

Work Efforts and Welfare Receipt by Poor Single Mothers: The Impact on Children's Behavior Problems

Economic deprivation and psychological distress significantly influence children's behavior problems living in poverty and growing up in single mother families. Using the 1992-94 round of NSFH data, this study examines factors affecting children's behavioral problems, focusing on work effort and welfare receipt by poor single mothers. Findings indicate that maternal employment and welfare receipt increase the probability of children having behavior problems. Implications are discussed.

Soo Yeon Kim, Purdue University¹
Barbara R. Rowe, Purdue University²
Gong-Soog Hong, Purdue University³

Introduction

Increased out-of-wedlock births and marital break-ups over the past two decades have led to growth in the number of poor single-parent families with children. Single mother families with young children have received particular attention, because unwed mothers or children with absent fathers have been major recipients of public assistance. There is a broad consensus in the literature that single motherhood is closely related to poverty, although those poor are diverse and the problems are complicated (Blank, 1997; Eggebeen & Lichter, 1991; Harris, 1993; O'Hare, 1996).

The growth in single mother families and their high likelihood of being in poverty are reflection in high rates of child poverty. In 1995, one out of five children under the age of 18 lived in families with cash incomes below the poverty line, and about 25 % of children under age 6 lived in poverty in the U.S. Moreover, 50 percent of children in female-headed families were in poverty (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1997). The increasing number of children in poverty from single mother families raises concern about the cumulative impacts of poverty on the development, health, behavioral and cognitive outcomes of children (Blank, 1997; Hao, 1995; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; O'Hare, 1996). Furthermore, single parenting and the absence of fathers from their households negatively affect children's socialization, role models, norm internalization, and future orientation, putting children at a greater risk of behavioral problems (Blank, 1997; Krein & Beller, 1988). Therefore, young children who are growing up in an economically disadvantaged environment and are also living with one parent deserve special attention and should be a main focus of policy debates and research.

Since President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act on August 22, 1996, concern about the impact of welfare reform on single mothers and their children have been raised. The new law replaced Aid of Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with state block grants, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), thus terminating a 60-year program of federal entitlements. Welfare reform efforts under the Clinton administration are designed to eliminate entitlements, restrict cash assistance, and require work of the able-bodied (Gnezda, 1996). Hence, the labor force participation of single mothers in poverty has become the centerpiece of debate.

The relationship between maternal employment and children's outcomes has been comprehensively investigated, although most studies have been conducted with middle-income or high income families. In contrast, little attention has been focused on the effect of maternal employment on children in poor or low-income families (Moore & Driscoll, 1997; Vandell & Ramanan, 1992; Zaslow & Emig, 1997). The effect of welfare receipt on children's behavior outcomes has received little attention (Hao, 1995).

The purpose of this study is to enhance understanding of single mothers and their children aged 5 to 17 in poverty. The analysis seeks to identify predictors associated with children's behavioral problems among single mother families (N= 167) living below the poverty line, using the 1992-94 round of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH 2). Probit analysis is conducted to identify the factors affecting the likelihood of children having behavioral problems among the single mother families. Throughout this study, the focus is on whether and how welfare participation and employment of poor single mothers influence.

Literature Review

Poverty and single motherhood, in general, have adverse effects on children's development and behavior outcomes. According to Baydar and Brooks-Gunn (1991), children raised in poor single mother families are more likely to have behavioral or cognitive problems than children from two-parent families. McLeod and Shanahan (1993) found that the stress of living in poverty has a detrimental effect on children's mental health. They indicated that a lifetime experience of poverty as well as a current poverty situation generates antisocial behavior, anxiety or depression, and peer conflict. For young children, single parenting and the absence of fathers from the household further strengthen the negative effects of poverty. Based on the household production theory, Krein and Beller (1988) wrote that single parents have fewer parental resources for human capital investment in children than married couples. Thus, children living in single parent families show lower educational attainment. Hao (1995) confirmed that compared to intact families, single-mother families degraded cognitive and emotional environments. Children of single mothers revealed lower reading abilities and greater behavior problems than their counterparts from two parent families.

The effects of maternal employment on children's outcomes have been extensively investigated. Much attention has been given to children in middle income families (Goldberg, Greenberger, & Nagel, 1996; MacEwen & Barling, 1991), whereas the relationship between employment by poor single mothers and children's outcomes has received little attention (Moore & Driscoll, 1997; Vandell & Ramanan, 1992; Zaslow & Emig, 1997).

Mother's employment was found to be negatively related to children's outcomes in middle-income or high-income families. But, maternal employment tended to have a positive or neutral impact on children's development and outcomes in low-income families (Baydar & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Goldberg et al., 1996; Moore & Driscoll, 1997; Vandell & Ramanan, 1992). It appears that economic security and the advantages resulting from maternal employment may offset negative effects on children in low-income families. Increased market goods or services, at the expense of time spent in child care and parenting, are perhaps more effective for poor children than those for middle or high income children.

The impact of public assistance on children's outcomes has not been extensively explored in the literature. Hao (1995b) examined the effects of public assistance on children's developmental outcomes, using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) data. She found that public assistance contributed to alleviating the economic hardship and psychological stress of poverty, improving emotional and material environments, and positively affecting children's outcomes. Simultaneously, public support had an adverse effect on children's developmental outcomes by increasing the parent's and child's anxiety over stigmatization and isolation. She found that school age children's reading ability and behavior problems were negatively affected by AFDC experiences.

Methodology

Data and Sample

The data for this study were from the 1992-1994 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), extensively collected and examined by the Center for Demography and Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The subsample utilized in this study is from the 1992-94 wave. All information is in reference to one "focal child" selected randomly from all children in the household. The respondents in this study are mothers with children between the ages of 5 and 17 and also living below the poverty line (n=339). Of the sample, over 49 % account for single mother families (n=167). Sample characteristics and children's behavior problems are contrasted by household type. In this study, our attention is limited to children growing in poor single mother families for multivariate analysis.

Variables and Hypotheses

Children's behavior problems are measured by mother's reports to the questions: Whether the child is difficult to raise; whether the child has repeated their grade; whether the child has been in trouble with police; whether the child has skipped or cut off school; whether the child has seen a doctor or therapist about emotional or behavior problems; and whether mothers have been called in to meet with a teacher or principal, because of a behavior problem.

The independent variables are drawn from findings of previous research and include current work effort of the single mother, public assistance, mother's characteristics, family structure, and child characteristics. Previous research indicated that mother's work effort positively affected low-income children's behavioral and cognitive outcomes by offsetting the negative effect of economic deprivation. It is hypothesized here that mother's work effort will lower the likelihood of children having behavioral problems. Increased income from public assistance may

provide a better environment with economic security, but welfare receipt imposes psychological strains on children and their mothers. Therefore, it is expected that welfare receipt will induce behavioral problems of children. Welfare receipt in this study is broadly defined as public assistance including AFDC, food stamps, housing assistance, or energy assistance.

Greenstein (1993) found that the younger mothers are, the more behavior problems their children have. So, it is hypothesized that mother's age would be negatively associated with children's behavior problems. In a study of Desai et al. (1989), black children showed lower intellectual abilities than children of other race. Other studies did not find that race made a significant difference in children's outcomes (Greenstein, 1993; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993). It is hypothesized that black children are more likely to have behavior problems than non-black children, holding other factors constant. It is expected that never-married mothers are more likely to have children with behavioral problems than previously married mothers. Poverty status 5 years ago is proxied for poverty continuance, which may influence socialization, life style, and value system of children. It is expected that poverty continuance will induce the negative outcomes of children. Urbanization of residence and region variables also are expected to influence the probability of having behavior problems. O'Hare (1996) emphasized that the geographic concentration of poverty exacerbates the negative consequences of being poor for children. Mothers' education represents their human capital regarding child-rearing, and parenting. It is hypothesized to influence children's behavioral outcomes positively. In contrast, mother's chronic illness threatens to reduce mother's effort and time spent in parenting and child care. The presence of mother's chronic illness is expected to increase the probability of having children behavior problems.

Family structure variables include the number of adults other than mothers in the household and presence of other support. The presence of other adults may reduce mothers' burdens of household work and child care. Single mothers rely on both public and private supports to cope with financial hardship. The presence of other support tends to supplement public aids and relieve financial strains (Hao, 1995). Here, other support is measured by whether or not they have received child support, alimony, or other family support. Both family structure variables are expected to decrease the likelihood of having behavior problems. Controlling for child characteristics is important, as literature suggests that children's behavioral outcomes and development differ by age and gender (Goldberg et al., 1996; Hao, 1995; Krein & Beller, 1988; Vandell & Ramanan, 1992).

Analysis

Means and frequencies were examined to investigate the sample characteristics by household type. Probit analyses were conducted to explore factors affecting the likelihood of children having behavior problems, because dependent variables used in the analysis are dichotomous variables. Probit models have more appropriate specifications of the distribution of the disturbances by assuming that error variances are normally distributed (Ben-Akiva & Lerman, 1993). Marginal effects were estimated to indicate the change in the probability due to one unit increase in each independent variable.

Results

One hundred sixty seven single mother families were compared to 172 two parent families. Single motherhood, given that both groups were in poverty, made a significant difference on children's behavioral outcomes. Chi-square tests confirmed that children of single mother families had more negative behavior outcomes than those of two parent families: More children from single mother families had repeated a grade; had been expelled or suspended from school; had been in trouble with police; or had skipped school than their counterparts. More single mothers had seen a principal or teacher for their children's behavioral problems than had married mothers.

More than 76% of single mothers participated in some sort of welfare program, whereas only 30% of two parent families were on welfare. Although they were eligible for public assistance programs, more single mothers received welfare than married mothers. Over 80% of single mothers reported that they were in poverty 5 years ago, compared to 62% of married mothers who had been in poverty line at that time, meaning that poverty has been more persistent for single mother families than for married couples. Few single mothers, approximately 5 % of the sample, were employed. On average, single mothers worked 2 hours per week, while married mothers worked 5.5 hours per week. Married mothers had a greater number of other adults living together in their households than single mothers. Two parent families had higher household incomes than single mother families. More single mother families resided in urban area than their counterparts.

Results of the probit analysis for single mother families were presented in Table 1. Behavior problems of children were used as dependent variables of each probit model. Likelihood ratio tests for each behavior problem

indicated that probabilities of having children expelled or suspended from school, and of having seen a teacher or principal for children's behavior problems were well estimated, whereas the other behavioral models were inestimable or were not found to have any significant results. Welfare receipt was found to be a significant predictor of having the child expelled or suspended from school. In other words, children of welfare mothers were more likely to be expelled or suspended from school than children without welfare. Age of mother was positively related to the likelihood of having children expelled or suspended from school. It was unexpectedly found that mother's education increased the likelihood of having children expelled or suspended from school, controlling for other variables. Mother's health status also was important factor associated with children's behavior problems. Children whose mothers had chronic illness were more likely to be expelled or suspended from school than those with healthy mothers. Age of children was found to be a significant predictor associated with this behavioral problem. It had a nonlinear relationship with the behavior problem. Children were more likely to be expelled or suspended from school up to the age 10. After that age, they were less likely to be expelled or suspended from school. Coefficients of marginal effect indicated the change in the probability of having children expelled or suspended from school when one unit in each explanatory variable increased.

The probability of seeing the teacher or principal for children's behavior problem showed similar findings. Work effort and welfare receipt, key variables in this study, were significant. Previous studies suggested that maternal employment had a positive effect on outcomes for children in low-income families. This study based on single mothers in poverty produced contrasted results. When single mothers spent more hours in market work, they were more likely to see the teacher or principal for children's behavior problem. Receipt of public assistance increased the probability of seeing the teacher or principal for behavior problems. As household income increased, mothers were less likely to see the teacher or principal for behavior problem, holding others constant. As expected, presence of chronic illness increased the likelihood of seeing the teacher or principal for behavior problem. Gender of children made a significant difference. Consistent with literature (Vandell & Ramanan, 1992), boys were more likely to experience behavior problems than girls.

Discussion

This study provides information about implications for children when poor single mothers work or participate in welfare programs. With respect to maternal employment, studies consistently suggest that it had positive or neutral effects on outcomes of the low-income children. This study, however, runs counter to previous findings. As mothers increase the number of hours worked, their children are more likely to be expelled or suspended from school. Primarily, these children are raised under poverty-stricken families headed by single mothers. McLeod and Shanahan (1993) indicate that children in poverty are highly likely to suffer from poor nutrition, hazardous environments, violent crime or criminal victimization. It might be that the detrimental impacts of poverty combined with single motherhood reinforce the negative effects of maternal employment by outweighing the economic advantages and improved material environment due to maternal employment.

On the other hand, labor market characteristics such as low wage and poor working conditions possibly contribute to children's behavior problems by influencing mothers' parenting behavior and psychological aspects negatively (Zaslow & Emig, 1997). Single mothers in poverty, who may represent less-skilled labor force, endure low earnings, job instability, and lack of health benefit in the workplace (Blank, 1997). Efforts to improve the job conditions of poor single mothers and to enhance their human capital should be accompanied in order to reduce poverty and increase the well-being of children and the families. In addition, role dissatisfaction and interrole conflict due to simultaneous role of mother and employee cause personal strains and negative parenting behavior, undermining the positive effects of maternal employment (Goldberg et al, 1996; MacEwen & Barlino, 1991). Thus, it is suggested that parenting behaviors or skills should be taken into account as an important mediator.

Since the passage of the new welfare law in 1996, the poor single mothers are mandatorily enforced to participate in the labor force, work-related activities, or job training programs. Notice that mother's work effort discussed here is voluntarily made, reflecting individual willingness and preference. The effects of maternal employment of their own volition may be different from the impacts on children of mandatory participation by their mothers. Hence, it is very important to reveal whether and how mandatory work requirement would influence the poor single mother families and their children in the future.

As expected, children with welfare receipt were more likely to have behavior problems than those were not on welfare. Hao (1995) mentioned that welfare had both positive and negative effects on children's developmental outcomes at the same time. The finding of the probit analysis revealed that welfare receipt was a highly significant predictor associated with children's behavioral problems. She stated that public assistance imposes the anxiety over stigmatization and isolation from society on both mothers and children. That is, negative impacts of welfare receipt

offset the positive effects like increased economic security. If current welfare system based on income testing and labeling continues to persist, stigma and negative characterization will be highly connected to welfare receipt, which in turn causes children's behavior problems.

Table 1.
Results of the Probit Analysis of Behavior Problem for the Single Mother Families

Variables	Expelled or suspended from school		Seen a teacher or principal for behavior	
	Coefficient	Marginal effect	Coefficient	Marginal effect
Intercept	4.688 (2.296)*	-.733(.368)*	3.166 (2.031)	-.719 (.456)
<u>Key Variables</u>				
Work effort	.016 (.016)	.0025 (.255)	.026 (.0136)*	5.8E-03(3E-03)*
Welfare receipt	1.497 (.528)**	.234(.077)**	1.256 (.448)**	.285 (.093)**
<u>Mother Characteristics</u>				
Age	.865 (.278)**	.135(.047)**	-.045 (.0403)	.075 (.053)
Black	.241 (.367)	.037 (.057)	-.186 (.32)	-.043 (.072)
Never married	.257 (.334)	.402 (.053)	.127 (.293)	.028 (.066)
Poverty status 5 years ago	-.502 (.471)	-.078 (.072)	-.696 (.434)	-.158 (.095)
Urbanization	.018 (.012)	.0027 (.001)	.015 (.009)	.003 (.002)
Northeast	.115 (.423)	.018 (.066)	-.593 (.403)	-.135 (.0904)
North Central	.003 (.435)	.0004 (.068)	.405 (.38)	.092(.087)
West (South)	-.21 (.486)	-.033 (.075)	-.154 (.426)	-.035 (.096)
Education	.127 (.73)*	.019 (.011)*	.029 (.051)	.0067 (.012)
Income	-.0003(.0004)	-.5E-06(6E-06)	-.8E-05(.0004)*	-2E-04(9E-06)*
Chronic illness	.634 (.331)*	.099 (.051)*	.685 (.287)*	.156 (.064)*
<u>Family Structure</u>				
Number of adult	.0025 (.232)	.0034 (.036)	.193 (.207)	.044 (.046)
Other support	-.367 (.328)	-.057 (.051)	.183 (.272)	.042 (.062)
<u>Child Characteristics</u>				
Age	.865 (.278)**	.135(.047)**	.331 (.234)	.075 (.053)
Age square	-.036 (.01)**	-.006(.002)**	-.014 (.011)	-.003 (.0024)
Gender	.018 (.302)	.003 (.047)	.733 (.281)**	.167 (.063)**
<u>Log Likelihood</u>	-54.83		-69.369	
<u>Chi-squared</u>	47.597***		37.904**	

Note: Standard Errors are in parentheses.

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001.

In this study, our attention is limited to children raised by single mothers living in poverty. Future study is suggested to extend to children of all poor families. Parent's poverty automatically is transferred to children. Many studies warn about the adverse effect of poverty on children's outcome, because children growing up in poverty are least likely to reach successful adulthood due to the failure in school. This study confirmed that more children under single motherhood showed behavior problems than children of married couples. Considering the fact that single mothers with young children disproportionately make up the poor population, we caution about the cumulative effects of poverty on children. Child poverty associated with single motherhood might lead to generational transmission of poverty (Krein & Beller, 1988; Hao, 1995).

References

Baydar, N. & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1991). Effects of maternal employment and child-care arrangements on preschoolers' cognitive and behavioral outcomes: Evidence from the Children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. *Developmental Psychology, 27*(6), 932-945.

- Ben-Akiva, M. & Lerman, S. R. (1993). Discrete Choice Analysis: Theory and Application to Travel Demand. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Blank, R. M. (1997). It Takes a Nation: A New Agenda For Fighting Poverty. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Eggebeen, D. J. & Lichter, D. T. (1991, December). Race, family structure, and changing poverty among American children. American Sociological Review, 56, 801-817.
- Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (1997). America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being.
- Gnezda, M. T. (1996, November). Welfare reform: Personal Responsibilities and Opportunities for Early Childhood Advocates. Young Children, 55-58.
- Goldberg, W. A., Greenberger, E., & Nagel, S. K. (1996). Employment and achievement: Mothers' work involvement in relation to children's achievement behaviors and mothers' parenting behaviors. Child Development, 67(2), 1512-1527.
- Greenstein, T. N. (1993, September). Maternal Employment and child behavioral outcomes: A household economics analysis. Journal of Family Issues, 14(3), 323-354.
- Hao, L. (1995, Fall). Poverty, public assistance, and children in intact and single-mother families. Journal of Family and Economic Issues, 16(2/3), 181-205.
- Harris, K. M. (1993, September). Work and welfare among single mothers in poverty. American Journal of Sociology, 99(2), 317-352.
- Krein, S. F. & Beller, A. H. (1988, May). Educational attainment of children from single-parent families: Differences by exposure, gender, and race. Demography, 25(2), 221-234.
- MacEwen, K. E., & Barlino, J. (1991, August). Effects of maternal employment experiences on children's behavior via mood, cognitive difficulties, and parenting behavior. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 53, 635-644.
- McLeod, J. D. & Shanahan, M. J. (1993, June). Poverty, parenting, and children's mental health. American Sociological Review, 58, 351-366.
- Moore, K. A., & Driscoll, A. K. (1997, Spring). Low-wage maternal employment and outcomes for children: A study. The Future of Children: Welfare to Work, 7(1), 122-127.
- O'Hare, W. P. (1996, September). A new look at poverty in America. Population Bulletin, 51(2).
- Vandell, D. L., & Ramanan, J. (1992). Effects of early and recent maternal employment on children from low-income families. Child Development, 63, 938-949.
- Zaslow, M. J., & Emig, C. A. (1997, Spring). When low-income mothers go to work: Implications for children. The Future of Children: Welfare to Work, 7(1), 110-115.

Endnotes

1. Graduate Student, Department of Consumer Sciences and Retailing
2. Associate Professor, Department of Consumer Sciences and Retailing
3. Associate Professor, Department of Consumer Sciences and Retailing