

LOW-INCOME FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE BREAKING UP UNDER WELFARE REFORM

Most children who are in foster care because of abuse or neglect come from poor families headed by single mothers who have historically relied upon welfare. While the child welfare system in the United States is dedicated to protecting children from maltreatment and returning foster children to their parents as soon as possible, public policies sometimes make this difficult.


Four recently completed studies by **Kathleen M. Wells, Ph.D.**, associate professor of social work and psychology at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, reveal how the child welfare system is functioning under conditions of welfare reform. In particular, Dr. Wells concludes that current policies may impair single mothers with children in foster care from getting their children back. In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act was passed to promote economic self-sufficiency among the poor by creating new work requirements for adults and placing limits on the length of time families can receive assistance. Working together with the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services, Dr. Wells and her research team discovered that since the welfare reform legislation was passed, the number of children entering foster care is climbing and foster children are returning home more slowly.

Wells also found that family income contributes to the speed with which children return home. Mothers who lost welfare assistance after their children were placed in foster care have the slowest rate of family reunification, compared to children whose mothers never lost such income. In Ohio, there is a thirty-six month time limit for welfare eligibility—mothers who get a job because their welfare benefits have been reduced have a much harder time getting their children back than mothers who rely on welfare consistently and don't work.

In addition, many mothers involved with the welfare system have severe problems, such as substance abuse or poor mental health, making it difficult to hold a job. Moreover, the low-wage jobs for which they may qualify are often unstable, provide inadequate benefits, require evening or early morning work, or offer limited flexibility. "Public policy must be changed so that single mothers and their children have adequate economic support and support from social services to function as a family," Dr. Wells concludes.

<http://msass.case.edu/faculty/kwells/research.html>

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A photograph of a young boy with short brown hair, wearing a dark blue and green plaid hoodie over a grey hoodie. He is sitting on a wooden bench or ledge, looking off to the side with a serious expression. The background is a wall covered in graffiti, with a wooden post visible on the left.

Welfare mothers who get a job have a much harder time getting their children back from foster care.