Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

Economic Security in Early Childhood as an Engine for Intergenerational Mobility

Health Equity

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Sara Jann-Heinze is the senior director of policy and advocacy at Maternity Care Coalition.

With turmoil in federal policy and cuts to federal programs, it has never been more important to consider what action Pennsylvania, and other states, can take to support economic security for children and families. State lawmakers can play an important role in shaping families' economic security and children's economic mobility.

The time around pregnancy and the birth of a child is a period of great financial vulnerability for those giving birth and their families. The cost of raising young children in the United States also puts a strain on families. Stark data highlights the consequences—nearly half of all children in the U.S. will experience poverty before they enter kindergarten. Children who experience poverty are at higher risk of poor cognitive, academic, social, health and economic outcomes throughout their lives.

All of this points to the need for a holistic policy agenda that supports families' economic security, particularly starting in pregnancy and through early childhood.

This was the impetus for an exciting collaboration between our organizations, which share a goal of informing and driving state-level policy conversations about how to help all families in the Commonwealth thrive, now and into the future. Maternity Care Coalition leads the project, which includes PolicyLab, PA Partnerships for Children and Children First. The collaborative approach draws on the different strengths of the organizations, from translating the evidence behind different policy areas to state-level advocacy.

The first step of this shared work was to dive into the research and unpack what we can learn from it, including where it offers evidence on policies and programs that support long-term positive outcomes related to children's health and well-being. This is what we did in PolicyLab's latest Evidence-to-Action brief, "Advancing Intergenerational Mobility Through Early Childhood Economic Security: Examining the Evidence."

> This resource explores the available research into ten policy areas' impacts on children's health, educational and economic outcomes: Medicaid, food and nutrition supports, housing supports, early care and education, cash assistance for families, tax credits for families, paid family and medical leave, minimum wage increases, predictive scheduling policies and diaper assistance.

We chose to focus on these areas because these policies directly influence how families meet basic needs and many of them significantly impact maternal well?being, early childhood development and/or long?term outcomes.

We also chose these areas because they are relevant to and actionable in Pennsylvania. In our state, some of these policies exist but could be protected or enhanced. For others, there is momentum for state action. And a few with emerging evidence could be considered for further exploration.

Below, we highlight a few key takeaways from the authors' conclusions:

- The research highlighted in the brief underscores the importance of looking at longer-term outcomes for children and across generations, as well as shorter-term intermediary outcomes. We risk underestimating the true value of any of these policies if we do not explore and give weight to their multigenerational impacts.
- As is common in policy research, studies usually isolate one policy to examine its effects. However, in reality, the policies and programs that we explore in the brief, and many others that we could have included, do not work in isolation. One intervention may not be sufficient to move the needle, especially in the face of other social and systemic barriers. This is something we're exploring at PolicyLab—a new pilot grant project will assess the impacts of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the expanded Child Tax Credit alone and in combination with one another on birth outcomes. We would urge states and advocates to pursue a holistic approach to enhance economic security and promote intergenerational mobility.
- Even where there is a rich body of research on many of the policies we explored, there are opportunities for further work to fill in knowledge gaps and generate the evidence needed to advance an economic security agenda. These include:
  - the interaction of policies to maximize administrative efficiency and family impact
  - the targeting of policies—including when, how and to whom they should be targeted to maximize effectiveness
  - variation in how policies and programs are administered, including administrative burdens related to accessing programs
  - additional research on policies where the evidence is currently mixed
  - long-term outcomes for some policies where that evidence is not yet available
- There are also emerging strategies such as predictive scheduling policies and diaper assistance for which we just do not yet have the research on their impact on children and families. It will be important to further explore them and interrogate their effectiveness.

This project is just getting started. Based on the evidence and feedback from key stakeholders and community members, project partners will be launching a Pennsylvania prenatal and early childhood economic security policy blueprint and sharing that with decision-makers.

Supporting families with evidence-based programs and policies that promote economic security during the prenatal to early childhood period is an effective way to improve children's health, education, and economic outcomes, and has potential benefits for future generations. We're excited for what's next in this critical work together.

Rebecka Rosenquist
Rebecka Rosenquist
MSc
Deputy Director of Policy & Strategy