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Summary of Key Findings for Working Paper No. 13

Staying Single: The Effects of Welfare Reform Policies on Marriage and Cohabitation

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Background

How have recent changes in the welfare system affected marriage and cohabitation? While there is some debate among policymakers and the public about the role of government in marriage and family formation, there is a clear value in understanding how new policies affect children's likelihood of living in healthy two-parent families. Welfare policy is an important starting point; a stated goal of the 1996 welfare reforms was to encourage the formation of two-parent families. However, recent random assignment studies of welfare and work programs have found only scattered and inconsistent effects on marriage, leaving policymakers with little guidance about whether these new policies are discouraging or promoting marriage. Understanding the role played by current policies is an important first step in considering the role interventions specifically designed to promote marriage might play in the future.

This paper uses meta-analytic techniques to provide a systematic appraisal of how welfare reform policies in six studies representing 14 welfare programs have affected marriage and cohabitation among single-parent families overall and for a variety of subpopulations. In each of the studies examined, single parents were randomly assigned to a program that included some combination of mandatory employment services, enhanced earnings disregards, time limits on welfare receipt, or equalized eligibility for two-parent families, or to a control group that was neither eligible for the program's services nor subject to its requirements. Random assignment ensures that any differences in outcomes for these two groups over time are attributable to the programs that were studied.

Key Findings

- The vast majority (close to 80 percent) of the single parents who entered these studies were neither married nor cohabiting at the time of the survey follow-up two to four years later.
- On average, these welfare reform programs had no effect on marriage or cohabitation. Moreover, few effects were found for specific subpopulations of families.
- Overall, programs with expanded earnings disregards and, for two-parent families, equalized eligibility had no effect on marriage or cohabitation either for the overall sample or for any subgroups of single-parent families.

- Programs that provided expanded earnings disregards but did not implement welfare time limits produced a small positive effect on marriage. However, this positive effect was no longer statistically significant when estimates from similar types of programs that also provided earnings supplements were included in the meta-analytic calculation.
- Programs that combined expanded earnings disregards with time limits on welfare receipt showed a trend, not statistically significant, toward reductions in marriage and increases in cohabitation among single parents.
- Programs with only mandatory services did not affect marriage or cohabitation among the overall sample. Like the programs with time limits, however, they showed a slight trend that was not statistically significant toward reductions in marriage.

Conclusions

Earlier studies have reported intriguing, scattered findings of welfare reform program effects on marriage. However, findings from this meta-analysis suggest that the programs did not have any consistent effects — at least in the short run — on marriage and cohabitation for single parents, whether for overall samples or for subpopulations. It is possible that different families exhibit countervailing positive and negative responses to these policies that could not be detected here (or that these welfare policies increased marital stability among two-parent families, a group not examined because of data constraints). Nevertheless, these findings indicate that, overall, the welfare policies examined are unlikely to be leading to substantial increases or decreases in single parents' decisions to marry or cohabit. This suggests that policymakers who seek to increase the rate of healthy marriages must investigate policies beyond those examined here. With the support of the federal government, states are beginning to explore and evaluate new policies, including counseling, information sharing, and related interventions designed specifically to foster and support healthy marriage.