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Caring for Children at the Poverty Line

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Child care services will be critical to successful efforts to “end welfare as we know it.” Rather than focusing attention on the nonworking poor, this paper argues that attention should be focused upon the needs of working-poor and working-class families, who may be former welfare families. The paper presents data from the *National Child Care Survey 1990* and *A Profile of Child Care Settings* that describe the child care needs and arrangements of working and nonworking-poor and working-class families relative to middle-class families; constraints on their use of care, including the availability, cost, and quality of programs; and preferences. Finally, it discusses the implications for public policy.

Why are working-poor and working-class families important groups for social policy? First, to productively employ as many parents currently on welfare as possible is a major goal of welfare reform efforts. However, due to their low levels of education and skills, many of these parents will remain poor for several years even if they are successful in obtaining employment (Chilman 1991, 1993; General Accounting Office, 1992; Klein & Rones, 1989). Second, even if some of these parents manage to raise their families out of poverty, at that point they will no longer be eligible for many of the subsidized services they had been receiving. If they suddenly find themselves paying for services they need but for which they did not previously pay, they may be very little better off than they were before, and find themselves at risk of returning to welfare (Moffit, 1992). Consequently, we argue that U.S. policy-makers may have to raise the level of income at which families receive subsidies for services such as child care and health care in order to raise the benefits of working.

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What is the relationship between child care and employment? While non-parental child care is generally necessary for mothers to work, it may be an even more critical factor for low income mothers, who are likely to be raising children alone (Chilman, 1991). There is substantial research evidence that the type, cost, and quality of child care are linked to parental employment decisions. The availability of care is likely to play an important part; however, little evidence has been available as to whether low-income parents differ from middle-income parents in access to child care arrangements.

The type of care, especially its stability, appears to be important to employment. Informal arrangements tend to be much less stable than formal arrangements. Parents report a greater incidence of losing time from work because the provider was not available in in-home than formal out-of-home arrangements (Hofferth, Brayfield, Deich & Holcomb, 1991). Research also shows that those parents with informal arrangements were more likely to report that child care problems prevented work than those with formal center-based arrangements (Siegel & Loman, 1991). The type of care parents select is closely related to the amount and form of the subsidy they receive. One study found that those using vouchers were more likely to select a formal center-based arrangement than those who paid out-of-pocket and were later reimbursed for their expenses (Siegel & Loman, 1991).

The cost of care is also important. Blau and Robins (1989) found that higher-cost child care was associated with a lower probability of starting and a higher probability of exiting employment, among mothers of all income levels. Fronstin and Wissoker (1994) found a stronger effect of child care cost on the work decisions of low-income compared with high-income mothers. A study of the Illinois Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) population found that problems with child care are estimated to have caused 20 percent of mothers to quit school or a training program in the last 12 months; another 20 percent were estimated to have returned to public assistance because of child care problems (Siegel & Loman, 1991).

Finally, the quality of care available is important. Recent research has shown that parents with poor quality care are more likely to leave their jobs than parents with good quality care (Meyers, 1993).

To better understand the characteristics of families at the poverty line, we need to understand the needs of those both below and above that line. The ability of families to move from welfare dependence to self-sufficiency depends upon the differences among these groups. Consequently, this paper focuses on the need for child care services; the pattern of current arrangements; cost, quality, and availability of programs; and preferences for child care among working- and nonworking-poor and working-class families, compared with middle-class families. By better understanding the current child care decisions these different groups make, we may better isolate the constraints under which they live. The ultimate objective is to determine

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