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RESEARCH FORUM ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND THE NEW FEDERALISM

Measuring Success of TANF for Children—Congress Considers Two Options

The well-being of children has been a crucial issue in the reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant—the current federal cash assistance welfare program. Proposals from the White House, Senate, and House of Representatives have all included language to this effect:

- The Bush Administration has proposed amending the overall purpose of TANF "to increase the flexibility of states in operating a program designed to improve the well-being of children."
- The June 2002 bill passed by the Senate Finance Committee specifies the need to "develop comprehensive indicators to monitor child well-being in each state."
- The February 2003 bill passed by the House of Representatives states that "the Census shall implement or enhance a longitudinal survey of program participation… to allow for the assessment of the outcomes of continued welfare reform on the economic and child well-being of low-income families with children… and… provide state representative samples."

Thus, there appears to be broad consensus now among the Senate, House, and Bush Administration that the overarching goal of a reauthorized TANF should be the improvement of child well-being and that resources should be allocated to measure the attainment of this goal.

Quality data that provide indicators of child well-being would permit researchers and policymakers to monitor the status of children within low-income households. The need for such data is critical.

Note from the Director–Barbara B. Blum

During the lengthy discussions of reauthorization for welfare programs, the subject of child well-being has emerged explicitly in the proposals of the Bush Administration, the House, and the Senate. This issue of *the forum* draws on a careful analysis by Michael Laracy, Senior Associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, of two possible strategies to actually measure child well-being—the federal SIPP longitudinal survey and a state-level cross-sectional survey.

Since children comprise such a large proportion of the population living in poverty, learning more about how our nation's children are faring is extraordinarily important. Mr. Laracy's work highlights the complexity of gathering sound and timely data. The pros and cons of each strategy are evident.

A beneficial investment of resources will advance our ability to identify problems and design ways to improve child well-being. One approach would be to finance both the state-level survey strategy and the enhancement of SIPP. Each could validate the other and highlight new areas for inquiry.

Previous Data Collection System Problematic

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) authorized the Survey of Program Dynamics (SPD), a panel study that was adopted from the larger longitudinal Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), in hopes that its data would be used as the key evaluative tool for measuring the effects of TANF. While the SPD does offer rich data, it has experienced attrition rates (the rate at which people drop out of the survey over time) of almost 50 percent, which has jeopardized the representativeness, reliability, and utility of the survey information. Moreover, SPD data files have been released slowly and are complicated to use, hindering wide-scale research efforts by researchers and policy analysts. As a result, the SPD has at best minimally informed the discussions around TANF reauthorization.

Some findings on child well-being from other major research studies have been made available as reauthorization is considered. Studies with relevant findings include the Three-City study, the Growing Up in Poverty project, the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies, the Minnesota Family Investment Program, and Canada's Self-Sufficiency project. Census statistics on child poverty and information from the U.S. General Accounting Office on child-only cases have also been important, but not sufficiently informative. A new or improved survey could

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provide state- and national-level indicators that would permit the measurement of how well the goal of improving child well-being is being met.

Two Survey Options to Consider

Two options exist to provide policymakers with the data required to assess progress on the new TANF goal of improving child well-being: (1) an improved and expanded SIPP; or (2) a new state-level cross-sectional child well-being survey. The most fundamental difference between an improved and expanded SIPP and a state-level survey is the sample frame and focus. The SIPP is a **longitudinal survey** that follows a given set of households across time, while the state-level survey would be a **cross-sectional survey** that measures a "snapshot" of a new set of households at a given point in time. Both options have strengths and weaknesses that should be weighed as reauthorization discussions proceed. Key issues to consider include:

- Ability of data to answer relevant questions about child well-being
- Representiveness for all states
- Timeliness of data
- Ease of use for policymakers and researchers
- Attrition and response rates
- Cost

Can data answer relevant questions about child well-being?

The SIPP includes the key content items requested by the House TANF bill: out-of-wedlock childbearing; marriage; welfare dependency and compliance with work requirements; the beginning and ending of spells of assistance; work, earnings, and employment stability; and the well-being of children. To better address questions around child well-being, an expanded SIPP would include new lines of questioning on child, adolescent, and family status. This would provide richer, more detailed data on a select number of topics. It would also over-sample low-income households, increase the sample size, and add a fourth year to the panel's duration.

The design of the state-level survey allows for a greater number of child well-being indicators to be assessed, although in less detail. The state-level survey would likely use standardized questions to produce comparative data within and across all 50 states. In addition, it could address state-specific data needs with customized questions and specific domains of interest. Proponents of this option argue that while quality research on child well-being is already available at the national level, state-level data are lacking, which poses a particular problem as decision-making authority is increasingly shifted to the states.

Is the survey sample representative of all states?

A survey's sample is crucially important because it relates to the representativeness of the survey results. If an enhanced SIPP is authorized by Congress, the most significant change will involve the addition of some 13,500 households to the existing study, bringing the total to around 45,000 households. This would allow representative samples in several additional—but not all—states, thereby improving the ability to measure indicators at the state level for a subset of states. An increased sample size would also expand the percentage of households with children, currently only about 40 percent, to allow more relevant information on child well-being to be produced. However, because only a subset of states (California, Texas, New York, Florida, New Jersey, Indiana, and Virginia) would have representative samples, SIPP is best designed to provide national-level, rather than state-level, indicators of child well-being.

The suggested state-level survey, on the other hand, could build on a current survey such as the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) that is sponsored by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration. The survey's sample size is 102,000 (2,000 per state and the District of Columbia). Having data representative of all 50 states allows for information to be obtained on any given state TANF program. This may be particularly useful given the quick rate at which state TANF programs change, making it difficult to identify which state programs are of interest well in advance.

How timely is the release of data?

The SIPP uses in-person interviews to obtain information on factors such as poverty, income, employment, health insurance coverage, work experience, and demographic characteristics. Coding the results of in-person interviews may be time consuming, contributing to slower turnaround of data for researchers and analysts to use. SIPP data are typically made available one year after collection.

Using telephone surveys and techniques such as computer-assisted telephone technology, data from a proposed state-level survey can be made available four months after being collected. Advantages to this technique include more frequent rounds of data collection and increased speed at which data may be coded and made available for analysis. Quick availability of data on general outcomes and indicators may provide policymakers with access to early feedback on failures and successes of programs.

Can data be easily analyzed by researchers and policymakers?

While the data sets compiled from surveys such as SIPP are exceedingly rich and powerful, they are also very complex to manipulate and use. Consequently, the data tend to be used by highly trained researchers in the federal government, universities, and think tanks.

In contrast, the data from cross-sectional surveys can be analyzed using simpler statistical techniques, making them more accessible to a broader range of researchers and policymakers.

To what extent do attrition and response rates affect survey results?

Previously, the SPD, derived from the SIPP, has suffered high attrition rates that can threaten the validity of longitudinal panel studies. Response rates with this method, however, tend to be high.

Answering Causal Questions

The primary advantage of a longitudinal survey is that researchers may observe changes in specific households across time. Thus, information is obtained at the household level that may inform questions of causality. Because cross-sectional information is obtained on a population level, it is not suitable for informing causal questions. It should be noted that true program impacts, or causal conclusions about outcomes directly attributable to a program, can only be made with formal random assignment experiments.

Because cross-sectional studies measure information at a specific point in time, using a different sample each time the survey is administered, attrition is not a factor. Low response rates, however, may be problematic with this technique. In-person data collection methods used by the SIPP typically yield high response rates and can allow for more detailed information to be obtained.

Is the survey cost-effective?

There is general agreement among the House, Senate, and White House that $10 million be allocated annually to data collection efforts. Because of the time and effort required to track particular families over time, longitudi-

Comparison of SIPP and State-Level Survey

	SIPP	State-Level Survey
Purpose	To provide data on economic issues (including income, employment, and service participation)	To measure child well-being on the state level
Survey Design	Longitudinal (follows given set of families across time)	Cross-sectional (snapshot of new set of families at each iteration)
Data collection technique	In-person	Telephone
Proposed sample size	44,962 households	100,000 households
Proposed frequency	Every 3 years	Every 2 years
Data turnaround	Slow (1 year)	Fast (4 months)
Cost per household	High	Low
State representation	Low sample sizes in many states	Representative of 50 states
Households with children	Part of sample	Total sample
Response rates	High	Low
Attrition rates	High	Not applicable
Ease of data analysis	More difficult	Less difficult
Data breadth and depth	Richer, more detailed data on fewer topics	Less detailed data on more topics
Indicator level	National-level indicators	State-level indicators
Usefulness of data	More useful to researchers	More useful to policymakers

nal studies such as the SIPP tend to be more costly than cross-sectional studies. Because of increased staff and travel expenses associated with in-person interviews, such methods have a greater cost per family assessed that also results in less frequent rounds of data collection. Obtaining very large sample sizes can also be prohibitively expensive.

The proposed state-level survey using telephone survey techniques to obtain data has a relatively low cost per household. This enables a greater sample size to be obtained and more frequent rounds of data collection to be conducted. However, efforts must be made to use alternative methods to reach families without telephones, critical when studying low-income families.

Congress Should Consider Multiple Factors

In deciding between the two survey options, members of Congress should consider:

- Which methodology is best to answer questions about the degree to which the goal of improving child well-being is met?
- Which type of data will best inform future policy?
- What will be the most cost-effective method of providing the needed information?

The way Congress decides these questions could have a lasting impact on the millions of children in our nation living in low-income families. ■

Research Forum on Children, Families, and the New Federalism

The Research Forum, an initiative of the National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, encourages collaborative research and informed policy on welfare reform and vulnerable populations. The Research Forum's ultimate goal is to identify and promote strategies that protect and enhance the well-being of low-income children and their families.

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