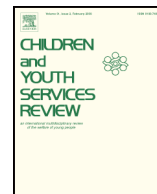




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The influence of concrete support on child welfare program engagement, progress, and recurrence

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ABSTRACT

Families living in poverty are significantly more likely to become involved with child welfare services, and consequently, referred to interventions that target abusive and neglectful parenting practices. Program engagement and retention are difficult to achieve, possibly because of the concrete resource insufficiencies that may have contributed to a family's involvement with services in the first place. Various strategies have been used to enhance program completion, such as motivational interventions, monetary incentives, and financial assistance with concrete needs. This study examines the influence of adjunctive concrete support provided by home visitors on families' ($N = 1754$) engagement, retention, and satisfaction with services as well as parenting outcomes. Using propensity stratification, mixed modeling procedures revealed that increasing concrete support predicted greater engagement, satisfaction, goal attainment, and lower short-term recidivism. Results suggest that adjunctive concrete support is a potentially beneficial strategy for promoting service engagement and satisfaction and increasing short-term child safety.

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1. Introduction

Child welfare systems serve a disproportionate number of poor families (Boyer & Halbrook, 2011; Drake & Pandey, 1996). Children living in poverty suffer a range of detrimental outcomes relative to their higher-income counterparts (Case & Paxson, 2002; Mayer, 1997). They have poorer health; miss more days of school; score lower on standardized tests; are more likely to develop serious chronic health problems, have a teenage pregnancy, drop out of school; and are less likely to achieve economic self-sufficiency (Case & Paxson, 2002; Mayer, 1997). Poverty likely influences maltreated children's well-being directly through limited access to quality health care and housing, for example, but perhaps to a greater extent *indirectly* through its effects on safety, permanency, and parenting. Indeed, families living below the poverty line are over 40 times more likely to enter child welfare than median-income families and the greatest predictor of maltreatment and child welfare entry is income (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Sedlak et al., 2010).

Within high-risk populations, hardships such as utility shut-offs, difficulty paying for housing, food insecurity, and self-reported material economic stress have been shown to increase the risk of involvement with the child welfare system (Courtney, Dworsky, Piliavin, & Zinn, 2005; Dworsky, Courtney, & Zinn, 2007; Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, & Bolger, 2004; Slack et al., 2003). When poor families enter the child

welfare system, children most often remain in the home and the families are then referred to—and perhaps court-mandated to—behavioral or social interventions designed to reduce harsh, abusive, or neglectful behavior, improve the living environment, and enhance caregiving capacity. These services often are delivered in the home. Compliance and retention are challenging given that families may already be burdened with stressors that accompany poverty. Thus, in addition to program content, child welfare service programs may assist families in meeting immediate concrete needs insufficiencies as a strategy to promote engagement and retention, and to support families and prevent removal or re-abuse during the service interval.

Concrete support potentially can serve at least three service-related purposes. First, providing relief from an immediate concrete needs crisis may be preferable to removing a child from the home due to insufficiency. For example, it may be better to provide funds to prevent the utilities from being cut off than to remove a child from a home because there are no utilities. Second, offering help with an immediate concrete needs crisis may facilitate engagement with services. Third, relief from an immediate needs crisis may bolster family stability and reduce stress, allowing better compliance with and progress toward goals. These potential benefits (better child retention in the home, better service engagement, and greater progress) presume that the concrete support provided is matched to the actual needs insufficiencies experienced by the family. Based on this assumption, some home-based child welfare service programs include provisions for funding immediate concrete resource assistance on a discretionary basis. The hypothesized benefits of this practice have received little empirical evaluation.

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1.1. The influence of poverty on child welfare involvement

There is an inverse association between income and child maltreatment rates (Bath & Haapala, 1993; Eckenrode, Smith, McCarthy, & Dineen, 2014; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996; Sedlak et al., 2010; Yang, 2010). In the Fourth National Incidence Study, children from families with low socioeconomic status (SES) were five times more likely to experience child maltreatment and seven times more likely to be neglected than children in households with higher SES (Sedlak et al., 2010). Other indicators of economic hardship, including welfare receipt and benefit levels (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Martin & Lindsey, 2003; Paxson & Waldfogel, 2002); unemployment (Gillham et al., 1998; Jones, 1990; Sidebotham, Heron, Golding, & Team, 2002); and single-parent family structure (Berger, 2005; Chaffin, Kelleher, & Hollenberg, 1996; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996) are also associated with child maltreatment risk. Further, child maltreatment has been shown to correlate with community- or state-level poverty rates (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007), and family-level poverty increases the risk for virtually every form of child abuse and neglect, regardless of whether it is reported to CPS (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Inverse relationships between income and child welfare involvement are not universal (e.g., Slack et al., 2003; Slack et al., 2004), depending on the sample.

Perhaps the more salient finding is that movement out of poverty, presumably resulting in adequate resources through which to meet concrete needs, appears to affect risk. Studies suggest that a stronger association exists between a change in income status (i.e., income loss versus income level) and risk of child welfare system involvement (Shook, 1999; Slack, Lee, & Berger, 2007). For example, a study conducted by Slack et al. (2007) revealed that a reduction in welfare benefits was associated with increased risk for child welfare system reports. Similarly, increasing income by providing additional financial support to single mothers was found to reduce risk of child maltreatment (Cancian, Slack, & Yang, 2010). This might suggest that economic supports used to avert basic needs crises may impact child welfare report or re-report risk, which is one hypothesis we will test in this study.

1.2. Program engagement, progress, and retention

Parents cannot benefit from services and interventions they do not receive. Program progress and outcomes are impeded when parents receive an insufficient dose, and those who drop out of programs have poorer outcomes. Progress and consumer-provider relationships in these services vary considerably, and poor engagement and premature exit from supportive or rehabilitative services are possibly due to the same strains and concrete resource insufficiencies that contributed to abuse or neglect and parents' involvement with child welfare systems in the first place. Effective strategies that can be implemented to promote program engagement and retention are recognized priorities for child welfare service providers. A range of strategies have been examined, including monetary incentives, the provision of transportation, on-site childcare and meals, home-based service location, and motivational interventions implemented before the start of, or in the early sessions of, a program (Chaffin et al., 2009; Dumas, Begle, French, & Pearl, 2010; Heinrichs & Jensen-Doss, 2010; Loman & Siegel, 2012).

Many of these strategies are predicated on research into the facilitators and barriers to program engagement and retention, most of which has focused on participant demographics (Ingoldsby, 2010). Not surprisingly, economic hardship is a significant barrier to participation as limited access to transportation, inability to afford childcare during program participation, and employment in multiple jobs, for example, can interfere with the ability to attend sessions (Ingoldsby, 2010; Muzik et al., 2014). Single-parent and ethnic minority families may also be less likely to engage and stay engaged in services (Ingoldsby, 2010). Further, families involved with child welfare who drop out of services report

more parental stress, harsher and less consistent discipline, and a lack of social support (McWey, Holtrop, Wojciak, & Claridge, 2014).

1.2.1. Program engagement and retention strategies

A variety of strategies have been implemented with families in poverty or involved with the child welfare system to improve engagement and retention, most of which have not been rigorously examined; a few of those strategies commonly implemented in child welfare settings are discussed below.

The provision of monetary incentives tends to be the most regularly implemented strategy to improve retention across a variety of programs and has been hypothesized to be particularly helpful in engaging low-SES families (Ingoldsby, 2010). Monetary incentives often come in the form of payment for sessions or study participation and are often in conjunction with the provision of transportation, childcare, and meals (Dumas et al., 2010; Loman & Siegel, 2012). Although hypothesized to be an effective retention strategy, many studies suggest that monetary incentives for program participation produce little to no improvements in program engagement, retention, and outcomes; however the form in which monetary compensation is received varies, and thus, results are mixed.

A randomized trial found that the provision of incremental monetary compensation for session attendance did not significantly improve attendance in a group-based community parenting program compared to a non-incentive condition (Dumas et al., 2010). The compensation did significantly influence potential participants' intent to enroll, although this difference disappeared when those parents who did not attend any sessions were excluded from analyses. In a similar study, compensation for session attendance and program completion enhanced the initial enrollment of families offered payment compared to those who were not, but did not significantly influence program engagement (Heinrichs, 2006). Both studies suggest that the offer of monetary incentives may be beneficial for recruiting parents into programs, but may not affect program engagement and retention.

Another study examining the influence of payment on program outcomes also showed that payment was not related to changes in self-reported parenting skills (Heinrichs & Jensen-Doss, 2010). It has been noted that people who receive money for their participation in programs may be less intrinsically motivated to participate, and consequently, less engaged with the curriculum, which in turn, results in less positive program outcomes. These studies examined monetary incentives, which differ from the focus of this study of the provision of immediate short-term resource provision. Both strategies involve cash support, but one uses cash as a reward and the other delivers support on a needs-based criterion designed to bolster child caregiving. A study examining the provision of needs-based financial assistance to low-income families showed that assistance with concrete needs (e.g., utilities, food or clothing, and other financial assistance) increased the number of days to a subsequent report to the child welfare system (Loman & Siegel, 2012). Collectively, these studies suggest that simply compensating parents for program participation may be helpful in getting parents in the door, but may not be helpful in facilitating successful program completion and promoting positive outcomes. On the other hand, assisting families with insufficiencies in a concrete resource crisis—such as when money is needed for rent, utilities, food or clothing, and assistance with other financially related needs—may be a more impactful alternative in engaging and retaining parents, and in turn, improving parenting outcomes. To our knowledge, this later type of assistance has not been tested for its impact on improving retention and engagement in home-based child welfare services programs, and this is a hypothesis we will test in this study.

1.3. Study setting

This study makes use of existing data from a study of families with open child welfare cases, mostly related to child neglect, who were

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