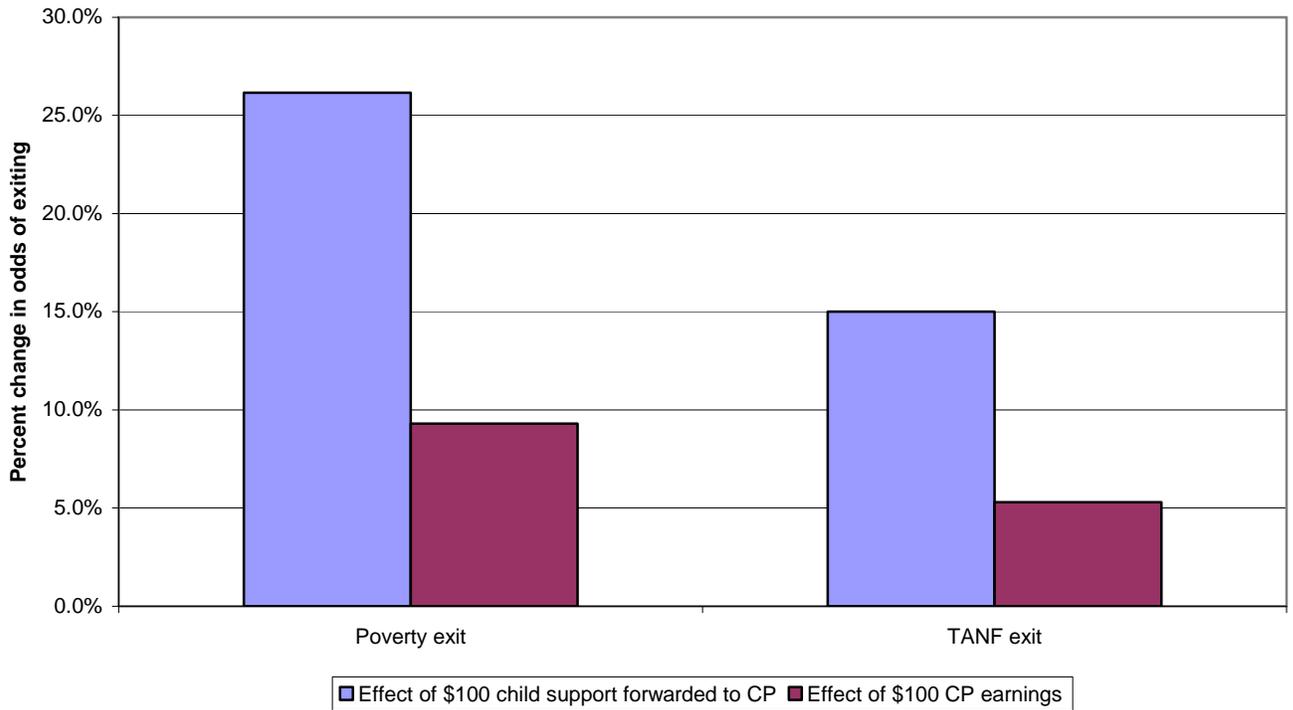
Table 2 presents the results of two parallel regressions predicting exit from the TANF caseload and exit from poverty status. Results of the TANF exit regression reveal an interesting pattern of relationships. First, as expected, current custodial parent wages are positively related to TANF exit. The odds ratio for this variable indicates a five percent increase in the odds of exiting TANF for each \$100 of wages earned per quarter. Strangely, this pattern is reversed for the variable that tracks average CP wage history over the prior eight quarters, perhaps indicating a tendency for some CPs to combine or alternate between TANF and low wage jobs. Not surprisingly, non-custodial parent wages bear a much weaker relationship to the odds of the CP exiting TANF. However, a large increase in the odds of exiting TANF is observed due to the amount of child support paid and forwarded to the CP through the formal payment system. For every \$100 per quarter of child support the CP receives, odds of exiting TANF increase by fifteen percent. Thus child support received bears a three times stronger association with TANF exit than does the custodial parent's own earnings. This replicates the major finding from the Schexnayder et al (1998) study of child support and welfare dynamics during the pre-PRWORA era.

Unlike in Schexnayder et al (1998), a similar dynamic is also observed in the poverty exit regression. In this case, both current and historical CP wage levels bear positive relationships with the odds of exiting from poverty. Custodial parents have a 9 percent greater chance of exiting for each \$100 of current quarterly wages, and 5 percent greater for each \$100 of historical quarterly wages. As above, the relationship with NCP wage levels is relatively negligible. Importantly, child support received again carries the greatest weight, albeit in a different form.⁴ In this instance, the collection of *any* child support from the NCP is associated with a 21 percent increase in the odds of exiting poverty, while each \$100 collected is associated with an *additional* five percent increase. Thus, a \$100 collection would be associated with a 26

⁴ Because of the relative infrequency of child support collections and the complicated way in which collections are distributed by the state, we parameterized child support collections with one dummy variable indicating whether any payment was made, a variable indicating the amount of child support forwarded to the CP, and a dummy indicating whether such payment was due to a government intercept. When more than one of these parameters is significant it

percent increase in the odds of exiting poverty, or an almost three times greater effect compared to that of the CP's own earnings. Figure 1 illustrates a comparison of the effects of CP earnings alone and of child support collections on both TANF and poverty exits.

Figure 1: Comparison of effects of CP earnings vs. child support collections



complicates the interpretation.

Table 2: Results of regressions predicting exit from TANF and exit from poverty status⁵

Variable Description	Poverty exit odds ratio	TANF exit odds ratio
Custodial parent age	.98	.98
Custodial parent gender is male	1.42	1.13
Custodial parent race is black		.76
Custodial parent race is hispanic		.87
CP TANF receipt history	.94	.43
Non-custodial parent age	1.004	1.003
Non-custodial parent race is hispanic	.91	.94
Non-custodial parent race is white	1.05	
Age of youngest child	1.14	1.02
Age of oldest child	.87	
Child born in previous year		1.12
Some children born out of wedlock	.75	.87
All children born out of wedlock	1.05	.85
Percent of time CP in recent workforce development	1.92	1.44
NCP in any recent workforce development		1.18
CP wage	1.09	1.05
CP wage history	1.05	.96
NCP wage		1.001
NCP wage history	1.004	1.001
CP has open child support case	1.13	1.21
CP has multiple open child support cases	2.04	.91
CP has child support order	1.07	.93
Total child support collections forwarded to CP	1.05	1.15
Any child support collections	1.21	
Any recent paternity establishments	1.27	1.44
Any paternity establishments		1.20
Urban county	1.12	.92
Rural county	.91	.89
Employment growth rate	1.03	1.02
Unemployment rate	.99	.98

⁵ All odds ratios listed are significant at p<.001

The recent availability of more detailed administrative data from the child support system has allowed more precise modeling of the dynamics of the child support enforcement system than was possible before. Indicators of OAG activity in processing support cases almost uniformly predict increased odds of exiting poverty, although several of them bear paradoxical relationships to exit from TANF. In addition to the significant effects mentioned above, custodial parents who are in poverty status have thirteen percent greater odds of exiting poverty if they have an open child support case, 104 percent greater odds if they have multiple open cases, seven percent greater odds if they have a support order, and 27 percent greater odds if they have had recent paternity establishments.

The poverty and TANF exit regressions show a number of other relationships, only some of which have policy significance, but all of which are important to include as controls so they do not account for the effects discussed previously. Significantly, all other things being equal, CP participation in workforce development for all of the prior six quarters is associated with a 44 percent increase in the odds of exiting TANF and a 92 percent increase in the odds of escaping poverty. A CP is even 18 percent more likely to exit TANF when the associated NCP participates in such programs, both of which findings suggest the value of workforce development. And finally, as an indication of a subset who are hard-to-serve, the TANF receipt history indicator shows that one who received TANF in all of the prior four quarters has 57 percent lower odds of exiting TANF.

TANF recidivism and entry to poverty

Of custodial parents who exited and remained off TANF for an entire calendar quarter after 1997Q4, 11.9 percent returned to the TANF rolls at some time in the subsequent quarter. Even more disturbing, of those few who managed to escape from poverty due to the combination of earnings and child support received, 26.7 percent found themselves back in poverty status in the following quarter. Regressions predicting these changes of status, recidivism to TANF and entry to poverty status, are summarized in Table 3.

Once again the pattern of results from the pre-welfare-reform study by Schexnayder et al (1998) is replicated in this post-welfare-reform analysis. For every \$100 per quarter of custodial parent wages, odds of returning to TANF are reduced by three percent. However, \$100 of child support received by the CP is associated with an eleven percent reduction in the odds of recidivism, an effect that is nearly four times that of the CP's own earnings. Likewise in the poverty entry regression, \$100 of custodial parent earnings is associated with a three percent decrease in the odds of entering poverty, while collection of any child support is associated with a 23 percent odds reduction, an effect more than seven times larger. Thus, child support collections appear to carry greater weight than earnings in supporting custodial parents' efforts to remain independent of TANF. And unlike in the pre-reform era, this relationship also holds for the much more difficult goal of extracting oneself and one's family from poverty. Figure 2 illustrates the differential effects of CP earnings and child support collections on entry to poverty and re-entry to TANF.

Figure 2: Comparison of effects of CP earnings vs. child support collections

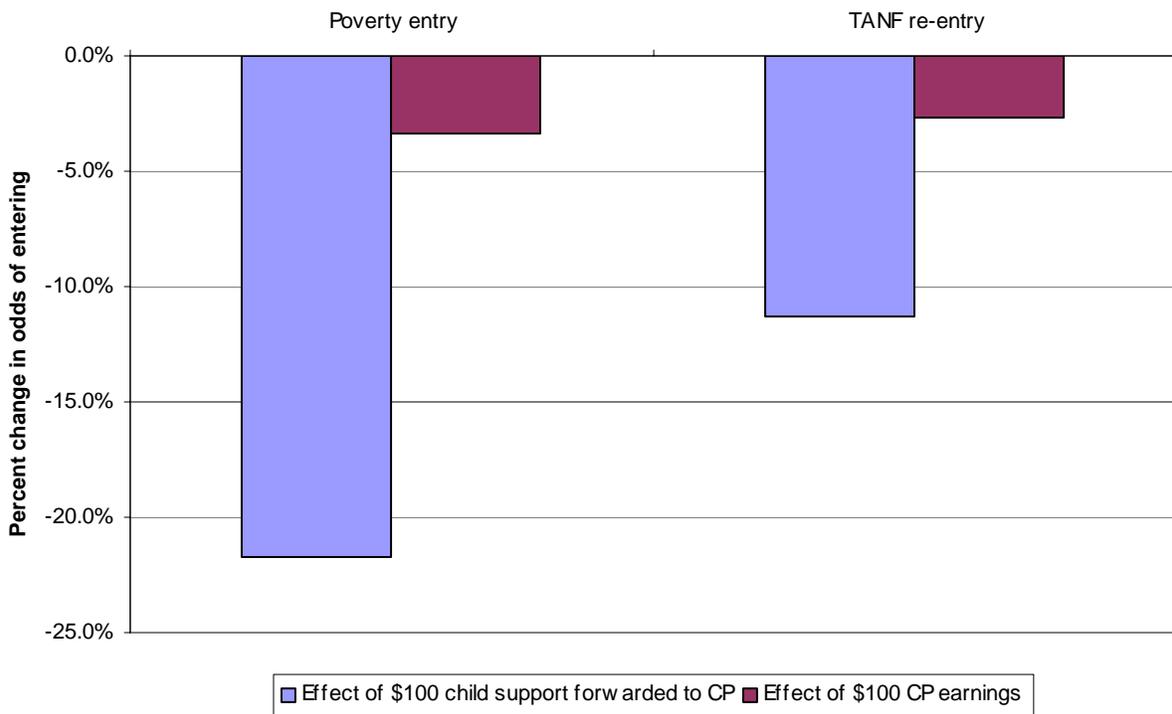


Table 3: Results of regressions predicting re-entry to TANF and entry to poverty status⁶

Variable Description	Poverty entry odds ratio	TANF entry odds ratio
Custodial parent age	.99	.98
Custodial parent gender is male	1.26	.72
Custodial parent race is black	1.07	1.36
Custodial parent race is hispanic		1.21
CP TANF receipt history	1.10	3.21
Non-custodial parent age		.996
Non-custodial parent race is black		1.33
Non-custodial parent race is hispanic		1.25
Non-custodial parent race is white		1.14
Age of youngest child	.95	.97
Age of oldest child	1.06	1.02
Child born in previous year		1.21
Some children born out of wedlock	1.33	1.21
All children born out of wedlock		1.14
Percent of time CP in recent workforce development	.56	1.19
CP wage	.97	.97
CP wage history	.97	1.01
NCP wage		.997
NCP wage history	.998	
CP has open child support case	.80	.69
CP has child support order		1.12
Total child support collections forwarded to CP	1.01	.89
Any child support collections	.77	
Any child support intercept collections	1.14	
Any recent paternity establishments		.71
Any paternity establishments	.87	.82
Rural county	1.07	1.14
Employment growth rate		.98
Unemployment rate		1.01

⁶ All odds ratios listed are significant at p<.001

Other child support enforcement indicators reveal interesting patterns in association with welfare and poverty dynamics. For example, having an open child support case affords a 31 percent reduction in the odds of TANF recidivism, but strangely having a support order slightly *increases* these odds. More predictably, the establishment of paternity is associated with lesser likelihood of returning to TANF or to poverty. And interestingly, while collection of any child support is associated with a 23 percent reduction in the odds of entering poverty, collection via government intercept (e.g., of an IRS refund) predicts *increased* chances of entering poverty. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of those whose tax refund checks are thus intercepted feel they are paying their share of their children's support, but perhaps the effects of this "Christmas in June" are fleeting. These may also be a subset of more difficult cases as suggested by the use of an IRS intercept as a collection tool.

There is no surprise in the finding that having a child in the previous year is associated with increased chances of entering TANF, nor that having children out of wedlock is associated with both TANF and poverty entry. And once again, CP receipt of workforce development services is associated with a large reduction in odds of entering poverty, but strangely has a positive effect on TANF recidivism. Perhaps this latter finding is a reflection of the types of services received. Finally, receipt of TANF in all four prior quarters portends a slightly increased risk of entering poverty, but a remarkable 321 percent increase in the odds of re-entering TANF.

Concluding Observations and Implications

Before presenting our main conclusions from our analysis of the role of child support and earnings in welfare and poverty dynamics in Texas, it is important to state what should be obvious to most welfare reform policymakers and researchers: namely, that the results presented here in many respects can be viewed as representing a *best-case scenario*. Emphasis on child support enforcement had been growing for several years preceding the time period studied. Welfare reform had passed the Texas legislature and been enacted in 1995; the Personal Responsibility Act had been passed by Congress and enacted in August 1996. In addition, by the

late 1990s, the Texas labor market was tighter than it had been in decades, with unemployment rates of 1-2 percent in a number of local labor markets including Dallas/Ft. Worth and Austin. If child support were to play a significant role in boosting exits from and preventing returns to welfare and in fostering exits from poverty, this was certainly the time to observe it.

We offer several major conclusions based on our Texas analysis. Whether these generalize to other states and time periods is for further research to demonstrate. Our first major conclusion is that the receipt of child support plays a strong and significant role in increasing the probability of exit from and reducing the probability of recidivism to welfare.

Second, receipt of child support plays a much stronger role than custodial parents' own earnings in increasing the probability of exit from welfare and reducing the probability of recidivism to welfare: the effect of child support on both welfare exit and recidivism rates is *more than three times as large* as that of own-earnings.

Third, the strength of these effects—both own-earnings and child support—appears to have roughly doubled in the TANF era when compared to the early 1990s. This result bears out the intent of policymakers and the expectations of knowledgeable researchers (e.g., Huang et al. 2002, Schexnayder et al. 2002).

Fourth, participation in workforce development services clearly provides value added for welfare recipients above and beyond that offered by child support, child care and other services, significantly and substantially increasing custodial parents' chances for exiting welfare and poverty. These effects are quite large. Moreover and quite reasonably, the effects are even greater when both the custodial and non-custodial parents receive such services, suggesting that there are benefits to providing services in a more holistic manner addressing the needs of the "family" as a whole.

A fifth and related conclusion is that, since workforce participation and child support play such strong positive roles in welfare and poverty dynamics, policymakers may well want to prioritize services to NCPs coupled with effective child support enforcement and payment mechanisms as an effective anti-poverty strategy. Earlier research (Schroeder and King, 2003) found that even among Texas' better earning NCPs, nearly half would fall short of economic self-sufficiency and more than a quarter would remain in poverty under the most attractive

human capital measures used. This suggests the need for workforce strategies that go well beyond simple work-first approaches. Unless non-custodial (and custodial) parents are assisted in enhancing their skills and securing stable, high-paying jobs, they are unlikely to experience high earnings levels. They are also unlikely to be *able* to contribute substantially to the support of their dependents through payments to custodial parents as envisioned by federal and state welfare reforms.

Our findings also suggest tantalizing possibilities for further research along several lines. One line of research would be to pursue replication of our findings in additional states, with special attention to analyzing a mix of high- and low-benefit and weak- and strong-enforcement states. If we can resolve issues regarding data access, several of the participating ADARE project states may provide this opportunity in the near future. Expanding our research and our estimation approaches with data from the National Longitudinal Survey-Youth samples, as Huang et al. (2002) have done, would also be useful.

Second, we should also extend the number of cohorts and the time period covered by our analysis to determine whether our findings are robust to both cohort and time period. In addition, we would like to see whether these welfare and poverty effects endure over the longer term.

Third, further qualitative and related field research is called for to ensure that we understand the mechanisms through which these beneficial welfare and poverty effects are occurring. This will assist us in informing improved policymaking and program practices in the field.

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