

Parent-Child Relationships, Parenting Behaviors, and Mental Health in Low-Income AFDC
Recipients vs. Low-Income Non-Recipients

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Abstract

A wide body of research investigating parenting and parent mental health has established a link between poverty and diminished psychological well-being and family functioning. Few studies have focused explicitly on the relationship between those measures and AFDC receipt. This study examined the effects of AFDC receipt on parent-adolescent relationships, parenting behaviors, and maternal mental health. Subjects were 25 AFDC mothers and 50 non-AFDC mothers. All mothers' annual incomes fell below \$15,000. A series of ANCOVAs controlling for mothers' marital and employment status revealed no significant differences on any of the dependent measures. The discussion highlights the political misrepresentation of low-income mothers who are receiving welfare, and makes recommendations for current welfare reform policy.

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A wide body of research investigating parenting and parent mental health has established a link between poverty and diminished psychological well-being and family functioning. For example, McLoyd (1990) argued that poor parents are at risk for psychological distress and are more likely than non-poor parents to practice punitive, affectively distant, or inconsistent parenting behaviors. McLoyd reported that many of these factors were the result of the life stress associated with such hardships as job loss or severe economic loss. Belle (1990) also reported research suggesting that single parent status, as well as low-income and unemployment status, were positively related to depressive symptomatology.

A less extensive body of literature has linked the receipt of public assistance to diminished psychological well-being. For example, Krinitzky (1990) found that low-income mothers who were welfare recipients were significantly more distressed and depressed than low-income non-recipients. She concluded that the psychological distress of welfare recipients could be explained by their poor health, by stressful life events, by the stress of welfare dependency, as well as the strain associated with welfare recipient status. In similar research, Nichols-Casebolt (1986) found that for low-income mothers, not receiving AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) was associated with significantly better scores on measures of personal competence and self-satisfaction. Her analyses controlled for income, marital status, employment status, race, age, education, number and ages of children, geographical location, and time since marital split. Ethnographic research (e.g. Popkin, 1990) has suggested that low-income welfare recipients, particularly those who were long term AFDC recipients, high school dropouts, or who were over 40, had lower senses of efficacy. Previous ethnographic studies reported by Popkin corroborate these findings with reports of welfare recipients' perceptions of welfare programs as discouraging because they fail to provide job training or educational opportunities. In Popkin's research, lowered sense of efficacy predicted to recipients' views about finding alternatives to AFDC, such that low efficacy individuals were significantly less likely to mention work as an alternative when asked to speculate about what they would do if they could not receive AFDC benefits.

Furthermore, low-efficacy individuals were significantly more likely to say that they could think of no alternatives to receiving welfare. In contrast, high efficacy individuals were 20% more likely to state that they would not need AFDC in one year, and were also more likely to state that there would be no obstacles to their finding a job in the future.

Research has also demonstrated that cutbacks on AFDC benefits are linked to psychological distress. Kulis (1988) measured self-reported psychological distress in low-income working mothers following the AFDC cutbacks under the OBRA of 1981. He found that variation in the severity of the cutback was related to psychological demoralization, even controlling for other stressful life events in the intervening year. Interestingly, greater reliance on AFDC *per se* was not related to demoralization; only when those benefits were reduced or eliminated did women report psychological distress. For either those women who remained on the welfare rolls after the cutbacks or those whose grants were eliminated entirely, the reductions were psychologically distressing in proportion to the magnitude of women's reliance on AFDC as a fraction of their total income before the cutbacks.

As much of this research suggests, much of the psychological distress exhibited by AFDC recipients can be linked to feelings of stigma related to their welfare recipient status, or to feelings of financial insecurity induced by cutbacks in their benefits. However, recent efforts to reform welfare have cast the psychological well-being and personal competence of welfare recipients in an entirely different light. Instead of a focus on improvements in the provision or delivery of services to low-income mothers, the argument has turned against the welfare system itself, and those who are a part of it. According to Axinn and Hirsch (1993) "Open season has been declared on poor women and the welfare programs on which they rely." Conservative academicians such as Charles Murray (1984) and Lawrence Mead (1992) have argued that poverty is not caused by a lack of opportunity, but rather a pathological state of dependency that prevents the poor from joining the mainstream. According to Mead (1992), "the question is how to deal with the problems of basic functioning among the seriously poor...such people have personal problems that must be addressed before impersonal reform...is even conceivable (p.211)." One solution that has been

supported by both conservative and liberal politicians and academicians has been the reduction or elimination of the current welfare system. As Axinn and Hirsch (1993) report, President Bush (in a 1991 commencement speech at the University of Michigan) called the public welfare system “addictive,” stating that it weakened the “moral sensitivity” of families and fostered dependency. The welfare system has been blamed for the worsening of poverty, the L.A. riots, and the increase in female-headed families.

According to some scholars (Axinn and Hirsch, 1993) implicit in many of the reform proposals now under consideration is the idea that poor mothers receiving welfare benefits are less competent as parents. For instance, the “family cap” proposal of the Personal Responsibility Act (part of the “Contract with America”) which would prohibit the increase in benefits that is now available to poor women who have additional children while on welfare, has been decried by feminists and advocates for the poor for its implication that low income welfare mothers are uniquely incapable of making responsible decisions about childbearing and parenting, and thus are legitimate targets for government control of their reproductive rights. Religious conservatives have also focused on reproductive rights in arguments against the family cap proposal; however, they are concerned with the possible increase in abortions that would result if the family cap were adopted. In neither case are the reproductive rights and personal needs of low income AFDC mothers considered important. Axinn and Hirsch suggest that all of the welfare reform proposals reflect deep-seated beliefs that low-income mothers are incapable of making good choices for themselves and their children in the absence of coercion: “Underlying each of the proposals is the suggestion that low-income women do not have the same concern for their children as do other women...welfare mothers are [seen as] inherently defective and therefore must be forced to take proper care of their offspring (p. 566).”

Another personal characteristic that has been attributed to AFDC recipients is an unwillingness to work or to make good faith efforts to become self-sufficient. Many of the current welfare reform proposals suggest substituting “workfare” for welfare; that is, making the receipt of welfare benefits contingent upon working a certain number of hours per week or on participating in

a job training or education program. While it is true that many such opportunities, if well-funded and comprehensive, would be beneficial for the long term security of low-income AFDC recipients, and despite the fact that currently fully 18% of all full-time workers earn an income below the poverty level for a four person family, conservative politicians have for the most part argued that the welfare population is inherently lazy and, given the choice, would rather not work or make efforts to become self-sufficient (e.g. former President Reagan's referral to "welfare queens" in one of his Presidential radio addresses).

While much previous research on poverty has addressed family functioning and maternal mental health, few psychological studies have focused explicitly on the relationship between those measures and AFDC receipt. Conversely, economic or sociological studies of AFDC receipt have lacked comprehensive measures of parenting and parent-child relationships. In addition, much of the current political rhetoric seems not to be based on empirical data from either of these disciplines. The purpose of the present investigation is to bring together these two lines of research by examining the effects of AFDC receipt on parent-child relationships, parenting behaviors, and maternal mental health. In addition, this research will test the assertion that welfare recipients are less likely to be employed than non-welfare recipients and are less willing to make efforts to become employed. This issue is particularly relevant to public policy in light of the current debate over welfare reform. Based on the available literature, we hypothesize that AFDC mothers will evidence more negative psychological symptoms than non-AFDC mothers. However, due to the lack of available literature, the comparisons between AFDC recipients vs. AFDC non-recipients in terms of parenting behaviors and parent-adolescent relationships will be exploratory in nature. Furthermore, we have no reason to believe that AFDC mothers will be less likely to demonstrate a willingness to work or to seek employment.

Methods

Sample

This study is part of a larger investigation being conducted at the University of Michigan (Maryland Adolescent Growth In Contexts Study: MAGICS). These data represent responses from the first wave of the study, when the target adolescents were in the seventh grade. Information will be used from 75 low-income mothers of young adolescents (average age of adolescents =12.3 years old) living in Prince George's County, MD. All mothers' annual incomes fell below \$15,000. There are 25 AFDC recipients (22 Black, 2 white, 1 other) and 50 non-AFDC recipients (34 Black, 10 white, 6 other).

AFDC mothers had 2.65 children under 18 years on average living in the home and reported an average of 3.9 people living in the home. They were an average age of 37 years old and had completed approximately 11 years of school. Only 46% of the AFDC mothers reported having received a high school diploma or a GED. Of these, 8 mothers received a diploma, 4 received a GED. Eight AFDC mothers were employed and 17 were unemployed. Twenty-one AFDC recipients reported not being currently married, while four reported being either married or living with a partner. In terms of marital history, 39% of the AFDC mothers had never been married, 19% were divorced, 31% were separated, four percent were widowed, and seven percent were married. Thirty-five percent of the AFDC mothers reported annual incomes of below \$5,000, 38% earned between \$5,000 and \$9,999 per year, and the remaining 27% of the AFDC sample earned between \$10,000 and \$14,999 in the year prior to the interview. Only 19% of the AFDC mothers reported receiving any money from child support payments.

Non-AFDC mothers had 2.16 children under 18 years on average living in the home and reported an average of 3.9 people living in the home. They were 36 years old on average, and had completed approximately 12 years of school. Sixty-four percent of the non-AFDC mothers had received either a high school diploma or a GED. Of these, 24 mothers had received a diploma and 8 had received a GED. Thirty-one non-AFDC mothers were employed and 18 were unemployed.

Thirty-two non-AFDC recipients reported not being currently married, while 18 reported being either married or living with a partner. In terms of marital history, 30% of the non-AFDC mothers had never been married, 22% were divorced, 22% were separated, two percent were widowed, and 24 % were married. Twenty percent of the non-AFDC mothers reported annual incomes of below \$5,000, 28% earned between \$5,000 and \$9,999 per year, and the remaining 52% of the non-AFDC sample earned between \$10,000 and \$14,999 in the year prior to the interview. Fourteen percent of the non-AFDC mothers reported receiving any money from child support.

Measures

Maternal psychological well-being was assessed via self-reported measures of anger, depression, and resiliency. The mother-adolescent relationship was assessed via maternal reports of mother-adolescent conflict, the amount of mother-adolescent communication about adolescents' friends, schoolwork, and life plans, the extent to which they enjoy activities with their adolescents, and the amount of time spent doing positive activities such as working on school projects, discussing current events, or doing something "just for fun.". Mothers' parenting behavior was measured in terms of the extent to which they monitored their adolescents' whereabouts during the day and evening, the amount of in-home and out-of-home rule enforcement, mothers' proactive prevention of adolescent problems, and the degree of self-reported inconsistent discipline behaviors. Employed mothers were asked how many hours per week they worked, while unemployed mothers were asked if they were currently looking for paid work. All scales had a Chronbach alpha greater than .60. Sample items from and reliabilities of scales are listed in Appendix A.

Results

Mean level differences between AFDC and non-AFDC on each of the dependent measures were examined via a series of ANCOVAs. The analyses for maternal mental health, mother-adolescent relationship, and mothers' parenting behaviors used mothers' marital status (married/partnered vs. not married/partnered) and employment status (employed vs. not employed) as covariates. Preliminary tests were performed in order to assess mean level differences in marital status and employment status between the two groups. The difference in marital status was approaching significance ($p < .07$) such that non-AFDC mothers were more likely to be married/partnered than AFDC mothers. The difference in employment status was highly significant ($p < .00$) such that non-AFDC mothers were more likely to be employed. Comparing those mothers in the two groups who were employed (AFDC mothers=8, non-AFDC mothers=31), however, revealed that there was no significant difference in the number of hours worked per week. AFDC working mothers worked an average of 39.3 hours per week, while non-AFDC working mothers worked an average of 38.1 hours per week. A comparison of mothers in the two groups who were not employed (AFDC mothers=17, non-AFDC mothers=18) indicated there was no significant difference in response to the question "Are you currently looking for paid employment?" Sixty-seven percent of the unemployed AFDC mothers indicated that they were currently looking for work, while 68% of the unemployed non-AFDC mothers reported currently looking for paid work.

We were also able to examine qualitative data in response to the question "Why are you not looking for paid work?" for those mothers in each group who were currently unemployed yet did not indicate that they were seeking employment. Respondents were allowed to state up to three reasons for not looking for work. For the AFDC mothers (N=6), the answers included: "lack of child care" (3 responses), "lack of skills" (1 response), "general health problems" (1 response), "planning to attend school" (1 response), "inability to drive" (1), and "would like to work at my child's school" (1 response). For the non-AFDC mothers (N=6), the answers included:

"immigration status" (2 responses), "not allowed to work" (2 responses), "lack of child care" (1 response), "disabled" (1 response), "general health problems" (1 response), and "don't want to (vaguely alluded to)" (2 responses). One non-AFDC mother indicated that she was not seeking employment because she knew that her former job was available.

Virtually all of the analyses comparing AFDC and non-AFDC mothers' mental health, mother-adolescent relationship, and parenting practices suggest that the two groups of mothers are similar, rather than different, on those measures. There were no differences at all between the two groups on maternal mental health. In terms of the parent-adolescent relationship, the only measure that was approaching significance ($p < .07$) was mothers' reports of enjoying activities with their adolescents, such that non-AFDC mothers reported enjoying activities with their adolescents more than did AFDC mothers. Finally, in terms of differences between the two groups in the degree of various parenting behaviors, there was a trend towards significance ($p < .10$) in only one of the measures-parent monitoring-such that non-AFDC mothers reported knowing where their child was more often than did AFDC mothers.

Discussion

Not surprisingly, poor AFDC mothers are more likely than poor non-AFDC mothers to have lower educational attainment and to be unemployed. Contrary to previous investigations, however, this study found no differences on measures of parent mental health in poor AFDC vs. poor non-AFDC mothers of young adolescents. Furthermore, we found no differences between the two groups on several measures of the quality of the parent-child relationship and on a variety of parenting practices. These results suggest, contrary to recent political allegations, that there is nothing uniquely dysfunctional about the population of poor mothers who receive welfare benefits. In fact, what is striking about these data is not only the similarity between the two groups on the majority of the measures, but the extent to which *both* groups of mothers reported practicing "good" parenting behaviors.

Moreover, we found no evidence that poor AFDC mothers are less inclined or less willing to seek employment. Fully two-thirds of the unemployed mothers in each group reported that they were actively seeking paid employment. And, among those unemployed mothers who reported not actively seeking paid employment, *structural*, rather than *personal*, characteristics raised barriers. Finally, a minority of the poor mothers in each group reported receiving any money from a child support award; a mere 19% of the AFDC mothers and only 14% of the non-AFDC mothers received any money from this source.

Implications for Welfare Reform:

The results from this investigation lead us to the following four conclusions about the proposed reform of the current welfare system:

1) End *poverty*, not welfare, "as we know it."

Any action plan to reform welfare should focus on provisions to raise the earnings capacity of low-income mothers and their children.

2) Provide education and training to the poor to help improve their chances of getting and keeping a job.

The low-income AFDC recipients in this sample were clearly motivated to seek employment, yet they had obvious deficits in educational attainment that will hinder their ability to obtain high-wage jobs.

3) Improve the child support system.

A meager proportion of the poor mothers in this sample reported receiving any money from a child support award. Clearly, child support awards must be made and enforced more systematically.

4) Introduce "welfare-to-work" only in the context of realistic funding for such proposals.

The sort of training and education that will make welfare recipients job-ready and self-sufficient will be expensive. In addition, quality child care, health care, and support services must be provided.

Appendix A: Sample Items from and Reliabilities of Scales

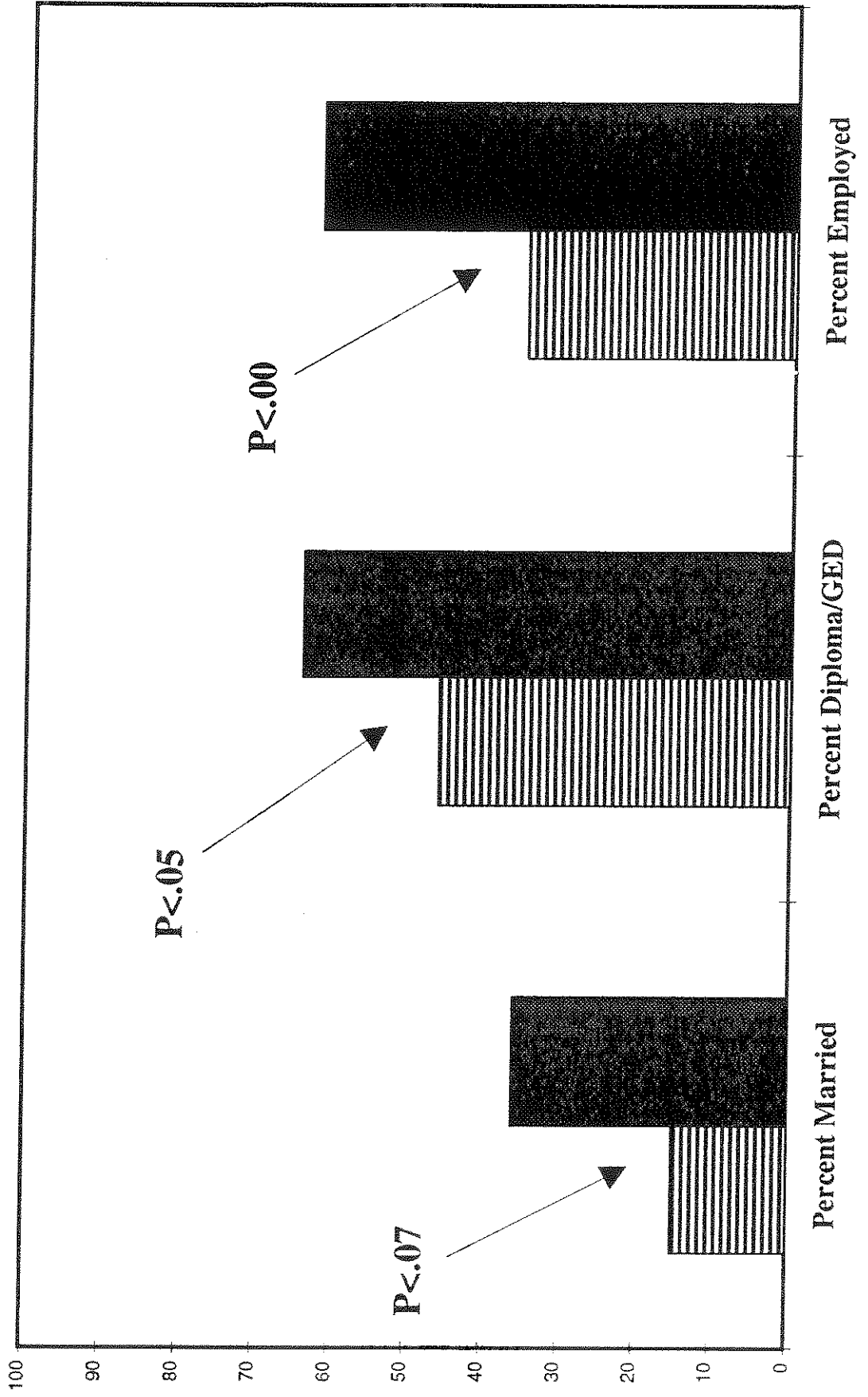
<u>Scale</u>	<u>Reliability</u>
<i>Parent Depression</i> (4 items) “During the past couple of months, including today, how often have you felt depressed?”	.82
<i>Parent Anger</i> (4 items) “During the past couple of months, including today, how often have you felt really mad at other people?”	.74
<i>Parent Resiliency</i> (4 items) “I am very good at figuring out problems and then making a plan to solve the problem.”	.83
<i>Parent-Child Conflict</i> (4 items) “How often do you and your 7th grader disagree about his or her clothes, hair, and makeup?”	.72
<i>Parent-Child Communication</i> (6 items) “How often does your 7th grader talk to you about problems he or she is having at school?”	.84
<i>Positive Time Use with Child</i> (5 items) “How often have you done something just for fun with your 7th grader, like go to the movies or go for walks?”	.78
<i>Enjoy Activities with Child</i> (7 items) “How much do you enjoy working with your 7th grader on schoolwork?”	.70
<i>Parent Monitoring</i> (4 items) “How often do you know where child is in the course of the day?”	.62
<i>Inconsistent Parenting</i> (5 items) “If you ask your child to do something and she does not do it, how often do you give up trying to get her to do it?”	.64
<i>Parent Proactive Prevention of Problems</i> (5 items) “In the past six months, how often did you talk to your child about your worries to keep her from involvement in them?”	.69
<i>In Home Rule Enforcement</i> (6 items) “How regularly are the rules and expectations about maintaining a certain grade point average enforced?”	.64
<i>Out of Home Rule Enforcement</i> (4 items) “How regularly are the rules and expectations about what time to be home on weekend nights?”	.92

References

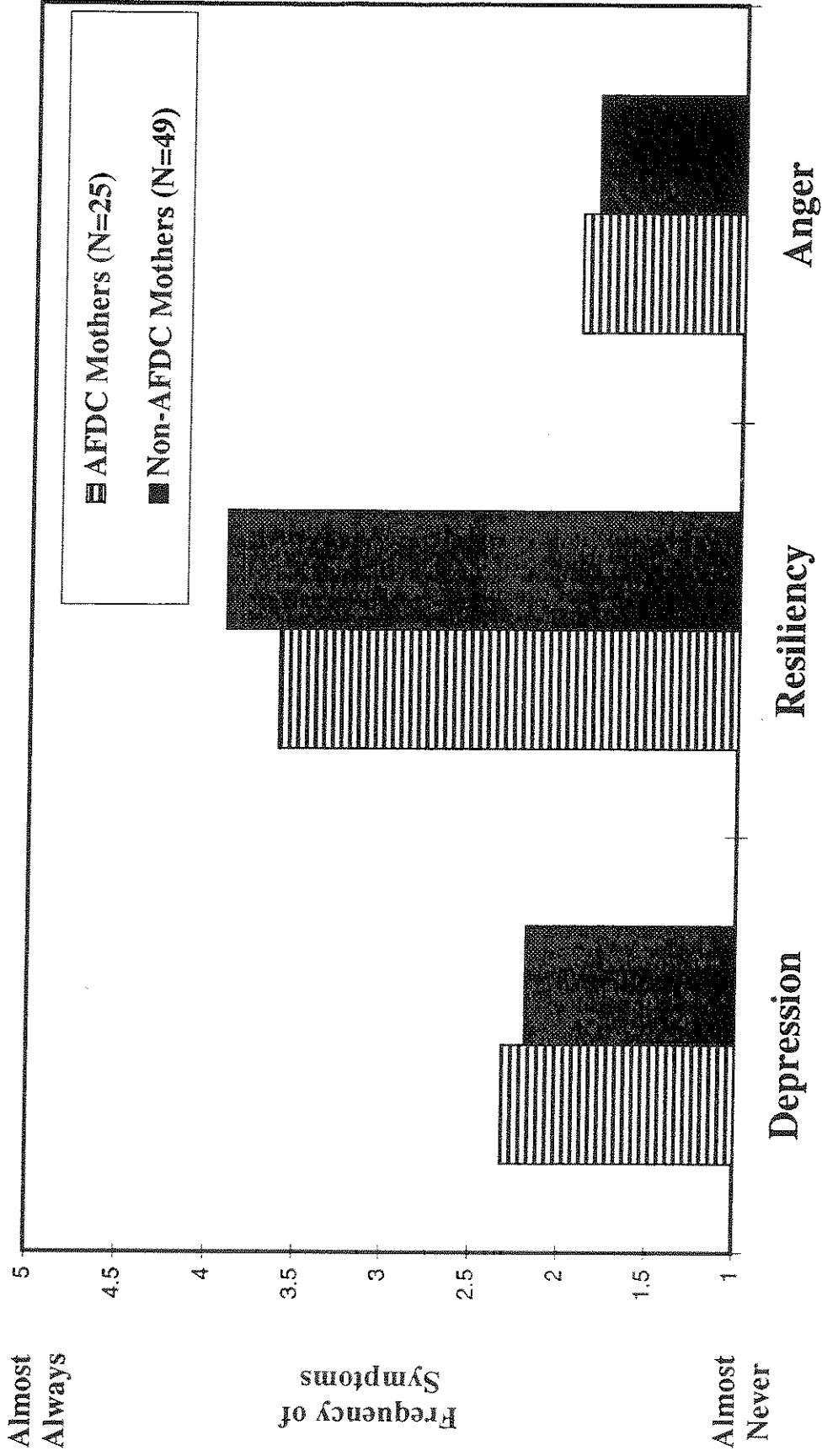
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Demographic Variables

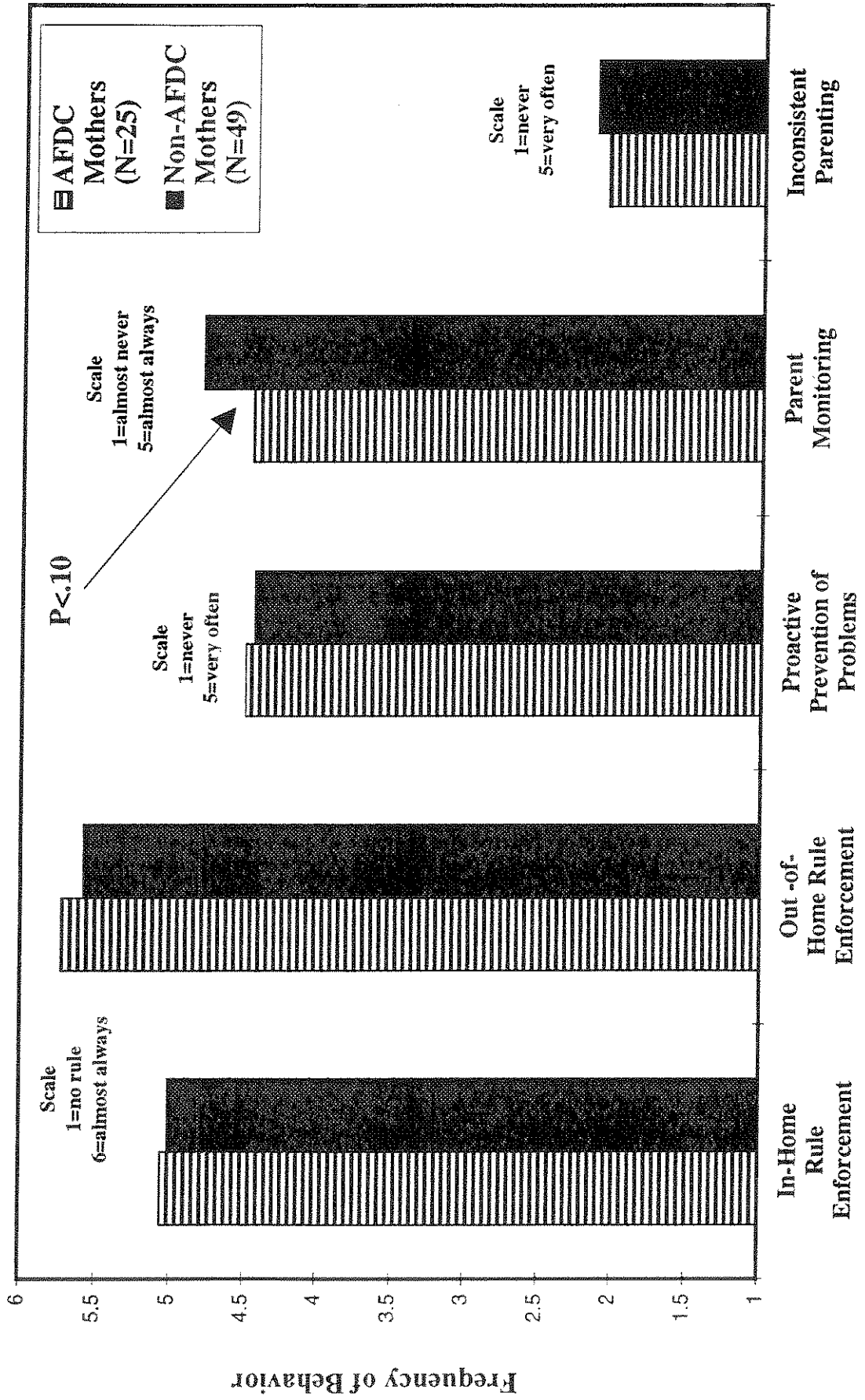
▨ AFDC Mothers (N=25)
■ Non-AFDC Mothers (N=50)



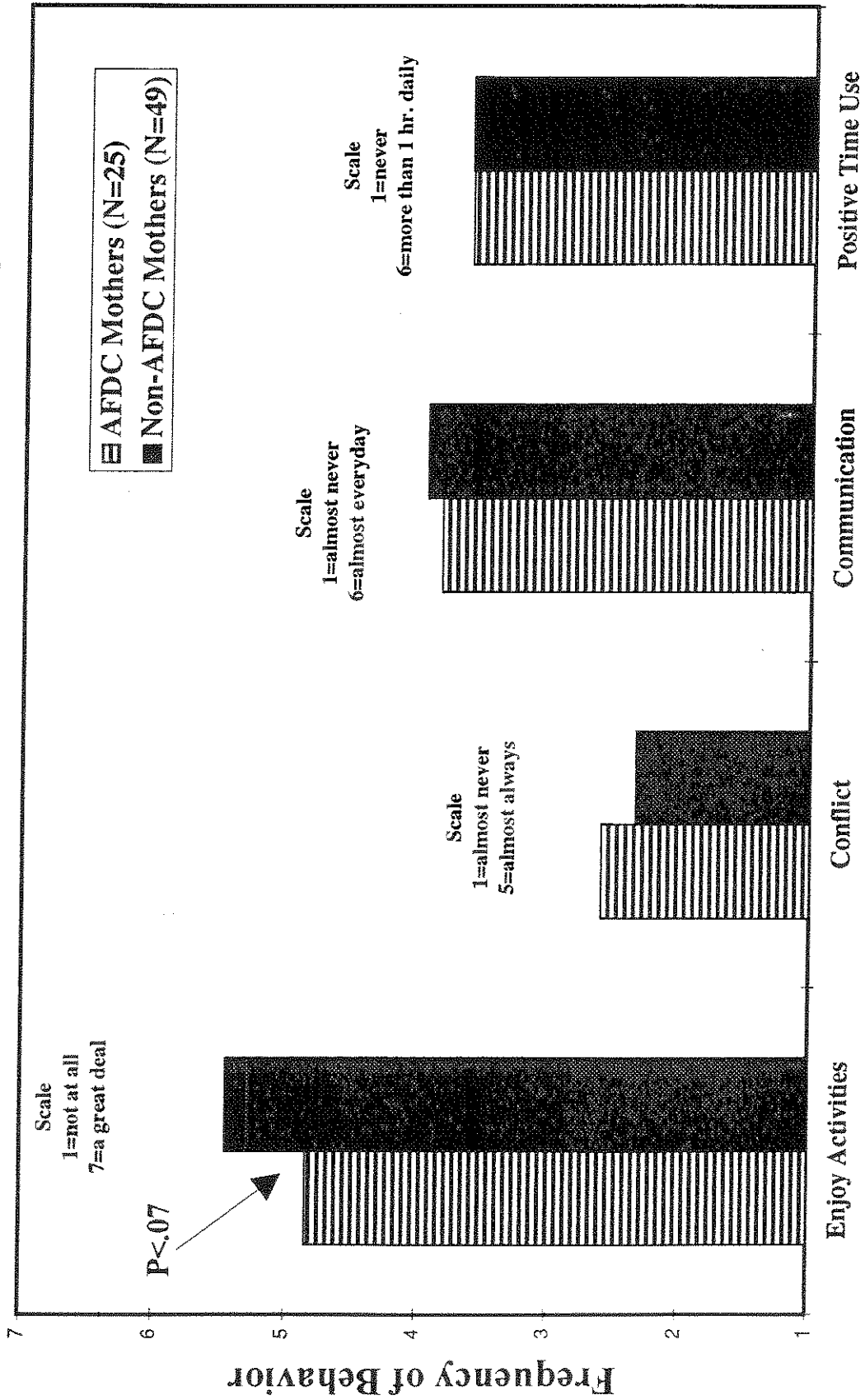
Parent Mental Health



Parenting Practices



Parent-Adolescent Relationship



Behavior