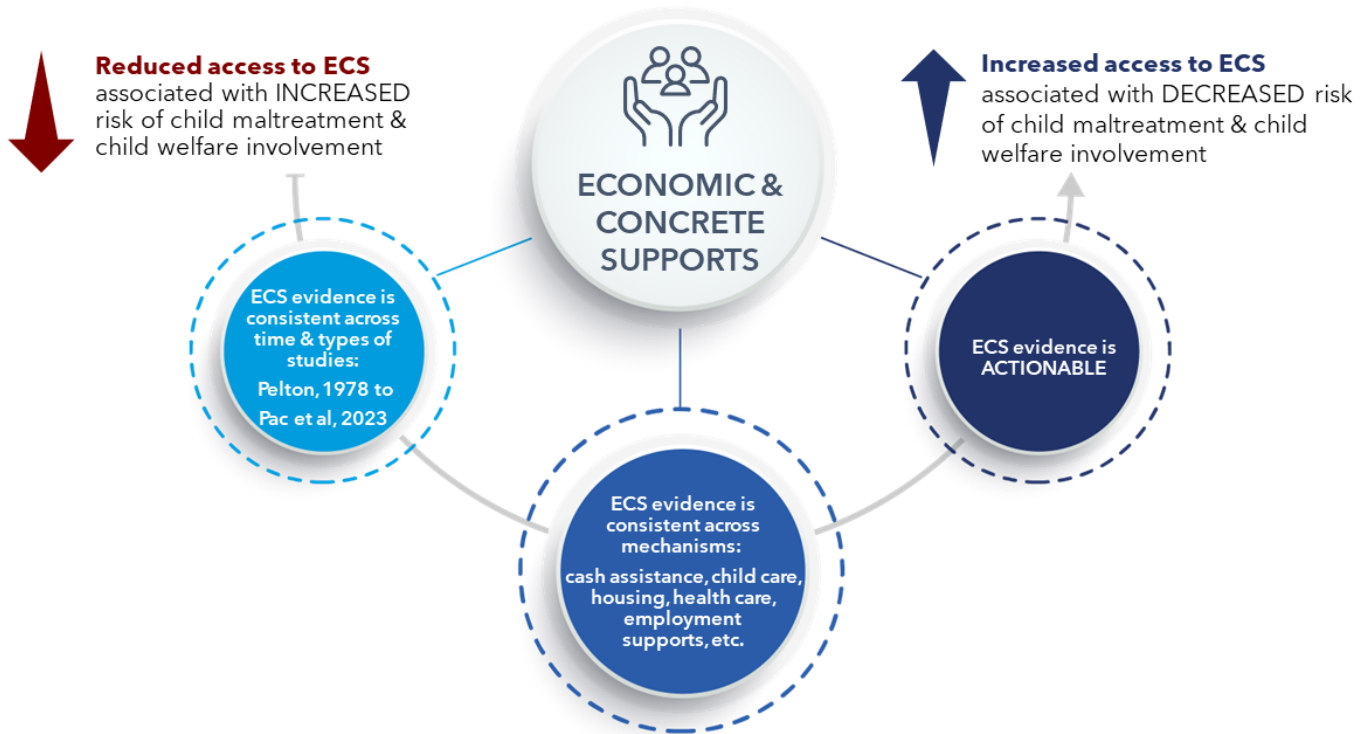


CHAPIN HALL POLICY BULLETIN

Economic and Concrete Supports (ECS): An Overview



OVERVIEW

Economic and concrete supports are “protective factors”—factors that prevent families from becoming involved in the child welfare system. The evidence indicates that increasing access to these supports may be an effective strategy to prevent child maltreatment, keep families together, and address racial inequities.

The central role of economic hardship as a driver of child welfare system involvement underscores the importance of addressing the concrete needs of families and promoting economic stability (Dolan et al., 2011; Conrad-Hiebner & Byram, 2020; Cai, 2022). A large body of research demonstrates the positive impact an array of economic and concrete supports has in reducing risk—from tax credits to child care to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and more (Grewal-Kök et al, 2023). For families who receive TANF, experiencing material hardship (difficulty meeting basic needs) is associated with increased risk for both neglect and physical abuse investigations. If these families experience at least one type of material hardship, they are three times more likely to experience a neglect investigation and four times more likely to experience a physical abuse investigation. And, if they experience multiple types of material hardships after not having experienced any, they are up to seven times more likely to experience an investigation for physical abuse (Yang, 2015).

States have wide discretion in how they administer TANF funds and make policy choices in establishing TANF cash benefit levels, income eligibility thresholds (up to the maximum allowable percentage of federal poverty level), time limits for receiving benefits (up to a 60-month lifetime limit), and sanctions for not meeting TANF requirements. Total TANF spending on cash assistance has declined by 69% since the program began. Today, 15 states spend less than 10% of their TANF funds on cash assistance to families (Puls et al., 2021).

EVIDENCE SPECIFIC TO TANF & CHILD WELFARE

The first statutory goal of TANF is to support needy families so that children remain safely at home or with relatives.

The evidence suggests that decision making in TANF is associated with whether children are able to remain at home.

Studies show that when TANF resources are more available to families, risk for involvement with child welfare decreases.

Conversely, when TANF resources decrease, risk for involvement with child welfare is shown to increase.

Increasing Access to TANF

State policies that increase family access to TANF benefits are associated with reductions in foster care placements. An estimated 29,112 fewer children would have entered foster care nationally (from 2004 to 2016) if states had made it easier for families to receive TANF cash assistance (Ginther & Johnson-Motoyama, 2022). Another study found that a 10% increase in state public benefit levels (AFDC/TANF and the value of food stamps) for a family of four was predicted to reduce foster care placements by 8% (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2003).

Decreasing Access to TANF

State policies that limit family access to TANF benefits—including reducing the maximum allowable cash benefit amount—are associated with increases in maternal self-reported physical child maltreatment (Spencer et al., 2021). Lifetime limits on receipt of TANF benefits and sanctions for noncompliance are associated with higher levels of substantiated maltreatment and foster care entries (Paxson et al., 2003; Ginther & Johnson-Motoyama, 2022). For example, states that implemented TANF time limits of less than 60 months experienced a 34.4% increase in substantiated maltreatment reports and a 37.3% increase in substantiated neglect reports (increases observed from 2004 to 2015; Ginther & Johnson-Motoyama, 2017). Another study found that a 10% reduction in the average monthly AFDC/TANF cash benefit amount for a family of three was associated with a 2.3% increase in state-level foster care caseload rates from 1985 to 2000 (Swann & Sylvester, 2006).

TANF, CHILD CARE, AND CHILD WELFARE

TANF funds can also be used for childcare. Childcare access is another protective concrete support. Each additional month that mothers who are low income receive a childcare subsidy is associated with a 16% decrease in the odds of a neglect referral to child welfare and a 14% decrease in the odds of a physical abuse referral (Yang, 2019). The childcare investments proposed in Build Back Better would be associated with a 6% reduction in substantiated maltreatment, a 3% reduction in foster care placements, and a nearly 12% reduction in child fatalities (Puls et al, 2022). Lack of access to childcare and childcare assistance is associated with increased risk for child maltreatment investigations (Klevens et al., 2015), especially for neglect (Yang & Maguire-Jack, 2016), and self-reported maternal neglectful behavior and physical aggression (Ha et al., 2019).

References: <https://shorturl.at/hvKU8> **More Resources:** <https://shorturl.at/hmtCM>

CONTACT INFORMATION

[Chapin Hall](https://www.chapinhall.org) is an independent, nonpartisan policy research center at the University of Chicago that provides public and private decision-makers with rigorous research and achievable solutions to support them in improving the lives of children, families, and communities. We partner with policymakers, practitioners, and philanthropists to construct actionable information, practical tools, and, ultimately, positive change for families. Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness. For more information about Chapin Hall, visit www.chapinhall.org or @Chapin_Hall.

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