

Center for Demography and Ecology

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**Poverty, Welfare Receipt and Adolescent Self-Esteem**

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A National Survey of  
**FAMILIES**  
*and*  
**HOUSEHOLDS**

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## **Abstract**

Using Wave II of the National Survey of Families and Households (1992-1993), this paper examines the relationship between poverty, welfare receipt, and adolescent self-esteem.

I find that for the dependent variable self-mastery, current welfare receipt is not significant. However, for adolescent self-worth, current use of welfare is associated with lower levels. This relationship persists even after controlling for child attributes.

Children in poverty are demanding the attention of both social scientists and the American public. Currently, about one of every five children in the United States lives below the poverty line. Poverty has consistently been shown to be associated with many negative outcomes for children, including lower educational attainment and problematic family formation (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). What has been lacking, however, is more analysis of mediating factors which can contribute to status attainment and family outcomes, e.g., psychological well-being, and particularly self-esteem. Why does self-esteem matter? I would argue that self-esteem is important in its own right as well as a mediating variable for other child outcomes. In an ideal world we should care just as much about a child's emotional state as the level of education they achieve. Additionally, this sense of worth would seemingly affect other child outcomes. If a child feels he/she is at a loss to affect life circumstances, or feels worthless, these feelings will likely affect many of his/her accomplishments. And indeed, Wilson and Portes (1975) found that self-esteem was related to both educational attainment and success in the work force.

Studies that have focused on child "mental health" have tended to concentrate on negative behavior of children, such as aggressiveness, acting out or withdrawal. Much less research has looked at positive dimensions of child well-being, at those factors which might help children to succeed and to overcome negative circumstances.

This research attempts to answer two questions regarding children's positive mental well-being. First, does poverty status, both short- and long-term, have an effect on self-esteem and self-mastery for children? Secondly, does welfare receipt influence these same outcomes? Why would we expect poverty to be related to a child's self-esteem? First, income is related to a family's access to particular resources which could enhance self-esteem. Additionally, poverty has been shown to bring a variety of stressors to a family, and those stressors, both directly and indirectly, might also influence children's self-esteem (McLoyd 1990).

Second, I am interested in the relationship between welfare and children's self-esteem, beyond the income effect of such receipt. Do poor children who do not receive public assistance have higher levels of self-esteem than those who do? Much of the current debate on social policy has focused on dependency issues and the role that public assistance, namely welfare, plays in this process. An important consideration here is the role of stigma and humiliation for welfare recipients. Research that examined the relationship between welfare receipt and self-esteem among adults found a negative relationship (Nichols-Casebolt 1984), although the author was unsure whether it was due to welfare reciprocity or lack of employment. Would we expect a similar relationship for children or would they be unaffected by such receipt by their parents?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Social psychological literature has tended to focus on social class and self-esteem and not on poverty or income dynamics. In their classic study, Rosenberg and Pearlin (1978) found little relationship between social class and young children's self-esteem. They argued that this was because distinct processes are at work for children; in contrast to adults, for children social class was an ascribed, not an achieved status. Additionally, children tend to live in very homogenous environments and thus are not as cognizant of social class differences. Rosenberg and Pearlin concluded that for these reasons one would not expect to find much of a relationship between social class and children's self-esteem.

To measure social class, they used the Hollingshead Index which is based on a composite of education and occupation, and has no direct measure of income. Thus, the study does not necessarily tell us much about children who live in poverty in the United States. It is the relationship between low income and self-esteem that I hypothesize to be so detrimental for

children. While it is true that social class may not be a recognizable concept for young children, we would expect them to be aware of a lack of family income or an inability to purchase needed goods.

Langner et al. (1970) investigated the relationship between income and self-esteem with a population of Manhattan school children. They found that self-confidence was at its lowest among low-income boys, but among girls there were no differences across income.

A study on related issues was done by Amato and Ochiltree (1986). In examining a data set from Australia, they concluded that family income was not significantly related to children's self-esteem (when controlling for parental occupational status), as measured by the Piers-Harris Scale. Additionally, they argued that self-esteem was mainly associated with interpersonal resources of the family, and not "family structure resources," e.g. parental help and attention.

A slight twist on the relationship between social class and self-esteem was done by Wilfang and Scarbecz (1990). The authors were interested in what they termed "nontraditional" measures of social class and their relationship with adolescents' self-esteem. They examined fathers' unemployment status, neighborhood unemployment, family welfare status, and perceived neighborhood quality. They concluded that these types of variables were more important than traditional "social class" measures in explaining differences in self-esteem. Nonetheless, like Rosenberg and Pearlin, they argued that it was children's attributes, rather than those of their parents, that were most important in determining the self-esteem of the children. Additionally, they found that welfare was significantly related to children's self-esteem, but this effect disappeared when such variables as grades and number of friends were added.

Whitbeck et al. (1991) examined whether economic family hardship had a n influence on adolescent's self-esteem. They concluded that it did, but that little of it was direct. Instead, children seemed to be negatively affected by parenting behavior, notably support and

involvement.

In a very recent study Axinn, Duncan and Thornton (1995) concluded that neither parental income nor assets were related to children's self-esteem. The authors, however, did not examine poverty status or welfare reciprocity.

Obviously, income is not the only factor that would seem to be related to self-esteem. Other research has focused on such issues as family structure, race, and gender. Raschke and Raschke (1979) found no significant differences in their measure of self-concept for children regardless of family type. Family type was defined as either intact, single parent, or reconstituted.

Self-esteem is considered to be comprised of three components: reflected appraisals (that is, how one is viewed or evaluated by society), self-perception, and social comparison. It is how one measures oneself on those three components that determines the level of self-esteem. Based on these criteria, one would expect minority groups and less favored people, most notably blacks and women, to have lower self-esteem than whites and men.

However, Rosenberg and Simmons (1972) concluded that contrary to popular belief, black schoolchildren (aged 8-19) actually had higher self-esteem than their white peers. To explain their results, they concluded that "black children have little awareness of how low their socioeconomic status in society really is" (p. 73). Additionally, they found that social economic status seemed to have some relationship between the self-esteem of white children, but not for blacks.

The results regarding gender differences in self-esteem are inconclusive (Wylie 1995). Most research has found little difference in global levels of self-esteem by gender, but there is some research that argues there are differences in specific areas of self-esteem (Rosenberg and Simmons 1972.) Wiley argues that the lack of differences in this area may be due to the fact that men and women base self-esteem on different factors.

It should be noted that Rosenberg (1992) among others, has consistently argued that these

ascribed statuses do not have an effect on self-esteem. As with social class, he argues that children will compare themselves to reference groups like themselves and thus, factors such as race and gender and even income will not have an influence.

## DATA AND MEASURES

The National Survey of Families and Households offers an ideal data set to study these issues. This study, which interviewed over 13,000 American adults aged 19 and older in 1987-1988 is in the process of completing follow-up interviews for these same persons. In addition, the second wave of data collection contains a focal child interview from a sample of children 10-17 (N=1370). The children were asked a series of questions about how they feel about themselves on a variety of measures, including three items from Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem index and four items from Pearlin's (1978) mastery index. The items from the self-esteem index are as follows: "I feel that I am a person of equal worth, at least on an equal basis with others," "I am able to do things as well as most other people," "On the whole I am satisfied with myself." The questions taken from the Pearlin scale were: "Sometimes I feel that I am being pushed around in life," "I have little control over what happens to me," "I can do just about anything I really set my mind to do," and "There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life." The response scales ranged from 1 to 4, with four being **strongly agree** and one being **strongly disagree**.

To measure income, I have data at two distinct points in time, 1987-1988 and 1992-1993, the two times of data collection. I use a dummy variable indicating whether or not a family is currently in poverty. In all of the models I also include a measure of poverty five years ago. I do this in an attempt to control for low income in the past which could have a relationship on child's mental health. Additionally, in the second model I include a dummy variable for those children



who were poor at both time 1 and time 2. By including this measure, I am examining whether there are distinct processes for those children who are in long-term poverty. Research that examined the relationship between childhood poverty and self-esteem found different results when using measures for short- and long-term poverty (McLeod and Shanahan 1993).<sup>1</sup>

Just over 12% of the sample did live below the poverty line. Additionally, 13% had been poor five years ago, and 3% of the sample experienced poverty at both time 1 (1987-1988) and time 2 (1992-1993).

The NSFH has data on whether or not a family received welfare for each year from 1987 to 1993. Thus, I can examine whether receiving welfare as well as length of reciprocity has any relationship on children's self-esteem. It should be noted that the data on welfare in the NSFH is somewhat problematic. First, it is only an annual measure, and welfare is distributed monthly. Thus from this data, I cannot differentiate between families who were on welfare for 24 months and those who received welfare for one month in each of the preceding years. They are quite different situations. Secondly, welfare utilization is best studied from a longitudinal perspective that can document the beginning and endings of spells, and not from a cross-sectional view. The latter tends to over-represent the number of long-term users (Bane and Ellwood 1994). Finally, I am primarily interested in welfare, yet the question asked of families does not differentiate between welfare, energy assistance, and general assistance. However, I am primarily interested in the relationship between means-tested programs and self-esteem, and for that question, it matters less what particular program one is receiving.

I constructed three dummy variables for welfare usage. One gives a score of 1 to those who

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<sup>1</sup> I realize that since income is not a static measure, a better measure for persistent poverty would be income in each of the preceding six years. Unfortunately, that data is not available in the NSFH.

are currently receiving welfare and a zero otherwise. As a second variable, families who have been on welfare but are not currently on it receive a 1. Finally, the omitted category contains those families who have never received welfare at any point in the last 7 years. In the bivariate analyses only, the number of years a family has received public assistance is used; it ranged from 0 to 7.

Slightly more than 10% of the sample was currently receiving public assistance. An additional 5% had at some point been on public assistance but were no longer. The mean number of years for the entire sample was .59; for those who received welfare at some point, the average was 4.7 years. This length is much longer than the average spell on welfare; thus it helps to illustrate that, because of the nature of the data, I am more likely to have long-term public assistance recipients.

#### PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

Using a scoring range from one to four, where the higher scores represent greater levels of self-esteem, the means and standard deviations for the eight variables are listed below.

Control	2.98	.83
Can do anything	3.36	.56
Little can do to change	2.89	.74
Person of worth	3.19	.55
Feel pushed around	2.60	.72
Able to do things well as most	3.19	.55
Satisfied with self	3.20	.57

I have combined these questions into two dependent variables, self-esteem and mastery depending on their scale of origin. Thus, in the models, I will examine the relationship between poverty and public assistance and both of these measures. Cronbach's alpha for self-mastery was somewhat low at .4026 while the alpha for the Rosenberg self-esteem items was .5768.

With the first set of questions I am attempting to measure an overall or a global self-esteem measure. Other research (Rosenberg et al., 1995) argues that the relationship between self-esteem and other variables differs depending on whether one is self-esteem specific to a certain domain. I am not concerned with specific self-esteem, but an overall feeling of self-worth.

I first ran basic bivariate regressions looking at the two dependent variables and race, sex, poverty status, and welfare use. When examining race, blacks had higher self-esteem while whites scored higher on self-mastery, though neither of these results was significant. There were also no significant differences by sex, although females scored higher on both scales. Children who were currently living in poverty had significantly lower scores on self-mastery, but self-esteem appeared unaffected. Conversely, children who were currently on public assistance had significantly lower self-esteem, but no differences were seen in self-mastery. I then examined length of time on welfare, to see if it was associated with various family outcomes. Preliminary analyses indicated they were not.

## MULTIVARIATE ANALYSES

A different story was seen when examining the results of the multivariate analyses. I ran six different models for each of the dependent variables. The first model contained current poverty status and a series of controls. Model two contained current poverty status as well as the two additional measures of poverty. The third model contained all of the poverty measures and the two welfare variables.

The controls that I used were child's age, child's sex, family type, and family education. Family type was used as a dummy variable, a value of 1 being an intact family. Family education was also a dummy variable, where a child received a 1 if either the mother or father was a college graduate. It has been argued that family education is what really matters for a child's self-esteem

and that much of any income effect is actually an education effect. I also included a measure of mother's self-esteem based on questions similar to those the child answered. It could be the case that mothers with low self-esteem are more likely to end up receiving welfare and that their children's self-esteem is highly correlated with their own. While OLS cannot directly test whether the relationship between welfare and adolescent self-esteem is direct or indirect, including a measure of mother's self-esteem may be informative.

Additionally, I ran each of these models with two variables attempting to get at children's attributes. This was because previous research has argued that for children, it is what they achieve that affects their self-esteem. My measures for attributes were grades which were on a scale from 1 to 8, where 8 represents all A's, and the average of two questions asking about number of friends, one for those of the same sex, and one for opposite sex. Turning first to the models without the child attributes: Current poverty status was unrelated to both self-esteem and self-mastery. Examining the effects of poverty as a series of dummies, I again found no effects on either of the dependent variables. Family education was significantly related to self-mastery in all of the models; for self-esteem, the relationship was not significant. A significant negative relationship was found between current welfare receipt and self-esteem, although not for self-mastery. For those children who had been on welfare at some point but were no longer, the relationship was not significant. When mother's self-esteem was added to the model, little change was seen. There was a strong significant relationship between the self-esteem of the mother and the child, but little relationship between mother's self-esteem and self-mastery.

With child attributes included in the models, we see that in the most basic model, current poverty is no longer significantly related to self-mastery. Again, when we examine the models with additional measures of poverty, very little appears to be happening. Neither of these variables was significant for any of the analyses. Current usage of welfare appeared to lower a

child's self-esteem even with these additional variables in the model. Past welfare usage was not significant. As for the child attributes, grades were significant in all the models, while number of friends was only associated with higher self-esteem.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It seems clear from these results that there are different processes occurring for the outcomes of self-esteem and self-mastery, even though none of these models explained much of the variation in these child outcomes. Self-mastery was significantly related to family education, but not to poverty status. This implies that it may not be simply access to resources, but how one uses those resources, that determines a child's sense of mastery. Use of public assistance was not significant in these models, although the signs for both current and past use were negative.

Turning to self-esteem, none of the poverty variables were significant, but current receipt of public assistance was. This relationship held, contrary to Wiltfang and Scarbecz, even after controlling for some of the child's attributes. Additionally, current welfare status remained significant and virtually unchanged whether or not mother's self-esteem was in the model (additional models not shown). This implies that the negative relationship between welfare and children's self-esteem is not merely a byproduct of low levels of maternal self-esteem.

I believe that these results suggest the need to continue to explore alternative measures of socioeconomic status. It may not be class or income per se, but other factors associated with these statuses that are affecting children. Additionally, the question of how public assistance negatively influences children's self-esteem needs to be investigated. Is it because of the stigma of this means-tested program? Or is welfare receipt merely serving as a proxy for other unmeasured family characteristics? It has already been shown that the recipients in this study are more likely to be long-term users; thus there may be strong differences between them and other poor families.

**TABLE 1 Means and Standard Deviations for Utilized Variables**

Child Variables	Mean (Standard Deviation)
Self-esteem	3.18 (.42)
Self-mastery	2.93 (.43)
Family type 1 if intact family, 0 otherwise	.56 (.50)
Race, coded 1 if black, 0 if white	.18 (.39)
Age, in years	12.62 (2.35)
Sex, 1 if male, 0 if female	.51 (.50)
Family education 1 if college graduate, 0 otherwise	.21 (.41)
Public assistance, number of years	.59 (1.67)
Public assistance, past but not now	.05 (.21)
Public assistance, currently	.10 (.30)
Grades in school, 1-8	3.46 (5.48)
# of friends	8.20 (7.22)
Household income	45,972.52 (50694.81)
Current poverty status 1 if yes, 0 otherwise	.12 (.33)
Poverty status 5 yrs ago 1 if yes, 0 otherwise	.13 (.33)
Poor both now and 5 years ago	.03 (.18)
Maternal self-esteem	3.44 (.39)

Source: National Survey of Families and Households, Wave 1 (1987- 1988) and Wave 2 (1992-1993)

Dependent Variable=**Self-Mastery**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1A	Model 2A	Model 3A
Child Variables						
Age	<b>.0433**</b> (.0073)	<b>.0489**</b> (.0083)	<b>.0477**</b> (.0085)	<b>.0425**</b> (.0073)	<b>.0478**</b> (.0082)	<b>.0439**</b> (.0085)
Male	-.0719 (.0331)	<b>-.0806*</b> (.0378)	-.0718 (.0384)	<b>-.0769*</b> (.0331)	<b>-.0843*</b> (.0378)	<b>-.0814*</b> (.0389)
Current Poverty	-.0411 (.0511)	-.0147 (.0748)	-.0016 (.0786)	-.0370 (.0513)	-.0056 (.0756)	.0041 (.0791)
Poverty 5 yrs ago		.0010 (.0648)	-.0016 (.0786)		-.0029 (.0641)	-.0099 (.0665)
Poor now and 5 yrs ago		-.0898 (.1052)	-.1090 (.1157)		-.1013 (.1061)	-.1392 (.1180)
Family Educ	<b>.1540**</b> (.0413)	<b>.1466**</b> (.0435)	<b>.1487**</b> (.0460)	<b>.1566**</b> (.0441)	<b>.1593**</b> (.0452)	<b>.1644**</b> (.0461)
Family Type	.0063 (.0357)	.0053 (.0420)	-.0240 (.0431)	.0085 (.0357)	-.0112 (.0418)	-.0298 (.0434)
# of Friends				.0001 (.0021)	.0023 (.0025)	.0021 (.0026)
Grades				<b>-.0073**</b> (.0024)	<b>-.0180**</b> (.0040)	<b>-.0181**</b> (.0041)
Black	.0501 (.0427)	.0114 (.0506)	.0181 (.0514)	.0468 (.0432)	.0298 (.0509)	.0359 (.0521)
Mom self-esteem	.0778 (.0429)	.0734 (.0507)	.0709 (.0521)	.0745 (.0428)	.0689 (.0505)	.0611 (.0529)
Past welfare			-.1529 (.0963)			-.1661 (.0965)
Current welfare			-.0444 (.0746)			-.0243 (.0764)
Constant	2.07	2.04	2.08	2.11	2.11	2.21
Adjusted R square	.069	.077	.078	.08	.10	.10
N=	732	595	576	721	588	558

\* T value significant at .05 level

\*\* T value significant at .01 level

Source: National Survey of Families and Households, Wave 1 (1987-1988) and Wave 2 (1992-1993)

Dependent Variable=**Self-Esteem**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1A	Model 2A	Model 3A
<b>Child Variables</b>						
Age	.0108 (.0070)	.0114 (.0777)	.0089 (.0486)	.0069 (.0089)	.0077 (.0057)	.0071 (.0080)
Male	-.0055 (.0317)	-.0034 (.0351)	.0113 (.0358)	-.0043 (.0315)	-.0075 (.0353)	.0092 (.0365)
Current Poverty	-.0265 (.0489)	-.0000 (.0694)	.0622 (.0732)	-.0227 (.0487)	.0093 (.0705)	.0561 (.0741)
Poverty 5 yrs ago		.0366 (.0601)	.0759 (.0623)		.0031 (.0598)	.0652 (.0622)
Poor now and 5 yrs ago		-.0771 (.0976)	-.0394 (.1078)		-.0637 (.0990)	-.1020 (.1103)
Family Educ	.0651 (.0395)	.0414 (.0422)	.0394 (.0429)	.0654 (.0390)	.0507 (.0421)	.0562 (.0432)
Family Type	.0465 (.0341)	.0468 (.0389)	-.0041 (.0402)	.0419 (.0339)	.0437 (.0390)	-.1078 (.0406)
# of Friends				.0042 (.0025)	.0042 (.0025)	.0047 (.0024)
Grades				<b>-.0107**</b> (.0022)	<b>-.0102**</b> (.0037)	<b>-.0108**</b> (.0038)
Black	.0710 (.0408)	.0536 (.0470)	.0629 (.0479)	<b>.0911*</b> (.0410)	.0703 (.0475)	<b>.0876</b> (.0487)
Mom self-esteem	<b>.1230**</b> (.0409)	<b>.1452**</b> (.0470)	<b>.1559**</b> (.0486)	<b>.1095**</b> (.0406)	<b>.1404**</b> (.0471)	<b>.1488**</b> (.0495)
Past welfare			-.1166 (.0898)			-.0823 (.0902)
Current welfare			<b>-.2342**</b> (.0695)			<b>-.2213**</b> (.0715)
Constant	2.57	2.51	2.56	2.66	2.53	2.60
Adjusted R square	.02	.02	.041	.041	.029	.052
N=	730	593	575	720	587	557

\* T value significant at .05 level

\*\* T value significant at .01 level

Source: National Survey of Families and Households, Wave 1 (1987-1988) and Wave 11 (1992-1993)



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