

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from a study of “child only” Work First cases in North Carolina. The report provides the results of telephone surveys conducted with persons in 500 child only cases across the state.

A. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Child only cases have been the subject of growing interest in recent years among policy makers in North Carolina and across the nation. With the decline in welfare caseloads since 1995, child only cases comprise a much larger percentage of TANF cases in North Carolina and other states. Adults in child only cases are typically not subject to the time limits or work requirements imposed upon regular welfare cases. As a result, they tend to leave welfare less quickly than most “regular” welfare cases, thereby explaining the increasing percentage of child only cases in the welfare caseload.

Different Types of Child Only Cases

As child only cases have come to account for a larger share of the welfare caseload, policy makers have shown increasing interest in finding out more about these cases. National studies have shown that child only cases may consist of several different types of cases, depending partly on the specific welfare policies in effect in an individual state. The major categories of child only cases are as follows:

- Cases in which the biological parents of the child are no longer in the home due to such factors as incarceration, substance abuse, death, or abandonment, and in which the child is being looked after by another adult – usually a “caretaker relative” such as a grandmother or aunt.
- Cases in which one or both biological parents are present in the home but the parents are not eligible for welfare because of their citizenship status.
- Cases in which one or both biological parents are present in the home but the parents are not eligible for welfare because one of them is receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits that make them ineligible for TANF. Some studies have shown that many of these SSI cases tend to be former TANF cases in which the parent has switched from TANF benefits to SSI benefits.
- Cases in which the parent has been removed from the welfare grant because of failure to comply with work requirements, and in which one or more children are still receiving TANF benefits.

The fourth type of case can only exist in states where the parent can be removed from the welfare grant because of sanctions for non-compliance and where the state decides to count these cases as child only cases. These types of cases do not exist in the child only caseload in North Carolina.

Key Issues of Interest to Policy Makers

Policy makers are interested in several key issues when it comes to the different types of child only cases. Among the major issues are the following:

Household Characteristics

- Particularly in cases involving non-parent caretakers, what are the characteristics of these cases in terms of:
 - the relationship between the caretaker and the child(ren);
 - household composition;
 - demographics; and
 - status of the biological parents.
- How do the non-parental cases compare to other child only cases and to “regular” TANF cases in terms of household composition and other characteristics?

Child’s Environment and Support System

- How satisfactory and stable are the custodial and living arrangements in cases involving non-parental caretakers?
- Do the custodial arrangements in non-parental cases provide an adequate environment for the child in terms of child development and overall child well-being?
- Do the non-parental caretakers provide the child with adequate support in such areas as schoolwork, involvement in school activities and groups, reading to the child, and other areas important for child development and well-being?
- How well-adjusted and healthy are the children in non-parental cases compared to children in cases where the parent is present?
- How adequate is the child’s environment and support system in parental cases in which a parent is on SSI?

Stress and Other Problems Among Caretakers

- Do the caretakers in non-parental cases or in cases where the parent is on SSI experience stress, depression, or other problems that make it difficult for them to look after the child effectively or to provide the child with a supportive environment?

- In cases where the caretakers or SSI parents are experiencing stress or other problems, what effect does this have on the well-being of the child?

Use of Available Services and Programs for Low-Income Families

- Do the parents or caretakers in child only cases (including parental and non-parental cases) make adequate use of support services and community programs available to help low-income families?
- Do the parents or non-parental caretakers tend to under-utilize these programs because they are not on Work First and have little contact with case managers who might refer them to these programs?
- In cases where the parents and non-parental caretakers are not making much use of available programs, what impact does this have on the child's well-being?

B. METHODOLOGY

This section briefly describes the methodology used to conduct the study of child only cases in North Carolina.

Sample Selection

The goal of the study was to complete surveys with 500 child only cases that were on Work First in early 2002. A statewide random sample of 750 cases was selected for the study. Of the 750 cases, there were 3 cases in which the respondent was found to be deceased or otherwise unavailable to conduct the survey. Of the 747 available cases, surveys were completed with 500 cases, representing an adjusted response rate of 67 percent.

Survey Design

The survey instrument covered four major areas, as follows:

- demographics and household composition;
- well-being of the children;
- well-being of the parent or non-parental caretaker; and
- use of community services and programs.

To assess the well-being of the children, a "focal child" was randomly selected for each case. The focal child had to be part of the Work First case. Questions about child well-being were asked only of the focal child. The survey instrument for the study incorporated a number of questions from the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), including questions on school engagement. The surveys also incorporated the six questions in the short version of the USDA food security index.

C. APPROACH TO THE DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis focused primarily upon comparing the following two types of cases:

- cases in which one or both of the biological parents of the Work First child(ren) were in the home (“parental cases”); and
- cases in which the Work First child or children were being looked after by a non-parental caretaker (“non-parental cases”).

Of the 500 cases for which a survey was completed, 375 could be classified as “non-parental” cases based on the information collected through the survey. The remaining 125 cases could be classified as “parental” cases, consisting mostly of cases where an adult was on SSI as well as a small number of non-citizen cases.

In addition to comparing the two types of child only cases, we examined how the child only cases compare to regular Work First cases on some of the demographic characteristics. The data on the regular Work First cases are derived from surveys that MAXIMUS conducted on a statewide sample of 1,750 families who were on Work First in the summer of 2000.¹

Survey Administration

The telephone surveys were conducted by telephone from the MAXIMUS Survey Research Center in Reston, Virginia using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). Respondents were offered an incentive payment of \$25 to \$30 to complete the survey. Multiple contacts were made with sample members, with varying calling hours, to maximize the response rate for the surveys.

D. ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

Chapter II of the report presents findings on the demographics of the child only cases, including household composition, and the education and employment status of the adults. For some variables, comparisons are also made with regular Work First cases. *Chapter III* presents findings on the well-being of the children in child only cases, including such variables as school engagement, child’s mental health, child-parent interaction, and child’s involvement in groups and activities.

Chapter IV of the report presents findings on the well-being of the parent or non-parental caretaker in child only cases, including such variables as physical and mental health, aggravation in parenting, and social support. Chapter IV also presents findings on resources and hardships among the households in child only cases. *Chapter V* of the report provides findings on the use of community services and programs by the parents and non-parental caretakers in child only

¹ *Characteristics and Barriers of TANF Recipients in North Carolina*, MAXIMUS, January 2001

cases, including such services as child care, child support, legal assistance, job training, mental health services, and help with food or clothing.