Welfare to Work under TANF: A New Generation of Responses to Poverty

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Abstract

This study defines poverty, explains its causes and consequences on various systems, and traces our governmental response to this problem from the New Deal efforts to the present system of welfare. Drawing from recent literature to examine specifically the efficacy of TANF's welfare to work (WtW) initiative, this writer focuses on the following: (1) on the target population, single mothers and children, and (2) on how this initiative is affecting both this group and the overall problem of poverty. Also included is a discussion of the historical and contemporary issues regarding this initiative as well as implications for social work policy and practice.

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Existing in all cultures and affecting people from many walks of life, especially single mothers and children, poverty does not discriminate. What is poverty, then? Is it simply a condition, or does it create conditions that reach far beyond a simple social issue?

In order to understand these questions, one must begin with basic definitions. Poverty is technically broken into two categories – absolute poverty and relative poverty. Absolute poverty exists when a family cannot provide for its basic needs – which include nutrition, clothing, and shelter. A measurement for this category is the poverty line, a calculation that is based on three times the amount of a family's normal food budget. On the other hand, relative poverty measures

economic status and compares it between families within the same geographical locus (Karger & Stoesz, 1998).

More complicated than poverty's definitions, however, are its causal explanations, ranging from the micro to the macro level. The micro-level explanation places blame on the American family's deterioration, a theme characterized by an increase in single mothers, teenage pregnancy, and a loss of the traditional male role (Egendorf, 1999). Next, the mid-level view focuses on inequality in the education system that perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Finally, the macro-level view looks at institutions such as the economy and government, and specifically examines these entities' effects on families and individuals, including inconsistency and discrimination in the job market (Coleman & Cressey, 1999).

With causes, then, come consequences, and poverty is no exception. According to Maurice Badon of Southeastern Louisiana University, "poverty is an insidious evil that robs families of the necessities we take for granted" (M. Badon, personal communication, November 19, 2001). For example, the poor are generally deprived of educational opportunities and, as a result of social stresses and a lack of adequate health care, are also highly susceptible to mental and physical illness. In addition, these groups tend to live in areas where crime is prevalent, creating another social stress with which to contend. Poverty is also tough on working parents because difficulties in finding adequate, affordable child care create consequent difficulties in maintaining employment (Coleman & Cressey, 1999). Furthermore, as a result of their parents' struggles, children suffer the most because they are totally dependent on "Mom" and "Dad," or sometimes on just one parent – a predicament that only makes the uphill battle seem insurmountable. The suffering of society's poor children arguably marks the eventual suffering of society as the future depends on the success of its youth, this premise echoed by former

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt: “the destiny of American youth is the destiny of America” (Trattner, 1999, p. 110). From the ideals and programs of Roosevelt to those of contemporary leaders, then, America’s historical response to poverty is traced with an emphasis on the roots of “welfare-to-work.”

Poverty Policies throughout the Years

In the early 1930’s, the Great Depression’s effects were felt across this country as poverty skyrocketed and, thus, became an issue of social responsibility. A response to society’s new concern was Roosevelt’s New Deal efforts, which included the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). These three programs were the cornerstone for the Social Security Act of 1935, the underpinning for Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). This new program, one that would eventually evolve into what we now call “welfare,” was specifically designed to aid children, and would keep its purpose and namesake for nearly thirty years in the tailwind of a prosperous economy resulting from World War II. In 1962, however, Michael Harrington’s *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* brought the poor back into the public eye. Soon after the release of this paradigm-shifting book came Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a beginning of “welfare reform” in ADC to include single mothers, a group that would receive growing attention in later reform efforts. Lyndon B. Johnson followed in 1964, declaring America’s War on Poverty, but was unable to stop two growing trends that would later become institutionalized in the welfare system: work requirements and tightened eligibility for benefits (Segal & Brzuzy, 1998).

In 1967, federal legislation spurred the Work Incentive Program (WIN), which required mothers to either go to work or participate in work training, and in 1981 the Omnibus Budget

Reconciliation Act (OBRA) tightened the government's grip on welfare benefits, restricting eligibility and reducing federal subsidies. Other welfare reform legislation reflected these examples in the following years. The Family Support Act of 1988 (FSA), for example, placed tighter work requirements and restrictions on mothers and was, therefore, seen by many as a punitive legislation. Eight years later, Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act. A result of this law was Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a program that now outlines provisions for the current system of welfare benefits (Segal & Brzuzy, 1998).

Under TANF, the federal government issues block grants to each state on a Maintenance-of-Effort (MOE) mandate, which imposes a minimum, must-spend percentage of funding. Rises in caseloads and consequent surpluses of funds are putting pressure on states to meet these mandates, and additional federal restrictions on appropriate spending are further putting a damper on agencies (Reichert, 1998). In addition to these administrative constraints, welfare recipients also receive a tightening of the reins in the form of lifetime limits for receiving benefits and even stronger work requirements for mothers with young children (Segal & Brzuzy, 1998). These "reforms," finally, are expected to move people from welfare to self-sufficiency, but are they accomplishing this goal?

Overview

This study draws from recent literature to examine specifically the efficacy of TANF's welfare to work (WtW) initiative, outlining the following: (1) the target population, single mothers and children, and (2) how this initiative is affecting both this group and the overall problem of poverty. Also included is a discussion of the historical and contemporary issues regarding this initiative, along with implications for social work policy and practice.

Welfare to Work: Outcomes

Earlier noted was Welfare to Work's target population, single women and children. Cancian (2001) described the new regulations imposed on these groups, claiming that "contemporary society seems to view employment as the avenue for success, at least for poor women . . .TANF required that by 2000 single mothers with school-aged children receiving benefits work at least 30 hours per week." In addition, Welfare to Work, she contended, sets "lifetime limits of no more than 60 months of benefits, although states may impose shorter time limits, and may have done so" (Cancian, 2001, p. 309). Is this initiative, then, punishing or helping its clients, and what are the results of these restrictions? A welfare reform evaluation (1999) attempted to answer this question, saying drops in caseloads from six million in 1994 to three million in 1998 indicate that Welfare to Work is achieving its implicitly intended function. Critics of this function, however, are have expressed doubt, and "argue that moving families off of welfare is no guarantee that the program is helping them find employment and reducing poverty. Those who leave welfare . . . may be relying on other forms of government assistance, charitable organizations, or informal support systems such as family and friends." This evaluation, finally, reported on a study by the General Accounting Office (GAO), which concluded that from 19 to 30 percent of those who leave welfare rolls eventually return to the system ("Evaluating Welfare Reform," 1999).

Probably the biggest historical issue regarding Welfare to Work is the following question: if you decrease welfare rolls and instead require work, where will former recipients go if the labor market does not provide enough employment? According to Featheringill (1999), who paraphrased the Department of Health and Human Services' former assistant secretary Peter

Edelman, "our economy has never had enough jobs for everyone, even during the good times" (*Poverty: Opposing Viewpoints*, 1999, p. 103).

This contention, however, may not be so. Actually, more than enough jobs are prevalent in the market system but, unfortunately, are either low paying or not compatible with the demanding lifestyles of single mothers, and the so-called "good" jobs require skills the welfare-to-work training efforts are perhaps failing to teach.

Mothers who balance family and work are presented with many challenges, and may require jobs that can offer family leave, child care tax credits, and family-friendly company policies, but finding jobs offering these accommodations may be more difficult than expected. In a recent study, for example, Cancian explained:

> Low income women in low paying jobs are unlikely to have access to many of these benefits. Early evidence suggests that a large proportion of women leaving welfare for work find temporary jobs or jobs with irregular schedules, with implications for child care and transportation. Such jobs often fail to provide health coverage, and more generous, family-friendly benefits are even less common. (p. 311)

As previously mentioned, transportation is also a problem for former recipients who get jobs. For example, these new workers may be unable to establish a way to work because jobs are either too low paying, or located outside the limits of mass-transit services. An advocacy article spoke to this problem, declaring a "lack of transportation to get people to suburban areas where jobs are" ("Cities Still Struggling with Welfare," 1999, 10).

In addition to low-paying jobs and implications for transportation, a mismatch between former recipients' skills and those required to attain good jobs provides a clue that welfare-to-

work job training may be simply ill-preparing these groups and/or teaching them skills for which no true demand exists. Carnevale and Desrochers (1999) supported this expectation, asserting a concern that recipients have neither the skills that the job market demands, nor the knowledge that jobs will lead to upward social mobility:

> A careful look . . . reveals a stark mismatch between many welfare recipients' skills and the skills required to get, and successfully perform in, the good jobs the new economy is creating – jobs that lead to self-sufficiency. (p. 20)

This discrepancy, then, implies that job training, education, and skills matching supports may need further analysis and modification to increase the efficacy of Welfare to Work.

Discussion and Conclusion

The implications these problems create for social work policy and practice rest solely on research, and will, therefore, guide future concerns regarding the effects of current policies and programs on women, children, and the overall condition of poverty. Suggestions for policy and practice gleaned from the available literature include advocacy at the macro level, initiatives to increase public awareness of discrimination, and efforts to analyze public policy for further revision. First, advocacy needed at the macro level should focus on the development of new policy and on the improvement of those already in existence, including refinements in public transportation, and in education training, and employment programs to include poor fathers. Also needed are efforts to increase public awareness of discrimination against all women in the workplace and abroad. Finally, research efforts to analyze and modify Welfare to Work's impact on its targeted population and problem must be continued to insure that inefficiencies within the program remain in the public eye.

Advocacy

Advocacy at the macro level should include the creation of policy for improvements in the range of public transportation, the maintenance and extension of important long-term supports for the welfare-to-work transition, and finally, the assurance of education, training, and employment available to poor fathers.

Improving public transportation to help new workers get to their government-mandated jobs is a worthy endeavor, certainly a way to show former recipients that their representatives in government not only want them to leave welfare, but also care to empower them. Second, as a result of low-paying, non-family-friendly jobs in the marketplace, along with impending cuts in benefits, future advocacy is needed to keep certain services. Cancian spelled out this need, asserting that "subsidized child care and health care are important long-term supports" (Cancian, 2001, p. 313).

Another important policy concern is to make education, training, and employment services also available to poor fathers. Corrina Vallianatos (2001) summarized a report on this group, stating, "poor fathers receive less means-tested assistance than poor mothers and participate less in job search or education and training activities." She then supported this statement, contending that cash assistance contributed to a third of mothers' family income, but only 17 percent of fathers'; that in 1996 only six percent of fathers received job search assistance, compared to 11 percent of mothers; and, finally, that only four percent of fathers engaged in training/education classes, compared with 19 percent of mothers (Vallianatos, 2001, p. 12).

Increase Awareness about Discrimination

Cancian asserted that "women of color face particular challenges in moving from welfare to work; they are likely to face discriminatory attitudes of employers and fellow employees, to live in areas with high unemployment, and to have lower levels of formal education" (Cancian, 2001, p. 310). Almost needless to mention, then, is that awareness of these issues is crucial to policy analysis and change, but also important is to remember that all women are minorities and are often pushed aside, regardless of their ethnic origin.

The Importance of Research and the Final Thought

This writer's third suggestion is, by far, the most crucial because continuing research ensures the isolation of inefficiencies and inequalities of policies and programs. Research must then continue to serve this highly important function.

In conclusion, with the passing of time limits comes the question of where the aforementioned 19 to 30 percent that would have returned to the system will go for support – a serious question for future concern. In addition, implications of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, although not definitive, are seemingly spurring an economic recession. Where will America's mothers and fathers go, finally, when Welfare to Work, or the economy, pulls the plug on them?

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Heath F. Borne is a Social Work major. Dr. C. Harrell Weathersby was his professor.

Dr. Weathersby's Comments: *I believe that Mr. Borne has done an outstanding job of fulfilling the requirements of the assignment in his analysis of the Welfare to Work Program, a part of the current Temporary Aid to Needy Families program. This is an extremely relevant topic, given the current economic situation and the implications for the needy families in the United States.*