

Federal welfare programs can have negative effects on children's cognitive scores

June 13 2011

The United States federal government supports many welfare and entitlement programs that attempt to eliminate poverty by providing financial assistance to families in need. Now, a researcher at the University of Missouri has found that requirements for some of these welfare programs can create stress on families, which can have a negative effect on young children.

Colleen Heflin, an associate professor in the Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri, studied the cognitive scores of young [children](#) whose families receive assistance from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which is the largest federal support program for families with children. Heflin found that the cognitive scores of three-year-old children whose families were on TANF were much lower than children who were not on the program.

"Our findings suggest that the way these assistance programs are structured could have negative effects on child outcomes," Heflin said. "While TANF traditionally has been the main social program to offer financial support to low-income households with children, current program requirements may create pressures that conflict with the objective of improving child outcomes."

For example, families receiving assistance from TANF must comply with requirements ranging from [drug testing](#) and attending job development classes to accepting [minimum wage](#) jobs that require [single mothers](#) to be away from their families during evenings and weekend.

By examining results from a Princeton University and Columbia University "Fragile Families and Child Well-Being" study, Heflin found that the stress created within the [family](#) when parents are trying to meet these requirements ultimately results in the decreased cognitive scores of the [young children](#). However, Heflin found that social programs based in the tax system, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, show no such negative effects on the children of the household.

"The design of the program matters," Heflin said. "An income-increasing program through the tax system doesn't show these negative effects. However, programs like TANF seem to hurt kids, which is the opposite of what we want our social programs to be doing. We don't create policies to hurt young children, we try to help them. TANF has created enough pressure on families trying to comply with its regulations that it has actually begun to exert a negative force on these families at the margins."

Heflin says the next step in her research will be to study the federal Unemployment Insurance program to see what effects that program has on children. This study was published in *Children and Youth Services Review* and was co-authored Sharon Kukla-Acevedo, an assistant professor at Central Michigan University.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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