



Poorer Outcomes for Children in Welfare-Sanctioned Families

by P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Rebekah Levine Coley, Brenda J. Lohman, and Laura D. Pittman

Beginning in 1996 with the overhaul of the federal cash assistance program for poor families, states have been allowed to sanction recipients with loss of all or part of their cash assistance grant if they do not comply with the rules and regulations of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale and colleagues in the **Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study** have undertaken one of the first studies in the post-reform era that focuses on how children of sanctioned families are faring under welfare reform.

Drawing on data from the first wave of the Three-City study, they find that adolescents and preschoolers in sanctioned families that have left welfare are generally at greater risk of behavior and academic problems than children in nonsanctioned families.

Effects of Sanctions on Children

The authors draw their findings from data on 1,885 preschoolers (ages 2-4) and adolescents (ages 10-14) in low-income families (200% below the poverty line). The families were interviewed in 1999. The children were administered two tests assessing cognitive development — an applied problems test and a reading test — and mothers reported on children's behavioral problems. Overall, the children in the study were more developmentally at risk than children in national samples, which is in line with past research on the effects of poverty on children.

The authors examined four groups of children: those whose mothers were recent leavers, both sanctioned and not, and those who were still receiving welfare, sanctioned or not. (Sanctioned recipients were those whose grant

had been reduced or eliminated for not following the rules. Recent leavers were those who left welfare in the two years prior to the 1999 interview.)

Cognitive Outcomes

Children in sanctioned families scored lower on cognitive and behavioral tests than children of nonsanctioned current and former welfare recipients. Preschoolers in sanctioned families scored 9-10 points lower on the applied problems test than nonsanctioned families, whether on or off welfare. On the reading test, however, scores were similar for children of nonsanctioned recent leavers and children of sanctioned mothers still receiving welfare.

For adolescents, the patterns are less clear-cut, but still point to a negative link with sanctioning. Adolescents of both sanctioned and nonsanctioned welfare recipients, as well as teens of sanctioned leavers, scored 6-14 points lower on applied problems and reading tests than adolescents of mothers who had left welfare without a sanction.

The poorer outcomes among sanctioned families might be explained in one of two ways. Being sanctioned might increase financial hardship and familial stress, thus negatively affecting child outcomes. On the other hand, patterns of maternal and family functioning might lead both to a mother's sanction experience and to her child's at-risk development. Low education, single parenthood, and health problems, for example, might make a mother less likely to be able to comply with welfare rules and may also be associated with poor developmental outcomes for children.

The authors find that mothers' education and marital status are the most important factors

driving the cognitive outcomes, not welfare or sanction status per se. In other words, the cognitive outcomes appear to be related primarily to characteristics of mothers that both increase the likelihood of being on welfare and being sanctioned and that are linked with low cognitive achievement for children.

Behavioral Outcomes

Behavior problems are even more pronounced among children in sanctioned families. Preschoolers of sanctioned mothers who have recently left welfare are especially vulnerable to serious behavioral problems. Approximately 56% of the children in this group scored in the range indicating serious behavioral issues, higher than any other group, and three times higher than national norms. Similarly, for adolescents, 48% of sanctioned mothers who had left welfare indicated serious behavioral problems. This compares to 26% of teens whose mothers left welfare without sanctions.

Unlike the outcomes on cognitive functioning, adolescent behavioral problems are not as directly tied to maternal characteristics. Even when the authors control for mothers' mental and physical health as well as parenting practices, teens in welfare families and sanctioned-leaver families have higher levels of behavior problems than their counterparts.

In summary, preschoolers and adolescents in sanctioned families are at greater risk compared to those in nonsanctioned families. Preschoolers in these families score substantially lower, on average, on the applied problems test, and preschoolers of sanctioned recent welfare leavers are at extremely high risk of substantial behavioral problems. For teens, the differences are largely confined to sanctioned families that had left the rolls.

Policy Implications

The authors do not make the argument that sanctions per se are behind the poorer outcomes. Instead, they argue that the findings do identify some groups of children who deserve more focused attention. Sanctioned families have a number of characteristics that serve as markers of concern for the healthy development of children and youth. As such, state and federal governments should explore options for identifying and reaching out to the most disadvantaged and high-risk families involved in the welfare system. Possible policy options include assistance to bring families into compliance with rules before they are sanctioned, closer monitoring of sanctioned families, and the provision of additional supports, such as mental health services, academic enrichment, after-school programs, and other family support services.

Study Description

The Three-City study is based on a stratified random sample of low-income families in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. It includes a longitudinal survey of roughly 2,400 families with children birth to age 4 and ages 10-14 in low-income neighborhoods. Families were first interviewed in 1999 and reinterviewed 16 months later. The majority are African American and Hispanic single-mother families, and about 40% were receiving welfare. Advantages of the study are that it assesses the effects of welfare programs "on the ground," rather than small demonstration programs, and includes extensive measurement of child well-being and family processes from multiple data collection strategies. The authors used tests from the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery, revised, to assess analytical and reading skills. Behavioral assessments were based on scores from the Child Behavior Checklist.

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