

Data Needs for Measuring Family and Fertility Change After Welfare Reform

*Edited by
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Preface

Data Needs for Measuring Family and Fertility Change After Welfare Reform is one of a series of reports from the Committee to Review Welfare Reform Research, a project of the Welfare Reform Academy. The committee was formed to help the public, other scholars, practitioners, and policymakers understand research on welfare reform and apply its lessons. Its purpose is to assess the quality and relevance of the most significant evaluation studies, identifying those findings that are sufficiently well-grounded to be regarded as credible. The committee members are experts in evaluation and related social science fields.

The 1996 welfare reform act, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PROWRA), establishes family goals that include discouraging out-of-wedlock births while encouraging marriage and two-parent families. The act also gives states flexibility in designing programs to reach these goals. To evaluate welfare reform's impact on families, however, requires better data than is currently available at both national and state levels on births, marriage, divorce, abortion, family formation, and the living arrangements of children. The three papers in this monograph examine the strengths and weaknesses of some key data sources and suggest ways to improve them. William D. Mosher and Joyce C. Abma discuss possible contributions of the National Survey of Family Growth to welfare reform evaluation. Stephanie Ventura describes birth data and explains its uses in assessing welfare reform. Stanley K. Henshaw discusses the adequacy of abortion data, which are needed to measure states' performance on PROWRA's goal of reducing nonmarital childbearing without increasing abortion. Future publications from the Welfare Reform Academy will examine the strengths and limitations of Census Bureau data and other statistical sources not covered here, discuss the application of these data to performance bonuses, and make a general assessment of family and fertility change after welfare reform.

We sincerely hope that the materials in this report aid in assessing research on family and fertility change after welfare reform.

—DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV

Introduction

*Douglas J. Besharov**

Among other goals, the 1996 welfare reform law—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)—seeks to “encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families” by encouraging marriage and discouraging out-of-wedlock childbearing and teenage pregnancies. The law gives states considerable freedom to design programs and establishes incentives to work towards its goals. For example, PRWORA provides \$100 million in bonuses per year for the five states most successful in reducing out-of-wedlock childbearing while not increasing abortion (the “illegitimacy bonus”). The act also sets aside a total of \$200 million per year (the “high performance bonus”) for states that make progress towards a broad set of work- and family-related outcomes.

Welfare reform’s goal of strengthening families enjoys widespread support, and many expect additional provisions on this subject in the law’s reauthorization in 2002. Evaluating welfare reform’s impact on families, however, requires better data than is currently available—on births, marriage, divorce, abortion, family formation, the living arrangements of children, and related trends. The papers in this monograph describe available data, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and suggest needed improvements.

In the first essay, statisticians William D. Mosher and Joyce C. Abma of the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) describe the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and explore its potential as a tool to assess welfare reform. The NSFG, an extensive nationwide survey of women ages 15 to 44, provides reliable national estimates of births, pregnancies, living arrangements, and related behaviors. Interviewers obtain a complete history of each woman's pregnancies, marriages, periods of cohabitation, contraceptive use, work, education, early sexual experiences, and childhood living arrangements—as well as demographic information and data on sources of income, including welfare. In addition, researchers can link individual cases to Census tracts to analyze the data by neighborhood characteristics. The last NSFG was conducted in 1995, on the eve of welfare reform; the next occurs in 2001, five years after its enactment. This timing makes the survey especially useful in assessing welfare reform nationally. Its limited sample size, however, precludes making comparisons among state programs. The next NSFG includes a representative sample of men as well as women.

Mosher and Abma describe several options for making the survey more useful in monitoring family and fertility-related trends. Oversampling could boost the reliability of estimates for racial and ethnic groups, regions, or even permit analysis of behaviors in some large states. More frequent fielding of the survey would make it possible for researchers to follow trends more closely. The authors also suggest including military personnel, instituting a follow-

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up survey on contraceptive use and unintended pregnancy, collecting biomarkers to test for sexually transmitted diseases and other conditions, and adding a sample of people in prison.

In the next essay, Stephanie J. Ventura, Chief, Reproductive Statistics Branch, Division of Vital Statistics, NCHS, describes birth data and explains its uses in assessing welfare reform. Regulations implementing the “illegitimacy bonus” specify NCHS data as the basis of state awards. Reporting procedures and data are therefore being “more carefully examined,” according to Ventura. Birth data is collected through the federal-state Vital Statistics Cooperative Program, which provides information on all births, including information on mother’s age, race, Hispanic origin, marital status, number of previous children, and educational attainment. Birth certificate information on the age and marital status of the mother are “quite reliable, and they can be used with confidence in evaluating welfare reform,” according to Ventura. Information on fathers is “less well reported, especially when the parents are not married.”

Resource constraints at the federal and state level have led NCHS to stop collecting information on the dates of the mother’s previous live births or pregnancy terminations. Yet, information on birth spacing has implications for welfare reform, since closely spaced births and larger numbers of children may make the goal of self-sufficiency more difficult for welfare recipients to attain. Ventura summarizes proposed revisions to the standard birth certificate, recommended by a panel of experts and scheduled to take effect in 2003, that would increase the usefulness of birth data in assessing welfare reform. She also notes the need for states and the federal government continuing to work together to preserve and heighten the quality of vital statistics.

Finally, Stanley Henshaw, a reproductive epidemiology consultant and former deputy director of research at the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI), discusses the adequacy of abortion data. Abortion data are needed to measure states’ performance on PROWRA’s goal of reducing nonmarital childbearing *without increasing abortions*. The data are also needed to investigate whether state welfare reform policies may inadvertently lead to increases in abortion. (Such concerns, for example, have been expressed about family cap policies, adopted by some states, which eliminate additional payments for children conceived while the mother is receiving welfare.)

Henshaw describes two major sources of information on abortion: the Alan Guttmacher Institute’s survey of abortion providers and data from state health departments, as reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Either source may be used to determine state eligibility for bonuses under PRWORA. Health department data provide information on the numbers of abortions and characteristics of women receiving them. Not all states have mandatory reporting, however, and abortions performed by small facilities are often missed. AGI does not collect information on women receiving abortion, but strives to identify all abortion providers and periodically surveys them, producing abortion totals that are often more complete than health department counts. For example, in 1996, 26 states reported totals that were more than 5 percent lower than AGI’s, and figures were more than 20 percent lower in 12 of these states. “In most of these cases,” writes Henshaw, “the state health department figures are almost certainly significantly incomplete.” Comparisons from earlier years show similar discrepancies, but not necessarily for the same states. The accuracy of state abortion figures may also be affected by

inconsistencies in reporting at the clinic level, whether abortion reporting is voluntary or mandatory within a state, whether abortions are reported by the state in which a woman resides or the state in which the abortion is performed, or other factors.

Henshaw describes several options for improving existing state reporting systems, including the establishment of a cooperative federal-state reporting system similar to that used by NCHS for natality and mortality statistics. Such a system, which would require new legislation, might include “strong incentives” for mandatory reporting and a minimum set of information on each abortion, such as: month of the procedure; weeks of gestation; abortion procedure used; and the woman's age, marital status, state and county of residence, education, race, and ethnicity. NCHS's model reporting form, the "U.S. Standard Report of Induced Termination of Pregnancy" includes these items. To help assess welfare reform, Henshaw suggests adding a question on welfare receipt. The federal government could also mandate that all states require medical facilities to report on abortions individually, rather than in the aggregate. This change would make it possible to analyze abortion patterns by combining characteristics such as age, race, and marital status. Finally, the federal government could more actively monitor and enforce existing reporting requirements, increase subsidies and sanctions to encourage quality reporting, and provide training to officials in abortion-reporting systems.

These essays document the major strengths and weaknesses of the key data sources on births, marriage, divorce, abortion, the living arrangements of children, and related matters—and suggest how they may be improved. Future publications from the Welfare Reform Academy will examine the strengths and limitations of Census Bureau data and other statistical sources not covered here, discuss the application of these data to performance bonuses, and make a general assessment of family and fertility change after welfare reform.