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The influence of family-based social assistance programs and parenting on child development: A conceptual framework for research with U.S. families in poverty

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Abstract

Nearly three decades since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, federal cash assistance to families in poverty in the United States has entered political discourse once more with the Biden Administration's introduction of the American Families Plan. At the heart of this discussion are theories of change that derive from the family and developmental sciences. As a result, scientists in these fields have a duty to understand the history of the last reform and the consequences it has since had for children in poverty. In this paper, I review the history of perspectives toward government social assistance programs, as well as extant research demonstrating the mechanisms through which maternal employment and federal cash assistance impact child wellbeing. Lastly, I propose a conceptual framework for understanding the influence of family-based social assistance programs and parenting on child wellbeing to guide future research.

KEYWORDS

child tax credit, family poverty, federal cash assistance, parenting, welfare reform

INTRODUCTION

Nearly three decades since the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in the United States (U.S.), the merits of family-based cash

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assistance have entered political discourse once more. PRWORA ended six decades of entitlement to federal cash assistance (i.e., welfare) in the U.S. by replacing it with a time-limited program requiring participation in work-related activities by able-bodied, adult heads of household, earning it the nickname *workfare*. Twenty eight years later, amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic and open conversations about racism (i.e., the dual pandemics), two legislative proposals have the potential to reshape the landscape of U.S. social welfare services once again: the American Families Plan proposed by the Biden Administration in April 2021 and the reintroduction of the American Family Act in June 2023 by House Representatives Rosa DeLauro, Suzan DelBene, and Ritchie Torres.

Recent estimates place 11 million U.S. children in poverty, with rates being higher among Black, Latine, American Indian, and Alaska Native children (i.e., one in seven children), children under 5 years old (i.e., one in six children), and children in the U.S. South (i.e., one in five children; Children's Defense Fund, 2023). During the 38 months in which the COVID-19 global pandemic was deemed a public health emergency in the U.S. (i.e., from March 11, 2020 to May 11, 2023), the nation saw over one million more children pass the threshold into poverty (Children's Defense Fund, 2023). The Biden Administration's expansion of the Child Tax Credit via the American Rescue Plan in March 2021 was the single largest contributor to observed reductions in childhood poverty until it was ceased in December 2021 (Parolin et al., 2022). Given that the American Family Act would expand the Child Tax Credit once more, it therefore stands to benefit a significant number of children in the U.S. should it be passed into law.

Many programs exist in the U.S. to address a specific aspect of family poverty impacting child health and wellbeing (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] and Medicaid addressing food insecurity and access to health care, respectively) and often families are recipients of more than one form of assistance. The distinguishing feature of federal cash assistance to families in need like that proposed by the American Family Act is the flexibility it provides to families to apply the funds to their specific needs. Indeed, families that received the Child Tax Credit in 2021 reported using it in a variety of ways including paying for transportation and childcare and paying down debt (Burnside, 2021). However, as research and historical precedent indicates, perspectives about people in poverty and the subsequent opposition to cash assistance are heavily influenced by racist and sexist ideologies painting this same flexibility of spending as a cause for concern (Gilens, 1996, 2023). Such influences were evident in public discourse during the last reform of the U.S. welfare system in 1996 which sparked, not for the first or last time, an ideological debate about the government's responsibility in addressing family poverty. Such a debate, in turn, relies on individual and dominant narratives about what is believed to be the cause of family poverty and how it is maintained across generations.

Although the implications of PRWORA's move away from needs-based cash assistance have been documented by researchers across many fields (e.g., political science, economics, education, sociology, psychology), arguments regarding the mechanisms through which family-based cash assistance benefits children and, therefore, mobility out of poverty in the next generation, stem from the family and developmental sciences. Those in favor of PRWORA's transition to workfare argued that increased income from work requirements, modeling of work-oriented behaviors, and better routines in the household would benefit children and youth, thus breaking the cycle of poverty by enforcing employment among parents who were, at the time, predominantly single mothers (Haskins, 2006; Moffitt, 2003). Opponents of workfare anticipated that household income would decline when cash benefits were lost and that increased strain on parents due to the type of employment available to low-income mothers (i.e., low-wage, unstable) without institutional support elsewhere (e.g., childcare, transportation) would result in worse outcomes for children and greater likelihood of remaining in poverty (Morris et al., 2005; Orloff, 2002). Given the significant influence that the family and developmental sciences had on this previous reform of welfare, it is imperative that family scientists

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generally, and those working with families in poverty more specifically, are familiar with the empirical and political histories influencing debate around such policy. Being familiar with the research on the effects of maternal employment and federal cash assistance since the reform will also prepare family scientists to engage in debate and advocate for the families they work with.

With these goals in mind, I first review the history of family-based social assistance in the U.S. beginning with the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935 and the prevailing social and political (hereafter "sociopolitical") influences upon its reform six decades later. Specifically, the intersectional influences of racism, sexism, and anti-immigrant sentiment. Then, I summarize pertinent research regarding the effects on child development of maternal employment and family-based cash assistance both before and after the reform separately by three developmental periods: early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. Lastly, I present a conceptual model to guide future research on the effects of family-based social assistance programs and parenting on the developmental wellbeing of children and youth. Maternal employment and cash assistance were key points of debate during the last reform of U.S. welfare and remain important to discussions about the American Families Plan and childhood poverty today. It is for this reason that I focused my review of research on these two features. However, the proposed framework could be applied to any family-based social assistance program.

AFDC BECOMES TANF

The passage of the U.S. Social Security Act in 1935, which established Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), unemployment insurance, and old-age social security, occurred amidst the global economic crisis known as the Great Depression (Greenberg, 2009; Moffitt, 2003). Until that point, the U.S. was the only industrialized nation in the world that did not have some version of social security or unemployment insurance (Peters, 2019). Still, prevailing white supremacist attitudes and anti-Black racial biases of the Jim Crow era undermined efforts to establish a government safety net in the U.S. (Coates, 2014). For instance, Black Americans in the Great Depression experienced unemployment rates double that of European-descended white Americans in many parts of the country, reaching extremes in the U.S. South (e.g., 70% in Atlanta, Georgia; Greenberg, 2009). Despite this, the Social Security Act blocked many Black Americans from accessing federal financial aid by excluding farmers and domestic workers, positions that were primarily held by Black Americans living in the former Confederate states at the time (Coates, 2014). The exclusion of these specific occupations was a facet of the legislation added by Southern Congressmen before they would agree to pass the bill into law (Coates, 2014; Greenberg, 2009).

Prevailing ideas about the roles of men and women in society at the time also heavily influenced the implementation of the Social Security Act. In 1940, 26 states barred married women from seeking employment because they were perceived to be taking jobs away from able-bodied men (Way, 2018). Similarly, in the early years of social security's design, women who were married for less than 10 years before divorcing their husbands lost any claim to their former spouse's social security benefits (Peters, 2019). Laws such as these were based on societal norms and expectations that a woman would marry young, remain married, and serve as the primary caregiver to their children until they were fully grown. Indeed, while *de jure* AFDC was created to provide cash assistance to children "deprived of the support or care of one natural (i.e., biological) parent by reason of death, disability, or absence from the home, and were under the care of the other parent or another relative" (Moffitt, 2003, p. 292), those households actually set to receive AFDC at the time were primarily headed by a non-Hispanic white single mother raising children after the death or disability of her husband (Moffitt, 2003). Just 4 years after its introduction, 80% of AFDC recipients were white women (Soss et al., 2011) indicating

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that AFDC's *de facto* purpose was not as race- or gender-neutral as the original eligibility definition may suggest (Gilens, 1999).

AFDC began drawing controversy when the labor market, perceptions of women and immigrants, and assumptions about the racial composition of the welfare rolls began to change (Garand et al., 2017; Gilens, 1999, 2023; Peters, 2019). First, more women entering the workforce during World War II altered public perceptions of mothers such that they were viewed as capable of supporting their families on their own and no longer in need of government assistance after the death or disability of the father (Peters, 2019). Then, the fictitious depiction of a Black single mother collecting welfare checks under different names (i.e., the "welfare queen") used by former President Reagan during his 1976 and 1980 presidential campaigns and throughout his presidency (1981 to 1989) further biased public opinion of AFDC negatively (Foster, 2008; Gilens, 1999). The public began to believe that most AFDC recipients were Black Americans receiving benefits for the majority of their adult lives, and government expenditure on AFDC was viewed as wasteful (Gilens, 1999; Peters, 2019). Gilens (1999) specifically demonstrated that negative stereotypes about Black Americans more strongly predicted opposition to cash-based assistance in the U.S. than stereotypes about Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian groups during this time, dubbing this trend the *racialization* of attitudes about welfare in the U.S. (Gilens, 2003). More recently, an examination of support for welfare spending from 1992 to 2012 demonstrated that anti-immigrant sentiment (i.e., negative attitudes toward illegal immigrants and desire to decrease legal immigration) was also a strong predictor of such opposition, suggesting that an "immigrationalization" (p. 150) of attitudes toward cash-based social assistance may have been occurring at the time as well, although such a trend is less well studied in the U.S. compared to in Europe (Garand et al., 2017). In reality, the program cost the government very little (less than 1% of all expenditures), the majority (78%) of recipients remained on the rolls for 5 years or less, and nearly as many non-Hispanic white Americans were receiving assistance as Black Americans by 1994 (Gilens, 1999; Peters, 2019).

Despite the inaccuracy of perceptions of AFDC, several legislative decisions in the 1980s began to solidify such public opinion into law. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 imposed limits on total household income and incentivized states to experiment with reforms through the provision of federal waivers to AFDC requirements such as limiting the number of consecutive years an individual could receive benefits (i.e., time-limits), requiring that adult heads of household maintained employment (i.e., work requirements), and requiring that the benefit amount remain the same if another child was born to the family while they were receiving benefits (i.e., family caps; Soss et al., 2001). By 1995 (a year before the reform), 40 states had been granted federal waivers (i.e., 80%; Harvey et al., 2000). The creation of the Job Opportunities (JOBS) program in 1988 further pushed for economic self-sufficiency from welfare recipients on a national level by promoting employment, education, and training programs (Moffitt, 2003).

In 1996, PRWORA brought to fruition more than two decades' worth of incremental legislative moves away from entitlement social benefits. AFDC was eliminated and replaced with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a time-limited program requiring that a family's financial means first be tested (i.e., a means-tested program) to confirm that they are earning below a specified limit before receiving assistance (Peters, 2019). PRWORA additionally established a federal, 5-year limit for receipt of aid throughout a person's lifetime and enacted strict work requirements for able-bodied adult recipients. Financing for TANF is administered to states via block grants with the stipulation that these funds be used to serve one of four purposes: (a) the provision of cash assistance, (b) the promotion of job preparation, employment, and marriage, (c) the maintenance of two-parent families, or (d) the prevention of pregnancy among unmarried women. With funds administered in this way, states are given immense leeway in determining whether a program meets these criteria and how well to fund programs for each stated purpose (Peters, 2019). As a result, TANF funds have been used to

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finance programs with a range of goals including dissuading abortion, encouraging abstinence until marriage, reimbursing textbook rental fees, funding dental care, addressing drug use, and preventing gambling (Parolin, 2021). This devolution of power to the states also allowed states to mandate stricter work requirements, sanctions, or lifetime limits compared to the federal standards. During the period of reform directly after the passage of PRWORA, 21 states adopted moderately strict sanctions wherein the full benefit check is revoked after long periods of noncompliance or multiple infractions, and 14 states imposed very strict sanctions wherein the entire benefit check is revoked after just one infraction (Soss et al., 2001). Additionally, features of the federal waiver experiments in the states survived the reform, including residency requirements (i.e., requiring persons to live in a state for a specified amount of time before applying for aid; originally outlawed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1969) and family caps (Moffitt, 2003).

Once again, it is important to consider the implementation of TANF in the context of sociopolitical influences. In research by Soss et al. (2001), states with AFDC rolls in 1996 that were predominantly comprised of Black or Latine recipients were significantly more likely to initiate family caps or impose lifetime limits stricter than the federal limit. This effect was significant over and above the influence of the state's AFDC-to-TANF policy continuity, the state's economic circumstances, changes in incarceration in the state over 6 years, the unmarried birth rate of AFDC recipients, interparty competition in the state, and the state government's ideology (measured using information from congressional election outcomes, the partisan division of state legislatures, the party of the governor, and "yea" versus "nay" roll-call voting scores of state congressional delegations; Soss et al., 2001). Further, as the proportion of Black American recipients of TANF increased, the probability that a state would impose full-family sanctions (e.g., if an adult recipient violates work requirements, the entire family loses their benefits) increased by more than 40%; the probability of imposing a family cap increased by more than 90%; and the probability of imposing a lifetime limit shorter than the federal limit increased by nearly 80% (Soss et al., 2004). The size of the state's population of Black American residents is also shown to predict less generous TANF policies (Rodgers et al., 2008) and the allocation of TANF funds to programs other than cash assistance (e.g., marriage promotion programs) over and above the effects of other state-specific qualities, ultimately contributing to rates of childhood poverty among Black Americans in these states (Parolin, 2021). Factors found to influence support of federal cash assistance on an individual level include racist and sexist framing in the news, attitudes about immigration (legal and illegal), and the educational status, party identification, marital status, race, and gender of individual citizens (Foster, 2008; Garand et al., 2017; Gilens, 1996, 1999). Lastly, there is evidence of racial bias in caseworkers' decisions to revoke a recipient's benefits, known as sanctioning (Kalil et al., 2002; Monnat, 2010). Reports show a significant drop in caseloads since the reform, particularly among immigrants (see Borjas, 2002 for a discussion of the effect of California's Proposition 187) and members of racially and ethnically minoritized groups (Slack et al., 2007; Soss et al., 2008; Van Hook, 2003). This drop in enrollment has more to do with the increased bureaucratic burden of workfare on individual citizens and stigma around benefits receipt than it does with the program having succeeded in lifting families out of poverty (Cherlin et al., 2002; Gilens, 1999; Perreira & Pedroza, 2019; Slack et al., 2007).

Two additional facets of the 1996 legislation impacted the availability and accessibility of TANF programs for American Indian and Alaskan Native families as well as many immigrant families. As a result of these features of the legislation, many families in poverty from these groups cannot (or cannot easily) access TANF. For a brief description of these features of PRWORA and what it has meant for the availability of research on program effectiveness for children from these groups, please see the supplemental information provided online.

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EVIDENCE FOR THE EFFECTS OF FAMILY-BASED CASH ASSISTANCE AND MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Proponents of the 1996 reform argued that maternal employment would improve child and youth outcomes through parental modeling of routines and work-directed behavior more than federal cash assistance would (Haskins, 2006). Opponents of the reform countered that federal cash assistance free of work requirements benefited children and families by changing the very circumstances that hinder future academic and economic gains, improving their odds of social mobility out of poverty (Morris et al., 2005; Orloff, 2002). Opponents of the reform also pointed to developmental research indicating that maternal employment in the child's first year of life was harmful to children because of the mother's absence from the home (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2002); however, this research was conducted with a sample of white children from middle-income families. Studies since have indicated that these effects do not translate to low-income families, nor are they present when maternal employment begins after the first year (see Lombardi & Coley, 2013). Thus, the prevailing perspective today is that this initial concern was overstated (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2005).

Within the aforementioned context of the historical and sociopolitical influences that shaped the U.S. federal welfare system today, I turn now to a review of the evidence for the effects of maternal employment and/or cash assistance on child wellbeing. I review evidence from both naturalistic studies conducted during the 1996 reform and interventions implemented since that test the effects of family-based social assistance. Combining these sources of evidence helped to clarify the mechanisms through which effects for children occur. The research that follows helped inform the development of the framework proposed here, but is by no means fully inclusive of all the research on such programs and the effects of the reform. To the extent of my knowledge, and as of the writing of this paper, a systematic review of policy or programmatic intervention effects focused on family-based cash assistance and parental (mainly maternal) employment for families in poverty has not been conducted since Morris et al. (2005).

Infancy and early childhood (ages 0 to 5)

Evidence for the influence of maternal employment coupled with cash assistance on the wellbeing of children ages 0 to 5 is mixed, including null proximal effects (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003), harmful indirect effects (Campbell & Houser, 2020), and both beneficial and harmful latent effects (Lombardi & Coley, 2013). The Three Cities Study, for example, found no significant change over 2 years in preschoolers' reading or math skills or maternal report of child internalizing and externalizing behaviors associated with mothers' transitions onto or off TANF or into or out of employment 5 years after the reform (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003). This was surprising given prominent research at the time suggesting children younger than 5 would benefit the most from economic supplements (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). For comparison, a Canadian antipoverty employment program that mimicked U.S. workfare but provided more generous economic supplements similarly found no effects for young children who were ages 0 to 2 at program entry and 3 to 5 at the 3-year follow-up assessment (Morris & Michalopoulos, 2003). Findings of this program later indicated better cognitive performance and general health than controls for children who were 3 to 5 at program entry and ages 6 to 11 at follow-up (Morris & Michalopoulos, 2003). It may be that the U.S. workfare supplements were insufficient to significantly affect outcomes over 2 years for preschoolers of the Three Cities Study (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003). For instance, one analysis using data from random-assignment experiments indicated that an annual increase of $1000 was needed to see minor gains—5%–6% of a standard deviation—in preschool children's academic achievement (Duncan et al., 2011). Meanwhile, improved household income may have no effect on very

young children (ages 0 to 2) or latent effects may not emerge until children have begun preschool or kindergarten (Morris & Michalopoulos, 2003).

Later reports from the Three Cities Study provide some evidence of effects for preschoolers emerging later in childhood. Lombardi and Coley (2013) found that preschool children of mothers after the reform who maintained high-quality employment over 5 years had significantly better reading and math skills and fewer emotional and behavioral problems at age 9 than children of mothers with infrequent, low-quality, or no employment. Further explicative analyses found that receipt of consistent health insurance through employers played a role in the improvements found for children (Lombardi & Coley, 2013). Meanwhile, working more than 40 h a week at one job was associated with lower reading and math skills from preschool-age to age 9 (Lombardi & Coley, 2013). Thus, factors associated with the type of employment available to mothers in poverty (resulting from lower educational attainment; Lombardi & Coley, 2013) appear to be key factors in improving outcomes for children in early childhood.

Seeking to explicate the effects of 1990s-era welfare policies, Morris et al. (2005) assessed outcomes for preschoolers across 13 employment-based welfare programs. Results of this analysis indicated that only those programs that increased both household income and employment resulted in improved school achievement for preschoolers and early school-aged children. Programs aiming only to increase employment had no effect, while the effects of income on preschoolers' performance were partially mediated through increases in children's center-based, rather than home-based, care arrangements (Morris et al., 2005). Access to childcare without the additional economic support discussed above is a substantial barrier for many families in the U.S. For example, during focus groups conducted immediately following the reform, workfare recipients expressed concern over families being able to find adequate childcare while attempting to meet work requirements and emphasized that non-cash benefits (e.g., childcare assistance, Medicaid) were more important than cash benefits for this reason (Burton et al., 1998). Moreover, despite being employed and receiving cash assistance, mothers in the Three Cities Study receiving lower wages were found to experience greater emotional and parenting stress (Campbell & Houser, 2020). Greater parenting stress, in turn, predicted more harsh discipline resulting in less prosocial, more aggressive, and more delinquent behaviors in preschoolers 2 years later (Campbell & Houser, 2020). Thus, research finds that type of childcare, quality of wages, stress resulting from employment conditions, and access to private healthcare are mechanisms through which welfare receipt affects outcomes for preschoolers.

There are two new programs serving families in poverty today with children under 5 that provide material or cash assistance without concomitant work requirements. Room to Grow couples a strengths-based parenting program with the provision of social assistance to parents (primarily mothers) of newborns in the form of material goods for the baby (e.g., books, clothes, toys). A randomized controlled trial evaluation following the first year of the program indicated that parents in the treatment group felt more competent and less stressed after 1 year (Wimer et al., 2021). Baby's First Years examines via randomized clinical trial the effects of unconditional cash transfers of $333 compared to $20 to families in poverty for the first several years of the child's life. As of this writing, results of the 3-year follow-up evaluation are reported in a conference paper abstract accessible online (Gennetian et al., 2022) and, thus, cannot be reviewed in detail. However, the findings reported in brief articulated that parenting quality was not a mechanism through which receipt of cash assistance benefitted children. More information regarding the mechanisms of effects and benefits for children for both programs is still forthcoming, however.

Middle childhood (ages 6 to 12)

The National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies found that programs aiming only to increase employment without supplying cash assistance did not positively affect early

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school-age children, thus corroborating similar evidence found for preschool children (Hamilton et al., 2001; Morris et al., 2005; Zaslow et al., 2000). As with childcare for preschoolers, the afterschool care arrangements of school-age children may be a mechanism through which maternal employment and family-based cash assistance affect youth outcomes. For example, for children enrolled in the Three Cities Study, more time spent in higher quality childcare was associated with reductions in preschool children's behavior problems overall (Votruba-Drzal et al., 2004) and improvements in cognitive behavior (Vesely et al., 2013) with evidence of some effects sustaining into middle childhood (Votruba-Drzal et al., 2010). Similarly, school-aged children in New Hope (a program testing a package of social assistance benefits in addition to welfare and employment) were found to participate in more structured afterschool activities, such as team sports and religious activities, compared to controls at both the 2- and 5-year follow-up (Huston et al., 2001, 2005). Although the quality of the care provided through afterschool activities was not assessed in New Hope as it was for preschoolers in the Three Cities Study, researchers attributed improvements in child outcomes in part to the use of stable afterschool care arrangements compared to the higher rates of unsupervised care reported by control families (Huston et al., 2005; Lowe et al., 2005).

Importantly, effects of income and employment support were found to fade after the third year in New Hope when receipt of subsidies and supplements ceased. No effects were found for the quality of parenting provided, corroborating evidence for similarly aged samples from experimental welfare studies suggesting that changes in parenting are not a mechanism through which the benefits of social assistance for children can be explained (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Huston et al., 2005; Morris et al., 2001). In contrast, the Minnesota Family Investment Program, which sustained income and employment supports beyond New Hope or traditional workfare assessed by the Three Cities Study, saw beneficial outcomes for school-aged children across domains (Morris & Gennetian, 2003).

Adolescents (ages 13 to 18)

Although welfare and employment transitions had no significant effects over 2 years on preschool children in the Three Cities Study, maternal employment was associated with improvements in adolescent anxiety (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003). Meanwhile, leaving employment led to increased behavior problems among adolescents (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003). This pattern of effects was found to sustain over time. Specifically, children in middle childhood at program entry whose mothers lost employment by the time they were adolescents were more likely to display problem behaviors than those whose mothers remained employed (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2011). Conversely, maternal transitions into employment during the 6-year timeframe of the study were associated with less severe behaviors from adolescents (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2011). Outcomes such as these vis-à-vis employment transitions were expected. Receipt of cash assistance on its own before the reform was found to have no association to adolescent behavioral and cognitive outcomes in one nationally representative study (Levine & Zimmerman, 2005). After the reform and, importantly, after the shift in national perspectives toward recipients of cash assistance, Chase-Lansdale et al. (2011) found that adolescents were significantly more likely to display serious externalizing behaviors if their mothers transitioned onto TANF by 2005.

Other employment-based welfare and antipoverty programs have also found small to moderate negative effects for adolescents in behavioral and academic domains (Fauth et al., 2007; Gennetian et al., 2002, 2004; Morris et al., 2001). For instance, in one study in which social assistance was provided via different types of housing vouchers, parents who moved to low-poverty neighborhoods reported less psychological distress, and children ages 8 to 13 reported fewer anxious, depressed, and dependent behaviors than their counterparts who remained in

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low-income housing (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Interestingly, adolescents ages 13 or older who moved to low-poverty neighborhoods did not demonstrate the same improvements to mental health, which was attributed by the researchers to their ability to sustain connections to peers in their old neighborhoods during a time when peer influence holds increased saliency. Taken together, the evidence presented thus far suggests other mechanisms—beyond employment, overall household income, and workfare-era cash assistance—may determine whether adolescent outcomes are negative or positive. Time diaries recorded by mothers in the Three Cities study indicated that mothers spent more time with their adolescents than younger children despite starting a job and also self-reported that their parenting quality was unchanged (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Coley et al., 2007). Similar employment-based welfare programs found null or minor changes in mental health and parenting quality for parents of adolescents (Huston et al., 2005; Morris & Michalopoulos, 2003). In a qualitative analysis of the experiences of parents on workfare, Tubbs et al. (2005) found that parents made use of what time they had with children by finding moments to talk about their days through mealtime, playtime, and sharing treats. Alternative mechanisms proposed for adolescents, though not yet thoroughly tested, include perceptions of maternal stress, perceptions of family status while on workfare, and increased childcare and household responsibilities taken on by adolescents due to maternal employment (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003, 2011).

Summary

Evidence thus far indicates that employment without childcare and transportation support (Burton et al., 1998; Roy et al., 2004; Tubbs et al., 2005) and modern-day workfare without reduction of bureaucratic burden or bias (Cherlin et al., 2002; Leventhal et al., 2005) is nearly impossible for working-poor families to sustain. Empirical work agrees that programs seeking only to increase employment without economic supplements do little to improve wellbeing among preschoolers and school-aged children (Gennetian et al., 2002; Hamilton et al., 2001; Morris et al., 2005). Comparatively, although mothers' transitions into employment in the early days of the 1996 reform appeared to benefit adolescent behavioral adjustment, a closer look at developmentally significant factors like their peer associations, their responsibilities in the home, and qualities of their relationship with caregivers before and after employment transitions would help to clarify these discordant findings (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Coley et al., 2007; Huston et al., 2005; Morris & Michalopoulos, 2003; Tubbs et al., 2005). Lastly, the effects of economic supplements begin to fade if not maintained. Those programs that produced sustained impacts for child and youth outcomes over time offered social assistance in a variety of forms but have not been tested on a national scale (e.g., New Hope, Huston et al., 2005; The Minnesota Family Investment Program; Morris & Gennetian, 2003). Furthermore, limited support for parenting as a mechanism through which family-based cash assistance affects child and youth outcomes (e.g., Campbell & Houser, 2020), as originally hypothesized, suggests there may be a quality to these associations not yet captured by current models. Next, I present a conceptual model to aid with understanding these relationships.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE RESEARCH ON THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY-BASED SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS AND PARENTING ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT WITH U.S. FAMILIES IN POVERTY

In this section, I present a conceptual framework for understanding the mechanisms through which family-based social assistance programs, understood in the context of both past and

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present sociopolitical climates, may impact child wellbeing. Generated from the review of literature presented here, subpar economic conditions—unassisted by today's workfare approach to social assistance—pose a potential risk to child health and wellbeing. The welfare-to-work reform sought to target many aspects of environments for families living in poverty (i.e., a push for employment, household income) but evidence suggests that the way in which these factors have been targeted has not benefited children in or near poverty as much as was anticipated by proponents of the 1996 reform. One component that requires more attention in the family and developmental sciences is how the sociopolitical climate of an era, which shapes public opinion, legislation, and ultimately funding of these initiatives, plays a role in child and youth outcomes. How children and youth become aware of their families' economic conditions, internalize or defend against stigma and experiences of discrimination, and how their feelings toward their circumstances are expressed and managed may influence developmental outcomes (see Elliott et al., 2016 for an example). The conceptual framework proposed here acknowledges the influence of social and political power in shaping low-income and poverty conditions for families. In so doing, I draw heavily from the Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) and the Integrative Model for the Study of Developmental Competencies in Minority Children (García Coll et al., 1996; García Coll & Szalacha, 2004). The central piece of the model defining parenting effectiveness as its fit to the child's specific needs is informed by Smith Bynum's Theory of Racial Socialization in Action (TRSA; Smith-Bynum, 2023).

The sociopolitical climate has been fundamental in shaping perspectives of welfare from the outset (Gilens, 1999; Greenberg, 2009; Orloff, 2002). It operates in many ways including through media representations of those in poverty (Gilens, 1996), who does and does not hold political power at local, state, and national levels (Orloff, 2002), and the degree of competition between political parties at each level of governance (Soss et al., 2004). The sociopolitical climate functions similarly to Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem and chronosystem, capturing the laws, values, and customs of a given era. Starting with Box A (Figure 1) on the left, I demonstrate through unidirectional arrows how this climate shapes the quality of the environments and public services families have access to—what García Coll et al. (1996) refer to as promoting or inhibiting environments. Included here are schools, neighborhoods, health care, and social assistance programs (i.e., workfare, supplemental security income, food stamps). These are depicted using circles to represent how they are interconnected and inter-influencing (e.g., the economic and/or ethnic-racial segregation of the neighborhood influences that of the school, access to social assistance programs influences access to health care). To the left of Box A, I provide examples of features within each environment that are salient to advancing knowledge about family-based social assistance programs and how they impact youth outcomes. As in García Coll et al.'s (1996) model, the directionality of power is immediately noticeable. However, there are instances where the quality of the services available influence systems of power within the sociopolitical climate, such as the way vocal supporters of the Affordable Care Act in townhalls throughout the U.S. in 2017 played a role in preventing its overturn (Colliver, 2017). Included in the background of Box A are factors influencing and influenced by the sociopolitical climate (aspects that are found in the second and third boxes of García Coll et al.', 1996 model); just as racism influences how individuals receiving social assistance are represented in news and media so, too, do these representations reinforce racist beliefs among media consumers. I include racism, sexism, and anti-immigrant sentiment as examples in Box A because I have reviewed their influences on cash-based assistance. However, with the increase in policies targeting the freedoms of the LGBTQIA2S community, particularly the trans population, cis-hetero-misogyny is an example of another important factor influencing the quality of environments children and youth have access to that researchers must consider.

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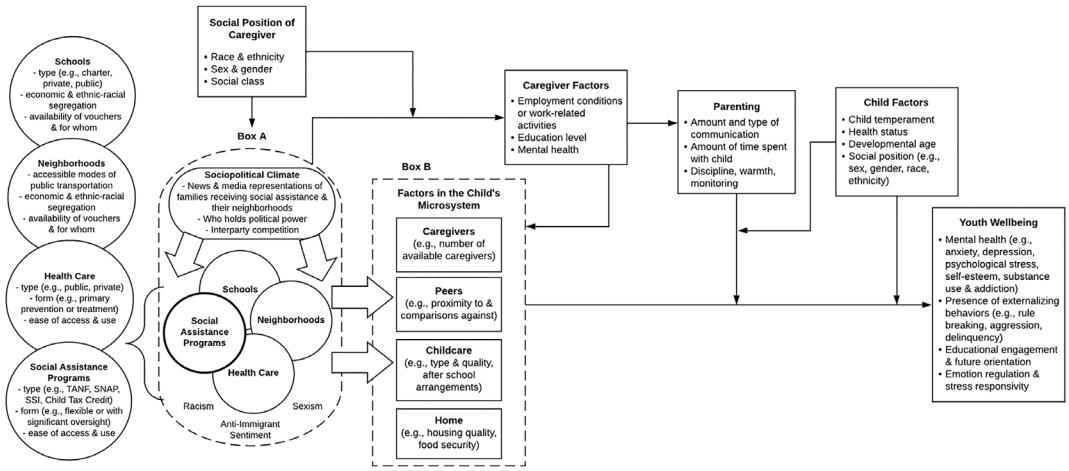

FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework to guide research on the influence of family-based social assistance programs and parenting on child development with U.S. families in poverty.

Factors in the child's microsystem that influence their exposure to and experience of their family's socioeconomic situation are displayed in Box B. As much of the research reviewed here indicates, the effects of the welfare-to-work reform on child and youth outcomes can be explained by effects on their proximal environments. Some of the research reviewed here covers effects on parental mental health and connection to peers (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003), childcare and afterschool arrangements (Huston et al., 2005; Votruba-Drzal et al., 2004), and housing quality and food security (Coley et al., 2007; Elliott et al., 2016). The box enclosing the child's proximal environments uses a dotted line to indicate that these are examples; to review the evidence for more examples would be beyond the scope of this manuscript. Additionally, although there was some evidence for the mediational effects on preschoolers' behavioral outcomes through parental use of harsh discipline for those mothers' working and receiving cash assistance (Campbell & Houser, 2020), there was not as much support for this pathway as the arguments for and against the reform initially suggested. Programs aiming to support families in poverty often identify parenting as a mechanism through which receipt of social assistance benefits children (e.g., Early Head Start; Douglass et al., 2021; Room to Grow; Wimer et al., 2021). Instead, I propose that the quality of the social assistance available to families in poverty is the mechanism through which anti-immigrant sentiment, racial and gender oppression, and other sociopolitical factors impact the proximal environments and subsequent wellbeing of youth in poverty. Parenting that meets children's needs in these contexts may then serve as a protective factor or buffer to the strain and stress from socio-politically-caused poverty conditions. Rather than focusing on the quality of parenting as the explanatory mechanism (i.e., mediator) through which the cycle of poverty can be disrupted, as was the case during the 1996 reform, I present parenting as a moderator to better align with the existing evidence base and leading, non-individualistic theories of how poverty sustains across generations (Massey & Denton, 1993).

Evaluations of Early Head Start, a U.S. federally funded program providing free childcare to families meeting income eligibility requirements, would support parenting as an explanatory mechanism through which social assistance programs improve child outcomes (e.g., increased use of responsive parenting leading to children's improved language skills; Douglass et al., 2021). However, federal social assistance in the form of childcare and early childhood education does not carry the same history and stigma in the U.S. that federal cash assistance

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does. Moreover, Early Head Start's approach explicitly targets parenting quality as a mechanism for improving outcomes among children in poverty (e.g., teaching parents how to help their children develop secure attachments, helping parents create environments that stimulate learning; Raikes et al., 2014). Consequently, the program's success may be evaluated on how well parents changed their parenting as opposed to whether poverty-related conditions changed for the family. The history and research I have reviewed here regarding federal cash assistance in the U.S. demonstrates the significant influence the sociopolitical context has upon the success of a given social assistance program and, ultimately, the research questions family and developmental scientists pose to gauge that program's success. By centering the role of sociopolitical systems in sustaining childhood poverty, the proposed conceptual model encourages more research on how best to support parents, as Early Head Start does, by assessing parenting as protective against (rather than causally linked to) the effects of poverty on children.

To the left of the box presenting parenting as a moderator is a box capturing caregiver factors that, although external to the parenting process, are important influences on it, such as caregiver job quality, education level, and mental health. Similar to Bronfenbrenner's model, caregiver factors also influence the child's microsystem. For example, this can occur through the child's access to the caregiver's time, transportation to visit peers, childcare and afterschool arrangements, housing, and how food stamps are used. Family stress hypotheses would suggest that caregivers' financial strain and stress are experienced by children through changes in parenting quality (e.g., harsh discipline). However, given the limitations of this evidence discussed previously, a variety of other workfare-related factors experienced by the child in their microsystem are presented for consideration (e.g., comparisons against peers, type and quality of childcare or after school arrangements, the number of available caregivers and their relation to the child). Factors of the child external to the parent–child relationship are listed in the box titled Child Factors and include (but are not limited to) temperament, age, health, and social identity (Li-Grining, 2007). As with Smith-Bynum's (2023) model, the extent to which a caregiver is able to meet a child's specific needs (e.g., age-specific, temperament-specific) while preparing children for experiences they are more likely to encounter given the sociopolitical climate and the child's social identities (e.g., gender, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity) will determine the effectiveness of a given parenting approach. For this reason, child factors are shown as moderating the path from Box B (experiences in the child's microsystem) to youth wellbeing outcomes, as well as the effect of parenting on this path. Finally, the box entitled Youth Wellbeing contains example indicators of child wellbeing represented thus far in the literature on the effects of welfare reform. Other factors of child wellbeing could, of course, be considered for future investigation.

As in García Coll et al. (1996), a caregiver's social position in a hierarchical society will influence their experiences of the sociopolitical climate and the quality of the environments they have access to as a result of segregation, racism, sexism, and more. Thus, caregivers' social position variables are presented as predicting Box A. Qualities of these environments will additionally affect the employment conditions, educational attainment, and mental health of caregivers, represented by a predictive arrow from Box A to the box of caregiver factors. Lastly, the social position of a caregiver moderates the effects of the sociopolitical climate, oppressive forces, and proximal environments on caregiver factors such that a Black mother in a racially and economically segregated neighborhood experiences the sociopolitical climate and its effects to her occupational, educational, and mental health outcomes differently than a white mother in similar conditions may. My aim here is a framework that depicts the significance of an individual's social position for the environments and opportunities they have access to without deemphasizing the role the sociopolitical climate plays in shaping these same environments and opportunitites.

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CONCLUSION

It has been nearly three decades since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 and, just like then, we stand at a critical juncture for the future of family-based cash assistance for U.S. families. The American Family Act of 2023 proposes to approximately double the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, make it fully refundable (meaning greater cash-in-hand for families in or near poverty), and make it permanent. In January 2024, the Republican-led Ways & Means Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives approved the Tax Relief for American Families and Workers Act, which includes a phased increase to the refundable portion of the Child Tax Credit for the next three years, only. Deliberations in the Senate are ongoing as of March 2024 and it is unclear if the legislation will pass. If passed, however, it will weaken the odds of the American Family Act being passed into law. This raises several questions for developmental and family scientists. First, does ground-breaking legislation to reduce childhood poverty stand a chance of becoming law in the current sociopolitical climate? And second, if it does, will it be enough to address the childhood poverty crisis in the U.S.?

Although I cannot answer these questions, my goal here was to assess them first through a review of the historical perspectives surrounding federal social assistance programs (perspectives that are inextricably intertwined with perspectives of *who* lives in poverty and how they got there). I then discussed in-depth the potential mechanisms through which caregiver employment (maternal employment, in particular) and federal cash assistance may impact child wellbeing, as demonstrated by the available research. Finally, I presented a conceptual framework to guide current understanding and future research of the influences of family-based social assistance and parenting on child development for U.S. families in poverty. With this framework, I recognize the significance of the historical context of welfare reform and any policy changes therein upon the proximal environments individuals in poverty have access to.

One of my goals has been to center parenting as a protective factor for consideration by interventionists simultaneously while targeting the factors creating poverty. Researchers and interventionists could choose to target the proximal environments of children and youth, the policies impacting these environments (e.g., through policy advocacy or involvement in political systems), the attitudes of those designing, voting for, or implementing policies and programs, or the parenting that supports children. Some specific ideas include examining the role of adolescents' perceptions of stigma associated with the family's receipt of cash assistance and intervening to prevent injuries to mental health, media-based interventions to reduce (ideally, eliminate) the racial, gender, and anti-immigrant biases influencing perceptions of recipients of family-based cash assistance and, ultimately, how such policies are implemented at the state-level, and interventions that couple the provision of unconditional cash assistance to families (e.g., Baby's First Years; Gennetian et al., 2022) with programs to support parents in the present moment (see Cates et al., 2016 for examples). Interventions like these targeting the needs of children beyond the preschool years, in particular, are sparse and needed. Additionally, more qualitative and mixed methods research is needed to better understand how families in poverty experience and navigate U.S. social assistance programs to inform how they must improve (see Marti-Castaner et al., 2022).

The voices of those who stand to be impacted the most by the American Family Act are sorely missing in the rooms where such decisions are made. In fact, representation of those most severely affected by legislative and funding decisions appears lacking in nearly all forms of government and social support. Family and developmental scientists have been at the forefront of providing evidence both for and against social assistance programs, as well as documenting the potential mechanisms by which these programs work (or fail to). As such, we have a duty to understand the history surrounding welfare reform and the consequences it has had for children, such that we might learn from our mistakes and do more of what works. I am not the first

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in recent years—nor will I be the last—to call upon family scientists to name the mechanisms of oppression sustaining disparities in health and wealth today and to be more active in disrupting these mechanisms (e.g., Anderson, 2019; Cross et al., 2022; Curtis et al., 2022; Walsdorf et al., 2020; Williams, 2023). It is my aspiration that with this conceptual framework in place more focused recommendations for practice and policy can be uncovered as the work to end childhood poverty in the U.S. continues.

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