



**ASSESSING THE FAMILY
CIRCUMSTANCES OF CURRENT
AND FORMER TANF
CHILD-ONLY CASES
IN SAN MATEO AND SANTA
CLARA COUNTIES
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Executive Summary

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Summary

Child-only cases represent about 40 percent of California's TANF caseload. In counties that have experienced especially high caseload reductions, such as San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties in the San Francisco Bay Area, child-only cases represent half or more of the total CalWORKs (California TANF program) caseload. The citizen children of undocumented parents make up as many as 40 percent of the child-only caseload. These families are very similar to aided adult families, in that there are needy parents in the household who are able to work but currently do not earn enough to support their families. Yet because the parents are barred from receiving assistance, these families rely on lower grants and are not able to access the services available to other families.

This report explores the characteristics and well-being of such undocumented immigrant child-only cases in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties. Building on previous work on TANF leavers in these counties, The SPHERE Institute surveyed the parents of almost 800 citizen children who were currently and formerly aided on child-only CalWORKs cases. Comparing these findings to results from an earlier study of aided-adult leavers (citizens or legal immigrants), we review the demographic characteristics, the employment status, the economic circumstances and other measures of well-being for both the child-only and aided-adult cases. Finally, we assess which characteristics appear to be associated with exiting the child-only caseload for these families.

The major findings include:

- **The demographic characteristics of these current and former child-only cases present significant barriers to self-sufficiency.** Consistent with our sampling strategy, virtually all of the respondents reported being neither U.S. citizens nor legal permanent residents. The parents in these families have extremely low levels of education, with the majority not even reaching high school. Most of the respondents,

usually mothers, had limited English proficiency, although their spouses (present in 32 to 44 percent of households) more commonly spoke English. Finally, these child-only families had significantly more children than the typical aided adult leaver.

- **Even among current cases, most families include at least one adult working, usually for low wages.** At least one parent is working full-time in 78 percent of child-only leaver households, and at least one parent is working part-time or full-time in 55 percent of current child-only cases. However, the mean wages for respondents and their spouses range from \$7.47 per hour to \$9.90 per hour, and a number of them work for below minimum wage.
- **Parents with English proficiency earn much more than those without.** Mean wages are as much as 50 percent higher for those very proficient in English, compared to those who are not. Most respondents would like additional education and training to improve their job prospects, and the majority by far indicate a desire for English as a Second Language (ESL) training.
- **Despite earning more on average than aided-adult leavers, child-only leavers have lower total income and much lower income relative to the poverty threshold (which takes family size into account).** These families also pay a larger share of their income on housing, even though they are much more likely to live in over-crowded extended family or multi-family households.
- **The majority of leavers appear to remain eligible for, but do not receive Food Stamps.** However, one family in four reports food insecurity and an equal share rely on food pantries or soup kitchens.
- **One in five children in child-only leaver families lack health insurance.** Since these children formerly received cash aid, they should be eligible for coverage through Medi-Cal, Healthy Families or Santa Clara County's extended coverage program, Healthy Kids. Very few respondents report any health coverage other than Medi-Cal, which provides only emergency services and pregnancy coverage to undocumented immigrants.
- **For child-only cases, the factors most predictive of leaving assistance are those tied to higher earnings.** For example, education and English proficiency matter, but their effects are seen primarily through their impacts on work and wage levels. Families with more children find it more difficult to leave aid, and like other welfare families, long-term recipients are more likely to continue to receive aid.

While welfare reform has largely ignored the citizen children of undocumented immigrant parents, these cases make up a large share of the remaining welfare caseload. Prior to September 11th, a new immigration amnesty program for at least some of these families appeared likely. If an amnesty did take place, these families would be good candidates for welfare-to-work programs.

Unfortunately, at present there are relatively few avenues available to serve these families through public assistance programs. However, additional outreach could help ensure that these families access health insurance coverage for their children and non-assistance Food Stamps for eligible household members, while services such as ESL and child care assistance could greatly benefit these families. With respect to government subsidized child care, undocumented parents of citizen children are not eligible for these services through the CalWORKs program, but they are eligible for federal child care block grant funds and state funds through the State Department of Education programs. These families also face transportation barriers that could be partially addressed by changes in asset limits for cars and the availability of driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants.