



## Assessing the Initial Impact of Welfare Reform

Sarah Carnochan JD, MSW , Virginia Ketch MSW , Allison De Marco MSW ,  
Sarah Taylor MSW , Anne Abramson MSW & Michael J. Austin PhD

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## ARTICLES

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# Assessing the Initial Impact of Welfare Reform: A Synthesis of Research Studies (1998-2002)

Sarah Carnochan  
Virginia Ketch  
Allison De Marco  
Sarah Taylor  
Anne Abramson  
Michael J. Austin

**ABSTRACT.** The research examining welfare programs and populations has increased substantially since the enactment and implementation of the Personal Opportunity and Work Responsibility Act (PRWORA), the most substantial change in welfare policy since 1935. This literature review examines studies conducted between 1997 and 2002. It captures the major findings in four principle areas of inquiry: (1) barriers to employment, (2) population characteristics, (3) welfare to work service programs and the impact on service delivery organizations,

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Sarah Carnochan, JD, MSW, is Research Coordinator, Virginia Ketch, MSW, is Research Assistant, Allison De Marco, MSW, is Research Assistant, Sarah Taylor, MSW, is Research Assistant, Anne Abramson, MSW, is Research Assistant, and Michael J. Austin, PhD, is Principle Investigator, all at Bay Area Social Services Consortium, Center for Social Services Research, School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720 (E-mail: mjaustin@uclink4.berkeley.edu).

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and (4) outcomes of welfare reform with regard to family well-being and family formation. The review concludes with a research agenda that can guide the next phase of research in a post-welfare reform environment that continues to await federal reauthorization. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Welfare reform, welfare to work, TANF, PRWORA, barriers to employment, welfare leavers

### INTRODUCTION

Welfare programs have been subject to extensive evaluation since the 1970s. With the enactment of the Personal Opportunity and Work Responsibility Act (PRWORA) of 1996, which replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program with the Temporary Aid to Needy Families program, the volume and breadth of research examining welfare programs and populations have increased substantially. This literature review provides an overview of research conducted since welfare reform legislation was enacted and implemented by the states. It examines university-based studies, as well as the large-scale studies conducted by researchers affiliated with research organizations such as MDRC and the Urban Institute. While the review is comprehensive, it is not exhaustive.

#### *Work, Welfare, and Income: Overall Outcomes*

As one of the primary goals of the 1996 welfare reform legislation, moving families off of welfare and into the workforce has been the focus of much of the research conducted in the post-reform period. Welfare caseloads have fallen dramatically since the implementation of welfare reform and studies show that most welfare recipients who left welfare during this time have found employment. However, research shows that many of these families continue to live in poverty and are vulnerable to returning to welfare. There are also many families who are not working after leaving welfare and little is known about how they are surviving.

Studies conducted after the implementation of welfare reform, including the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), the

Three-City Study, and the Women's Employment Survey, show that between 50 percent to 75 percent of welfare leavers are working at some point after leaving welfare (Loprest, 1999; Moffit & Roff, 2000; Bavier, 2001; Danziger, Heflin, Corcoran, Oltmans, & Wang, 2002; Brauner & Loprest, 1999; Acs & Loprest, 2001). However, only 33 percent to 50 percent of these working welfare leavers were employed continuously in all months after leaving welfare, suggesting that many have been unable to find stable, permanent employment (Moffit & Roff, 2000; Bavier, 2001; Acs & Loprest, 2001). At least 60 percent of these working welfare leavers were employed in full-time jobs (Loprest, 1999, 2001; Danziger et al., 2002; Moffit & Roff, 2000).

Data from the NSAF show that about 75 percent of working welfare leavers are employed in the service industry or wholesale/retail trade, which often means low wages and few benefits (Loprest, 1999). Studies show that between 25 percent to 33 percent of working leavers did not receive employer-sponsored health insurance, and less than 50 percent had paid sick leave (Loprest, 1999; Acs & Loprest, 2001; Moffit & Roff, 2000). Some working leavers are also employed in jobs that require unusual or irregular schedules, with more than 25 percent of welfare leavers working mostly night shifts (Loprest, 1999).

Although welfare reform appears to have been successful in moving the majority of welfare recipients off welfare and into the workforce, poverty rates among welfare leavers are high. Studies show that about 50 percent to 75 percent of welfare leavers reported incomes that would place them below the poverty level (Loprest, 2001; Danziger et al., 2002; Moffit & Roff, 2000; Acs & Loprest, 2001). Low wages, few benefits, and high rates of poverty mean that many welfare recipients experience significant material hardship after leaving welfare. Over 25 percent to 33 percent of welfare leavers experienced food hardship or had to cut or skip meals (Loprest, 1999; Acs & Loprest, 2001), while 12 percent experienced moderate or severe hunger (Danziger et al., 2002). Since many former welfare recipients do not receive employer-sponsored health insurance, some are left without any health insurance at all. Between 25 percent to 41 percent of adult welfare leavers and 13 percent to 25 percent of their children had no health insurance coverage (Loprest, 1999; Danziger et al., 2002; Gritz, Mancuso, Lieberman & Lindler, 2001).

While the majority of welfare leavers are working after leaving welfare, it is important to note that there is a significant minority of welfare leavers who are not working. Two studies found that 13 percent to 39 percent of welfare leavers reported being unemployed at the time they

were interviewed, while almost 20 percent had not worked at all since leaving welfare (Loprest 1999; Moffit & Roff, 2000; Danziger et al., 2002). Some of these non-working leavers live in households with other wage earners or have other sources of income, but some do not. About 25 percent of non-working leavers did not live with a working spouse or partner and over 50 percent to 75 percent did not receive income from child support, Social Security, or SSI (Loprest, 1999; Moffit & Roff, 2000; Danziger et al., 2002). Of even greater concern, between six percent to 14 percent of non-working welfare leavers reported receiving no other sources of income at all (Bavier, 2001; Weil, 2002).

Among those former welfare recipients who do not successfully make the transition from welfare to work, many return to the welfare rolls. Research shows that about 20 percent to 33 percent of welfare leavers returned to welfare at some point (Acs & Loprest, 2001; Loprest, 1999; Loprest, 2001; Bavier, 2001). Furthermore, Bavier (2001) found that rates of recidivism increased with length of time off welfare.

The research conducted in the post-reform period consistently shows that the majority of welfare recipients are employed at some point after leaving welfare, however, employment rates do not provide a complete picture of how welfare recipients are doing. Further research needs to focus on the long-term employment experiences of welfare leavers, including employment stability, earnings progression, and job quality. Among those who are not employed after leaving welfare or return to welfare, more research is needed to determine why they are not working, how they are surviving, and what programs and policies are needed to help these families successfully make the transition from welfare to work.

Since future research needs to build upon the research conducted to date, this review of the literature seeks to capture the highlights of major findings in four major areas of inquiry:

1. barriers to employment and related work supports and transitional assistance,
2. population characteristics related to race, ethnicity, and immigration as well as the impact of time limits and sanctions,
3. welfare to work service programs and the impact on service delivery organizations, and
4. outcomes of welfare reform with regard to family well-being and family formation.

## **BARRIERS AND SUPPORTS**

### ***Barriers to Employment***

Barriers to employment (e.g., lack of education, substance abuse, or physical disability) can significantly influence a person's ability to find and maintain steady employment. Research conducted since welfare reform focuses on the prevalence of barriers among welfare recipients, how barriers impact employment, and whether some barriers impact employment more than others.

Many current and former welfare recipients have one or more barriers that may negatively affect their ability to find and maintain employment. Studies show that between 40 percent to 66 percent of welfare recipients reported having at least two barriers, while 25 percent reported having four or more (Danziger et al., 2000; S. Zedlewski, 1999). Current welfare recipients have also been shown to have more barriers to work than former welfare recipients (Loprest & Zedlewski, 1999; Moffit et al., 2002). For example, among welfare recipients in the 1997 NSAF study, 17 percent reported three or more obstacles to work compared to seven percent of former recipients (Loprest & Zedlewski, 1999).

Multiple barriers are associated with poor employment outcomes, welfare recidivism, sanctions, and the continuous reliance on financial assistance. A number of studies have found that welfare recipients with multiple barriers are less likely to be employed than recipients with fewer barriers (Danziger, Corcoran et al., 2000; Danziger & Seefeldt, 2002; D. Polit et al., 2001; S. Zedlewski, 1999). Welfare recipients with multiple barriers are also more likely to be on welfare for longer periods (Danziger & Seefeldt, 2002). Former recipients who returned to welfare were more likely to be in poor physical or mental health, have less than a high school education, have a child under age one, and less likely to have regular access to a car (Loprest, 2002; Mancuso & Lindler, 2001). Moreover, clients with two or more barriers to employment are more likely to be sanctioned than clients without barriers (Burt, 2002).

Research has identified the following factors as having the greatest negative impact on employment outcomes (Danziger, Corcoran et al., 2000; S. Zedlewski, 1999): human capital deficits (e.g., lack of education and/or work experience), experiences of workplace discrimination, lack of transportation, physical or mental health problems, alcohol or drug dependency, having a child under one year old, and lack of English proficiency.

*Human Capital Deficits:* The lack of education and/or work experience are more negatively associated with employment than many other barriers alone (Danziger, Kalil et al., 2000; Danziger et al., 2000; Zedlewski, 1999). Studies show that over 30 percent of welfare recipients do not have a high school diploma or GED and are more likely to lack a high school diploma than former welfare recipients (Danziger & Seefeldt, 2002; Moffit et al., 2002; S. Zedlewski, 1999).

*Childcare and Transportation:* Welfare recipients frequently report childcare and transportation as barriers to employment. Studies show that about 50 percent of welfare recipients felt that childcare was a barrier to employment, while 35 percent of unemployed women stated that they had left a job because of lack of childcare (D. Polit et al., 2001; Kalil, Born, Kunz, & Caudill, 2001; Kalil, Schweingruber et al., 2001). Between 30 percent and 50 percent of welfare recipients reported that lack of transportation was a barrier to employment (Kalil, Born, Kunz, & Caudill, 2001; Danziger et al., 2000). In a statistical simulation of census data, welfare assistance was reduced by one-third and employment was increased by 50 percent when childcare costs were subsidized by 50 percent (Connelly & Kimmel, 2001).

*Physical Health:* Physical health problems are also prevalent among welfare recipients and are associated with negative employment outcomes. Higher rates of physical health problems were found among welfare recipients than the general population (Polit, London, & Martinez, 2001). Studies show that about 20 percent of welfare recipients had a physical health problem, while almost 15 percent had a permanent disability (Danziger, Corcoran et al., 2000; Kalil, Schweingruber et al., 2001). Current welfare recipients were also found to have higher rates of functional disability than former welfare recipients (Moffit et al., 2002).

*Substance Abuse and Mental Health Problems:* The majority of studies find prevalence rates for substance abuse of less than four percent among welfare recipients (Danziger et al., 2000; Polit et al., 2001). However, when substance abuse occurs, it appears to be negatively correlated with employment status (Danziger, Corcoran et al., 2000; D. Polit et al., 2001). Substance dependent recipients were also more likely to cycle on and off of welfare, and their welfare episodes were shorter than non-substance-dependent recipients (Schmidt, Dohan, Wiley, & Zabkiewicz, 2002).

The incidence of mental health problems among welfare recipients has generally been found to be higher than among non-recipients (Danziger, Corcoran et al., 2000; Danziger & Seefeldt, 2002; Jayakody,

Danziger, & Pollack, 2000; Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000). Two separate studies found that recipients with depression were less likely to be working than non-depressed recipients (Kalil, Schweingruber et al., 2001; Richardson, 2001), while another found that women with a psychiatric disorder were 25 percent less likely to be working than women without a disorder (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000).

*Domestic Violence:* Danziger et al. (2000) found that just under 15 percent of their sample reported having experienced domestic violence within the past year versus three percent of national non-recipient samples. The relationship between domestic violence and employment outcomes remains unclear. Some studies indicate that women who experienced domestic violence were more likely to be on welfare for longer periods and less likely to be engaged in stable employment (Polit et al., 2001; Danziger & Seefeldt, 2002). However, in a study using WES data, Tolman and Rosen (2001) did not find a relationship between past or current domestic violence and employment outcomes or welfare status.

*Environmental Factors:* In addition to the individual level barriers discussed above, external or environmental factors also act as barriers, especially economic conditions. In fact, Figlio and Ziliak (1999) argue that 75 percent of the caseload decline between 1993-1996 can be attributed to the economic boom and increased availability of jobs, while less than one percent of the decline can be attributed to welfare reform. Much more research is needed on the relationship between economic conditions and caseload changes.

In an overall assessment of barriers, the evidence suggests that barriers to employment are more prevalent among welfare recipients than in the general population. While the presence of one barrier may not prevent employment, multiple barriers are associated with increased use of welfare, welfare recidivism, and poor employment outcomes. More research is needed to determine how barriers actually impact employment and what kinds of supportive services will help facilitate the transition to work for welfare recipients with one or more barriers to employment.

### ***Work Supports and Transitional Assistance***

As families make the transition from welfare to work, transitional assistance and work support programs designed to supplement the earnings of low-income workers can help make this transition successful. The Urban Institute estimated that in 1998, if all families with children participated in the government safety net programs for which they were



eligible, poverty would have declined by more than 20 percent and extreme poverty would have been 70 percent lower (S. Zedlewski, Giannarelli, Morton, & Wheaton, 2002). The major transitional assistance and work support programs include the Food Stamp Program, Medicaid, housing assistance, child care subsidies, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and transportation assistance.

### *Food Stamps*

Although food stamps provide a valuable income support to low-income working families, participation rates remain low. Studies show that about 33 percent to 40 percent of former welfare families continue to receive food stamps after leaving welfare, even though most remain eligible (Zedlewski, 2001; Miller, Redcross, & Henrichson, 2002; Danziger et al., 2002). Research indicates that the act of leaving welfare may increase the probability of leaving the Food Stamp Program, with former welfare families more likely to leave the program than similar low-income, non-welfare families with children (S. Zedlewski, 2001; Mills, Dorai-Raj, Peterson, & Alwang, 2001).

The majority of welfare leavers in the NSAF reported leaving the Food Stamp Program due to increased earnings or a new job; however, an increasing percentage of families reported leaving due to administrative difficulties in maintaining eligibility (Zedlewski, 2001). There are also differences among former welfare families that left the Food Stamp Program and those that continued to receive food stamps. Zedlewski (2001) found that former welfare recipients that left food stamps were more likely to own a car, while Miller et al. (2002) found that welfare leavers who continued to receive food stamps were more likely to live in public or subsidized housing.

### *Medicaid*

The Medicaid program, which provides health care for low-income families, is an important form of transitional assistance for the many welfare leavers who do not have access to employer-sponsored health insurance. However, as with food stamps, participation rates are low. Data from the National Survey of America's Families show that about 33 percent of welfare leavers and about 50 percent of their children were covered by Medicaid (Loprest, 2001). Similarly, state-level leaver studies show that approximately 50 percent or fewer adults were without Medicaid coverage after leaving welfare and about 33 percent of their

children lost Medicaid coverage (Guyer & Springer, 2000; Loprest, 2001).

The evidence does not indicate that the loss of Medicaid coverage after leaving welfare is offset by an increase in the number of former welfare families covered by employer-sponsored health insurance. Garrett and Holahan (2000) found that only 23 percent of welfare leavers had employer-sponsored health insurance and that 41 percent were uninsured. Even among the 56 percent of employed welfare leavers, only 33 percent had private/employer health coverage (Garrett & Holahan, 2000). Similarly, the Women's Employment Survey reported that over one-third of employed former welfare mothers did not have health insurance and 13 percent did not have coverage for their children (Danziger et al., 2002). Finally, it is important to note that women who fear losing medical benefits are less likely to work (Kalil, Schweingruber et al., 2001).

### *Housing Assistance*

Housing assistance can ease the transition from welfare to work by ensuring that low-income families are not paying an excessive percentage of their income on rent. However, studies show that about 36 percent or fewer of current and former welfare recipients receive housing assistance (Zedlewski, 2002; Polit et al., 2001; Acs & Loprest, 2001). Former welfare recipients with incomes below the poverty level that had housing assistance while on welfare were more likely to be employed than those who had not received housing assistance (S. Zedlewski, 2002). In evaluating the Jobs-Plus welfare-to-work program, researchers found that the program had a greater impact on the employment and earnings of welfare recipients in public housing than those living in unsubsidized housing (Blank & Riccio, 2001). Furthermore, Section eight recipients were more likely to report work activity than public housing residents (Quane et al., 2002).

### *Child Care Subsidies*

Child care subsidies are an essential support for welfare recipients making the transition from welfare to work, however, many do not receive these subsidies. A review of state-level leaver studies shows that less than 30 percent of former welfare recipients received child care subsidies (Schumacher & Greenberg, 1999). Another comparison found that receipt of child care subsidies among welfare leavers ranged

from five percent to 20 percent across states (Acs & Loprest, 2001). Loprest (1999) also found that in the first three months after leaving welfare only 19 percent of leavers received childcare assistance.

While these low participation rates may be due, in part, to the limited supply of child care subsidies, there is some evidence that suggests that lack of awareness may also be a contributing factor. Between 40 percent and 60 percent of welfare leavers across state studies reported being unaware of the availability of child care subsidies (Schumacher & Greenberg, 1999). Although child care assistance is intended to aid all low-income working families, research indicates that welfare recipients are more likely to receive child care subsidies than former or non-welfare recipients (Danziger et al., 2002; Blau & Tekin, 2001).

### ***Earned Income Tax Credit***

The Earned Income Tax credit (EITC) provides low-income working families with a refundable tax credit that can help lift many of these families out of poverty. After adjusting income for welfare leavers by estimating the value of the EITC and food stamps and subtracting payroll taxes, researchers at the Urban Institute found that the number of former welfare families below the poverty line would have fallen from 61 percent to 48 percent in 1997, and from 52 percent to 41 percent in 1999, if all had received the EITC (Loprest, 2001).

In the state-level leavers studies that examined EITC use, 41 percent to 65 percent of welfare leavers reported receiving the credit (Acs & Loprest, 2001). Although it appears that the EITC is being under-utilized by former welfare recipients, there is some evidence to suggest that there is a link between welfare participation and knowledge of the EITC. Using NSAF data, Phillips (2001) found almost two-thirds of parents were aware of the EITC. However, former welfare recipients were more likely to know about the EITC than current welfare recipients or those never on welfare.

### ***Transportation Assistance***

As noted earlier, transportation is commonly identified as a barrier to work, however, there is little research on the impact of providing transportation assistance to former welfare recipients. In the Urban Change Project, researchers found that current and former welfare recipients who drove their own cars to work were more likely to be engaged in sta-

ble employment (Polit et al., 2001). Similarly, in a pre-welfare reform study, welfare recipients who owned an automobile were more likely to have worked in the past month, worked more hours on average, and had higher average monthly earnings (Ong, 1996).

## **POPULATIONS AND TIME LIMITS**

### ***Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration Status***

The 1996 welfare reform legislation included provisions that denied welfare benefits to undocumented immigrants and legal immigrants who arrived after August 22, 1996. The effect of these provisions is still a matter of debate. Since the implementation of welfare reform, however, white families have left the welfare rolls at higher rates than other minority groups (Lower-Basch, 2000). The reasons for this disparity in caseload decline are difficult to determine. The initial research conducted in the post-reform period suggests that employment outcomes, service participation, response to programs, barriers to employment, and experiences of discrimination are different for members of various racial and ethnic groups.

*Employment and Earnings:* Research examining rates of employment and earnings for immigrant families receiving welfare is minimal, but evidence suggests that a welfare recipient's race may be associated with earnings and type of employment, but not with employment rate. Non-white recipients are more likely to be hired in lower-paying jobs (Gooden, 2000) and are likely to be earning less (Allard & Danziger, 2001; Harknett, 2001) than white recipients. However, Danziger et al. (2000) found that race was not associated with rate of employment.

*Program and Service Participation:* There is also conflicting evidence about the impact of job search and job support programs on members of diverse racial and ethnic groups. Harknett (2001) found similar employment outcomes overall for black, white, and Hispanic welfare recipients enrolled in a Labor Force Attachment program. However, Gooden (2000) found that enrollment in a job readiness program was associated with higher earnings for whites, but not blacks.

Preliminary evidence suggests that immigrant women may have additional barriers to service participation. Capps et al. (2002) report that almost 40 percent of respondents to a survey conducted among low-income immigrants gave incorrect answers to the majority of questions asked about program eligibility. Similarly, Ng (1999) found that only

38 percent of non-citizen Mexican-American and Vietnamese-American women currently receiving welfare or on welfare within the past seven months in Santa Clara County were receiving CalWORKs services. Reasons given for lack of participation included problems with child care or transportation and not understanding what services were being offered or required due to lack of English proficiency (1999).

*Access to Jobs and Discrimination:* Evidence suggests that some of the differences observed in employment outcomes for members of different racial and ethnic groups may be caused by variability in access to jobs. Allard and Danziger (2001) found that recipients living in suburban areas had greater access to jobs than inner city residents did. White recipients tended to live in suburban areas and had greater access to jobs than non-whites living in the inner city. Recipients living in areas with greater access to jobs were also more likely to exit welfare.

Danziger et al. (2000) also found that a welfare recipient's perception of experiencing four or more episodes of discrimination<sup>1</sup> was negatively associated with employment outcomes. While Holzer and Stoll (2002) found that the hiring rate for black and Hispanic welfare recipients was lower than their representation in the population and that black and Hispanic welfare recipients were less likely to be hired by suburban companies and more likely to be hired by companies serving a greater proportion of black and Hispanic customers.

*Cultural Differences:* Analyzing NSAF data, Wertheimer, Long, and Vandivere (2001) found differences in attitudes toward single parents and maternal employment that may influence how members of various racial or ethnic groups respond to TANF policies. For example, 82 percent of African American mothers felt that a single mother can bring up a child as well as a married couple can compared to 67 percent of Hispanic mothers and 63 percent of white mothers. Sixty percent of Hispanic mothers believe that a mother with small children should not work outside the home compared to 50 percent of white mothers and 35 percent of African American mothers.

The limited body of research on race, ethnicity, immigration status, and welfare reform suggests that employment outcomes, service participation, response to programs, barriers to employment, and experiences of discrimination are different for members of diverse racial and ethnic groups. Until more information is available to guide policy decisions and program design, staff in welfare to work programs need to search for ways to be sensitive to racial and ethnic differences (Finegold & Staveteig, 2002; Wertheimer et al., 2001).

### *Sanctions and Time Limits*

Sanctions and time limits received a great deal of attention in the welfare reform debate, with a five-year lifetime limit on the receipt of welfare benefits being included in the PRWORA. States have discretion in setting sanction policies and time limits; however, federal funds cannot be used for families who have reached their federal five-year limit. Research conducted on families who have been sanctioned or reached time limits suggests that these families differ from other welfare families, especially in terms of the barriers that interfere with the search for employment.

*Research on Sanctions:* Currently, thirty-six states impose full-family sanctions, and eighteen of these impose sanctions at the first instance of noncompliance (Bloom & Winstead, 2002). As of 2000, three times as many families had lost TANF assistance because of full-family sanctions than because of reaching a time limit (Goldberg & Schott, 2000). Sanctions also differed across states in how they were enforced. For example, an MDRC study, using an innovative randomized research design, found that more non-compliers were sanctioned in Michigan than in California due to stricter standards (Knab, Bos, Friedlander, & Weissman, 2000).

In a study comparing sanctioned leavers with those who left welfare for other reasons, sanctioned leavers tended to have significantly different characteristics in terms of unmet medical needs, going without food, and having utilities turned off (Lindhorst, Mancoske, & Kemp, 2000). Similarly, Goldberg and Schott (2000) found that they also have more limited work experience, a greater incidence of domestic violence, disabilities, and other physical and mental health problems. In a third study, sanctioned families were found to have a high incidence of health problems and low levels of education, as well as transportation and child care issues (Bloom & Winstead, 2002). Finally, outcomes were found to be worse for sanctioned families. Bloom and Winstead (2002) found that those who left aid due to sanctions had lower employment rates and earnings than those who left welfare for other reasons.

*Research on Time Limits:* Twenty-three states currently have a 60-month termination of benefits time limit, while 17 states have a shorter time limit for termination of benefits. Eight states and the District of Columbia reduce benefits or change the form of benefits after the time limit is reached, and two states have no time limit (Bloom et al., 2002). Michigan and Vermont have not imposed time limits (Gooden & Doolittle, 2001). Some states chose to continue to provide for basic as-

sistance for children after the family reaches 60 months of aid—Arizona, California, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, and Rhode Island (Schott, 2000). Other states have chosen to implement short time limits. Connecticut has the shortest limit at 21 months, while Wisconsin has a 24-month limit (Gooden & Doolittle, 2001).

Research on the impact of time limits is scarce, as families in many states have not yet reached time limits or are just beginning to do so. Bania et al. (2001) found that time limited leavers were more likely to be African-American, have three or more children, a long history of receiving aid, be 35 or older and less likely to have a high school degree or GED. Conversely, a study reported by Hagen (1999) found that those affected by time limits would be under 25, have young children, and lack education and work experience.

Bania et al. (2001) also found that recipients hitting time limits were more likely to participate in food stamp and Medicaid programs than the other two groups of leavers. However, these time-limited exiters generally had lower incomes and were more likely to be living below the poverty level than the non-time-limited leavers. In another study, time limits appeared to have little impact on income, but did influence welfare usage and had moderate impact on employment (Grogger, 2001). These findings suggest that time limits primarily affect families who were already combining work and welfare.

### **WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAMS**

There has been a great deal of debate over which type of welfare-to-work program is the most successful in helping families make the transition from welfare to work. The labor force attachment model focuses on moving people into jobs quickly, while the human capital development model focuses on education and training activities. Research conducted prior to welfare reform shows that there is no added economic benefit for participants in human capital development programs without attention to career advancement strategies. Other studies show that programs that are flexible and have a strong employment focus tend to have the best outcomes for participants.

*Labor Force Attachment vs. Human Capital Development:* The National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (NEWWS), a large-scale longitudinal study of welfare-to-work programs, was commissioned by the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the labor force attachment (LFA) and human

capital development (HCD) program models. However, the NEWWS study programs initiated prior to welfare reform that differ in several ways from the current welfare-to-work programs implemented under welfare reform.

The NEWWS evaluation reported findings in favor of LFA programs over HCD programs in a side-by-side comparison (Hamilton, Freedman, Gennetian, Michalopoulos, Walter, Adams-Ciardullo, Gassman-Pines, McGroder, Zaslow, Ahluwalia, Brooks, Small, & Ricchetti, 2001). Examining five years of data, researchers found that there were no added economic benefits from the HCD programs over the LFA programs. In addition, the LFA programs moved people into jobs more quickly and were less costly to operate than the HCD programs. The LFA programs outcomes were also applicable to the participants who lacked a high school diploma or GED certificate—the population thought to be best served by the HCD approach (Hamilton et al., 2001). As anticipated, researchers analyzing the NEWWS data also found that the earnings for the LFA programs were higher at the outset, due probably to more rapid job entry for participants (Bloom & Michalopoulos, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2001).

In a review of California's Greater Avenues to Independence (GAIN) program, also initiated prior to welfare reform, Hotz, Imbens, and Klerman (2000) found that while GAIN's work-first programs were more successful than the human capital development programs in the early years but the relative advantage disappeared in later years as the employment impacts of the LFA programs diminished in magnitude and statistical significance.

In a more recent meta-analysis of twenty-nine welfare reform initiatives, including the NEWWS study, Bloom and Michalopoulos (2001) reported two main findings. First, programs that used mixed initial activities and had a strong work emphasis achieved the best results. Second, although most programs generated increases in employment and reduction of welfare rolls, only the programs that included financial supports to those who found jobs increased the incomes of participants.

*Case Management Strategies:* The debate over how to design an effective welfare-to-work program has also addressed how to best utilize staff. Traditional welfare case management has divided services into two positions, eligibility determination, and employment services. In this model one staff person authorizes and processes welfare payments, while a separate individual delivers employment services. In the integrated case management approach, a single staff person is responsible for handling both eligibility and employment services.



As part of the NEWWS study, researchers found that integrated case management participants had significantly higher rates of participation in program activities than the traditional case management group (Brock & Harknett, 1998; Scrivener, Walter, Brock, & Hamilton, 2001). The integrated group had significantly lower welfare payments, but had similar employment rates and earnings compared to the traditional group. Finally, both integrated and traditional case management approaches led to significantly higher employment rates, earnings, and reduced welfare receipt compared to the control group (Brock & Harknett, 1998; Scrivener, Walter, Brock, & Hamilton, 2001). However, neither program increased participants' combined income from earnings, cash assistance, and Food Stamps, as the earnings increases were offset by decreases in cash assistance.

*Transitional Programs:* Transitional job programs, more intensive than case management, are another strategy that has been used to help TANF participants make the transition into employment. These programs provide temporary subsidized employment and supportive services for hard-to-employ clients. In their study of transitional programs, Hill, Kirby, and Pavetti (2002) found that workers in transitional jobs programs received more intensive support, supervision, and assistance than they would have in other TANF programs. In addition, the researchers found that transitional employment program led to permanent unsubsidized employment for 81 to 94 percent of the participants in the study.

### ***Impact on Service Organizations***

The 1996 welfare reform legislation represented a dramatic shift in the way we think about public assistance, moving from a system of guaranteed entitlement to a system of temporary aid. The implementation of welfare reform has had a substantial impact on social service agencies and service delivery systems. It has been characterized by the devolution of federal policy to state and local governments, increased discretion among front-line workers linked to new agency goals and flexible funding streams, and increased diversity of implementation strategies across programs.

*Organizational Goals under TANF:* Meyers et al. (2001) suggest that federal welfare reform policy goals are ambiguous or contradictory: TANF seeks to provide assistance to the needy while discouraging welfare use at the same time. States have subsequently chosen different interpretations of these dual goals in the implementation of TANF.

Consequently, the degree of congruence between official policy goals and local goals may vary.

*Structural and Service Delivery Issues:* Nathan and Gais (1999) found that states have enacted a variety of welfare laws, most of which are variants on the Work First or labor force attachment model. There has been considerable attention given to the way program responsibilities are divided, leading to shifts in agency assignments and political uncertainty. As a result, there has been a 'second order' devolution such that, even in state-administered systems, there is movement to devolve welfare and related social program responsibilities to local entities. Thirty-eight states have state-administered welfare systems, while 12 have state-supervised/county-administered systems, including some large states like California, New York, and Ohio.

In many locales, employment bureaucracies have been given more responsibility over welfare program operations under TANF (Nathan & Gais, 1999; Holcomb & Martinson, 2002). Early implementation research identified collaboration with other agencies and community organizations as an important element of service delivery reform under TANF (Carnochan & Austin, 1999). A more recent study elaborates some of the obstacles to collaboration between public welfare bureaucracies and private welfare-to-work contractors (Sandfort, 1999). Most significant are the collective concerns of frontline staff regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of collaboration with the range of community partners involved in implementing welfare to work programs.

Ragan and Nathan (2002) found several integration factors related to responsive service delivery systems, including: collaborative planning and oversight at the local level; collaboration to provide additional services; integration of funding streams; integration of a wide range of service providers; collocation of services; integrated intake and assessment; multi-disciplinary service delivery teams; and integrated information systems.

*The Front-line Worker:* As a result of devolution of authority to local agencies, local offices, and frontline workers are exercising greater discretion in dealing with clients (Nathan & Gais, 1999). Research has addressed a number of issues related to these frontline workers, specifically, worker beliefs regarding the goals of welfare reform, changing worker functions, and decision-making.

Nathan and Gais (1999) found that front-line workers were not as opposed to the behavior modification purposes of welfare reform as many people had expected. Similarly, front-line workers acknowledged a clear philosophical shift from giving money to requiring work, but

questioned TANF's effectiveness for long-term recipients and those requiring increased preparation for work (J. L. Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2002). However, Meyers et al. (2001) found that workers rarely acted in ways consistent with formal policy goals. They failed to emphasize the importance of work, inform clients of work-related services, or exercise discretion in order to facilitate employment for clients.

Frontline workers are also now responsible for making a variety of decisions that can have a significant impact on client experiences and outcomes. In a study looking specifically at decisions regarding the domestic violence exemption, workers stated that they gave exemption priority to cases in which the physical safety of the mother and her children was compromised and children were involved in situations that directly endangered them. However, in practice, most placed a lot of emphasis on the client's efforts to help herself and gave lower priority to clients who were more reliant on welfare and repeatedly returned to a violent partner. Given the low levels of agreement among workers about exemption priorities, the granting of hardship and domestic violence exemptions remains a highly complicated and subjective task without clear priorities and criteria to guide decision-making and design intensive staff training (J. L. Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2002).

### ***FAMILY WELL-BEING AND FORMATION***

The stronger work requirements enacted under welfare reform have affected children as well as adults. Welfare mothers are spending more time at work and less time with their children. Many children of current and former welfare recipients live in poverty, which has been shown in the research to negatively impact the development of children. As more welfare families join the ranks of the working poor, the effects of growing up in poverty become an even greater concern.

As discussed previously, despite large caseload reductions, welfare reform has failed to lift poor parents and their children out of poverty (National Campaign, 2001). Poor children, including current and former welfare recipient children and those whose families never received aid, fare worse than children in affluent families. Across state studies, low-income children were three to four times more likely to live in single-parent homes, were more likely to have behavioral and emotional problems, fair or poor health, and problems in school (Vandivere, Moore, & Brown, 2000). However, research on important indicators of child well-being indicates neither a pattern of solid improvement nor

significant declines for children affected by welfare reform (Child Trends, 2002).

The effects of living in poverty have also been shown to increase child abuse and neglect. The occurrence of documented child abuse and neglect is 22 times greater for children in families with incomes below \$15,000 than for families with incomes over \$30,000 (Hutson, 2001). Researchers have found that almost 60 percent of children entering foster care came from families who were receiving or recently had received aid under AFDC, however, this correlation has not received sufficient research attention under the TANF program (Hutson, 2001).

*Impact on Young Children:* Studies examining the impact of welfare reform on young children have looked at parental stress and behavior, as well as a number of indicators of child well-being. A longitudinal study looking at the impact of participation in a welfare-to-work program found a decrease in the amount of time mothers were spending with their children; as employment increased, children were spending more time in childcare (Growing Up in Poverty Project, 2002).

Unfortunately, child care for many welfare families is piecemeal, can be harmful to children, and cause problems for parents' employment (Dodson, Manuel, & Bravo, 2002). Social and cognitive development is lower among children who experience repeated changes in their child care arrangements than among children who have stable arrangements (Moore, Vandivere, & Ehrle, 2000). Children seem to fare better when they have high involvement in center-based child care and their mothers have high involvement in education and job training, when compared to mothers with only education or job training or families with low involvement in all three activities (Yoshikawa et al., 2001).

*Impact on School-Age Children:* Research on the impact of welfare reform on school-age children focuses primarily on academic achievement. Morris et al. (2002) summarize this research and conclude that mandated participation in employment services and activities does not appear to have an effect upon elementary school age children. A study conducted prior to welfare reform found that participation in a TANF-type Jobs First program was not related to poor academic and behavioral outcomes (Horwitz & Kerker, 2001). Behavioral problems appeared to be related to other factors, including mother's report of violence in the home, the presence of multiple depressive symptoms, few positive qualities attributed to the child, and grade repetition by the child (2001).

*Impact on Adolescents:* Research on the impact of welfare reform on adolescents has been somewhat limited, however, research conducted

prior to welfare reform suggests that welfare-to-work programs may negatively impact adolescents. An MDRC meta-analysis found that parents who participated in welfare and employment programs reported worse school performance, a higher rate of grade repetition, and more use of special educational services than did control group parents (Gennetian et al., 2002). Furthermore, program adolescents with younger siblings were more likely than controls to be suspended or expelled from and to drop out of school—possibly because they were more likely to care for siblings (2002). Other evaluations of welfare-to-work programs have also shown negative effects on the adolescent children of enrolled parents (J. L. Brooks, Hair, & Zaslow, 2001).

Using data from the post-reform NSAF, researchers found that children of welfare leavers and those of current recipients were equally likely to show low school engagement and to be reported in fair or poor health (Tout, Scarpa, & Zaslow, 2002). Two differences emerged, however—adolescents whose families recently left aid were much more likely to have been suspended or expelled from school than adolescent children of current recipients, and children of current recipients were more likely to have an activity-limiting condition than children whose families left welfare (2002).

### ***Family Formation: Marriage, Births and Teen Pregnancy***

In addition to the new emphasis on work, welfare reform legislation included two goals related to family structure. The first goal is to prevent out-of-wedlock births and the second is to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. While the research indicates that children do better in two-parent families (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), very few studies have been able to determine the effects of welfare reform on marriage and family structure.

*National Trends:* In an effort to better understand the experiences of single-parent families in the United States, The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a birth cohort of approximately 5,000 children in 20 cities. While the study does not focus on welfare recipients specifically, it includes poor unwed parents, the population that is most affected by welfare. Analyzing the Fragile Families data, researchers found that parents generally see cohabitation as a step towards marriage (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002; Waller, 2001a). The Fragile Families study also found that marriage alone would not bring mothers out of poverty. Using a complex model to estimate the effects of marriage on single mothers in comparison with married mothers, the

researchers found that the single-mothers would have to work half time and be married to men who worked full time for poverty rates to decrease (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002).

*Promoting Marriage:* In general, few evaluations have found positive effects from current programs designed to promote marriage among welfare recipients (Murray, 2001). However, the Michigan Family Investment Program (MFIP), a welfare-to-work demonstration project under AFDC, has shown the strongest results thus far in relationship to marriage. An MDRC evaluation of MFIP (Knox et al., 2000) found that the program was successful in increasing employment, reducing poverty, and led to increases in marriage and marital stability among program participants. Specifically, after three years, families in MFIP were more likely to be married than their AFDC counterparts. However, for both single-parent families and two-parent families, MFIP increased welfare receipt as compared to AFDC due to higher income disregards and enhanced incentives (Knox et al., 2000).

Efforts to promote marriage notwithstanding, there is conflicting evidence about the impact of marital status on employment. Brooks and Buckner (1996) found that unmarried women were more likely to be employed. However, in interviews conducted by Polit et al. (2001), women reported that being partnered increased employment through a wider social network and assistance with household responsibilities or child care.

*Preventing Births:* Welfare reform also sought to reduce dependence on welfare by reducing the number of additional births among welfare recipients. A major review of research examining the effect of benefit levels on family formation concluded that the evidence does support some effect of welfare [benefits] on marriage and fertility, although the magnitude of the effects remains in question (Moffitt, 1998, in Peters, 2001). One such benefit level adjustment is the family cap program, which reduces or eliminates additional benefits for women who have additional children while on welfare. Twenty-three states have family cap programs, but evaluations of them have produced inconclusive results (Offner, 2001; Peters, 2001).

Preventing birth among teenagers is another strategy used to reduce out-of-wedlock births to single mothers. Teen childbearing is costly; taxpayers pay \$3,200 per year for each teenage birth. Teen mothers are particularly destitute: only one in five receives any support from the child's father and 80 percent end up on welfare (Sawhill, 2001). Consequently, most states have enacted programs to reduce teenage pregnancy, including education in schools regarding safe sex and contraception use,

media campaigns, family planning services, and abstinence education. In a major review of sex and STD/HIV education programs for teenagers, Kirby (2002) found that sexuality programs do not increase sexual intercourse, with some programs decreasing sexual activity. Programs that feature “abstinence only” have not been subject to the same rigorous evaluation and outcomes remain uncertain (D. Kirby, 2002; Sawhill, 2001). It has yet to be documented that programs designed to reduce teenage births have impacted TANF utilization.

### CONCLUSION

Welfare reform generated an impressive body of national and state-level research conducted by individuals and organizations representing a wide array of disciplines. The majority of the research is rigorous and high quality. Yet for practitioners, important local and regional questions have not been addressed. Some of these relate to organizational impacts, such as *frontline worker responses*, and the effectiveness of inter-agency collaboration and service integration. Other questions relate to the *TANF participants* in welfare to work programs. Much of the population-focused research has examined adult recipients, yet issues such as service effectiveness, and the specific ways in which barriers operate in clients’ lives need further exploration. Far fewer studies have examined the experiences and outcomes of children in families receiving aid; this remains a broad and critical area for future research.

Based on this brief review of the extensive research on welfare reform implementation, a research agenda for the local implementation of TANF should include the following:

#### I. Documenting the experiences of local TANF participants

- What are the demographic characteristics of those who have left welfare, returned to welfare, or stayed on welfare? (interviews and administrative data)
- In what ways are the characteristics and experiences of these three groups similar or different? (interviews and administrative data)
- What services has each group of TANF participants utilized? (especially pre and post employment)
- What kinds of service barriers has each group experienced?
- What are the experiences of each group in gaining employment and the barriers encountered? (interview and administrative data)

- What more can TANF agencies do to help participants find and keep employment?

## II. Documenting the experiences of TANF staff who provide welfare to work services

- What are the demographic characteristics of those who provide welfare to work services?
- What are the staff perceptions of welfare to work services? (orientation and appraisal, assessment and employment, post-employment, and case management)
- What factors affect the provision of welfare to work services? (work environment, resources available, problems and strengths presented by TANF participants, and staff control over service provision)
- What are the elements of the decision-making process used by welfare to work staff to address the needs of TANF participants?

## III. Family well-being and formation

- How are children in the welfare system faring? (particularly for Leaver families, of which many are still in poverty, and Recidivist families)
- What is the nature of the overlap between the TANF caseload and the child welfare system?
- What are the effects of child-only welfare sanctions and time limits on children?
- What are the differential outcomes for single versus two-parent families in the welfare population?
- How is welfare reform impacting family formation?
- How are fathers involved in the lives of their children?
- Are these fathers in a position to help the family, either by paying child support or providing other supports?

## NOTE

1. Danziger et al. (2000) measure perception of workplace experiences based on study participants' responses to sixteen questions about discrimination based on race, sex, or welfare status. Experiences of discrimination included being denied a job and being exposed to inappropriate verbal comments.



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