

Depression Prevalence Among US Women on Welfare: A Systematic Review & Meta-Analysis

By Miette Gourlay (COL 2025) & Dara Jih-Cook (COL 2026)

Mentored by Dr. Jacqueline Corcoran, DSW Program, School of Social Policy & Practice



Background

- Depression's effects are so extensive that the World Health Organization identifies [depression as a leading cause of disability worldwide](#). [1]
- In the U.S., there are 2.8 million recipients of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families TANF [2]; [6,260,000](#) of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) [3]; [87,062,629](#) of Medicaid [4]; and [70,000](#) families with Healthy Families. [5]
- The last published review of depression in women on welfare [limited their focus to Aid to Dependent Children \(AFDC\) and TANF](#). [6]
- Because this study did not use meta-analysis, the average effect is unknown and there is [a need for a more precise and updated prevalence estimate](#).

Objective

To conduct a [systematic review](#) and [meta-analysis](#) of studies [reporting the prevalence of depression in women on welfare in the U.S.](#) and moderators that might influence the effect.

Methods

- [Searched databases](#): CINAHL, Embase, ProQuest Dissertations, PsycINFO, Pubmed, SCOPUS, & Social Abstracts
- [Inclusion Criteria](#)
 - $\geq 75\%$ women, 18+, on US Welfare (TANF/AFDC, WIC, Medicaid, Healthy Start, and other home visiting programs)
 - Depression = clinician diagnosis or self-report standardized tool

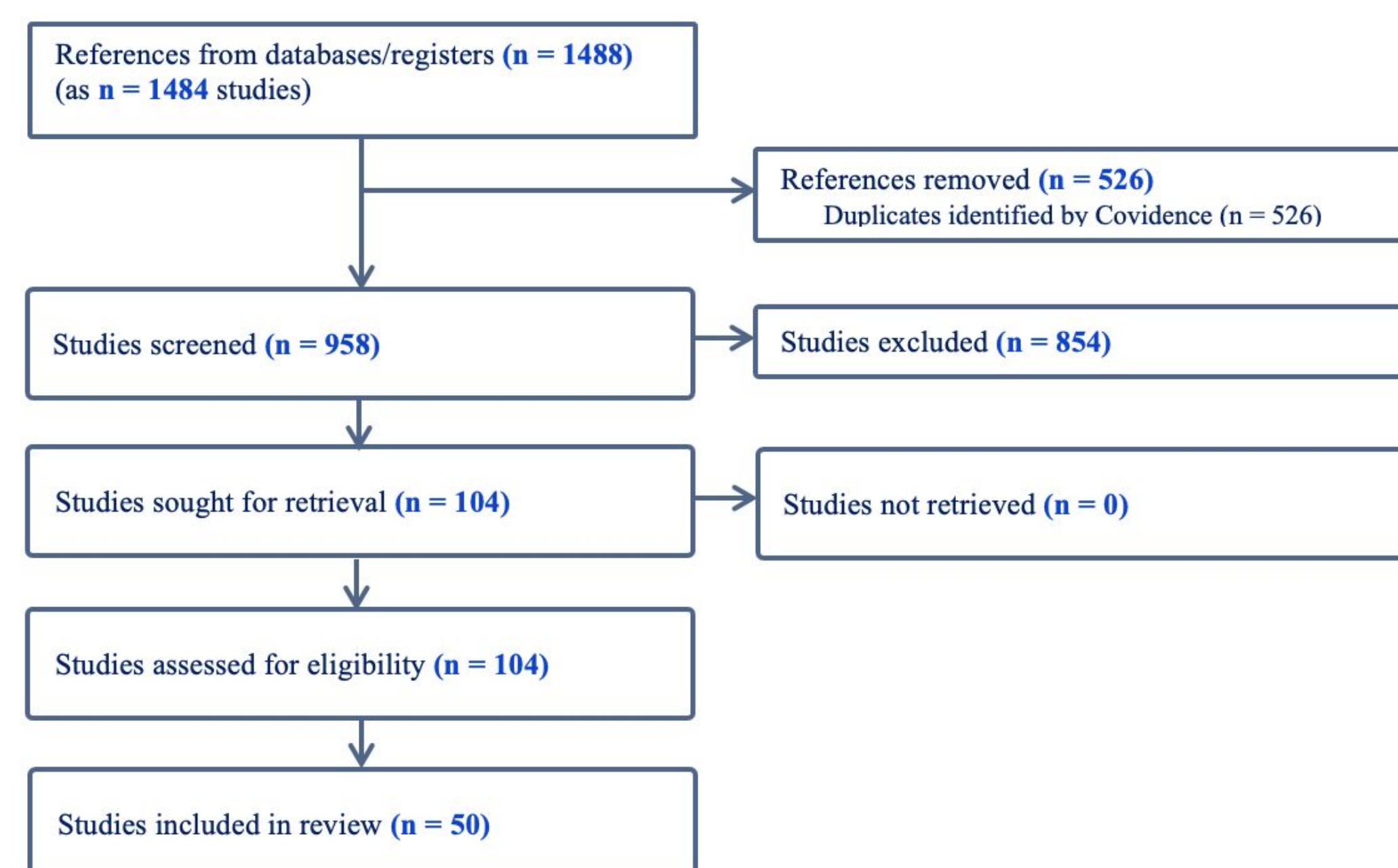
- [Data extraction](#): 2 independent reviewers extracted the share of women who were depressed as a percentage of the total sample, alongside the variables in Table 1

Table 1. Study Description & Quality Appraisal

Study Authors	Sample Size ²	Nationally/Regionally Representative Study? ³	Depression Measure Used	Welfare Type	Pregnant or Postpartum
Austin et al. (2022)	82728	Yes	Self-report	Medicaid	Postpartum
Baer et al. (2016)	30990	Yes	Self-report	Medicaid; WIC	Pregnant

- [Data analysis](#) performed using meta and metafor packages in the statistical software environment R
- [Moderator effects analyzed](#): (1) year of publication; (2) whether the population was high risk; (3) whether prevalence was different, depending on the welfare program; (4) whether the study involved self-report or a diagnosis; and (5) risk of bias indicator whether the survey was nationally or regionally representative

Figure 1. PRISMA Table



Results

- [50 included studies](#) with [225,010 participants](#) total; publication years ranging from 1998-2022
- Statistically significant prevalence rate of depression (pooled overall [prevalence rate of 29.93%](#))
- Significant amount of heterogeneity across studies but failed to identify any significant moderators

Conclusions

- Depression prevalence among women living on welfare in the U.S. is [high](#), almost reaching [a third of women](#)
- No moderators explained the heterogeneity of findings
- Given high rates of depression, well above the national average of 18.4%, future research should [focus on a concerted effort to ensure that women on welfare who are depressed are screened and referred for treatment](#). [7]

References

- [1] World Health Organization. (2021, September 13). "Depression" Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>
- [2] Falk, G., & Landers, P., A. (2023). The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant: Responses to Frequently Asked Questions.
- [3] WIC Program Participation and Costs (2023). <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/wisummary-7.pdf>.
- [4] April 2023 Medicaid & CHIP Enrollment Data Highlights (2023). Medicaid.gov. <https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid-program-information/medicaid-and-chip-enrollment-data/report-highlights/index.html>.
- [5] Evidence of Effectiveness (2022). Healthy Families America. https://www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HFA_Evidence_of_Effectiveness_2022_Website.pdf.
- [6] Lennon, M.C., Blome, J., & English, K. (2001). Depression and low-income women: Challenges for TANF and welfare-to-work policies and programs (Research Forum on Children, Families, and the New Federation Report). Retrieved from the National Center for Children in Poverty website: http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_381.pdf
- [7] Lee, Benjamin. "National, State-Level, and County-Level Prevalence Estimates of Adults Aged ≥ 18 Years Self-Reporting a Lifetime Diagnosis of Depression - United States, 2020." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 15, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7224a1.htm>.