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Making the Transition from Welfare to Work: Employment Experiences of CalWORKs Participants in the San Francisco Bay Area

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ABSTRACT. This study describes welfare-to-work participants in the San Francisco Bay Area, support services, experiences with the CalWORKs program, and predictors of employment status in the wake of welfare reform. Findings indicate that many are working and more Stayers and Recidivists than Leavers are using food stamps and Medi-Cal. Multivariate analysis reveals that race and financial supports were the significant factors contributing to employability, defined as the ability to secure employment despite the need to

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supplement earned income with welfare payments. To help people stay off of welfare, case management services are needed to help participants maintain employment and increase job skills. In addition to expanding our understanding of human behavior within the social environment of poverty, implications for practice and policy are identified.

KEYWORDS. CalWORKs, welfare, welfare reform, employment

INTRODUCTION

The enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) made substantial changes to the federal welfare program: a requirement that aid recipients participate in work or work-related activities; 2-year time limits on consecutive receipt of aid; and 5-year lifetime limits. One of the primary goals of the 1996 welfare reform legislation was to move families from welfare to work. The achievement of this goal can be seen, in part, by the decline in caseloads. In response to welfare reform, California enacted California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) legislation. Since January 1998, county social service agencies in the San Francisco Bay Area have undertaken major reforms in order to provide employment services to welfare recipients. Caseloads dropped significantly, owing to welfare reforms, more restrictive eligibility rules, increased aid to the working poor, and the strong economy (Fremstad, 2004), and there is evidence that many former recipients are working.

However, the employment success achieved by welfare-to-work participants varies; they are a diverse group with differing strengths and barriers to employment. While some participants have left welfare for work and continue to make progress in achieving self-sufficiency, others have returned to the welfare rolls, and still others continue to receive aid and are reaching their 5-year lifetime limit. The purpose of this study is to develop an in-depth picture of the experiences of CalWORKs participants in eight California counties—Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Solano, and Sonoma—5 years after the implementation of welfare reform to assess their experiences with the welfare-to-work program and to examine the factors that contribute to employment success.

Further, it is important to note that this study was conducted in the midst of major cutbacks as part of the statewide budget crisis of 2003, coupled with the weak labor market nationally from 2001 to 2003 that retarded some of the economic progress made by single mothers in the preceding years (Urban Institute, 2005). The economic downturns reduced mothers' probability of finding a good job, defined as \$7/hour with health insurance or \$8.50/hour without (Fremstad, 2004). As a result of these cutbacks, a number of CalWORKs services, such as those related to job retention, were eliminated or reduced, and the local labor market proved challenging for individuals from all skill levels. Consequently, CalWORKs participants who were able to successfully leave welfare for employment are particularly remarkable. Though this study looks only at welfare recipients in one California region, the findings are relevant to the continued national debate around welfare policy and have implications for welfare to work program and service design.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Welfare programs have been extensively evaluated since the 1970s. With the 1996 welfare reforms, the volume and breadth of research examining welfare programs and populations has increased substantially. The national studies cited in this review demonstrate that most welfare recipients who left the welfare rolls have found employment. However, research also shows that many of these families continue to live in poverty and are vulnerable to welfare recidivism. Between 50% and 75% of those who left the welfare rolls were found to be working to some degree (Acs & Loprest, 2001; Bavier, 2001; Brauner & Loprest, 1999; Danziger, Heflin, Corcoran, Oltmans, & Wang, 2002; Loprest, 1999; Moffit & Roff, 2000) with at least 60% of these employed full-time (Danziger et al., 2002; Loprest, 1999, 2001; Moffit & Roff). However, only 33% to 50% of them were employed continuously in all months after leaving welfare, suggesting an inability to find stable, permanent employment (Acs & Loprest; Bavier; Moffit & Roff). Further, families that left aid recently, 2000 or later, were less likely to be working than those who left aid in the 1990s, 58% in 2002, up from 50% in 1999 (Fremstad, 2004). One study found that about 75% of those who exited welfare-to-work programs were employed in the service industry or wholesale/retail trades, which often means low wages and few benefits (Loprest, 1999).

Studies show that 25% to 33% of those who left the welfare rolls and were working did not receive employer-sponsored health insurance, and less than 50% had paid sick leave (Acs & Loprest; Loprest, 1999; Moffit & Roff).

Although welfare reform successfully moved many welfare recipients into the workforce, poverty rates are high. Studies show that about 50% to 75% of welfare leavers are below the poverty level (Acs & Loprest, 2001; Danziger, et al., 2002; Loprest, 2001; Moffit & Roff, 2000). Low wages, few benefits, and high poverty mean that many recipients experience significant material hardship after leaving welfare (Acs & Loprest; Danziger, et al., 2002; Loprest, 1999). A significant minority of welfare leavers are not working. Two studies found that 13% to 39% of welfare leavers reported being unemployed, while almost 20% had not worked at all since leaving welfare (Danziger, et al., 2002; Loprest, 1999; Moffit & Roff). Among former welfare recipients who did not succeed in transitioning from welfare to work, many returned to the welfare rolls. Research shows that about 20% to 33% of welfare leavers returned to welfare at some point (Acs & Loprest; Bavier; Loprest, 1999, 2001).

Assessing barriers and supports is important for successful transitions to employment. Individual barriers can significantly impact an individual's ability to find and maintain steady employment, while certain supports may improve an individual's employability and ease the way into the workforce. Lack of education and/or work experience, workplace discrimination, lack of transportation, physical or mental health problems, alcohol or drug dependency, having a child under 1 year of age, and lack of English proficiency have the greatest negative impact on employment (Danziger et al., 2000; Zedlewski, 1999). In 2002, less than 30% of all welfare recipients were working compared to 51% of those recipients with no employment-related barriers (Zedlewski, 2002a). Studies show that between 40% and 66% of welfare recipients reported at least two of these barriers, while 25% reported four or more (Danziger, et al., 2000; Zedlewski, 1999), and current welfare recipients have more barriers than former welfare recipients (Loprest & Zedlewski, 1999; Moffit, Cherlin, Burton, King, & Roff, 2002). Multiple barriers are associated with poor employment outcomes, welfare recidivism, sanctions, and the continuous reliance on public assistance. Welfare recipients with multiple barriers are also more likely to be on welfare for longer periods (Danziger & Seefeldt, 2002).

As families move from welfare to work, support programs that supplement earnings can help make this transition successful (Blank & Riccio, 2001; Polit et al., 2001; Quane, Rankin, & Joshi, 2002; Zedlewski, 2002b). Major transitional assistance and work support programs include the Food Stamp Program (FSP), Medicaid, housing assistance, child care subsidies, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and transportation assistance. Despite their importance, participation rates in these programs are low. For example, studies show that only 33% to 40% of former welfare families continue to receive food stamps, though most remain eligible (Danziger, et al., 2002; Miller, Redcross, & Henrichson, 2002; Zedlewski, 2001) and only 33% of welfare leavers and 50% of their children receive Medicaid (Loprest, 2001).

Based on this brief review of the extensive research on welfare reform implementation (see Carnochan et al., 2005), the following research questions guided this study as it sought to document the experiences of local CalWORKs participants:

1. What are the demographic characteristics of those who have left welfare, returned to welfare, or stayed on welfare?
2. How are the characteristics and experiences of these groups similar or different?
3. What services has each group of CalWORKs participants utilized?
4. What factors are related to successfully obtaining employment?

The findings are discussed in terms of the human behavior and the social environment framework related to the life course perspective (Elder, 1998) as well as the implications for social work practice and policy. The quality of social environment (resources, opportunities, and threats to the daily lives of individuals) can be either detrimental or beneficial based on the reciprocal relationship of human behavior and social environment. Improving the social environment can benefit clients and thereby impact human behavior (Mulroy & Austin, 2004). This is particularly important for practitioners working with low-income parents and children in the CalWORKs program who are often faced with challenging living environments characterized by poor quality housing, violent neighborhoods, failing schools, and limited access to services (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Moore, Vandivere, & Ehrle, 2000; Sherman, 1997).

RESEARCH METHODS

Sampling and Recruitment

Under a regional research contract with 11 local county social services agencies, the researchers were able to access three groups of CalWORKs participants representing a continuum of welfare-to-work success. All of the participants were sampled between October 2002 and March 2003, as some counties had more difficulties programming their data systems to select cases that fit the following criteria.

1. **Leavers:** Respondents who left aid for work and remained off aid for at least one year (since December 2001). These participants had received aid for at least 6 months prior to exit and earned enough to be ineligible for aid, and the earnings were for the participant (not another family member). These CalWORKs participants left aid on or before December 2001, having been on aid since at least mid-2001.
2. **Recidivists:** Respondents who left aid for work and subsequently returned to aid. These participants were on aid for at least 6 months prior to exit. They were off aid for 3 to 12 months and subsequently returned to aid and were back on aid for at least 2 months at the time the sample was drawn. They qualified for the study if they left aid for work, and the income was related to their work and not that of a family member. These participants were on aid between June 2001 and February 2002, off aid between December 2001 and August 2002, and back on aid since at least November 2002.
3. **Stayers:** Respondents who were approaching or had reached their 5-year time limit on receipt of aid. CalWORKs participants who were approaching their lifetime limits in March or April of 2003 were sampled. These participants would have been on aid continuously since early 1998 when CalWORKs was implemented.

To protect human subjects, county CalWORKs staff contacted participants by phone or in person to ascertain their willingness to participate in the study. Once participants consented, workers forwarded contact lists to the research staff for interviewing. While the initial plan was to randomly select 10 CalWORKs participants for each of the three groups of participants from the 20 names provided by the counties, we were unsuccessful in reaching a large number of those participants and

decided to recruit every listed participant. The two major problems encountered in trying to reach potential study participants were incorrect, disconnected, or nonexistent phone numbers and lack of response to phone messages. Therefore, 436 participants were contacted, and 143 interviews were completed for a response rate of 33%. The telephone interviews were conducted between December 2002 and May 2003.

Variables

Demographic Variables

These variables included race and ethnicity, age, education, number and ages of children, citizenship, child care, and number of supports. The variable of race/ethnicity includes white, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, African American, and other. The variables of age and number of children were continuous, and level of education was dichotomized (less than high school and high school graduate and above). The age of the participant's youngest child was also dichotomized (5 and below or over 5). Citizenship and use of child care variables were dichotomous. The number of supports or benefits received was continuous and included counts of the following supports: SSI for oneself, SSI for a child, child support, informal support from a parent or other, a working partner, a Section 8 housing subsidy, Medi-Cal, tax credits, and food stamps. Supports were either monetary or in-kind, such as child care provision or shared housing.

CalWORKs Variables

The array of support services or activities included job club (structured group meetings to learn or refresh job search skills, including resume writing and interviewing), job search (individual program in which participants receive guidance, monitoring, and support from case managers to look for work on their own), assessment/screening of learning needs, domestic violence services, mental health services, substance abuse services, transportation, child care, clothing, school expenses, support services while working, education, homeless assistance (one-time initial housing payments), and job training. The array of welfare-to-work support services were categorized as Work First services, Core services, Disability and Special Needs services, and Education and Support Services While Working. To gather information on each participant's experience with CalWORKs services, the

following questions were asked: (1) How helpful was CalWORKs in getting a job (coded as “not at all helpful,” “somewhat helpful,” and “very helpful”); (2) How much “say” did you have in developing your welfare-to-work plan (coded as “no say at all,” “some say,” and “a lot of say”); (3) How much did you trust your worker (coded as “didn’t trust him/her at all,” “trusted him/her somewhat,” and “trusted him/her a lot”); and (4) How much did your worker listen to you (coded as “didn’t listen at all,” “listened sometimes,” and “listened to me a lot.”)?

Data Analysis

Data analysis included descriptive statistics: frequency distribution, percentage, chi square, and analysis of variance (ANOVA). They were used to summarize and analyze the data across the eight counties and to compare the three groups. Logistic regression was used to identify predictors of employment for the entire group of CalWORKs participants. Because of the relatively small sample size and the fact that we did not ask about total household income, we were unable to narrow our outcome variable down to “off aid and working” ($n = 33$) or “off aid with wages above poverty” ($n = 22$). As a result, we utilized “currently employed” as the outcome variable though this included CalWORKs participants still on aid and those who remained below the poverty line despite successfully transitioning to the workforce.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this data related to generalizability and potential bias. First, owing to the small number of clients interviewed per group in each county, we were not able to compare groups by county. However, we were able to provide a regional analysis of client groups. Since several counties needed to modify the sampling process due to the limitations of their data management systems, participants across counties may differ in the length of time or reasons for leaving aid. For example, in a few instances respondents described their status (Leavers, Recidivists, Stayers) in a different way than did the county agency, often because they had left aid after the original sample was drawn. As a result, the interviewees were asked to respond to the questions based on their prior status.

Finally, there may have been some self-selection bias in the sample of respondents. CalWORKs participants who agreed to participate may have had particularly positive or negative experiences, thereby skewing the results. In addition, participants without phones or those in temporary housing would not have been included in the study, and the findings may reflect an underestimate of negative outcomes. Finally, the study relied on self-report of retrospective data and is subject to all the risks inherent in the use of this interview method.

RESULTS

Demographics

Table 1 displays demographic data for the three CalWORKs groups. Overall, the vast majority of respondents were female (91%) and U.S. citizens (90%). They were approximately the same age (late

TABLE 1. Demographics of CalWORKs Groups^a

	Leavers (n = 33)	Recidivists (n = 49)	Stayers (n = 61)
Female	88%	90%	93%
Years of age (mean)	37.8 (SD = 8.39)	37.4 (SD = 10.52)	39.8 (SD = 8.44)
U.S. Citizen	94%	94%	84%
English as main language	88%	82%	69%
Race			
African-American	24%	29%	35%
Latino	15%	18%	20%
Native American	3%	8%	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	9%	22%	15%
White	33%	16%	28%
Other*	15%	6%	2%
High school grad or below	64%	71%	80%
Mean number of children*	2.5 (SD = 2.06)	2.2 (SD = 1.33)	3.1 (SD = 1.65)
Youngest child mean age*	9.8 (SD = 4.84)	7.1 (SD = 4.74)	8.4 (SD = 4.72)

^aChi square and ANOVA analyses were performed to compare the three groups with significant differences.

* $p < .05$.

thirties) with two to three children. The youngest children of the CalWORKs Stayers were younger than those of CalWORKs Leavers. More respondents in the Stayer group had a primary language other than English (31% versus 12% for Leavers and 18% for Recidivists). Fewer Stayers had education beyond high school (20%) than Leavers (36%) and Recidivists (29%).

Employment

As expected, Leavers had the highest rates of current employment (91%) as well as some employment during the past year (97%). However, while more Recidivists (67%) had been employed in the past year than Stayers (57%), more Stayers were currently working (48% versus 41%). Leavers tended to have held their jobs longer and to have earned more than the other groups. When they were working, however, members of all three groups worked full-time, approximately 35 hours per week. Although the average length of employment for Leavers (23 months) was higher than for the other two groups (11.5 months for Recidivists and 12 months for Stayers), respondents in each group had held jobs for a substantial period of time. About 40% of those currently on aid had not held a job in the past year.

While the majority of Leavers were working, a substantial proportion of them earned poverty-level wages. The mean annual earnings of working Leavers were \$22,493.95 (standard deviation [SD] = \$10,156.25). In 2002, the federal poverty level was \$15,020 for a family of three and \$18,100 for a family of four (Department of Health & Human Services, 2002). At these low levels of earnings, one-third (11 of 33) of the participants who had successfully left welfare did not earn enough to move their families out of poverty. However, four had a working partner who may have earned enough to put the family above the poverty line. The number of Leavers in poverty in this study was well below the rates of 50% to 75% found in other studies (Acs & Loprest, 2001; Burns, Drayse, Flaming, & Haydamack, 2003; Danziger, et al., 2002; Loprest, 2001; Moffit & Roff, 2000).

Respondents were asked whether they received any of the following employee benefits: retirement, health insurance, paid vacation, sick leave, subsidized child care, transportation, or family leave (Table 2). Half of the employed Recidivists and Stayers received no employer-sponsored benefits, compared to only 23% of the Leavers.

TABLE 2. Benefits Provided by Employers^a

	Leaver (n = 33)	Recidivist (n = 49)	Stayer (n = 61)
No benefits	23% (7)	50% (10)	52% (15)
Retirement benefits*	23% (7)	25% (5)	10% (3)
Health insurance*	57% (17)	35% (7)	14% (4)
Paid vacation*	60% (18)	25% (5)	24% (7)
Sick leave*	57% (17)	25% (5)	28% (8)
Subsidized child care ^b	3% (1)	0	3% (1)
Transportation ^b	7% (2)	5% (1)	3% (1)
Family Leave*	30% (9)	30% (6)	14% (4)
Other ^b	17% (5)	10% (2)	10% (3)

^aChi square analyses were performed to compare the three groups with significant differences.

^bChi square analyses were not conducted because 50% of the cells had less than five cases.

* $p < 0.05$.

Significant differences were found for retirement, sick leave, health insurance, vacation, and family leave. These rates of access to benefits were very similar to the rates reported in previous studies (Acs & Loprest, 2001; Danziger, et al., 2002; Gritz, et al., 2001; Loprest, 1999; Moffit & Roff, 2000). Most Stayers (78%) received cash aid while they were employed, compared to only 25% of Leavers and 40% of Recidivists. Since it might be assumed that 100% of Stayers would be receiving cash aid, the 22% who were not receiving aid while working may reflect sanctions owing to (1) reporting errors, noncompliance, or lost paperwork, (2) retrospective recall mistakes, or (3) reductions in aid due to increases in earned income.

Supports

The respondents were asked about monetary or in-kind support that they had received. ANOVA analysis revealed significant differences between the three groups related to the number of supports ($p < .001$) whereby Stayers received significantly more supports than either Leavers or Recidivists. Approximately half of the Leavers (51%) and Recidivists (49%) used child care compared to only one-fourth of the Stayers (25%). Only 58% of Leavers reported using Medi-Cal compared to 92% of Recidivists and 97% of Stayers. This big drop

in utilization may reflect the belief held by Leavers that they are ineligible or they are already receiving employer coverage (Wang & Holohan, 2003). Food stamp utilization by Leavers was also very low, possibly based on similar beliefs. These findings are consistent with prior research documenting low food stamp participation, especially when benefit termination is the result of administrative errors (Loprest, 2001; Zedlewski et al., 2003). However, caseloads increased dramatically between 2000 and 2003 across the nation, with those recently on welfare more likely to participate in the food stamp programs in 2002 than in 1997 or 1999 (Zedlewski, 2004a, 2004b). The use of "Section 8" housing subsidies was lowest for Recidivists (39%), highest for Stayers (70%), and moderate for Leavers (52%). It was not known how many of the respondents who did not receive "Section 8" vouchers were living in public housing. Across all three groups, few respondents received SSI for themselves or a child. Similarly, few respondents had a working partner. Somewhat more Leavers received child support (27%) than Recidivists (14%) or Stayers (21%). Again, more Leavers (52%) received tax credits than Recidivists (31%) or Stayers (25%).

Experience with CalWORKs Staff

The respondents were asked about their experiences with CalWORKs program staff related to seeking and maintaining employment (Table 3).

Though not statistically significant, more Leavers (61%) found the CalWORKs program very helpful in assisting them in getting a job compared to Recidivists (54%) and Stayers (42%). However, when combining responses "somewhat" and "very helpful," perceptions of helpfulness increased for all groups: 79% of Leavers, 85% of Recidivists, and 79% of Stayers. Only 20% or less of the respondents in each group reported that the CalWORKs program was not at all helpful in terms of job search and placement. When asked about the helpfulness of CalWORKs post-employment services in maintaining employment, 30% to 40% of each group of respondents reported that the CalWORKs program was very helpful. Approximately the same percentage (30% to 40%) found CalWORKs not at all helpful, with the remainder (20% to 40%) selecting "somewhat helpful." Only respondents who actually found work responded to this question (55% of all respondents). Finally, when asked to assess how helpful the program was in increasing their earnings, the most common response

TABLE 3. Experiences with CalWORKs^a

	Leaver (n = 33)	Recidivist (n = 49)	Stayer (n = 61)
How helpful was CalWORKs in getting a job	61% very helpful	54% very helpful	43% very helpful
How much say did you have in your plan	49% a lot of say	53% a lot of say	42% a lot of say
How much did you trust your worker	70% trusted a lot	58% trusted a lot	66% trusted a lot
How much did your worker listen to you	91% listened a lot	67% listened a lot	69% listened a lot

^aChi square analyses were performed to compare the three groups with no significant differences found.

was “not at all helpful” (64% of Leavers, 58% of Recidivists, and 56% of Stayers).

The respondents were asked about experiences with the CalWORKs staff member with whom they had the most contact. No significant differences were found with chi square analysis. Forty-one to 50% of the participants felt that they had a lot of involvement in the development of their welfare-to-work plans. However, when compared to Leavers (6%) and Recidivists (8%), more Stayers (25%) felt that they had “no say at all.” When combining the responses of “trust the worker a great deal” and “trust the worker somewhat,” the majority of respondents reported positive relationships with their worker (Leaver = 97%, Recidivist = 88%, and Stayer = 90%). Finally, respondents were asked how much they felt that their workers listened to them. Many more Leavers (91%) felt that their worker listened to them than either of the other two groups (67% for Recidivists and Stayers).

Participation in CalWORKs Services

The respondents were asked about their participation in and assessment of CalWORKs services. As noted in Table 4, the 14 services were clustered into four groups: (1) Work First services (job club, job search, job training, and clothing), (2) Disability and Special Needs Services (assessment/screening for learning disabilities, domestic violence, mental health, and substance abuse services), (3) Core Support

TABLE 4. Participation in CalWORKs Services^a

	Leaver (n = 33)	Recidivist (n = 49)	Stayer (n = 61)
Participated in work first services	82%	76%	74%
Participated in core services	79%	76%	84%
Participated in disability and special needs services	55%	49%	64%
Participated in education and support services while working	55%	51%	57%
Total number of services participated in	4.9 (SD = 2.61)	4.9 (SD = 2.65)	5.4 (SD = 2.67)

^aChi square and ANOVA analyses were performed to compare the three groups; no significant differences were found.

Services (transportation, child care, and homeless assistance), and (4) Education and Support While Working (English as a Second Language, high school diploma equivalency, vocation-related language training, adult basic education, tuition, certificate/degree programs, books and supplies, career advancement services, tattoo removal, and job support hotlines).

Work First Services

The vast majority of all respondents participated in job club and job search programs. The percentages were similar across the three groups for job club, while Recidivists had higher rates of participation in job search than the other two groups. More Leavers (67%) than Recidivists (50%) and more Recidivists (50%) than Stayers (40%) found the job club service to be very helpful. Many more Leavers found job search to be very helpful (85%) compared to Recidivists (49%) and Stayers (36%). Very few respondents participated in job training services (on-the-job training, community college vocational courses). In contrast to job club and job search, job training was seen as very helpful by Recidivists (81%), Stayers (83%), and Leavers (69%). Stayers

were most likely to report that job training was one of the most helpful services. Approximately 30% to 40% of the respondents in the three groups utilized clothing services. Every Leaver (100%) who participated in the study found Work First Services to be very helpful compared to 53% of the Recidivists and 67% of the Stayers.

Disabilities and Special Needs Services

Overall, many more respondents participated in assessment/screening for learning disabilities (LD) than in domestic violence (DV), mental health, or substance abuse services. Slightly more Stayers participated in LD assessment than the other two groups. Most of the Leavers (77%) found the assessment for special needs to be very helpful compared to Recidivists (48%) and Stayers (38%). Very few respondents participated in DV services. For those who used these services, all Leavers and Recidivists, and 75% of Stayers stated that they were very helpful. About one-fourth of each group participated in mental health services. Although the number of respondents to this question is small, many more Recidivists (88%) and Stayers (71%) reported that mental health services were "very helpful" than did Leavers (50%). Similarly, only a few respondents in each group reported participating in substance abuse services. Most of those who did participate found the services to be very helpful.

Core Support Services

The transportation services were well utilized by respondents in all three groups (61% of Leavers, 67% of Recidivists, and 59% of Stayers) and 90% of Leavers, 88% of Recidivists, and 75% of Stayers found the service to be very helpful. Over half of the respondents in each group used child care services, which were viewed as the most helpful service (67% of Stayers, 52% of Leavers, and 53% of Recidivists). Somewhat more Stayers (31%) utilized homeless assistance than Leavers (12%) or Recidivists (20%). Most of those who participated in the study, from 79% of Stayers to 100% of Leavers, found the services to be very helpful.

Education and Support Services while Working

More Stayers participated in school support services that provided funds for school expenses than the other two groups. Most partici-

pants found the service to be very helpful (90% of Leavers, 73% of Recidivists, and 93% of Stayers). More Recidivists (37%) and Stayers (34%) than Leavers (24%) participated in education services. The vast majority of participants (75% of Leavers, 78% of Recidivists, and 81% of Stayers) found the service to be very helpful. Not surprisingly, a greater percentage of Leavers (33%) utilized support services while working compared to the Recidivists (12%) and the Stayers (23%), and satisfaction ratings were very high.

Factors Related to Gaining Employment

Logistic regression was used to determine the effects of each of the independent variables on the dependent variable related to being currently employed. The independent variables included age, educational attainment, number of children, age of youngest child, number of supports utilized, number of CalWORKs services utilized, citizenship status, race/ethnicity, child care use, participation in Work First services, Core services, Disability and Special Needs services, and Education and Support Services While Working, and perceptions of service delivery.

Table 5 displays the variables that were significant predictors of employment status. Based on statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level, the results show that those with a greater number of supports (OR = 0.61) are less likely to be employed, while those who felt that the CalWORKs program was helpful when they were getting a job (OR = 2.89) and those with no children in child care (OR = 4.25) were more likely to be employed. Further, Asian/Pacific Islanders (OR = 8.8) are more likely to be employed than white respondents.

Neither the number of CalWORKs services utilized nor the type of services were statistically significant predictors of employment status. Education level, respondents' age, age of youngest child, and citizenship status were also not statistically significant. The perceptions of CalWORKs participants regarding their "say" in developing or modifying their welfare-to-work plans, their trust in their worker, and the capacity of CalWORKs staff to listen were also not statistically significant predictors of employment.

DISCUSSION

This study documents the experiences of CalWORKs participants in the San Francisco Bay area 5 years after the implementation of

TABLE 5. Odds Ratios and 95% Confidence Intervals Resulting from Logistic Regression of Variables on Employment Status

Variable	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Age	1.07	0.99–1.15
Education level	0.73	0.24–2.21
Number of children	1.10	0.81–1.51
Age of youngest child	0.78	0.23–2.69
Not a U.S. citizen	0.87	0.19–4.04
Hispanic/Latino	3.64	0.78–16.99
Asian/Pacific Islander	8.80*	1.59–48.66
African American	2.92	0.86–9.93
Other race	1.18	0.19–7.01
No children in child care	4.25*	1.33–13.59
Number of supports	0.61*	0.39–0.96
Number of services	1.11	0.79–1.55
How helpful was CalWORKs when trying to get a job ^a	2.39*	1.52–3.74
How much say in Welfare-to-Work plan ^b	1.44	0.76–2.75
How much did you trust your worker ^c	0.85	0.33–2.19
How much did your worker listen to you ^d	1.52	0.52–4.49
Participated in work first services	1.41	0.33–5.94
Participated in core services	0.67	0.15–2.96
Participated in disability and special needs services	1.39	0.46–4.24
Participated in education and support services while working	1.53	0.44–5.36

^aQuestion: How helpful was CalWORKs when you were trying to get a job? Choices: not at all helpful, somewhat helpful, very helpful.

^bQuestion: How much say did you have in the development of your welfare-to-work plan? Choices: no say at all, some say, a lot of say.

^cQuestion: How much did you trust your CalWORKs worker? Choices: didn't trust him/her at all, trusted him/her somewhat, trusted him/her a lot.

^dQuestion: How much did your worker listen to you? Choices: didn't listen to me at all, listened to me sometimes, listened to me a lot.

*Statistically significant at $p < .05$.

welfare reform. It describes their recent employment, their experiences with CalWORKs staff and programs, and identifies factors that were predictive of employment. The major findings include (1) moderate to high levels of employment among Leavers, Recidivists, and Stayers; (2) generally positive perceptions of the CalWORKs program staff; (3)

active participation in CalWORKs services; and (4) limited predictors of employment.

Moderate to High Employment

Many respondents in each of the three groups of respondents were currently employed. Nearly 100% of the Leavers were employed at some time in the year prior to the interview. More significantly, well over half of the Recidivists (67%) and Stayers (57%) were employed in the past year, even though their current employment reflected lower levels of workforce involvement. Employment seemed fairly long-term and stable across all groups, though Leavers were more likely to receive benefits. These findings indicate that the CalWORKs participants in this study have the desire and ability to find work despite the challenges that they face. It also indicates that the Recidivists and Stayers are not able to make ends meet with CalWORKs financial aid alone and must supplement it with additional income earned through work.

Further, the high percentage of citizens in this study (90%) may be obscuring the findings related to employment. While benefits were originally denied to legal immigrants and then restored in California, current assistance is provided to all qualified noncitizens, legal permanent residents, parolees, and battered noncitizens, as well as some nonqualified noncitizens who are ineligible for federally funded assistance (Urban Institute, 2002). Despite the benefit restoration, fear and confusion continued over eligibility, resulting in a sharp reduction in immigrant welfare use following implementation of welfare reform. This fear may have contributed to the low level of noncitizen participation in the study. Immigrants have significant employment barriers (including less education and work history), and those on welfare are less likely to be working and more likely to have jobs that lack the possibility for advancement (Tumlin & Zimmerman, 2003). In addition, job training programs often have English language requirements that limit access. More language courses and job training in the native language may help to reduce this disparity.

Positive Experience with CalWORKs

For the most part, the respondents had positive experiences with the CalWORKs program. Most of the respondents reported that their CalWORKs case manager listened to them a great deal and was

trustworthy. However, only about half of the respondents reported that they were highly involved with the development of their CalWORKs plan. The vast majority of the respondents in each group found the CalWORKs program to be “somewhat” to “very helpful” when they were seeking employment. Yet, across the three groups, respondents were less satisfied with the ability of CalWORKs staff to help them maintain their jobs or to earn more money. Many participants felt that it was their responsibility alone to remain employed and earn raises. The respondents who had not been able to keep their jobs or advance did not find CalWORKs services to be sufficiently helpful.

Participation in CalWORKs Services

Most of the respondents across the three groups participated in Work First services that are designed to move participants from welfare to work. The job club and job search activities had higher rates of involvement than did job training programs that may not have been needed to access employment. The child care and transportation services were particularly well utilized. In contrast, the disabilities and special needs services, as well as the education and support services while working, were less well utilized. Participation in special needs services (e.g., mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence services) may have been low because CalWORKs participants are required to self-identify in order to receive services. With the increased emphasis on screening for learning disabilities, more cases are being identified, and participants are receiving needed services. Interestingly, more Stayers reported participation in screening for learning disabilities. This may be a further demonstration that these CalWORKs participants who were reaching their time limits had more barriers than others who had managed, at some point, to leave aid for employment.

Factors Predicting Employment

Some interesting findings emerged from the multivariate analysis used to predict employment status. CalWORKs participants were more likely to be employed if they were Asian/Pacific Islander, had no children in child care, and had more positive experiences with CalWORKs staff. They were less likely to be employed if they had supplemental financial supports. The CalWORKs participants who were using child care services may have done so while they were

participating in various job preparation activities (job search or training). Participants who had other sources of support, such as SSI, child support, or informal support from friends or family, may have had less incentive to seek employment. A strong relationship between the participant and the worker, as evidenced by their perceptions of the helpfulness of the CalWORKs program, appeared to help participants overcome barriers and receive the supports needed to attain employment.

It is interesting to note that the number and type of CalWORKs services utilized were not predictive of employment status. Evidently, participation in these services was either not directly related to gaining employment or participants had not reached a point where these services were perceived to be helpful. The education level of participants may not be significant because of other barriers to employment such as mental health issues. These barriers often need to be addressed before participants can begin activities related to job attainment.

Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective, advanced by Elder (1998) and others, is a useful framework for examining the experiences of welfare recipients. It specifies the mechanisms of influence and interaction between individuals and their environment (Stone, Berzin, Taylor, & Austin, in press). This perspective helps to explain how the social conditions of poverty and changes in the social safety net can influence the behaviors of a parent entering the workforce. For example, births by teenagers can have a negative impact on employability, particularly as a result of limited educational attainment (Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

The life course perspective developed from a series of longitudinal research studies of child development across the life course in California during the Great Depression in the late twenties and early thirties (Elder, 1998). These studies revealed the instability of families experiencing changing economic conditions. The timing of economic deprivation seemed to have a differential impact. For example, Elder and Caspi (1988) found that boys who were younger when first experiencing financial hardship tended to be less hopeful, self-directed, and confident about their futures, while children who were adolescents during the Depression had an accelerated pathway to adult status—taking more responsibility within the family and marrying and having children earlier. As a result, Elder (1998) developed the following four principles of life course development:

1. Historical forces shape the primary social trajectories of family, education, and work as well as behavior and development in later years.
2. The timing of life transitions has lasting consequences due to their effects on future transitions.
3. Lives are linked and lived interdependently where social and historical forces are expressed through networks of relationships.
4. Life courses are constructed through the choices and actions taken and are influenced by the opportunities and constraints within their social structure and culture.

The life course perspective focuses on turning points and social roles. Satisfaction with one's life is closely related to satisfaction with the role of worker and parent (Clausen, 1995). The multiple roles that women are required to fill, especially entering the workforce and becoming self-sufficient, can lead to risks related to health and mental health for both the parent and the child (Elder, 1995). Children who are at the most psychosocial risk are those who are least likely to have good relationships and opportunities for success (Rutter, Champion, Quinton, Maughan, & Pickles, 1995). This has implications for CalWORKs participants in that their new roles as workers may conflict with their primary roles as parents and thereby impact their ability to become effective parents. The pressures of economic instability or transitions can increase the risk of depression and marital problems (Elder, 1998). Since maintaining quality parenting is essential for the optimal development of their children, these pressures may be detrimental to their children. Poor parenting, characterized by harsh and punitive discipline, is associated with externalizing behaviors in children, such as aggression (Dodge, Pettit, Bates, & Valente, 1995; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992).

Further drawing on the life course perspective, Elder (1995) asserts that historical change at the macro level (e.g., welfare reform) can eventually change the developmental experiences of children by transforming their primary relationships with their families and their peer groups. If the increased absence of mothers from the home (resulting from welfare policy changes) is not compensated for in ways that are beneficial to children (e.g., high-quality child care), then any potential gains for children (accruing from mothers' increased self-esteem and decreased depression related to work) may be short-lived (London, Scott, Edin, & Hunter, 2004; Corcoran, Danziger, Kalil, & Seefeldt, 2000). In applying the life course framework to interpret the findings of this study, it is apparent that increased supports are needed, both

formal and informal, for parents and for children to help these current and former CalWORKs participants succeed in their dual roles of worker and parent.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this study of CalWORKs participants, and the principles of the life course perspective, lead to a number of implications for improving services, related to the high employment rate, participation in welfare-to-work services, experiences with program staff, and challenges facing current and former participants. Across the three groups, a substantial percentage of CalWORKs participants were working. However, much of the work is entry-level and low-wage, reflecting the Work First approach to moving people quickly off of the welfare rolls and into jobs (Graves, 2003) as a strategy to reduce dependency rather than poverty.

While there has been little increase in the quality of jobs in heavily low-wage firms (Andersson, Lane, & McEntarfer, 2004), there has been a significant mismatch between the location of low-wage workers and available employment. These factors suggest that those who transfer from welfare to work will have difficulty moving out of low-wage work. The policy implications include the need to return to funding training support in future welfare reform legislation in order to help raise the skill levels and provide incentives for the creation of higher-paying jobs that lead to advancement. With so many participants in the workforce, additional intensive case management in the form of support services is needed to help participants keep their jobs, especially when their wages are not high enough to exit the welfare system. Increased efforts are needed to provide services to both current and former CalWORKs participants to improve their job skills and help them secure higher-wage jobs.

While several CalWORKs services were utilized extensively by all three groups, others were utilized by only one or two groups. More than half of Leavers, Recidivists, and Stayers utilized transportation and child care services. More Recidivists and Stayers participated in education services, while more Leavers participated in supportive services while working. More Leavers found the job club and job search services to be particularly helpful, and more Leavers were working as compared to the findings in many national studies. One interpretation is that Stayers and Recidivists may not be finding the job club and job search activities to be as helpful due to other unmet

needs that prevent them from becoming job ready. Further, the low satisfaction rates related to job club and job search activities among the Recidivists and Stayers may be due to the misperception that these services are designed to locate a job for the CalWORKs participant, while the actual purpose is to provide job search skills to enable participants to find their own jobs.

The respondents across the three groups reported that they were not actively involved in the development of their welfare-to-work plan (only 40% to 50% reported active involvement). They also reported that the CalWORKs program did not help them increase their earnings once they were employed. The implication is that participants need to be more involved in providing input into the development and monitoring of their welfare-to-work plans. Case managers need to help participants gain increased awareness and investment in their employment plans in order to increase compliance. Additionally, plans related to ongoing case management need to include assistance in exploring ways to increase earnings. Despite the high level of employment among the Leavers in this study, they continue to face major challenges in achieving self-sufficiency. While most are working, about one-third remains in poverty. Furthermore, many Leavers are not accessing the services for which they are eligible: food stamps, subsidized child care, and Medicaid for themselves and their children. Additional efforts are needed to ensure that those no longer receiving aid are aware of the financial supports available to them as well as services targeted toward upgrading their job skills. For example, California is one of the few states that allow CalWORKs participants who find jobs to continue to receive cash aid as an income supplement until they reach the poverty level, resulting in higher income and lower poverty rates (Fremstad, 2004). Consequently, there is reason to believe that welfare recipients in California fare better than those in other states, such as Wisconsin, where benefits for welfare leavers declined more than their earned income increased (Cancian, Haveman, Meyer, & Wolfe, 2003). Finally, there was a great lack of employer-sponsored child care and family leave that are needed to improve job stability and productivity. Federal and state policies that support employers who provide these benefits would be a complement to the welfare reform goal of increased self-sufficiency.

In addition to assisting Leavers in maintaining employment, those Stayers and Recidivists who have or soon will reach their lifetime limits on aid require additional support. For example, Stayers in this study were more likely to speak a language other than English and to have lower levels of educational attainment. This finding matches

other recent findings that indicate both lower employment rates and higher poverty rates for those who have reached their time limits, along with higher levels of material hardships, including problems with housing and utilities, and unmet health care needs (Colton, Bania, Martin, & Lulich, 2003; Fremstad, 2004; Wemmerus, Kuhns, & Loeffler, 2003). While California families who have exhausted their 5 years of support will continue to receive their children's TANF portion, they will experience continuing obstacles to supporting their families, especially when their barriers to employment have not been addressed. One policy proposal is to support transitional job programs that provide work experience to those with the most employment barriers (Hill, Kirby, & Pavetti, 2002), possibly on a part-time basis in combination with skills training and language classes.

CONCLUSION

The 1996 reform of the welfare system led to a number of policy changes (time limits and work requirements) that clearly impacted the provision of welfare services to families. While many respondents in this study have found work, others continue to struggle to become self-sufficient even with the support services provided by county CalWORKs agencies to address barriers and help participants move from welfare to work. If the ultimate goal of public policy is to effectively improve the well-being and self-sufficiency of low-income families, then future welfare reform legislation will need to address the following: (1) employer incentives to upgrade the skills of low-wage entry-level workers to assist them with job advancement and self-sufficiency, (2) expanded supports for on-going post-employment case management services to increase family self-sufficiency and reduce poverty, and (3) the development of transitional job support programs for those with significant barriers to employment.

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