



# The Long-Term Wellbeing of Families and Children Under a Conditional Punitive Social Safety Net

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## Background and Objectives

Social scientists have long been concerned about the behavioral implications of social safety net assistance, especially as it pertains to disincentives to work. Informed by a paternalist perspective (Mead 1997), welfare-to-work policies associated with the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program intend to modify people's employment behavior with the aim of improving employment habits and reducing use of direct cash assistance. To do so, programs condition cash benefits on employment related activities, including job searching, working a minimum number of hours per week, or attending school or job training. Beyond work-related requirements, some programs also require other behaviors of TANF participants, such as filing a child support order or requiring parents and children to complete health screenings. To encourage these behaviors, program participants may be sanctioned (e.g., reduction or full removal of benefits) for not fulfilling the requirements. Many studies have examined the immediate impacts of these policies, but the long-term effects of conditioned benefits and sanctions on the material wellbeing and health of families are not well understood.

TANF is a block grant program, meaning that states have broad discretion around implementing the program, creating considerable cross-state variation in the strictness and punitiveness of benefit conditions and sanctions. The decentralized, state administered nature of the program simulates "natural experiments" for researchers, providing opportunities to understand the effects of work-conditioned benefits on families' material wellbeing and health (Bruch, Meyers, and Gornick 2018; Hahn et al. 2017).

This project leverages the cross-state variation in policies to estimate the long-term impacts of program conditions and sanctions on the wellbeing of families who are low income. Specifically, this project focuses on how conditioning TANF benefits on a set of required activities (such as work requirements) and the use of punitive sanctions (such as benefit reductions or case closure) affect recipient's long-term material wellbeing and health. The project also examines whether the long-term impacts of conditions/sanctions are larger for participants in states with stricter (as measured by the required behaviors for program participation and the qualifying work-activities) or more punitive policies (as measured by the punishment or financial sanction for noncompliance).

## Relevant Behavioral Concepts

The paternalistic shift in welfare is partially demonstrated by the heightened supervision of participants and the additional conditioning of receipt on a set of required behaviors. Participant experiences of this "surveillance" as they try to meet program conditions or face sanctions for noncompliance may contribute to **system avoidance**: a generalized avoidance of other social assistance systems in which participants avoid similarly surveilled systems in

the future (Brayne 2014; Fong 2020). This avoidance may exacerbate experiences of hardships or health needs over time (Hughes 2021). In addition, **policy feedback** research indicates experiences with these policies can change participants' perceptions of government and their worth as citizens, contributing to reduced civic and political participation (Campbell 2012). Increased **administrative burden** is also tied to the paternalistic shift in welfare and may further impact participant behavior, as the policies restrict access and deter dependency by making it harder to apply for and maintain benefits (Herd and Moynihan 2018). Noncompliance could reflect the **learning and compliance costs** of program participation, or the burden participants face in learning about and meeting program requirements and rules, rather than a lack of desire to fulfill the requirements for program participation (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). Finally, participants may experience **psychological costs** due to facing stigma for participation in the publicly unpopular programs, along with the loss of autonomy and increased stress associated with participation (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015).

## Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. What are the long-term impacts of experiencing TANF benefit conditions and sanctions on participants' material hardship (food insecurity and housing instability) and health (depression/anxiety of mother; overall health of mother and child)?
  - a. **Hypothesis.** I expect that TANF participants who experience benefit conditions and sanctions will have more difficulty achieving financial security in the long-term due to loss of benefits and the associated burdens, thus leading to a higher long-term likelihood of experiencing material hardship and poor health.
2. Does the strictness and punitiveness of a states' TANF policies (e.g., job search requirements, financial sanctions for noncompliance, ongoing eligibility requirements, etc.) impact the material wellbeing and health of TANF participants living in that state in the long-term?
  - a. **Hypothesis.** I anticipate TANF participants who live in states with stricter conditions and more punitive sanctions will face greater learning, compliance, and psychological costs from program participation, be more likely to avoid social assistance systems in the future, and, thus, be more likely to experience material hardship and poor health in the long-term.

## Sample

This project uses data from the [Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study \(FFWCS\)](#). FFCWS is a multi-wave study covering 16 major US cities in 13 states. It follows 4,898 children born to new parents between 1998 and 2000 until the child reaches age 15 in 2013 through 2015.

To measure strictness of the conditions and the punitiveness of the sanctions imposed by state policy, this project uses the [Urban Institute's Welfare Rules Database \(WRD\)](#). WRD provides Welfare Dimensions Summary Scores (WDSS) for all 50 states. These scores cover a range of policy dimensions, including program activity requirements and activity-related sanctions from 1996 to 2018.

## Methods

This project uses a series of regression modeling strategies. To identify within-person trends overtime, I will estimate a difference-in-difference model. Difference-in-difference models allow for analysis of the average change in material hardship and health outcomes for the FFCWS participants who experienced a condition/sanction (the treatment)

compared to the participants who experience less strict or punitive ones or are exempt from the requirements. Analyses will account for confounding factors that may impact these relationships and the non-random selection into TANF programs. Additional models will leverage the exogenous state policy variation in the conditioning and sanctioning of benefits to isolate quasi-causal long-term estimates of the effects of paternalistic policies on material hardship and health.

## Practice and Policy Implications

This project informs the potential long-term implications of TANF cash benefit conditions and sanctions on participant wellbeing. This information is consequential to achieving the program's stated goals of reducing welfare dependence and increasing employment. It is also important to know if the program's behavioral interventions (e.g., job seeking activities, work/school/training requirements, or other TANF-participant behavior requirements) produce counterproductive social, economic, or health consequences for participants. The results from this research could inform the operation of social service programs like TANF, SNAP (food assistance), and Medicaid by furthering awareness of how the type of behavior-based interventions implemented impacts family wellbeing and participant behaviors. In addition, the results could inform how program administrators enforce conditions and impose sanctions. Finally, the project holds implications for policymakers, including informing the extent to which expanding these interventions across U.S. safety net programs is beneficial to families, specifically in programs targeting families who are low-income.

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## References

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