

TANF CHILD-ONLY POLICY: IMPROVING ACCESS AND ENROLLMENT IN ILLINOIS

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Abstract

This paper offers social work practitioners an intersectional analysis of social welfare and immigration policies, through the lens of TANF child-only policy. The paper assesses how TANF child-only grants for Ineligible Immigrant Parent (IIP) cases provide for citizen children and their undocumented parent(s) and makes recommendations for social work practitioners seeking to improve access and enrollment for eligible children. It focuses on the implementation of IIP child-only policy in Illinois and provides recommendations for improving implementation to better serve immigrant children and families.

The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) codified the radical transformation of the social safety net. PRWORA replaced the federal cash entitlement program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with a work support and time-limited income assistance program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF is funded through block grants to states. As a block grant, TANF allows states to fund a variety of programs and activities for low-income families. These are designed to encourage self-sufficiency, work participation, formation of two-parent families, and marriage by providing child care, workforce training, and cash welfare (Falk 2013). Disadvantaged families who are not considered work-eligible are able to access assistance through child-only grants that have no time-limits or work requirements. These families include those with parents who are disabled and receiving SSI (SSI child-only), those with children

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cared for by non-parental caregivers (NPC child-only), and those with parents who are ineligible immigrants (IIP child-only).

Since the signing of PRWORA, two related trends have emerged. First, TANF child-only cases have been on the rise. Nationally, child-only cases make up two in every five TANF cases (Mauldon, Speiglmán, Sogar, and Stagner 2012). The IIP child-only grant is the only means-tested program. It requires reporting of adult earnings from work to determine eligibility. Although children born in the United States to undocumented parents represent the majority of IIP cases, children of parents who are legal permanent residents and have not reached the five-year threshold are also included within this population. IIP child-only grants serve as a partial safety net for mixed-status families, who otherwise have few social programs in which they are eligible to participate.

The second trend is that since PRWORA there has been a decline in public benefits use by immigrant families, even among those who remained eligible for benefits and services (Fortuny and Chaudry 2011). This is largely a result of the five-year ban on legal permanent residents accessing public means-tested programs instituted under PRWORA (Fix, Capps, and Kaushal 2009). Additionally, in the same year, Congress passed into law the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA), permitting state and local law enforcement agencies—under agreements with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)—to provide enforcement of federal immigration laws. Together these policy changes have led to the decline in public benefits use by immigrant families.

This paper assesses how TANF child-only grants for Ineligible Immigrant Parent (IIP) cases provide for citizen children and their undocumented parent(s) and makes recommendations for social work practitioners seeking to improve access and enrollment for eligible children. Its focus will be on the implementation of IIP child-only policy in Illinois and provides recommendations for improving implementation at the state level to better serve immigrant children and families

DYNAMICS OF IIP CASES

Nationally, one-third of the children of undocumented parents are estimated to be living in poverty (Anthony 2007) and yet immigrant families are less likely to receive public benefits and are more likely to be uninsured (Fortuny and Chaudry 2011). Children of mixed-status families are also at greater risk of poor educational and developmental outcomes, as a result of the social and legal exclusion experienced by their parents. Their parents often work long hours in low-wage sectors and are unable to

tend to their developmental needs. Moreover, the stress, depression, and anxiety due to social isolation, exposure to poor working conditions, and lack of social supports and resources have a significant impact on children's early development and developmental contexts (Yoshikawa 2011).

For mixed-status families, the IIP child-only safety net is partial, but it does provide more protection in states with generous benefit levels, like California and New York. Nationally, IIP cases stay on assistance at a similar rate as adult-aid cases. According to data on child-only enrollments, IIP cases were most likely to enter or leave assistance within two-year intervals, suggesting that parents use IIP child-only grants as emergency assistance, during periods of instability in employment either through job loss or loss in hours and wages. At the same time, IIP child-only policy is limited to only cash assistance as TANF administrators reported little knowledge of IIP family needs (Mauldon et al. 2012).

ASSESSING ILLINOIS POLICY

Since states have significant discretion in the design, use, and implementation of TANF funds, there is great variability across states in terms of eligibility, benefit levels, and the structure of TANF programs. Child-only benefits are calculated based on the number of eligible children within the "assistance unit" (AU); thus within a household, all citizen children are considered a part of the AU. Beyond this benefit calculation, benefit levels and income thresholds vary. In assessing TANF child-only policy design and implementation in Illinois it is helpful to compare it with a state that has high take-up rates (e.g., California).

As of 2008, it is estimated that there are 87,000 families with undocumented parents and citizen children in the state of Illinois, but in 2010 there were reportedly only 1,581 IIP cases (Mauldon et al 2012). Thus for every 1,000 undocumented families, there are predicted to be only three IIP cases. In California the ratio is 45:1,000. There are a number of factors that may be contributing to the low take-up rate of IIP child-only grants in Illinois. According to Mauldon and others (2012), two factors appear to matter most in determining states' take-up rates of child-only grants: 1) generosity of benefit levels and income thresholds and 2) whether the state's policy environment is hospitable toward immigrant populations.

As for the generosity of benefits, Illinois benefit levels and income thresholds are below average. One eligible child receives a monthly payment of \$117, and for two eligible children the payment is \$230 (Illinois Department of Human Services 2013). Alternatively, California's monthly benefit per child is \$382 and in New York it is \$582. Illinois, however, is considered hospitable relative to other states. The state

recently passed a bill that would allow undocumented immigrants to obtain state driver's licenses (Cano and Nealy 2013) and passed its own version of the Dream Act, which created a private scholarship fund for eligible undocumented college-bound students. The state also withdrew its participation from the Secure Communities Program, which required local law enforcement to check fingerprints of individuals in custody with those filed in the US Homeland Security Department's database (Preston 2011). Finally, although not widely publicized, the state's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) provides child care subsidies to eligible low-income families, including legally permanent and undocumented residents.

Another potential contributing factor to the low take-up rate is how a state chooses to prioritize the use of its TANF funds, the central category being basic assistance, or cash welfare, that includes assistance for both adult and child-only cases (Falk 2012). Illinois spends the least amount of its TANF funds on basic assistance and the greatest share on work support and child welfare activities, leaving less available to increase enrollment or assistance levels for IIP child-only cases. Contrast this with California, which has prioritized its TANF funding to provide basic assistance (53 percent), followed by child care (13 percent), and work-related activities (12 percent) (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2012).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

The fundamental challenge for social workers remains the fact that IIP-eligible families are not utilizing the benefit, since many parents avoid interacting with government officials and institutions due to the (real and perceived) danger of exposing a family member's legal status. It is therefore important for the child welfare field to become increasingly aware of the intersection between child welfare and immigration policies by recognizing the fears and anxieties that inhibit IIP families from seeking services. Improving access to IIP child-only grants for this subpopulation might provide an entry point for other family support services, for which citizen children are eligible.

The most fundamental action to improve IIP family access to services is to promote greater transparency of Illinois' TANF programs and services, ensuring eligibility rules and guidelines are publicly available.¹ Doing so would allow social work practitioners and community-based organizations to better inform and educate mixed-status families on this available benefit. In turn, child welfare practitioners should work with community-based immigrant organizations to educate state administrators and promote outreach and recruitment efforts in coordination with the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS).

Community-based immigrant organizations can also be utilized when trying to reach IIP-eligible families. In states with high participation rates, strong immigrant networks and organizations have played an important role in disseminating information and allaying parents' fears of enrolling in public benefit programs for their children (Mauldon et al 2012). Outreach efforts should be considered as part of an overall strategy to promote early intervention and attempts at increasing enrollment in TANF would do well alongside efforts to increase Medicaid coverage, SNAP and child care benefits use, etc.

Child welfare practitioners can also work in coordination with medical staff at public hospitals to approach and educate undocumented new mothers about the benefits that their US-born children are eligible to receive, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and TANF. As suggested by the high take-up rate of WIC among undocumented families (Yoshikawa 2011), such an approach would serve as a less threatening entry point for understanding the services available to mixed-status families and help to ease the fears and anxieties associated with applying for public benefits.

Developing relationships between IDHS, child welfare, early childhood practitioners and agencies, and immigrant organizations should also be a goal for practitioners. Given the lack of understanding of IIP family needs among state administrators, it would be important to coordinate with other agencies or identify ways to provide information on other forms of non-TANF assistance that children are eligible to receive. An assessment of service gaps and needs of mixed-status families could be conducted and matched with identifying existing services available to families. This assessment and knowledge of available benefits and services could be used to inform mixed-status families, TANF agencies, and community-based organizations.

Finally, child welfare and early childhood practitioners and immigrant groups must organize together in order to effectively advocate and illustrate the need for increasing benefit levels for child-only grants generally, and also increase the income threshold for IIP cases, since it is the only means-tested program.² The high proportion of TANF spending on child care subsidies can be attributed in part to the political strength and organization of child care providers in the state of Illinois. This is to say that organized political pressure—through education and advocacy by immigrant rights organizations and social work practitioners—can and must play a role in ensuring the needs of children of mixed-status families are acknowledged and addressed by state funding allocations as well as improving the benefit levels of child-only grants as a whole.

CONCLUSION

In the current policy environment, TANF remains one of the primary funding streams for state social safety-net programs. This paper has suggested solutions for improving TANF's implementation within Illinois for IIP-eligible families by promoting: 1) greater transparency of IIP child-only grant eligibility guidelines; 2) outreach and education efforts; and 3) cross-sector/agency partnerships aimed to improve access and enrollment in TANF child-only grants in conjunction with efforts to ensure that citizen children enroll in other public benefits they are eligible to receive. Efforts to increase enrollment can help public agencies, child welfare and early childhood practitioners, as well as other stakeholders concerned with child poverty, better understand and address the needs of mixed-status families—a growing, but politically invisible population.³ Given the hardships as well as social and legal exclusion experienced by mixed-status families, access to case management or other services would help to connect these families to available non-TANF funded services.

Comprehensive immigration reform that creates viable pathways for obtaining citizenship, increases worker protections, and provides relief from the threat of deportation would help to dramatically improve the quality of life of mixed-status and undocumented families. At the federal level, the prospects for such families are dim, as the current Senate immigration reform bill proposes a difficult path requiring a minimum of nineteen years and a number of fees to obtain citizenship. Although the bill includes increased labor protections, it also proposes substantial investment in increasing border enforcement and security (National Immigration Law Center 2013). As social work practitioners, we have a responsibility to understand the intersection of immigration and social welfare policies and the ways in which the interaction of such policies inhibit immigrant children's access to programs and benefits. Social work practitioners working in the fields of child welfare, early childhood, and education must build a collective knowledge base regarding the dual effects of these policies and work together with immigrant advocates and public agencies to identify creative approaches at the local and state levels to improve access and ensure that mixed-status families obtain benefits that they are eligible to receive as part of efforts to improve overall child welfare.

ENDNOTES

¹ This discretion includes not requiring states to provide or publish eligibility guidelines for TANF programs and services (Falk 2013, 21). Although one of the conditions to receiving the TANF block grant is for states to furnish a plan every three years to the

Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, such plans do not require states to provide information on basic eligibility rules for TANF assistance, nor is such information readily provided by states (Ibid).

² Given the structure of the TANF financing system, this will be difficult to do. Under PRWORA, TANF block grant funds are fixed. The law entitles states to a basic block grant equal to states' AFDC spending pre-1996. Thus, the funds allocated to states do not change when caseloads increase or decrease (Falk 2013, 3). Furthermore, incentives are to fund work-support activities in order to meet funding requirements. TANF law sets the requirement that 50% of all families and 90% of two-parents be "engaged in work," definitions of work vary by state. However, work participation rates are lowered by credits earned by states through caseload reductions and expending beyond the maintenance of effort (MOE) requirement (Falk 2013, 15).

³ Although this paper specifically focuses on IIP child-only policy and mixed-status families, it is important to also acknowledge that undocumented children and families are politically invisible and legally excluded from state and federally funded programs. Improving the quality of life and well-being of undocumented children and families is equally urgent, but not the primary subject of this paper.

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