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ABSTRACT

An examination of the way welfare reform is presented in the national news media can provide insight into which aspects of the reform news consumers consider important. This study used a content analysis to examine all stories about welfare reform in the national press from: (1) June through August 1996, during which time the federal legislation was debated and enacted; and (2) June through August 1997, during which time legislation was being implemented at the state level. Content of 680 stories was examined for: the welfare issues addressed; main focus; discussion of impact of the reform and how it affects children; length; and photo content. Findings indicated that the most frequent story focus was on the potential and actual impact of the reform, with politics also a frequent focus. Children were the primary focus of 6 percent of articles and received a limited discussion in 38 percent. The Los Angeles Times contained more welfare reform stories that other sources, although The New York Times featured the most articles focusing on children. A greater percentage of editorials addressed children's issues than any other article type. Impact of welfare reform was most frequently discussed in terms of government budgets. The impact of reform on children's lives was discussed most frequently in general terms. Based on the findings, it was concluded that framing the welfare reform issue primarily as one that affects public budgets can have consequences on how news consumers perceive the issue, and vote or act upon it. (KB)

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CHILDREN NOW

Content Analysis on Welfare Reform Reporting

Children & Welfare Reform

High Stakes, Low Coverage

Conducted by Katharine Heintz-Knowles
Assistant Professor of Communications
University of Washington

for Children Now
January 1998

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Content Analysis on Welfare Reform Reporting

Children and Welfare Reform: High Stakes, Low Coverage

Conducted by Katharine Heintz-Knowles
Assistant Professor of Communications
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INTRODUCTION

Welfare reform dominated the news across the nation in 1996 and 1997. In 1996, Congress ended Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and restructured assistance to America's poorest families with a new program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In 1997, states began to take on the challenge of reshaping their own benefit programs for poor families. **Of the 12.6 million Americans directly affected by these actions, two-thirds (8.7 million) are children.**

In September 1997, Children Now commissioned this content study of national welfare reform print coverage to examine the extent to which media reporting addresses children. Including children in such news coverage is particularly important because the stakes for children in welfare reform are higher than for adults. Poor children are among the most vulnerable people in this country and welfare reform has the potential to impact their lives in deep and permanent ways. Welfare policies affect children's housing, nutrition, health, child care arrangements, and parental time available. The new welfare policy environment will impact nearly one in eight American children and therefore, bears tremendous consequences for the future of this nation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NEWS MEDIA

Nearly 50 years ago, sociologist Harold Lasswell (1948) identified one of the major functions of the press as *surveillance*. Much like sentries in other societies, Lasswell argued, the press perform the function of surveying the environment and alerting the members of society to conditions and/or changes in the environment that concern them. As societies became more complex and global connections between them increased, the surveillance function of the press took on even more importance. In modern industrialized societies, citizens rely on the press to keep them informed about the events and issues – both domestic and international – that impact their lives.

Given this reliance, it is no surprise that research consistently indicates that those issues and topics that get press attention are also those issues and topics that are identified by news consumers as important to their society. For example, during election campaigns, the news media are often instrumental in educating voters about the issues and in encouraging citizens to vote (Weaver, 1994). Public concern about other issues has also been shown to be influenced by media coverage. Ader (1995) demonstrated how public concern about environmental pollution in the U.S. over a 20-year period rose and fell along with the level of news attention paid to the issue. This phenomenon – labeled **agenda setting** – suggests that the news media, through their decisions regarding inclusion and exclusion of issues and topics, set the public agenda for discussion. Issues that receive a great deal of news attention are more likely to be perceived as important – and therefore worthy of public attention and discussion – than issues that receive little or no news coverage. Following this, it is reasonable to expect that the particular topics discussed within the context of selected issues can influence the dimensions considered important by news consumers.

This study examines one topic on the news agenda – welfare reform – and examines the way it was presented in the national news media at two time periods. A close examination of news coverage of this particular issue can provide some insight into which aspects of the reform news consumers in the U.S. might consider important or unimportant.

METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on the coverage of welfare reform in the national press for two time periods: 1) June - August 1996, during which time the federal legislation was debated and enacted; and 2) June - August 1997, during which time legislation was being implemented at the state level. Using computerized news databases (NEXIS and Dow Jones News Service), all stories about welfare reform were identified and collected from the following national news sources: *The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Associated Press, Time, Newsweek,* and *U.S. News and World Report*. These sources were selected because they are among the foremost national news organizations in the U.S. and their content is often included in news media around the country. In this way, these sources may set the news agenda for communities nationwide.

This sample of news coverage was subjected to a systematic analysis used to categorize the stories along a number of descriptive dimensions. The coding judgments were performed by a group of three graduate students working under close supervision of the study's author. Consistency in judgments across coders was assessed using randomly-assigned pair-wise comparisons which yielded reliability coefficients exceeding 90% for all of the variables reported.

Stories were examined for the welfare issues addressed, main focus, inclusion of discussion of impacts of the reform and how the reform impacts children, length and photo contents. The analysis included breaking news articles, feature stories, editorials, and op/ed columns. Letters to the editor were not included for analysis.

RESULTS

Story Sources and Frequency

This study yielded a total of 680 stories. Approximately 63% of the articles appeared in 1996, when the legislation was being debated and voted on. The vast majority of the stories (84%) were from the daily newspapers and most (70%) were breaking news stories. Although the primary purpose of the study was to provide an overall assessment of news coverage of welfare reform, rather than to compare and contrast the individual accomplishments of the news agencies studied, it is interesting to note some of the differences observed in study sources. The *Los Angeles Times* printed the largest number of articles in the sample (N=165) and its coverage was about evenly split between the two years. For most of the other sources, the bulk of the coverage was in 1996. *The New York Times, The Washington Post* and *Associated Press* each featured approximately twice as many articles in 1996 than in 1997.

Table 1: Total Number of Welfare Reform Articles by Year

Publication Source	Year of Publication		Total
	1996	1997	
Associated Press	62	32	94
Los Angeles Times	83	82	165
The New York Times	109	53	162
USA Today	33	19	52
The Wall Street Journal	28	20	48
The Washington Post	98	44	142
Newsweek	5	0	5
Time	7	2	9
U.S. News & World Report	0	3	3
Total	425	255	680

Table 2: Article Type by Year

Article Type	Year of Publication		Total
	1996	1997	
Breaking news/hard news	296	182	478
Feature story	40	29	69
Editorial	30	13	43
Op/ed	59	31	90
Total	425	255	680

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Primary Focus of Articles

Table 3 shows the primary focus of the articles by year of publication. The most frequent focus of welfare reform articles was on the potential and actual impacts of the reform (N=257). Politics, both in terms of the legislative process and in terms of political party strategies, was also a frequent article focus, especially during 1996 (N=228 for the political measures combined). Children were the focus of just 40 articles (6% of the total sample).

Even though children were the focus of 40 articles, they were identified in just 29 article headlines or sub-headlines. Table 4 shows the frequency of inclusion of children in the headlines and/or sub-headlines of the articles coded.

Table 3: Focus of Article by Year

Primary Focus	1996	1997	Total
Impacts of reform	145	112	257
Political/legislative process	110	55	165
Program descriptions	34	35	69
Partisan politics	56	7	63
Children's issues	33	7	40
Fiscal/budget issues	13	5	18
Profile of recipient/family	8	9	17
Historical perspective	4	0	4
Other	22	25	47
Total	425	255	680

Table 4: Frequency of Mention of Children in Headlines

	Frequency	Percent
In the headline only	25	3.7%
In headline & sub-headline	2	0.3%
In sub-headline only	2	0.3%
Not mentioned in the headlines	651	95.7%
Total	680	100.0%

Articles Focusing on Children – Highlights

"Welfare Reform in Name Only" by David T. Ellwood, The New York Times

The op/ed clearly defines the reform legislation as a children's issue and shows how many of the different parts of the legislation will impact children.

"Workfare Plan Stretches Child Care Thin" by Robert Imrie (AP), Los Angeles Times

The article directly explores the impact of welfare reform on children by telling individuals' stories, while also providing statistical evidence that their experiences are not unique.

"Guarantees for the Children" by John D. Deardourff, The Washington Post

The op/ed characterizes welfare as a children's program and discusses the impact of the proposed reforms primarily in terms of how they will affect children's lives.

"A Third of Poor Kids in Working Families, Study Says" by Diane Duston, Associated Press

The article discusses the results of a report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation about the economic roots of poverty and its effects on families. It discusses welfare reform as one option for dealing with the hardships faced by poor families and adds a case study of a poor family in addition to information from the report.

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Characteristics of Stories that Discussed Children

Children were the primary focus of just 40 articles (6%). In 257 articles or slightly over one-third (38%), there was a discussion of children, in most cases a limited one. For each article in the sample, coders determined if children were the *main focus* of the article (defined as discussed in more than 50% of the total article); if children received *significant discussion* (between 25% and 50% of the article discussed children); if children received *limited discussion* (less than 25% of the article); or if children were not discussed.

Table 5: Frequency of Discussion of Children by Year

Discussion of Children in the Article	Year of Publication		Total
	1996	1997	
Primary focus			
Count	33	7	40
% of total	5%	1%	6%
Significant discussion			
Count	51	10	61
% of total	8%	1%	9%
Limited discussion			
Count	109	47	156
% of total	16%	7%	23%
No discussion			
Count	232	191	423
% of total	34%	28%	62%
Total			
Count	425	255	680
% of total	63%	38%	100%

News Sources

Although the *Los Angeles Times* contained more stories overall on welfare reform, the source featuring the most articles in which children were the main focus or subject of significant discussion was *The New York Times*. For *The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, USA Today,* and *The Washington Post,* about half of all 1996 articles had at least some discussion of children. For 1997, none of the news agencies showed sustained focus on children, even though many of the reforms implemented in 1997 had a direct impact on child welfare recipients.

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Table 6: Focus on Children in Article by News Source & Year

News Agency	Year of Publication 1996	1997	Total
Associated Press	19	10	29
Primary focus	1	—	1
Significant discussion	—	2	2
Limited discussion	18	8	26
Los Angeles Times	37	25	62
Primary focus	7	3	10
Significant discussion	7	5	12
Limited discussion	23	17	40
The New York Times	57	14	71
Primary focus	14	2	16
Significant discussion	22	2	24
Limited discussion	21	10	31
USA Today	16	5	21
Primary focus	3	1	4
Significant discussion	5	1	6
Limited discussion	8	3	11
The Wall Street Journal	6	2	8
Primary focus	—	1	1
Significant discussion	—	—	—
Limited discussion	6	1	7
The Washington Post	51	8	59
Primary focus	6	—	6
Significant discussion	17	—	17
Limited discussion	28	8	36
Newsweek Magazine	4	—	4
Primary focus	1	—	1
Significant discussion	—	—	—
Limited discussion	3	—	3
Time Magazine	3	—	3
Primary focus	1	—	1
Significant discussion	—	—	—
Limited discussion	2	—	2
U.S. News & World Report	—	—	—
Primary focus	—	—	—
Significant discussion	—	—	—
Limited discussion	—	—	—

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Article Type

Children were most likely to be the focus of breaking news stories, primarily because most of the articles about welfare reform fell into this category. Although smaller in number, a greater percentage of editorials addressed children's issues than any other type of article. Forty-nine percent (49%) of the editorials coded (21 out of 43) and 41% of the op/eds (37 out of 90) contained at least some discussion of children.

Table 7: Discussion of Children in Article by Article Type

Article Type	Focus on Children in Article				Total
	Primary Focus	Significant Discussion	Limited Discussion	No Discussion	
Breaking news/hard news					
Count	24	39	100	315	478
% of total	5%	8%	21%	66%	100%
Feature story					
Count	4	7	25	33	69
% of total	6%	10%	36%	48%	100%
Editorial					
Count	5	5	11	22	43
% of total	12%	12%	26%	51%	100%
Op/ed					
Count	7	10	20	53	90
% of total	8%	11%	22%	59%	100%
Total					
Count	40	61	156	423	680
% of total	6%	9%	23%	62%	100%

Article Length

Table 8 presents the mean length of stories by article focus. The average length of articles included in this study was 911 words. Articles with a primary focus on children were shorter than average. Articles that included some discussion of children were longer than average.

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Table 8: Average Length of Article by Article Focus

Article Focus	Mean Length in Words
Profile of recipient/family N=17	1539
Program descriptions N=69	1017
Impacts of reform N=257	962
Fiscal/budget issues N=18	934
Partisan politics N=63	900
Children's issues N=40	810
Political/legislative process N=165	744
Historical perspective N=4	646
Other N=47	865
All articles N=680	911

In Table 9, a more in-depth analysis of story length relative to the focus on children is presented.

Table 9: Average Length of Articles by Focus on Children

Focus on Children in Article	Mean Length in Words
Some discussion of children N=257	1067
Primary focus on children N=40	810
Significant discussion N=61	1029
Limited discussion N=156	1147
No discussion of children N=423	807
All articles N=680	911

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Context for Discussion of Children

Many of the articles included some discussion of the impacts of welfare reform. These impacts were categorized according to the target of the impact. Table 10 shows the emphases in discussion of impact. NOTE: Some articles discussed more than one type of impact. Each discussion of an impact was coded, so the total number of impacts is larger than the total number of articles in each sample.

The impact of welfare reform was most frequently discussed in terms of federal/state/county budgets (N=147 articles, 21.6% of the sample). Seventeen percent of articles (N=118) discussed the impact of welfare reform on federal and state governments. Employment levels was the third most frequently examined impact and children's well-being was the fourth.

Table 10: Impacts Discussed in Articles

	Total Articles (N=680)	
Impacts On:	**Number**	**Percent**
Budgets - federal, state, county	147	21.6%
Federal to state control shift	118	17.4%
Employment	108	15.9%
Children's well-being	107	15.7%
Adult behaviors (e.g. seeking work)	79	11.6%
Welfare caseloads	78	11.5%
Adult well-being	54	7.9%
Immigrants	47	6.9%
General impacts	38	5.6%
Welfare bureaucracy	31	4.6%
Total	807	

Indicators of Children's Well-Being

Coders examined more closely the discussion of welfare reform impacts on children. Impacts were classified according to a number of indicators of child well-being, such as children's poverty or health care. Table 11 shows the frequency of discussion of each of the individual impacts.

One hundred seven articles discussed the impact of welfare reform on children's lives; 128 separate impacts were discussed in these articles. The impact of welfare reform on children's lives was discussed most frequently in general terms (N=40). Children's housing, safety, cognitive development, and nutrition were the least frequently addressed impacts of reform, discussed in less than 1% of all articles in the sample.

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Table 11: Discussion of Impacts of Welfare Reform on Children

Impacts on:	Number of Mentions	Percent of Articles
General impact	40	5.9%
Children's poverty level	27	4.0%
Children's health	20	2.9%
Child care	16	2.4%
Children's future	8	1.2%
Children's cognitive development	5	0.7%
Children's nutrition	5	0.7%
Children's housing	3	0.4%
Children's safety	1	0.2%

Welfare Issue Addressed

Welfare reform involves a variety of programs and issues, many of which have direct impact on the lives of American children. For each article in the sample, the major welfare issue addressed was identified and coded. Table 12 presents the frequency of focus on the different welfare issues. Approximately one-third of the articles in this sub-sample focused on a specific program. Most of the articles addressed multiple welfare issues or featured a general discussion of welfare reform.

Table 12: Major Welfare Issue Addressed

Major Issue Addressed	Number	Percent of All Articles
Multiple issues addressed	262	39%
General welfare reform	176	26%
Job training/workfare	99	15%
Cash aid (AFDC or TANF)	40	6%
Medicaid/Medi-Cal	25	4%
Food stamps	23	3%
Supplemental security income	7	1%
Child care	7	1%
Other	41	6%
Total	680	100%

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Photo Contents

Children appeared in just 17 photographs accompanying the articles (15% of all photos). Public officials or adult welfare recipients were twice as likely as children to be featured in accompanying photographs.

Table 13: Contents of Photos in Articles with Some Discussion of Children

Photo Contents	Frequency	Percent of Photos
Public officials	29	25%
Adult welfare recipients	27	24%
Children/families	14	12%
Welfare workers, government employees	8	7%
Children with public officials	3	3%
Other/unknown	33	29%
Total	114	100%

CONCLUSIONS

This examination of news coverage of welfare reform indicates that children's issues were underrepresented in terms of children's stake in the legislation. While over two-thirds of welfare recipients are children, they were discussed in just over one-third of the articles in the sample (N=257), and were the primary focus of only 6% of all articles (N=40). Children were rarely mentioned in the headlines of articles. Articles with a focus on children tended to be shorter than average.

The impact of welfare reform was a frequent focus of the articles sampled. However, the impact on children's well-being ranked fourth behind other considerations, including federal/state/county budgets, the control shift from federal to state governments and employment levels. When impacts on children were discussed, it was most often in general terms.

These characteristics are important when considering the agenda-setting role of the news media. Most Americans rely on the news media for information about political issues – and use that information to judge the importance of these issues. If people are to do what's best for children, they must be informed about how policies, such as welfare reform, impact the child population. Framing the issue primarily as one that impacts public budgets or the political process can have consequences in how news consumers perceive the issue, and hence, vote or act upon it. Recognizing that the sources sampled in this study are all influential national publications, it is likely that the agenda set by these publications is reflected in smaller publications nationwide.

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Children Now is a nonprofit, independent voice for children, working to translate the nation's commitment to children and families into action. Children Now combines policy expertise and up-to-date communications strategies that reach parents, lawmakers, citizens, business, media and community leaders to generate positive change on behalf of children. With particular concern for those who are poor or at risk, Children Now is committed to improving conditions for all children. Founded in 1988, Children Now is a national organization with special depth in California.

This project is a joint effort of Children Now's Working Families and Children & the Media Programs. The Working Families Program fosters children's healthy development through better support for low-income working families. The Children & the Media Program works to improve media for children and about children's issues.

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Children & Welfare Reform

High Stakes, Low Coverage

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Content Analysis on Welfare Reform Reporting
A Report by Children Now

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Welfare reform dominated the news across the nation in 1996 and 1997. In 1996, Congress ended Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and restructured assistance to America's poorest families with a new program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In 1997, states began to take on the challenge of reshaping their own benefit programs for poor families. Of the 12.6 million Americans directly affected by these actions, two-thirds (8.7 million) are children.

In September 1997, Children Now commissioned a content study of national welfare reform print coverage to examine the extent to which media reporting addressed children. Professor Katharine Heintz-Knowles of the University of Washington conducted the study, analyzing newspaper and magazine coverage in a sample of the nation's most prominent publications from June through August 1996 and June through August 1997.

This summary provides highlights of the findings. In short, a mere fraction of news stories discuss children, an amount that neither represents children's proportion in the welfare caseload nor their enormous stake in the outcome of these policy discussions.

Underrepresentation of children in welfare reform news coverage influences the perceptions of both decision-makers and the public at large. By missing this large piece of the story, underreporting may give people the misimpression that children are a small number of those receiving welfare and that the quality of their lives is not an important consideration in the policy debate. Neither is true.

Including children in such news coverage is particularly important because the stakes for children in welfare reform are even higher than for adults. Poor children are among the most vulnerable people in this country and welfare reform has the potential to impact their lives in deep and permanent ways. Welfare policies affect children's housing, nutrition, health, child care arrangements and parental time available. The new welfare policy environment will impact nearly 1 in 8 American children and therefore, bears tremendous consequences for the future of this nation.

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Most Welfare Reform Stories Do Not Discuss Children.

- Only 6% of articles contain a primary focus on children and just another 9% contain a significant discussion of children.

- Two-thirds of welfare reform articles contain no discussion of children.

- Just 4% of headlines mention children.

- The editorial page (editorials and op/eds) has the best record of addressing children with 23% of editorials and 19% of op/eds having a primary focus on or significant discussion of children, compared to 13% of breaking news stories.

- Articles written in 1996 are about three times as likely as 1997 articles to have a primary focus on or contain significant discussion of children. Twenty percent (20%) of 1996 articles primarily focus on or significantly discuss children compared to 7% in 1997.

- *The New York Times* had the best record of focusing on children, with 16 articles containing a primary focus on children (10% of all *New York Times* articles) and 24 including a significant discussion of children during the two time periods studied. The *Los Angeles Times* was second, with 10 articles primarily focusing on children (6% of all *Los Angeles Times* articles) and 12 articles containing significant discussion.

- The articles that primarily center on a profile of a welfare recipient or family are significantly longer (1,539 words) than those primarily addressing other aspects of welfare reform (911 words).

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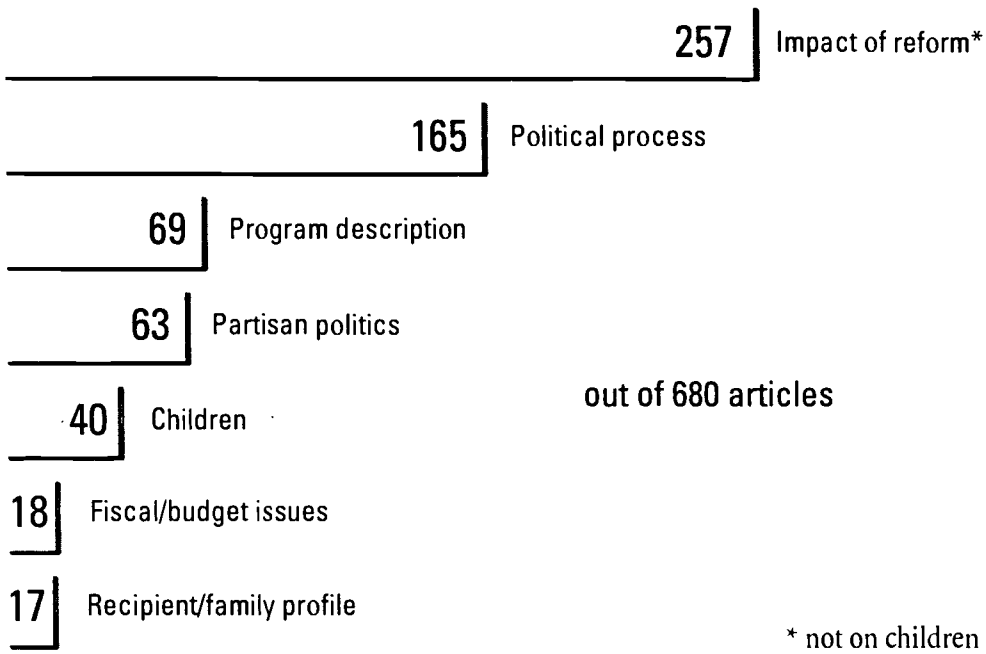
Primary Focus of Article



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Stories were examined for the welfare issues addressed, main focus, discussion of impacts of the reform and how the reform impacts children, length, and photo contents. The analysis included breaking news articles, feature stories, editorials and op/ed columns. Letters to the editor were not included. For more information on methodology, please refer to full content study report.

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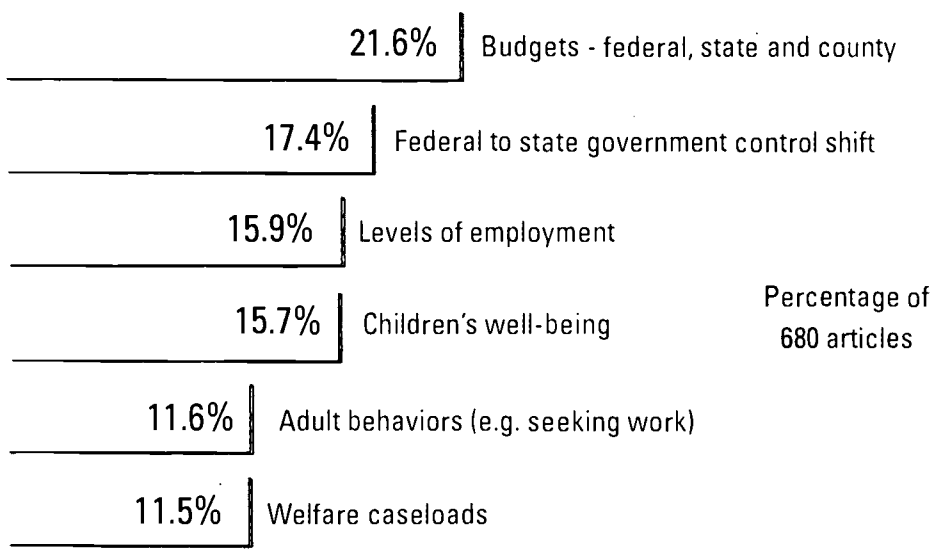
Less Than One-Sixth of Articles Include Any Discussion of Welfare Reform's Impact On Children's Well-Being.

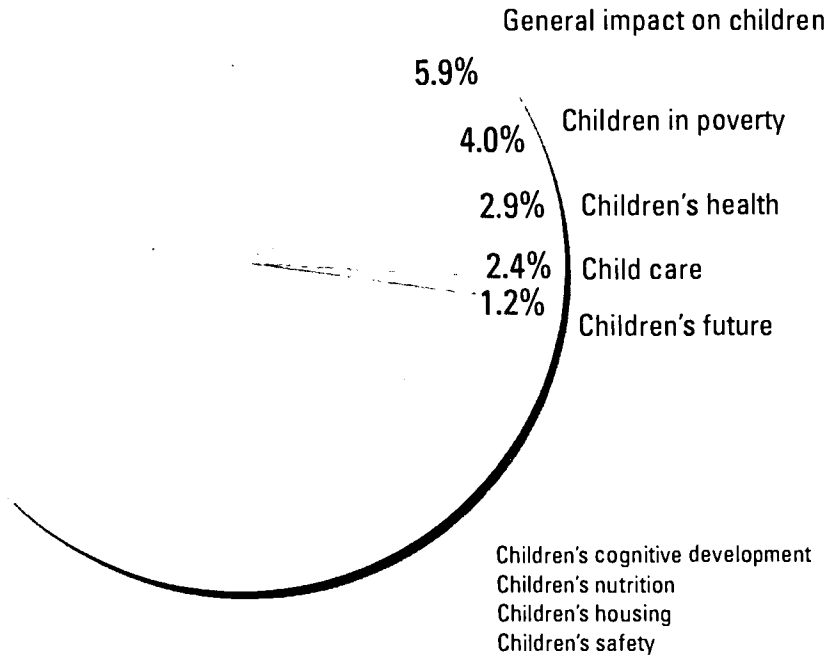
Welfare Reform's Impact: Areas Addressed



Two-thirds of welfare recipients are children.

Coverage of Welfare Reform's Impact on Children

Total articles in study: 680



Children's Well-Being is Most Often Discussed in General Terms.

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Resources for Reporters

In addition to the selected national organizations below, Children Now's web site (www.childrennow.org) lists additional national resources, plus state and county contacts for California.

Center for Law and Social Policy
(202) 328-5140
www.clasp.org
Publishes welfare research and updates on welfare policies and activities.

Children Now
(510) 763-2444
www.childrennow.org
Publishes California welfare reform updates and resource lists; maintains comprehensive data on children's well-being.

Children's Defense Fund
(202) 628-8787
www.childrensdefense.org
Publishes national welfare reform updates and analyses; referrals to activities on behalf of children nationwide.

Coalition for America's Children
(202) 638-5770
www.kidscampaigns.org
Provides referrals to children's organizations throughout the country and strategies for individual involvement.

Families and Work Institute
(212) 465-8637
www.familiesandworkinst.org
Conducts policy and worksite research on the changing workforce and changing family/personal lives.

National Association of Child Advocates
(202) 289-0777
www.childadvocacy.org
A network of state- and community-based children's advocacy groups in 39 states and 9 cities and communities.

National Center for Children and Poverty
(212) 304-7100
cpmcnet.columbia.edu/dept/nccp
Publishes issue briefs on children and welfare reform, as well as other poverty-related issues.

Urban Institute
(202) 833-7200
www.urban.org
UI's multi-year New Federalism project is tracking welfare reform and child outcomes in all 50 states.

Welfare Information Network
(202) 628-5790
www.welfareinfo.org
An information clearinghouse on welfare reform analyses and activities around the nation.

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Coverage Ideas

1. Take the opportunity at press conferences on welfare (or other issues affecting families) to ask policy makers what the impact of that day's announcement will be on children. Ask the same of non-governmental organizations.

2. Use your stories to challenge common stereotypes of welfare recipients and other families struggling to make ends meet. Let your readers know that two-thirds of all people on welfare are children.

3. As the reforms continue to be implemented in 1998 and 1999, examine the effects on children — those receiving welfare and those in low-income working families.

4. When important information on how children are affected is unavailable, make that part of your story.

5. When comparing implementation in different states, focus on a family in each state and/or compare a measure of child well-being (e.g., the percentage of children living in poverty) from each state.

6. Follow several families receiving welfare and/or working in low-wage jobs. Report periodically on their transition through these changes. Highlight the changes that the children experience.

7. If the broader story is about an aspect of reform not directly related to children (e.g., new welfare-to-work numbers), consider creating a sidebar to highlight the impact on children.

8. Talk to children and youth often, consulting them about your coverage as well as including them in your stories.

9. Explore solutions to the problems children may face in welfare reform implementation (e.g., inadequate child care, unstable housing) and examine obstacles to those solutions.

10. Follow up on stories about children. Return in six months and see what has happened to programs covered earlier, whether obstacles have been removed and how children have fared in the meantime.

Conclusion

Children Now developed this study to help the media reflect on its coverage of a critical issue that is certain to remain in the spotlight. In the years ahead, the story will gain even more dimensions as both children receiving welfare and children in low-income working families are affected by these policy changes. Our project has been undertaken in a spirit of partnership and collaboration with the news media with the goal of achieving accurate, comprehensive reporting of important children's issues.

For a copy of the full content study report, please contact Children Now, 1212 Broadway, 5th floor, Oakland, CA 94612, (510) 763-2444.

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