



Prepared for the Welfare Expert Advisory Group

Obligations and Sanctions Rapid Evidence Review Paper 8: Work Obligations for Sole Parents and Outcomes for Children

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Executive summary

This rapid evidence review summarises evidence on the effects of work obligations for sole parents receiving welfare benefits on outcomes for children.

Current settings are that Sole Parent Support (SPS) recipients in New Zealand (NZ) have part-time work obligations if they have a youngest child aged between three and 13 years. Sole parents with a youngest child aged 14 years or over generally receive Jobseeker Support (JS) and have full-time work obligations. If an additional child (either a new-born or an older child) is included in a sole parent's benefit, work obligations can apply from when that child turns one, depending on the age of the next youngest child.

Internationally, the age-of-youngest-child threshold at which work obligations apply is three in the United Kingdom (UK), France, Germany, Norway and Switzerland, six in Australia, and 14 in Ireland. Age thresholds are lower than three in many states in the United States (US) and Canadian provinces. In Nordic countries, there is generally an expectation that most sole parents are able to find work once parental leave ends.

Evidence from experimental and quasi-experimental impact studies on the effects of work obligations for sole parents on outcomes for children is mixed, and its generalisability to the NZ setting is unclear. Available studies, which are mainly from the US, suggest different (and sometimes conflicting) impacts for children of different ages and in different areas of life.

Results from both impact and qualitative studies are, however, consistent in suggesting that positive impacts require supportive accompanying policies (the availability of in-work financial incentives and affordable centre-based early childhood education and out-of-school care and recreation services especially). An increase in employment that does not also raise income is unlikely to have positive impacts in the near term. Informal childcare, which is often reported as valued by parents interviewed in qualitative studies, is associated with negative, or less positive, effects for younger children in impact studies.

In impact studies, more stringent application of work obligations, and application of work obligations when children are very young, appears to have more negative effects. In qualitative studies, a heavy emphasis on sanctions is reported by parents to be a source of financial and psychological distress.

Evidence for adolescents suggests some positive effects on retention in school, mixed results for teenage birth rates, and negative effects on educational outcomes from reduced supervision or increased responsibilities in the home. The net effect, and the

degree to which these effects are the result of work obligations, rather than other elements of welfare reforms, is unclear.

This evidence base **does not offer a firm guide to the age of youngest child at which work obligations should apply**. However it does caution against applying work obligations to parents with very young children. It also highlights the need to take account of adolescents' needs, and reinforces the need for supportive accompanying policies, flexibility, and a balance between sanctions and support in implementation.

Purpose

This rapid review provides an overview of:

- NZ's **current settings** for work obligations for sole parents
- How NZ compares in **international comparisons** of the age of youngest child at which obligations apply
- **Evidence from experimental and quasi-experimental studies** on the effects of work obligations for sole parents, with a focus on effects on children
- Findings from **contextual studies**, including qualitative research.

A separate paper in this series (Paper 1) provides an overview of the use of obligations and sanctions in welfare benefit policy, covering their rationale, frameworks for understanding how they might influence behaviour and outcomes, ways of categorising studies and effects, and approaches that might help minimise the need for sanctions to be used as a means of achieving public policy goals.

Current settings

Over the period 1997-2010, **work obligations** for sole parents receiving NZ welfare benefits were applied (1997), strengthened (1999), removed (2003), and then applied once more (2010). Obligations were then strengthened in October 2012, and again in April 2016 (McKenzie, 2018; MSD, 2007; Rea, unpublished draft).

Currently, Sole Parent Support (SPS) recipients have part-time work obligations if they have a youngest child aged between three and 13 years. Sole parents with a youngest child aged 14 years or over generally receive Jobseeker Support (JS) rather than SPS, and have full-time work obligations.

If an additional child is included in benefit, the sole parent has work preparation obligations until the child turns 12 months of age. The additional child may be a new-born or an older child, and may be the child of the sole parent, or in their care. When the additional child turns 12 months of age, the sole parent's obligations are based on the age of the next youngest child (eg part-time work obligations apply if the next youngest child is aged four, full-time work obligations apply if the next youngest child is aged 14).

The 'work test obligations' that apply when a client has work obligations are described in Paper 2 in this series

Work preparation obligations apply to SPS clients with a youngest dependent child aged under three years. These obligations can include planning for employment, reporting to Work and Income on progress in meeting obligations, attending interviews with Work and Income, or undertaking an activity to improve work readiness. The exact mix of activities may differ based on individual circumstances.

If a client does not meet their work or work preparation obligations without a good and sufficient reason then an obligations failure will be initiated and a sanction may be imposed. The sanction stops if the client recomplies or undertakes an approved activity. For sole parents, the maximum penalty is 50% of the main benefit payment (see Paper 2 in this series).

In the year to June 2018, the proportion of clients with a sanction applied in a given month averaged 3% for sole parents with full-time work obligations, 2% for those with part-time work obligations, and 1% for those with work preparation obligations (see Paper 3¹ in this series for trends in these rates). Not all cases where sanctions are applied lead to a loss of income. Clients can dispute the decision, and if the outcome is in their favour and the obligations failure is overturned, the sanction is removed (backdated to the date of imposition).

International comparisons

There is no up-to-date comprehensive cross-country comparison of assistance and work-related obligations for sole parents. In a 2007 comparison, NZ was one of 10 countries out of 28 that provided a main cash social assistance benefit specifically for sole parents (Immervoll, 2010 p10). In the 2011 OECD report '*Doing Better for Families*', NZ was one of four countries highlighted (together with the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland and Australia) where such benefits had, until recently, been paid for long periods without any work obligations.

Since, the age-of-youngest-child threshold for work obligations has been lowered to three in the UK. The age threshold was also lowered in Ireland (initially to 7 and then revised to 14 following lobbying by advocacy groups).² Work obligations currently begin to apply when the youngest child turns six in Australia.³

The age threshold is three in France, Germany, Norway and Switzerland. Age thresholds are lower than three in parts of the United States (US) (Herbst, 2017)⁴ and Canada. In a number of Nordic countries there is an expectation that most sole parents are able to find work after parental leave ends (eg Sweden, Denmark, Finland). In other countries, the age at which obligations apply is determined by case managers (eg Belgium, Japan) (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018 p63; Immervoll, 2010 p40; OECD, 2011 p219).

In a series of publications, the OECD advocated for work obligations to be applied to sole parents receiving welfare benefits, conditional on supportive accompanying policies being in place (eg OECD, 2007; OECD, 2009; OECD, 2011):

¹ See Figures 7, 8 and 15.

² See <https://www.thejournal.ie/lone-parent-payment-cut-2191561-Jul2015/> and <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/lone-parents-will-not-have-to-seek-work-until-child-is-14-under-budget-1.2389920>

³ See <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/enablers/mutual-obligation-requirements-parenting-payment/39206>. Planning requirements can apply from 1 July 2018 where there are younger children.
<https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/news/new-requirements-if-you-get-parenting-payment>

⁴ In the US, work obligations in many cases are accompanied by time limits where benefits are cut if the caregiver does not enter work within a specified period, and/or lifetime time limits are placed on entitlement to welfare benefits.

“It is in the long-term interest of all families, including sole-parent families, to engage in paid work, as this is the most effective way of reducing the risk of family poverty, enhancing child development, and generally giving children the best possible start in life. Therefore, the policy approach towards sole parents on income support in Nordic countries is the same as for any other parent: parents who are no longer entitled to paid parental leave (or home-care payments) are work-tested for benefit receipt. This requires active and early interventions toward labour market re-integration of (sole) parents on income support, involving investment in childcare, in-work benefits to make work pay, and employment supports (e.g. intensive case-management and counselling, training programmes, and work-experience placements).” (OECD, 2007 p99).

“Some countries, such as Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, spend considerable amounts on single-parent benefits which last until children are into their teens with the notion that this promotes child well-being. There is little or no evidence that these benefits positively influence child well-being, while they discourage single-parent employment. Payments could be phased out when children reach compulsory schooling and the resources re-directed to improve family income of improve pre-compulsory education up until this stage for single-parent families.” (OECD, 2009 p19).

Evidence from experimental and quasi-experimental studies on parental outcomes

While the main focus of this brief is evidence relating to the effects of sole parent work obligations on children, it is useful to first briefly summarise evidence on effects of work obligations on parental benefit receipt, employment and income, and parental mental and physical health, as these are important pathways through which children might be affected. Most available studies are from the US, and examine the effects of the welfare reform that introduced Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or the policy experiments or waivers that preceded that reform.

Parental benefit receipt, employment and income. Evidence reviews and meta-analyses suggest mandatory welfare-to-work programmes reduce benefit receipt, and have a moderate positive effect on employment and earnings (Greenberg, Cebulla, & Bouchet, 2005; Grogger and Karoly, 2005; Moffitt and Garlow, 2018; Ziliak, 2016). At the same time, there is some evidence that they can also increase movement to health- and disability-related benefits (Avram et al., 2018; Hartley, Lamarche & Ziliak, 2017), and increase the rate at which sole parents are disconnected from benefit but not in work (Blank & Kovak, 2007; Avram et al., 2018).

Reviews of studies from the US and Canada have found limited or negative effects from mandatory welfare-to-work programmes on the net income of sole parents and poverty largely remains high (Ziliak, 2016; Gibson et al., 2018). Effects of the US welfare reform appear to have been different for different groups of women, and this is reflected in trends in poverty over the period — the overall poverty rate for single mothers fell, but the deep poverty rate (the percentage of families making less than 50% of the poverty line) did not change much, and extreme poverty rose sharply (Moffitt and Garlow, 2018).

In the US, net benefits from cost-benefit analyses of mandatory welfare-to-work programmes are “surprisingly small” (Greenberg, Cebulla, & Bouchet, 2005 pv). Increases in sanction rates increase programme costs considerably. Net benefits to the

government and society are modest. Net benefits to individuals directly affected are negligible, because the increase in earnings tends to be offset by lost welfare benefits (Greenberg, Cebulla, & Bouchet, 2005).

Welfare-to-work reforms and policy experiments have typically involved bundles of policy changes, and reviews highlight the role of accompanying childcare policies and financial incentives in shaping effects. When quality child care is provided alongside the intervention, programmes are found to be significantly more effective in boosting employment and earnings, even in areas with few jobs (Gorey, 2009). Without financial incentives, welfare-to-work programmes do little to reduce welfare caseloads or improve the lives of families (Greenberg, Cebulla, & Bouchet, 2005).

Because of the bundled nature of welfare reforms and policy experiments, few studies allow the distinct effect of work obligations to be studied. For the US, this means “[w]e cannot say with confidence what might have happened if we had changed just one component of the welfare system — such as work requirements — while leaving everything else fixed” (Moffitt and Garlow, 2018 p21). Notable exceptions are recent quasi-experimental studies that have examined changes in the age-of-youngest-child thresholds at which obligations apply in the UK, NZ and Australia.

A **UK study** based on administrative data examined the staggered lowering of the age of youngest child at which work obligations applied to sole parents from 16 to 7 (a further lowering of the age has occurred since). Nine months after losing entitlement to unconditional income support, the reform increased the probability that a previously welfare-receiving sole parent was:

- in work by 10 percentage points
- either receiving health-related benefits or off benefit but not in work by 18 percentage points.

Those who had spent a higher proportion of time on welfare benefits before being affected by the reform were more likely to be on health-related benefits or off benefit but not in work (Avram et al., 2018).

An unpublished draft **NZ study** based on Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS) data examined the period 1996 to 2014. Results suggest that over that period work obligations increased both employment and job seeking. After controlling for labour market conditions and demographic factors, there appeared to be small but significant impacts for sole parents overall:

- part-time employment increased by around 2.8 percentage points (with no significant impact on full-time employment)
- job search increased by 1.7 percentage points
- labour force participation increased by 4.4 percentage points (Rea, unpublished draft).

It would be useful to update this analysis to 2018 in order to include the recent further extension of obligations, and to capture a period when full-time work obligations applied for a sustained length of time. Descriptive data from the period when a full-time work obligation was first introduced (in 1999) and then removed (2003) suggest larger changes for the group directly affected — the proportion of sole mothers with a youngest child aged 14 or over employed full-time in the HLFS fell by five percentage points between the year ending March 2003 and the year ending March 2004 with the removal

of the full-time work obligation (MSD, 2007).

In an **Australian study**, a requirement for parents to undertake at least 15 hours of work-related activities per week after the youngest child turned seven was associated with a large increase in the rate of exit from benefit. Two thirds of these exits were exits from welfare altogether and one third were exits to other welfare payments (Fok and McVicar, 2013).

Parental mental and physical health. A recent systematic review examined 12 randomised controlled trials (RCTs) of welfare-to-work interventions and looked at their effects on the mental and physical health of sole parents (Gibson et al., 2018). All but one of the studies took place in the US or Canada before the year 2000. Seven of the interventions included in the review were mandatory, involving mandatory job searching, training, work placements or other employment-related activity.

Overall, the review found that:

- welfare-to-work interventions did not have important effects on health, possibly because there was not much change in employment or income
- depression remained very high whether sole parents were in the intervention group or not.

There were insufficient studies to statistically investigate effects by whether the intervention was mandatory or not, although sensitivity analysis was suggestive of negative effects from mandatory interventions. As with much of the US evidence base on effects on employment and welfare receipt, it was not possible to confidently disentangle the distinct effect of work obligations within these empirical studies because of the bundled nature of the interventions.

A recent **UK study** based on a nationally representative longitudinal study examined sole mothers who were newly exposed to work obligations when the age-of-youngest-child threshold was lowered from 10 to 7 in 2010 and from 7 to 5 in 2012, relative to control groups of sole mothers who were never exposed or continuously exposed throughout the period. Mental health declined in the newly exposed groups relative to the control groups. The effects were small, but are potentially important for population health because sole parent families make up around a quarter of all families with children in the UK (Katikireddi et al., 2018).

Evidence from experimental and quasi-experimental studies on children's outcomes

The current international evidence on the effects of work obligations for sole parents on their children's outcomes is mixed.

Reflecting on the US evidence, the review by Ziliak (2016) concludes that there is a "need to sort out some of the conflicting evidence on child well-being that arises from demonstrations, leaver studies, and observational studies—young children versus adolescents—in terms of physical and emotional health. The historical underpinning of TANF is on improving child welfare, and yet some of our weakest causal evidence to date on welfare reform is in this domain" (Ziliak, 2016 p381).

Available studies suggest different (and sometimes conflicting) impacts for children of different ages and in different areas of life. Results are more consistent in suggesting that impacts depend on the stringency of the application of work obligations, the wider policy context, and whether centre-based or informal childcare is used.

Achievement and cognitive ability. A series of US RCT demonstration studies in the late 1980s and 1990s sought to learn how policies designed to increase employment and reduce welfare receipt among low-income parents affected the development of their children. A synthesis of results found that:

- programmes with earnings supplements that increased maternal employment *and* income improved children's achievement in pre-school
- programmes that increased maternal employment but did not improve income had no discernible effects on children's achievement in pre-school
- programmes that supported centre-based childcare increased achievement for children in pre-school relative to children in home-based care
- no conclusive patterns were found for children aged six to 10
- adolescents aged 11 or over experienced worse academic outcomes, which appeared to be linked to the effects of increased responsibilities at home, including care and supervision of younger children (Morris et al., 2009).

The results for younger children contrast somewhat with negative impacts estimated in a study that examined cross-state variations in welfare rules after the 1996 US welfare reform. Using variations in age-of-youngest child exemptions from work requirements, Herbst (2017) estimated that the effect of work-requirement-induced increases in maternal employment in the first year of life was worse cognitive development for children, despite poverty being reduced (see box).

Evidence from age-of-youngest-child exemptions: Following welfare reform, mothers receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) were required to participate in a work-related activity for at least 30 hours per week within 24 months of receiving assistance. States were allowed to make their own rules relating to exemptions for mothers caring for an infant or toddler, and could apply different rules according to whether the child was a first or subsequent child. As a result there is considerable variation between states, and across mothers within states, in the amount of time a mother is allowed to remain home with a new-born child.

Herbst (2017) used this variation as an 'instrumental variable' to analyse the effect of maternal employment on the cognitive development of children in a nationally representative birth cohort study.

Lower available exemption time was strongly correlated with maternal employment in the first year. In simple regression results, children of working mothers scored higher on a test of cognitive ability at nine months. However, the instrumental variable estimates showed that policy-induced early maternal employment had sizable negative effects on test scores.

Analysis that aimed to explore mechanisms found that although working mothers were less likely to be in poverty, they had an increase in depressive symptoms, and were less likely to breast-feed their children. Working mothers reported increased child behavioural difficulties. The children were less likely to be read to by a family member, and had more exposure to non-parental child care arrangements.

Maternal return to work had a negative effect on children's early cognitive development, no matter when it occurred in the first year of life, and similarly sized adverse effects persisted into the second year of life.

The estimated effect implies that the impact of an additional three months of maternal employment in infancy was equivalent to one-third of the test score gap between children from the bottom and top quartiles of family socioeconomic status.

Another study used the variation across states in welfare reform policy settings, including work requirements, as a source of exogenous variation in children's exposure to childcare (Bernal & Keane, 2011). This study estimated that more time in informal childcare in the first three years of life induced by welfare reform lowered cognitive test scores for children at ages three to six. In contrast, formal centre-based care had no adverse effect. Informal childcare was used by 75% of single mothers in the study, and was more likely to be used if work requirements applied and were strict. The estimates imply the test scores of children of single parents in the population overall were modestly reduced by welfare reform.

Health and wellbeing. In the systematic review of welfare-to-work RCTs carried out by Gibson et al. (2018), across voluntary and mandatory interventions overall there was no evidence for important effects on children's health. However, results from sensitivity analysis "suggested that voluntary interventions that lead to increased income may have positive effects on child mental health, while mandatory interventions that increase employment but do not improve income may lead to negative impacts on ... child health" (Gibson et al. 2018). As noted, it not possible to confidently disentangle the distinct effect of work obligations within these studies.

In the review by Ziliak (2016), studies that analysed national survey data and used quasi-experimental methods to estimate the impact of the reform found evidence of:

- negative effects on breastfeeding in states with more stringent work requirements for new mothers with children aged six months (Haider et al., 2003)
- increased substantiated reports of child maltreatment in states with stricter lifetime welfare limits and stricter sanctions for non-compliance with work requirements (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2003).

School retention and teenage childbearing. In "a potential bright spot" (Ziliak, 2016 p379), studies using national survey data and quasi-experimental methods to look at adolescent outcomes found reduced school drop-out rates (Offner, 2005; Dave et al., 2012; Miller & Zhang, 2012). Results for teenage childbearing were mixed, with two studies finding reductions (Offner, 2005; Lopoo & DeLeire), and two finding either mixed or no effects (Hao & Cherlin, 2004; Kaestner et al., 2003). Welfare reform made a number of changes to policy settings that could have influenced school retention and teenage childbearing, so that any effects found might not be solely due to work obligations.

Outcomes for children in adulthood. Two very recent working papers have examined 'intergenerational effects' — outcomes for children affected by the US welfare reform as they themselves become adults. The studies use the same longitudinal survey, but use different methods, and consider children's exposure to welfare reform in different parts of childhood. Results are mixed.

Hartley, Lamarche & Ziliak (2017) examine mother-daughter pairs over the period 1968-2013 and exploit cross-state variation in the nature and timing of welfare reform and the generosity of earned income tax credits. Exposure to welfare reform in adolescence substantially reduced the intergenerational transmission of welfare receipt from mothers to daughters. This result is not surprising given the reduction generosity and restrictions on access introduced by welfare reform. More interesting are the findings that daughters were no better off in broader economic status — welfare reform exposure in adolescence resulted in no reduction in the strength of the intergenerational transmission from mother to daughter of:

- use of safety net programmes more broadly defined (inclusive of food assistance and health- and disability-related payments)
- low educational attainment
- non-employment
- earnings at or near poverty levels.

Vaughn (2018), in contrast, finds positive effects for the younger generation from exposure to welfare reform. This study exploits cross-state variation in the timing of reform, but does not consider the nature of reform. Children from low-educated single mother households who were exposed to welfare reform from their early childhood scored higher on reading achievement tests in childhood, and, as adults, were more likely to complete college. There was also some evidence of higher rates of marriage and a reduced likelihood of having children out of wedlock. Estimated effects were larger for women than men.

A concern with the longitudinal study on which these studies are based, however, is that intergenerational effects can only be examined for those who remain in the study. If welfare reform caused some people to become disconnected from society, then it is possible they also became disconnected from the longitudinal study, in which case results will be biased. There is evidence that the lowest income children of the lowest income parents are the most likely to be lost from the survey (Schoeni & Wiemers, 2015).

Contextual studies

Qualitative studies of parents affected by work obligations often report that parents experience conflicts in managing work obligations with childcare responsibilities.

A systematic review of 16 qualitative studies of the impact of mandatory welfare-to-work requirements for sole parents found that conflict with the demands of caring for children, and loss of control over decisions regarding employment, childcare, and training, were reported to lead to stress, fatigue and poor mental health. Employment available to sole parents was often poorly paid and precarious. In the absence of appropriate childcare facilities, older children were often left to supervise younger siblings. Factors identified by interviewees that mediated stressors included:

- access to social support, often in the form of informal childcare
- higher quality childcare that was reliable, affordable, local and flexible
- supportive work place practices.

Most of the findings from the review related to negative impacts. However, some respondents found participation in welfare-to-work programmes a positive experience, and reported benefiting from training, and experiencing increased self-esteem (Campbell et al., 2016).

The review included a NZ study (Baker, 2002; 2004; Baker & Tippin, 2002) which emphasised the need for holistic and health-aware policy design and service delivery for sole parents supported by benefit.

The **evaluation of the NZ 2002 reform** that removed work obligations for DPB and Widows benefit (WB) included in-depth interviews with case managers and with people receiving DPB or WB. The evaluation found that difficulties arranging childcare were

particularly pronounced for those who worked non-standard hours, and as a result they often relied on informal childcare or individual carers (MSD, 2007).

"The hardest thing is trying to find someone to look after my son. He has to stay overnight or someone has to stay here. Sometimes I get home [from work] at two in the morning. It's hard if I have to get up in the morning after that. I did try working during the day but I felt rushed. I was always worrying about getting back in time after school." (DPB/WB recipient, in-depth interview, May- June 2004)

The evaluation also highlighted concerns that benefit recipients with teenage children had about the risks to teenagers if supervision was reduced. An often expressed desire was to increase supervision for this age group. Some parents described teenagers as being "high maintenance, mobile and unpredictable in ways that pre-schoolers were not." Concerns about effects of reduced supervision on their teenage children were increased for sole parents who lived in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (MSD, 2007).

A study conducted in 2011 by the Family Centre Social Policy Research Unit involved in-depth interviews with parents and children in 60 Māori, Pacific and Pakeha sole parent families who had demonstrated resilience in their lives (Waldegrave et al., 2011; Waldegrave et al., 2016).

Mothers interviewed in the study saw well paid employment as key to improving their family's economic wellbeing. Many sought opportunities to improve their lives and employment prospects through education or training. They also saw education as the path to a positive future for their children. Most of the parents were employed part-time, and preferred to be working. They wanted to combine achieving adequate incomes with being at home when their children were not at school. They needed "flexible employment hours that did not compromise their responsibilities as parents. They also needed good-quality childcare that would cover the full hours of employment and travel to and from work" (Waldegrave et al., 2016 p14).

Children said they supported their parent's employment, mainly because of the economic improvement this brought, and for many because they thought it made their mother happier. They were conscious of their family's often limited financial means. Children often made a positive contribution to the resilience of their families.

Challenges found in each of the groups interviewed in the study included the effects of violent relationships, low incomes, gaining suitable employment, insecure and unsuitable housing and, to varying degrees, poor physical and mental health. Drug and alcohol services were an area of need, as were stopping-abuse services and relationship support and advice.

The study advocated for improved access to services, including cultural, sporting and holiday experiences for children and young people, and culturally anchored services such as Whānau Ora. Some families reported that they had been helped by the wrap-around support provided by Family Start.

Findings from a **UK longitudinal qualitative study of sole parents** found that a strongly sanction-focussed implementation of work obligations in that country meant a significant mismatch between the support provided and what sole parents needed to help them into work. Most wanted to work, but support provided was not intensive, personally tailored or flexible enough. Affordable childcare was a significant barrier, and jobs obtained were often poorly paid or insecure. Sanctions, and the threat of sanctions, were the cause of significant psychological distress and financial insecurity (Johnsen & Blenkinsopp, 2018).

A report on early findings from the study noted that multiple policy stakeholders and sole parents who were interviewed said the age threshold for work obligations failed to account for the variability in children's needs (Johnsen, Watts, & Fitzpatrick, 2016). According to one respondent,

"[i]t shouldn't in any way be based on something as crude as the age of the child, it has to be based on the welfare and the needs of the child, so there will be a lot of circumstances, including when the children are teenage, where, actually, there are quite good reasons why the parent may need to be concentrating on the child at the time..." (Johnsen, Watts, & Fitzpatrick, 2016 p3).

Conclusion

Evidence from experimental and quasi-experimental impact studies on the effects of work obligations for sole parents on outcomes for children is mixed, and the generalisability of findings from a mainly US literature to the NZ setting is unclear.

Drawing on evidence from literatures on the effects of early maternal employment and participation in early childhood education on children, and emphasising the need for flexibility and supporting accompanying policies, Boston and Chapple (2014) suggest an appropriate age-of-youngest-child threshold for work obligations to begin to be applied to sole parents receiving welfare benefits lies somewhere between one and three (Boston & Chapple, 2014 p141-144).

Available impact and qualitative studies from the welfare literature do not offer any alternative, firm guidance to the age of youngest child at which work obligations should apply. However, they do caution against applying work obligations to sole parents with very young children. They also highlight the need to take account of adolescents' needs for care, support with their education, and supervision. The studies reinforce the importance of supportive accompanying policies (the availability of in-work financial incentives and affordable centre-based early childhood education and out-of-school care and recreation services especially), and of flexibility and balance between sanctions and support in implementation.

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