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News & Issues

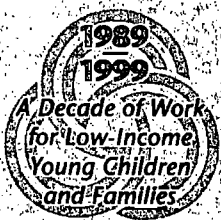
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NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHILDREN IN POVERTY

The Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health
Columbia University

Identifying and promoting strategies to reduce the young child poverty rate and to improve the life chances of young children in poverty

Helping Vulnerable Young Children Affected by Welfare Reform

As TANF caseloads fall, policymakers are turning their attention to adults facing special barriers to employment. Parents who experience domestic violence, substance abuse, and serious mental health issues, particularly depression, face great challenges for their children—especially their young children. For this most vulnerable population, welfare reform offers the opportunity to address a long-standing and high stakes issue: helping both the parents *and* their children.

NCCP's latest Children and Welfare Reform Issue Brief, *Promoting Resilience: Helping Young Children and Parents Affected by Substance Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Depression in the Context of Welfare Reform*, focuses on the subset of "hard-to-serve" low-income families most affected by these risk factors who have young children. "Welfare reform and the push to reach the national goal of ensuring that every child enters school 'ready to succeed' provide the impetus for communities, states, and the federal government to take action now on behalf of this often ignored population," says the author, Dr. Jane Knitzer, NCCP's deputy director.

Families Confront Multiple Risks

It is not known exactly how many families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), sanctioned under TANF, or reaching time limits are affected by these risks, or how many of them have young children. An estimated 16–37 percent of welfare recipients abuse drugs or alcohol, 20 percent are likely to face domestic violence in a 12-month period, and two to three times as many low-income mothers as other mothers are likely to experience depression. One study found that 28 percent of

The families that we are talking about are so complex... we have to be mindful of this and not just look at alcohol/substance abuse or mental health or low literacy or domestic violence, because we are going to miss the boat.

A participant at the NCCP meeting, Promoting Child and Family Resiliency in the Context of Welfare Reform, Washington, D.C., October 1998.

low-income parents report being depressed compared to 17 percent of all parents. Maternal depression is a particularly harmful condition. It not only affects young children, but the results last, with children of depressed mothers showing higher rates of mental illness or greater incidence of high risk behaviors as they grow older. Even as such families cope with these special challenges, they must also confront the basic pressures all low-income families struggle with—adequate income, and access to housing, health services, transportation, and child care.

Although many young children in families with adults affected by these risk factors are resilient and do fine, the report paints a sobering picture of the many other young children who have been traumatized. Dr. Knitzer describes the risks these young children face—poor health, difficulty with relationships, and insufficient learning and mastery of social competence tasks. "We know that for children with the 'double jeopardy' of being poor and facing these special challenges, the risk of negative developmental outcomes multiplies," she says.

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A View from the
**RESEARCH FORUM ON CHILDREN,
FAMILIES, AND THE NEW FEDERALISM**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Welfare Research
Perspectives
Past, Present, and Future**

Barbara B. Blum
Ellen C. Berrey

August 1999



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