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FOCUS ON RESEARCH

WELFARE TO WORK INTERVENTIONS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF LONE PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

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Background

The UK government is currently reforming the welfare system so that lone parents will be required to look for work when their youngest child is 5. Evidence on the effects of employment on the health of lone parents and their children is mixed, but it is known that lone parents and their children suffer from worse than average health. While evaluations of welfare reform in other countries have collected data on the health impacts of such reforms, this evidence has not been systematically reviewed.

Aim

To systematically review the evidence on the impacts on health outcomes of welfare to work interventions for lone parents and their children.

Project Outline/Methodology

We used systematic review methods to identify and extract evidence from evaluations of the health impacts of such interventions on lone parents and their children. We included randomised controlled trials of welfare to work (W2W) interventions which reported impacts on the physical or mental health of lone parents or their children. We developed a typology of interventions to allow analysis of impacts by intervention type. We also assessed the quality of the included studies. The review was registered with the Cochrane Collaboration.

Key Results

We found 9 W2W interventions, which were reported in 20 publications. All of the studies were conducted in North America. The interventions were complex and contained multiple components. They differed in ethos and approach; some aimed to reduce poverty by increasing income while some encouraged employment whether this increased income or not. They also used different approaches to promote employment; some encouraged training while others promoted swift placement in work. There were few significant impacts on maternal health, but a number of significant positive and negative impacts on child health were found. Although employment increased,

income did not increase for many, and in some cases there were small decreases. However, there were some issues with study quality, which must be borne in mind when considering the conclusions.

Conclusions

The health of lone parents does not appear to have been affected by participating in these W2W interventions. Children's health seems to have been affected more, with positive and negative impacts across different studies. It is possible that these effects were influenced by the type of intervention involved. The interventions reported here rarely improved the income of lone parents, even where efforts were made to do so. This may reflect the low quality of jobs accessible to lone parents. Many lone parents in the control groups also started working.

What does this study add to the field?

This study contributes to the evidence base around requiring lone parents to enter employment at a time when radical changes to the UK welfare system are underway. It also adds to the field of systematic reviews of social interventions by developing methodology for reviewing complex structural interventions.

Implications for Practice or Policy

This evidence is important because lone parents and their children are vulnerable to inequalities in health. The detailed findings of this review may have implications for the implementation and delivery of W2W programmes in the UK. In particular, evidence on the health impacts of different intervention types may inform the development of effective approaches to intervention.

Where to next?

This report is an overview of the findings so far. A detailed analysis will be presented in the forthcoming Cochrane review. Further research will include a review of qualitative evidence, analysis of secondary data and a longitudinal qualitative study of lone parents affected by welfare reform in the UK.

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