

Health benefits unlikely from lone parents welfare-to-work policies

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Improvements in health have been used to justify mandating employment for lone parents, but new research shows that their health is unlikely to improve under these measures.

The Cochrane Review, which is published today, was led by Dr Marcia Gibson from the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow. It indicates that welfare to work interventions probably have little to no effect on health, contrary to the assertions of successive governments. It also suggests that lone parents find work by themselves when jobs are available.

The review looked at a series of welfare to work studies, which compared what happened to lone parents who were in welfare to work interventions with lone parents who were not. The data analysed suggest that the effects of welfare to work interventions on health were probably too small to be noticeable.

The study also found that effects on employment rates were small, as those who were not in the interventions often found work on their own.

Key findings included:

- Although politicians have argued that such policies will have positive health benefits, the Cochrane review findings indicate that there is probably very little to no effect on health.
- Poverty and depression remained high among all participants in

the studies analysed, whether they took part in a welfare to work intervention or not.

- Lone parents appear to find work by themselves when jobs are available.
- Economic conditions may have a stronger influence on lone parent employment than interventions in the welfare system that mandate employment.
- Employment increased both for parents who were in welfare to work programmes and those who were not, but income did not increase.

Lead author of the review Dr Gibson said: "Successive British government administrations have argued that mandating employment for lone parents will increase employment, reduce poverty, and improve health for lone parents and their children.

"However, the evidence from our Cochrane Review indicates that welfare to work probably does not change lone parents' health and may have negative effects in some cases. In conjunction with evidence from other studies, our findings also suggest that economic conditions are likely to have a stronger influence on lone parent employment."

The studies included in the Cochrane Review were large welfare to work studies, conducted in North America, where welfare reform was implemented in the 1990s. These studies compared what happened to lone parents who were in welfare to work interventions with lone parents who were not, and the findings indicated that there was probably little to no effect on health, and effects on employment rates were quite small as those who were not in the interventions often found work on their own.

The authors argue that these findings are important because the perceived successes of North American welfare policy have had a strong and direct influence on the direction of policy in the UK under

successive UK administrations since 1997.

A linked review of qualitative studies on the same topic, which was conducted by the same author and published in BMC Public Health last year, suggested that welfare to work could have negative impacts on health and wellbeing.

Dr Gibson said: "Our previous qualitative review suggests that many lone parents linked welfare to work programmes with increased stress, anxiety and depression."

The Cochrane Review, "Welfare-to-work interventions and their effects on the mental and physical [health](#) of lone parents and their children," is published today. The MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow, is funded by the Medical Research Council and the Scottish Government Chief Scientist Office.

More information: Marcia Gibson et al. Welfare-to-work interventions and their effects on the mental and physical health of lone parents and their children, *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* (2017). [DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD009820.pub2](https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD009820.pub2)

Provided by University of Glasgow

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