Welfare-to-Work Programs in America, 1980 to 2005

Meta-Analytic Evidence of the Importance of Job and

Child Care Availability

US Historical-Political Context

Welfare cash assistance programs extraordinarily costly
- **Longstanding political debates**

Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981
- **Restricted earnings of welfare recipients**
  - **Fewer remained eligible while working**

Family Support Act of 1988
- **Further formalized welfare-to-work programs**
  - **Required client enrollment in job training programs**

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996
- **Allowed states great freedom in welfare-to-work initiatives**
  - **Time limits, work requirements, sanctions, etc.**

Scientific Context

Federal legislation typically came with state mandates to rigorously evaluate their welfare-to-work programs

Billions were invested in hundreds of state-wide and national evaluations

- Many were RCTs

This meta-analysis aims to produce new knowledge from this national welfare-to-work database.

C2 Review of Welfare-to-Work Programs: Smedslund et al., 2006

Meta-analysis of 73 North American RCTs

Modest employment effect that diminished from 1 to 5 years of follow-up

"Local context had a *much* more powerful effect than the programs themselves."

Could not account for this identified contextual variability

- **Heterogeneity of programs and methods**
- **Validity of key moderators?**
  - **Predictive validity of unemployment rates?**
  - **Diffusion of child care (treatments)?**

Research Aim

This study aimed to systematically replicate and extend the C2 review,

to explain the large program variability that it identified.

Methods

Study Selection

C2 review as foundation: 73 RCTs

Exclusion criteria:

- **Accomplished prior to 1980**
- **Not United States**
- **Sampled teens or men only**
- **< 100 participants**
- **Followed participants for < 1 year**
- **Aggregated outcomes across numerous places**

15 RCTs excluded

Extend search: 7 RCTs included **65 RCTs for meta-analysis**

Hypothesized Effect Modifiers

Labor Market Withdrawal (LMW)

- **Unemployment rates used previously**
  - **Low to no predictive validity**
- **Construct & predictive validity of LMW among African American (AA) men supported by sociologic theory**
- **Census prevalence of labor force nonparticipation among AA men in study areas (metro, county, state)**

Low AA LMW (more jobs) → W-to-W more effective

Child Care Provision

- **Conceptual definitions of child care used previously**
- **Empirically verified procedural definitions used here**

Effective child care → W-to-W more effective

Meta-Analysis

Fixed study effects (natural logarithm of relative risks [RR]) were weighted by their inverse variances.

Pooled RRs within 95% CIs were calculated from regression statistics.

- As were heterogeneity (χ^2) and between-group (z) tests

Pooled intervention effects differed between groups followed for 1-3 (RR = 1.06) & 4-6 years (RR = 1.03), $z = 1.73$, $p < .05$.

- Therefore, main welfare-to-work effects and moderators (area labor market withdrawal and child care provision) were tested separately within these strata.

FOR MORE INFO...

Greenland, 1987

Results

Exemplary Findings:

Employment Effects of W-to-W Interventions at 4-6 Years F/U

Employment Moderating Effect of Job Availability: Followed 4-6 Years

	Labor Market Withdrawal	
	Low	High
Studies	**14**	**3**
RR (95% CI)	**1.07 (1.04,1.10)**	**0.98 (0.96,1.01)**
Prevent fraction	**6.5%**	
# needed to treat	**27**	

Note. High = highest quartile (38+% not in labor force).

Employment Moderating Effect of Child Care Availability: 4-6 Yrs F/U

	Child Care Provided	
	Yes	No
Studies	**2**	**15**
RR (95% CI)	**1.11 (1.06,1.17)**	**1.02 (1.00,1.04)**
Prevent fraction	**9.9%**	
# needed to treat	**17**	

Discussion

Summary

No significant long-term employment effects in areas where jobs were relatively unavailable or among programs that did not provide child care

Programs that provided child care were significantly more effective (5-10 fold) in the short- and long-term, even in areas of high labor market withdrawal.

<u>PFs ranged:</u> 9.9-15.3% vs. 2.0%

<u>NNT ranged:</u> 10-15 vs. 95

Possible Review Limitations

Potent publication bias seems unlikely

- **Some indicated, but suggests small main effects may be overestimates**
- **None of the primary studies were designed to test this meta-analysis' moderators**

RCT design limitations probably not potent

- **Nearly all large & randomized**
- **No RCT design parameters were systematically associated with effect sizes**

Social Policy Implications

The personal behavioral characteristics of welfare recipients themselves, the target of many welfare reform policies, seem to be of near inconsequence.

Social forces, on the other hand, that shape the availability and accessibility of employment and other opportunities, seem to be of much greater consequence.

Conclusions

Effective child care seems to be a key element of welfare-to-work programs that work. It ought to be integral to any future programs.

The availability of good jobs ultimately matters most. Proactive social and economic policies that positively affect job availability are likely to be far more effective than reactive social welfare policies that aim to affect the jobless themselves.

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Smedslund, G., Hage, K. B., Steiro, A., Johme, T., Dalsbø, T. K., & Rud, M. G. (2006). Work programmes for welfare recipients. Campbell Collaboration Review.