EmPwRing Families Beyond Survival: Distinguishing Conditional vs Unconditional Cash Supports in Child Welfare

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Abstract

Welfare programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), are designed to support low-income families by helping meet basic needs. However, these programs often include complex eligibility requirements and administrative burdens that create uncertainty for families. Following changes in federal policy, program requirements for restricted cash support can unexpectedly shift, leaving families vulnerable. In contrast, the Empower Parenting with Resources (EmPwR) program provides unconditional, unrestricted cash support to families involved in the child welfare system. Given the limited attention to flexible financial support programs, this study examines the differences between restricted and unrestricted cash support. In this study, 400 Illinois families participating in the EmPwR program and involved in intact family services receive approximately $500 per month for one year. Survey and interview data were analyzed to compare participants' descriptions of restricted, traditional assistance programs to unrestricted cash support through EmPwR. Early findings suggest flexible support, such as the EmPwR program, may better address families' needs than traditional welfare assistance. Future research should examine how reducing program restrictions may contribute to greater economic stability and improved family well-being.

Keywords: child welfare, EmPwR, financial assistance, unrestricted cash gifts

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INTRODUCTION

- Public assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (**SNAP),** Temporary Assistance for Needy Families **(TANF),** and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (**WIC)**, often include strict eligibility requirements and administrative barriers that can make benefits difficult to access.
- Research suggests that more flexible forms of financial support, including the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend, may reduce child welfare involvement.
  - **EITC:** Associated with reductions in child maltreatment, particularly neglect.
  - **Alaska Permanent Fund**: Annual cash payments (approximately $1,000) have been associated with fewer reports of child neglect, fewer referrals for physical abuse, and lower child mortality.
- **Empower Parenting with Resources (EmPwR)** is a randomized controlled trial examining the effects of unconditional cash gifts for Illinois families receiving intact family services.
- Although considerable research has examined traditional public assistance programs, relatively little is known about how unrestricted cash support influences family well-being and child maltreatment risk.
- This study compares key characteristics of the EmPwR program with traditional public assistance programs (SNAP, TANF, and WIC).

AIM

- Determine whether flexible resources better support families' needs.
- Compare restricted and unrestricted financial assistance specifically regarding eligibility, duration, and rules.
- Examine how findings can inform future child welfare and financial assistance programs.

METHODS

- Surveys
  - Baseline N= 259
  - 6 mo. N= 137
  - 12 mo. N= 59
- Interviews
  - N= 180
  - Common themes expressed throughout interviews include experiences with and perceptions of child welfare programs.

RESULTS

Program	%	Eligibility	Duration	Amount	Rules
EmPwR	100% enrolled; 50% randomized to treatment group	• Receive intact services at one of two specific agencies in IL • Main caregiver for child or children • Sign online consent forms • Speak English or Spanish	12 Months	Average $500/month	Unconditional and unrestricted
SNAP	Base: 52.1% 6 Mo: 56.5% 12 Mo: 65%	• Monthly gross income does not exceed limit • Legal documentation of citizenship and living situation • Complete application and provide documentation at interview • Adhere to work requirements	1 month - 3 years	$292 - $2,196	Restricted to food items
TANF	12 Mo: 5%	• Must be pregnant or have dependents • Be a citizen or certain immigration status • Adhere to work requirements • Have a self-sufficient plan • Complete application and provide documentation at interview	5 years (60 months total)	$342 - $3,184	Restricted to shelter, food, and utilities
WIC	Base: 15.5% 6 Mo: 19.8% 12 Mo: 13.3%	• Income cannot exceed maximum limit • Pregnant, or had a baby in the last 6 months • Stillbirth or miscarriage in the last 6 months • Have children under 5 • Mandatory 1st visit in-person	Case specific, generally birth to age 5	$11-$74 (monthly benefit amount)	Restricted to specific food packages

*"With the **TANF**...**those programs aren't for everybody**, because if you've got a special needs kid at home...I don't really have the capacity to parent him and then turn around and go deal with other people for 20 hours a week."*
-Single mother of 3, part-time variable work, treatment group

*"I have to report SSI to everything... So if I get SSI, **it counts against us for any other social programs**...It [**EmPwR**] **was such a big help**...I wish it was something the state would implement, you know, just for-for every low-income [family]. **It would prevent a lot of things.**"*
-Mother of 2, treatment group

*"... they just **didn't offer it because maybe I don't qualify**...there are a lot of things they haven't offered me for that very reason. **It's a little more complicated.**"*
-Single mother of 6, control group

*"And the formula, if you get **WIC**, you **only get so much of that** and then you have to **buy some out of pocket**. So it was constantly trying to save up money to be able to afford formula because **you can't let your kid go hungry.**"*
-Mother of 4, control group

DISCUSSION

- Supports with more restrictions can be difficult to utilize due to strict eligibility requirements, documentation demands, and unstable access to benefits.
- In contrast, EmPwR's unconditional cash support allows families greater flexibility to meet immediate and individualized household needs.
- Findings suggest that flexible financial assistance may better support family stability and reduce barriers within the child welfare system.
- Future research should continue examining the long-term effects of unrestricted cash support on family well-being and child welfare outcomes.
- Results may help inform more flexible, family-centered child welfare services and financial assistance programs.

LIMITATIONS

- The EmPwR study is currently limited to families receiving intact services through two partner organizations in Illinois.
- TANF was not included in the baseline or 6-month surveys, limiting comparisons across all study time points.
- Findings are based on self-reported survey and interview data.

CONCLUSION

- Findings highlight the potential of unconditional cash support to reduce barriers associated with traditional assistance programs and support more family-centered approaches to financial assistance within the child welfare system.

Key Takeaways:

- Compared the accessibility of traditional assistance programs and EmPwR's unconditional cash support.
- Highlighted participants' experiences navigating child welfare and financial assistance programs.
- Demonstrated the potential of flexible financial supports to better address families' individualized needs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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