





one significant material hardship beyond insufficient income from wages such as food insecurity, substandard housing, housing insecurity, or economic insecurity, variously defined.

- Mothers also have multiple obstacles to employment and to a greater degree, on some obstacles, than do mothers in the general welfare population. Common obstacles to employment were transportation (74.1%), lack of a high school education or a GED (48.1%), and a substance use problem (48.1%). Mothers with co-occurring obstacles to employment, especially obstacles posed by substance dependence, are less likely to be employed than are mothers without such problems.

*For example*, mothers with co-occurring mental health and substance use obstacles to employment were about 84% less likely to be employed than were mothers who did not have those barriers ( $B=1.81$ ,  $\text{Exp}\{B\}=.016$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

- Moreover, children whose mothers abuse substances are reunified more slowly within 12 months of their placements than are children whose mothers do not; however, the effect of abuse on reunification speed is mediated through its effect on loss of cash assistance.
- In brief, two proportional hazard models that test whether loss of income mediates the relationship between substance use and reunification were tested. When the results of the models are compared, it is clear that when the mediating variable is removed (loss of cash assistance), there is a statistically significant relationship between mother substance use and reunification speed ( $p < .05$ ). These findings strongly support the hypothesis that although a mother's substance use influences reunification, the effect operates mainly through the effect a mother's use has on her loss of cash assistance post-placement.
- Three quarters of mothers expected their children to return home, but stated they needed concrete material assistance pertaining to, for example, housing and transportation in order for reunification to occur. Difficulties meeting the agency's expectations centered on lack of financial resources, conflicts between work and caring for others, and substance dependence.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this project suggest that families involved in the child welfare system or at risk of such involvement have not fared well under conditions of welfare reform. The project's authors offer these recommendations for consideration before Congress votes on renewal of this legislation.

### Income Support as a Child Welfare Intervention

Most mothers are unlikely to have access to the income needed to support their children during the first year of their child's placement. The mother can receive cash assistance from Ohio Works First at the same level for up to 6 months following the removal of a child. This restriction may further undermine the mother's ability to regain custody of the child.

Long-term income support for mothers should be considered a critical child welfare intervention, and its potential to increase rates of reunification should be explored further. While mothers seek to improve their work capabilities, methods to increase their income could include cash assistance, payment for education or job training, wage subsidies, or child support from children's fathers.

### Long-term Psychiatric Support as a Child Welfare Intervention

Substance dependence delays or prevents mothers from regaining custody of their children and makes the child welfare system a de facto drug treatment system. Moreover, current approaches to treatment may be ineffective or inappropriate to treat mothers' with both substance dependence and mental health problems.

Implementation of evidence-based practices for women with dual diagnoses within the child welfare system, specifically those with substance dependence and mental health problems, should be a high priority. In addition, a more flexible child welfare policy with respect to permanency planning deadlines than the one we have at present would allow mothers to create momentum toward recovery and to retain the hope of regaining custody of their children permanently.

