

research snapshot

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Welfare-to-Work Makes Lone Mothers More Vulnerable to Social and Economic Insecurity

What is this research about?

Welfare-to-work policies have been informed by neoliberal values in Canada and the US. Recent restructuring in the 21st century for welfare-to-work has seen a growth in the neoliberal value of “risk”. That is, the values of uncertainty, flexibility and individual actions that makes a person a “citizen” of the market. The experiences of lone mothers reveal that the “risk” values in welfare-to-work policies are a contradiction. They promise the prospects of work, income and stability, while making success harder for lone mothers to achieve.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers began by explaining the impact of “risk” on policy responses to welfare. In Canada and the US, policy puts a greater emphasis on individual responsibility rather than collective support, and on the individual’s ability to manage their own risks. They reviewed changes that emerged in welfare policies:

- in the US with the Temporary Aid for Need Families, under the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act;
- in Canada with the replacement of the Canadian Assistance Plan by the Canada Health and Social Transfer.

What you need to know:

Welfare-to-work policies have exposed lone mothers to greater social and economic insecurity. Thus, they are turned into greater “risks” rather than managers of risk.

- The researchers looked at three tenets of welfare-to-work policy in Canada and the US. They wanted to review the tensions and contradictions they brought on for lone mothers. This included a review of previous and ongoing primary research with lone mothers in Canada by the researchers, and secondary research on lone mothers’ experiences.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that the tenets of welfare-to-work policies brought tensions for lone mothers who depended on them.

1. A person must invest in their human capital and be a part of the labour market in order to navigate the growing global labour market. The researchers found that for lone mothers, becoming a “market citizen” gave them only short-term gains. For example, lone mothers were encouraged to gain more education

or complete routine job searches. But these actions did little to decrease the poverty they experienced, especially with the amount of part-time, low-pay and no-benefit jobs – especially in the fast food industry. The lack of stable quality child care also continued to grow in the lives of lone mothers.

2. Economic security is within a person's reach if their risks are managed in a proper and flexible way. Welfare policies assume that taking risks will result in gained income. But lone mothers do not have the social and economic resources to do so. They are usually expected to make decisions within the limits of welfare, and they are penalized by the loss of benefits if they do not. Part-time work fits into the family needs of lone mothers, but they are often overlooked as ideal choices for a job by employers.
3. As a "market citizen", lone mothers can gain more choice, opportunity and security with welfare support. While welfare-to-work reveals an effort to build work ethic in lone mothers, they are assumed to be equal to men in their access to opportune work. Their caregiving work is ignored with the assumption that all men and women are equal (or the same) market citizens. Their right to "mother" is curbed by the idea that the only form of economic security is paid work.

How can you use this research?

This research may be of good use to policymakers in any level of governance. It sheds useful insights on welfare policy trends in Canada and the US, as well as the tensions that have resulted. It may inform future reform in policies that address the experiences of lone mothers.

This research may be also be useful for frontline personnel like social workers. They may gain a stronger understanding on the experiences of lone mothers with the welfare system, which may also inform future practice and advocacy.

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