

Welfare Reforms and the Cognitive Development of Young Children

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To investigate whether the cognitive development of young children in poverty is affected by activities of their primary caregiver and by household income source, which are two components of family poverty experience that have been affected by recent welfare reforms.

Methods: Bivariate and multivariate analyses were used to examine the relationships that caregiver activity, household income source, and family characteristics (family income adequacy, caregiver depressive symptoms, caregiver education) have with the cognitive development of 59 impoverished children less than three years old.

Results: Of the three poverty experience variables included in the multivariate analysis, only employment as the exclusive source of household income had an independent relationship (positive) with children's cognitive development. Two of the family characteristics, income adequacy and caregiver education, also were associated with the children's cognitive score, and they were both better relative predictors than the employment-only income source variable. Income adequacy was positively associated and caregiver education was negatively associated with children's cognitive development.

Discussion: Although recent welfare reforms, in combination with economic growth and declining unemployment, have changed the poverty experience of young families by increasing the proportion that secure at least part of their income from employment, our study provides preliminary evidence that these reforms have made little difference for most young impoverished children. Instead, our findings suggest that the cognitive development of young children is influenced as much by the actual amount of household income as by their parents' activity and source of income.

MeSH terms: social welfare; poverty; pre-school children; development

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.

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Acknowledgement: The authors gratefully acknowledge funding for this project from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. This manuscript is an expanded version of a presentation at the 94th Annual Conference of the Canadian Public Health Association, Calgary, AB, May 2003.

We thank the families who participated in the study. In addition, we thank Wayne Biggs, Diane Dennis, Effie Gkandaki, Della Goa, Krista Hungler, and Sandra McKenzie-Keating for data collection, and Effie Gkanadaki, Vlad Gomez, Wayne Gorman, Krista Hungler, and William Rutakumwa for assistance with data coding. Donna Dosman's suggestions about the data analysis and the feedback from the two anonymous reviewers were very helpful.

This paper explores the implications of recent welfare reforms for children by investigating whether the cognitive development of young children in impoverished families is affected by the activities of their primary caregivers and household income source. Welfare reforms, beginning in the mid-1990s, increased policy efforts to move social assistance recipients into the workforce by requiring them to find jobs and/or participate in welfare-to-work activities such as life skills and job training. According to government documents, participation in welfare-to-work programs is not "mandatory" in all provinces, but the consequences of not participating include loss or reduction of benefits.¹ Although policymakers in all provinces/territories agree that some members of society, such as lone parents with young children, should not be required to engage in welfare-to-work initiatives, the definition of young children varies from six months old in Alberta to school age in Manitoba and Ontario.^{2,3} Prior to welfare reforms, lone mothers could provide full-time care to their children and receive social assistance until their youngest child was at least school age.^{2,4} Since the initiation of welfare reforms, which were paralleled by economic growth and declining unemployment,^{5,6} young impoverished children have experienced a different type of poverty in which primary caregivers are more likely to be employed or engaged in welfare-to-work activities, in addition to their parenting role, and family income is more likely to come from the labour market than from social assistance.

Although poverty is a known determinant of poor health and development of children,⁷⁻¹¹ researchers are just beginning to examine the effects of the type of family poverty experience on children. Recent studies suggest that impoverished children whose families secure at least part of their income from employment are somewhat healthier and have slightly higher developmental scores than their peers whose family income is solely from social assistance.¹²⁻¹⁸ Studies have been inconsistent, however, about the extent to which these differences are explained by pre-existing parent and family characteristics such as family income, maternal mental health, and maternal education. Moreover, the combined effect of caregiver activities and

household income source on children's cognitive development is unexplored.

We conducted a study in Edmonton, Alberta to learn about how impoverished children are affected by their family poverty experience and to gain insight into the effects of welfare reforms on young children. Specifically, we investigated the independent effects and relative importance of two components of family poverty experience – caregiver activity and household income source – on the development of young children. Additionally, household income adequacy, caregiver depressive symptoms, and caregiver education, which are three family characteristics that influence young children's development, were included in our analyses. Alberta is perhaps the best environment in Canada within which to conduct such an analysis because it was one of the first provinces to begin intensifying policy efforts to move social assistance recipients into the workforce.^{19,20}

METHODS

Sample

Data for this cross-sectional study were collected in 2001 from 98 families in Edmonton who had a before-tax income at or below the low income cut-offs (LICO) and had a child less than five years old. Participating families were recruited from social service agencies, employability programs, subsidized housing complexes, and through snowball sampling. Within participating families, the child under five who had the next birthday was selected to be the focus child for data collection. The person most knowledgeable (PMK) about that child was subsequently identified and completed a structured interview about parent activities, household income and income sources, family structure, health

TABLE I

Distribution of Sample by Family Poverty Experience, Current Study and Comparable NLSCY Data (1998)²³ re: Household Income Source of Pre-School Children

	Current Study Valid percent (frequency) N=59	NLSCY Data (1998) Valid percent (frequency) N=2826
Household income source past 12 months		
Income exclusively from social assistance	23.7% (n=14)	21.5% (n=609)
Income from mixed sources	54.2% (n=32)	29.5% (n=834)
Income exclusively from employment	22.0% (n=13)	48.9% (n=1383)
PMK activity past 12 months		
Full-time caregiving only	20.3% (n=12)	Not available
Welfare-to-work transition	59.3% (n=35)	Not available
Paid work only	20.3% (n=12)	Not available

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

care benefits, parent and child health, child care, and children's development. Our research protocol received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics, University of Alberta on May 28, 2001. Because children's first three years of life are a "sensitive period" during which their experiences are important for development,^{21,22} we focussed the analysis discussed here on a sub-sample of 59 children who were under three years of age.

Variables and data analysis

The concepts of interest in this study are children's development, family poverty experience, and family characteristics. Appendix 1 describes how these concepts were operationalized. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables of interest. Analysis of variance and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used, as appropriate, to describe the children's development scores and family characteristics by two aspects of poverty experience – household income source and PMK activity during the past year. The relatively small and non-random nature of our sample pointed to the need to determine its representativeness for the purposes of generalizing the findings. Thus, we

compared our sample to a representative sample of pre-school children in poverty using available data from the National Longitudinal Survey on Children and Youth (NLSCY).²³ Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) multiple regression was subsequently used to investigate the independent effects and relative importance of PMK current activity, household income source, and family characteristics on child development. Since welfare reforms may affect families' use of child care, which is known to play a role in children's outcomes,²⁴⁻²⁶ we controlled for time children spent in non-parental care.

RESULTS

Table I describes the sample with respect to the two dimensions of poverty experience examined in our study. Means of key variables and findings from the bivariate analyses are shown in Tables II and III. The sample in our study is representative of impoverished Canadian families with pre-school children in terms of household income adequacy and PMK education (Table II), but impoverished families with mixed income are over-represented and families with income from

TABLE II

Means (SD) for MDI Score and Family Characteristics by Household Income Source, Current Study and Comparable NLSCY Data (1998)²³ for Pre-school Children and Their Families

Variable	Current Study			NLSCY Data (1998)			
	Total Sample	Social Assistance†	Mixed Income‡	Employment*	Total Sample	Social Assistance‡	Employment*
MDI score	97.93 (11.50)	93.93 (11.35)	97.50 (11.09)	103.58 (11.29)	Not available	Not available	Not available
Income adequacy	61.55 (17.61)	50.05§ (11.94)	61.88 (18.29)	73.12 (13.42)	66.40 (20.00)	53.10§ (16.34)	73.40 (18.21)
PMK depressive symptoms	17.97 (10.02)	20.29 (11.49)	18.66 (8.79)	13.77 (10.76)	Not available	Not available	Not available
PMK education	11.47 (2.10)	10.86§ (1.61)	11.03§ (2.09)	13.23 (1.69)	11.54 (2.23)	10.50§ (2.33)	12.07 (2.04)

† Household income over the preceding 12 months was from social assistance, with no income from employment.

‡ Household income over the preceding 12 months was from mixed sources (a combination of employment and social assistance).

* Household income over the preceding 12 months was from employment, with no income from social assistance.

§ Significantly different from employed poor, $p \leq 0.01$

|| Significantly different from social assistance poor, $p \leq 0.05$

TABLE III

Means (SD) for MDI Score and Family Characteristics by PMK Activity During the Preceding 12 Months

Variable	Total Sample	Paid Work*	Welfare-to-work Transition†	Caregiving‡
MDI score	97.93 (11.50)	95.42 (13.40)	101.16 (9.31)	91.55§ (12.60)
Income adequacy	61.55 (17.61)	63.69 (10.72)	63.55 (20.52)	53.55 (11.43)
PMK depressive symptoms	17.97 (10.02)	16.67 (11.85)	18.40 (9.12)	18.00 (11.36)
PMK education	11.47 (2.10)	12.92§ (1.00)	11.17 (2.35)	10.92 (1.51)

* PMK was employed and did not participate in any welfare-to-work activities during the preceding 12 months.

† PMK was engaged in welfare-to-work activities such as job training, life skills or upgrading, during the preceding 12 months.

‡ PMK was caregiving full-time and neither worked nor participated in welfare-to-work activities during the preceding 12 months.

§ Significantly different from those engaged in welfare-to-work activities, $p \leq 0.05$.

|| Significantly different from those engaged in full-time caregiving, $p \leq 0.05$.

TABLE IV

OLS Multiple Regression Analysis of Children's Cognitive Development on Income Source, PMK Current Activity, and Family Characteristics

Variable	B	SE	Beta	t
Employment†	8.07	3.99	0.29	2.02*
Social assistance†	-0.49	3.90	-0.20	-0.13
PMK currently employed	-3.18	3.43	-0.14	-0.93
Income adequacy	0.29	0.10	0.44	2.94**
PMK depressive symptoms	-0.27	0.15	-0.24	-1.84
PMK education	-2.36	0.81	-0.43	-2.93**
Non-PMK child care	3.29	2.01	0.22	1.64

Adj. $R^2 = 0.265$; $F = 3.74^*$

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$

† Mixed income was the omitted household income source variable.

employment only are under-represented in our sample (Table I). The income source differences between our sample and the NLSCY sample suggest that caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings from the current study as they relate to income source of impoverished Canadian families. Further, the mean CES-D score (17.97) of PMKs was above the cut-off indicating a clinically significant level of depressive symptoms (16), as is common among women in poverty.²⁷⁻²⁹

Results from bivariate analyses indicate few statistically significant differences in children's MDI scores and family characteristics in relation to the two dimensions of poverty experience (Tables II and III). In fact, only two family characteristics – income adequacy and PMK education – were significantly different by income source; both were higher in working poor families (Table II). Consistent with previous research,¹²⁻¹⁸ children in social assistance-receiving families had MDI scores that were 10 points lower than their counterparts in working poor families, and, while this difference is not statistically significant (likely due to the small sample size), it is of clinical interest. In addition,

children whose PMK was exclusively at home had statistically significant lower scores than other children (Table III). Table III also shows that employed PMKs had more years of education than other PMKs.

Findings from the OLS regression analysis are summarized in Table IV. Despite the fact that income source, income adequacy, and PMK education were all included in the multivariate analysis, statistical tests showed that multicollinearity was not a problem. Of the three poverty experience variables included in the regression analysis, only employment as exclusive income source was independently associated with children's MDI scores. In contrast, there was not a statistically significant difference between the MDI scores of children in families with mixed income and children in social assistance-receiving families. Two family characteristics – income adequacy and PMK education – also were associated with children's MDI scores. In terms of the relative importance of the poverty experience variables and family characteristics on children's MDI scores, income adequacy and PMK education were stronger predictors than employment-only income source.

DISCUSSION

Welfare reforms have been a key focus of poverty-related policies in Canada during the past decade. These reforms, in combination with economic growth and declining unemployment, have altered two dimensions of family poverty experience – caregiver activity and household income source. Our findings suggest that these changes have positive consequences for a small percentage of young children in poverty. First, the finding that PMK activity did not have an independent association with children's cognitive score provides preliminary evidence that young children have not been helped or hurt by reforms mandating their parents to become employed or engage in welfare-to-work activities. Second, our results show that children in families for whom employment was their sole income source had higher cognitive scores than their counterparts in families with any part of their income from social assistance, independent of caregiver activity and family characteristics. These findings coincide with previous research showing an independent association between income source and the school readiness,^{12,17} behaviour, math ability,¹³ and reading ability¹⁵ of impoverished children. Our study suggests that welfare reforms have benefited young children in families that moved from social assistance to employment and thus no longer receive any income from social assistance – to the extent that reforms have contributed to an increase in the proportion of families for whom employment is their sole income source. This is, however, a small percentage of children in poverty. Between 1994 and 1998, when welfare reforms were implemented across Canada, the percentage of pre-school children in impoverished families whose exclusive income source was employment increased by only seven percentage points, from 42 to 49%.²³ Despite welfare reforms, economic growth, and declining unemployment rates, half of impoverished Canadian pre-school children continued to live in families that received at least part of their income from social assistance.

While poverty experience seems to have had a limited effect on young children since the initiation of welfare reforms, our results indicate that other family character-

istics – household income adequacy and PMK education – played an important role in the development of children in our study. Our finding that children's cognitive scores increased as their household income approached the LICOs, independent of the effects of the poverty experience variables, demonstrates that the cognitive development of the young children was influenced as much by the actual amount of household income as by their parents' activity and source of income. Our findings are consistent with studies of welfare-to-work programs in the US,³⁰⁻³³ which suggest that young children whose parents are participating in welfare-to-work programs will do better when their parents' transition from social assistance to employment is accompanied by an increase in income. Unfortunately, when social assistance recipients move into the labour market, they most often obtain short-term, low-skill jobs that rarely result in incomes that are higher than social assistance incomes.^{20,34,35} In short, our findings reinforce evidence that poverty is a determinant of poor health and development for children,⁷⁻¹¹ and given the very young age of children in our sample, the independent positive relationship between household income adequacy and children's cognitive development is particularly striking.

One unexpected result was the negative relationship between PMK education and children's cognitive score. This is contrary to previous studies³⁶⁻³⁸ and likely reflects the fact that the sample in our study was constrained to families in poverty. Previous studies showing a positive relationship between parents' education and children's cognitive development have used samples with a broader range of income than that used in the current study. Perhaps PMKs with more education who are living in poverty have additional barriers, such as mental illness, which limit their ability to secure employment and earn higher incomes. Moreover, such barriers also are likely to negatively influence children's development. Given this hypothesis, we used a two-way ANOVA to investigate whether the interaction between education and depressive symptoms was associated with MDI scores, but the results were not statistically significant. Future research should investigate whether the negative relationship between PMK education and

Appendix 1

Operationalization of Variables

Concepts and Variables	Description of Variable
Children's Development Cognitive Development	The Bayley Scales of Infant Development®—Mental Development Index (MDI) was used to evaluate the cognitive development of children from 1 to 42 months. ³⁹ The MDI produces a normalized score with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15.
Poverty Experience Income source	Three dichotomous variables indicating whether: a) <i>social assistance</i> was the main source of household income during the previous year, with no income from employment; b) household income was from <i>mixed sources</i> (employment and social assistance) during the previous year; and c) <i>employment</i> was the main source of household income during the previous year, with no income from social assistance.
PMK activity past 12 months	A categorical variable indicating PMK's main activity during the past 12 months as paid work only, welfare-to-work transition, and full-time caregiving only.
PMK current activity	A dichotomous indicator coded as "1" when the PMK was employed at the time of the interview and "0" otherwise.
Family Characteristics Income adequacy	Household income in 12 months prior to interview as a percentage of LICOs.
PMK depressive symptoms	Centre for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D) ⁴⁰ is a 20-question self-report scale that is designed to assess symptoms of depression in the general population. It reports the frequency of depressive symptoms experienced by respondents during the previous week. A score of 16 or greater indicates the presence of depressive symptoms.
PMK education	The total number of years of schooling as reported by the PMK.

MDI scores is an anomaly of this sample or reflects an association particular to impoverished families.

In conclusion, at the end of the 1990s, 21% of Canadian pre-school children lived in impoverished families.²³ Although welfare reforms appear to have contributed to a shift in the poverty experience of young families by increasing the proportion that secure at least part of their income from employment, our study provides preliminary evidence that the reforms have made little difference for most young impoverished children. Poverty continues to negatively influence young children's well-being. Until welfare-to-work initiatives, as well as other social and economic policies, significantly reduce the rate and depth of poverty, it is unlikely that the development of young Canadian children in poverty will improve.

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Received: November 27, 2003

Accepted: August 24, 2004

RÉSUMÉ

Objet : Déterminer si le développement cognitif des jeunes enfants vivant sous le seuil de la pauvreté est influencé par l'activité de la principale personne qui s'occupe d'eux (le « parent-substitut ») et par la source de revenu du ménage – deux éléments de la vie des familles pauvres qui ont été touchés par les réformes récentes de l'aide sociale.

Méthode : À l'aide d'analyses bivariées et multivariées, nous avons examiné les liens entre l'activité du parent-substitut, la source de revenu du ménage et les caractéristiques de la famille (suffisance du revenu familial, symptômes de dépression chez le parent-substitut, niveau d'instruction du parent-substitut) et le développement cognitif de 59 enfants démunis de moins de trois ans.

Résultats : Des trois variables d'expérience de la pauvreté qui ont fait l'objet de notre analyse multivariée, l'emploi comme seule source de revenu du ménage était la seule à présenter une relation indépendante (positive) avec le développement cognitif des enfants. Deux des caractéristiques familiales (la suffisance du revenu et le niveau d'instruction du parent-substitut) étaient aussi associées au score obtenu par les enfants sur le plan cognitif, et toutes les deux étaient de meilleures variables prédictives que la variable de l'emploi comme seule source de revenu. La suffisance du revenu était associée positivement, et le niveau d'instruction du parent-substitut associé négativement, au développement cognitif des enfants.

Discussion : Les réformes récentes de l'aide sociale, combinées à la croissance économique et à la baisse du chômage, ont changé l'expérience de la pauvreté chez les jeunes familles en augmentant la proportion de ces familles qui tirent au moins une partie de leur revenu d'un emploi, mais notre étude a mis au jour des données préliminaires indiquant que les réformes ont peu changé la situation de la plupart des jeunes enfants démunis. Au contraire, nos constatations donnent à penser que le développement cognitif des jeunes enfants est influencé tout autant par le revenu réel du ménage que par l'activité et la source de revenu des parents.