

HOW EXISTING WELFARE REFORM RESEARCH DISTORTS WELFARE REALITY

Welfare researchers consistently fail to address the question of quality of life for welfare leavers, spending vast sums to answer irrelevant questions.

1. Are families better off with TANF?

Tracking of TANF Clients: First Report of Longitudinal Study from the Center for Applied Research of Millsaps College in Jackson, MS under contract with the Mississippi Department of Human Services is an example of a study that fails to acknowledge the impoverished condition of families leaving welfare. The study's own survey found that almost two-thirds of former welfare recipients were currently unemployed, but in its analysis of findings the report only states, "Many clients work full- or part-time after leaving TANF; however, relatively fewer clients in rural areas find full-time employment than clients in urban areas."

Another study that examined economic wellbeing, *The Los Angeles Jobs-First GAIN Evaluation* conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, examined early findings of the work-first approach implemented by Los Angeles County. Although the data demonstrated that many participants were working but continued to remain in poverty, many of them not earning enough to leave welfare, researchers none-the-less concluded that a "work first" approach was superior to basic adult education that included GED preparation and English as a Second Language classes.

2. Are children better off with TANF?

A Study of Washington State TANF Leavers and TANF Recipients, funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services in 2000, indicates that only 20% of eligible families receive childcare subsidies and that welfare recipients who are not working outside the home are less likely to utilize childcare. The study fails to discuss the cause and effect relationship between childcare availability and employment.

Poverty, Welfare and Children: A Summary of the Data by Child Trends is a research brief made possible by funds from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Freddie Mac Foundation. While it addresses the long-term effects of poverty on children as well as a racial breakdown of children in poverty, it makes no connection between welfare reform and the number of children living in poverty or extreme poverty (less than half the poverty level).

There are vital questions which welfare research could ask. Some studies do take up these issues:

3. Is TANF really a viable path out of poverty for families?

Most states now require welfare recipients, with their caseworkers, to develop individual responsibility plans (IRPs) which may bind the participant to a course of action for moving immediately into employment. How does this process actually work? *The Broken Promise: Welfare Reform Two Years Later* by Equal Rights Advocates, raises important questions about the need for individualized

assessments and plans that can tailor services to the needs of participants. The study also points to barriers such as overburdened and under-trained caseworkers that prevent such assessments and plans from becoming reality.

Specifically addressing the efficacy of education programs, *Welfare College Students: Measuring the Impact of Welfare Reform* by Thomas Karier, published by the Jerome Levy Economics Institute in 2000, examines college enrollment and retention of welfare recipients. The report finds a significant decline in enrollment by welfare recipients because impoverished students left welfare to remain in school or they were forced to leave school. It also finds that welfare recipients who dropped out of college earned less than what they would have earned had they graduated

The chief merit of these studies is that while they all acknowledge the intent of specific dimensions of welfare reform, they focus on the impacts of policies and procedures as they affect TANF participants and their families. Conversely, studies like *Early Impacts of the Virginia Independence Program*, published in 1999 by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., which examines the number of clients sent into various employment-related services, do not explore the degree to which TANF participants were given fair and accurate assessments of their needs, aptitudes, or limitations. Though the report is able to determine how many welfare recipients have left welfare and how many have been involved in training programs, the researchers' failure to address the process of individual assessment makes it difficult to determine how effective the program was in meeting the individual needs of clients.

4. To what extent is the over 50% drop in the welfare rolls due to sanctions?

With millions of mothers being sanctioned or otherwise pushed off welfare and into low-paying jobs, what is happening to children? *Cash Assistance Exit Study* by the Arizona Department of Economic Security in 1999, funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services, provides a rich sample of data about sanctioned welfare recipients. The study finds that people who were sanctioned in Arizona were more likely never to have married, to be African American or Hispanic, and to have reached the 24-month time limit, as well as less likely to have completed high school (in other words, the same people likely to face a number of additional barriers to employment and to experience greater need. The data also suggest inconsistent treatment by geographical area.

Interestingly enough, these findings are echoed in *The Determinants of Welfare Caseload Decline* by the Heritage Foundation's Center for Data Analysis. The study asserts that the primary cause for welfare caseload decline is not the economy but harsh welfare policies in the states, assessing caseload declines based on the harshness of state sanction policies and crediting states with harsher policies for the steep decline in the national caseload. This self-referential, self-congratulatory study reflects the dominant thinking with respect to sanctions that exists among academic and research circles today, but comfortably ignores the inconsistencies and inequities actual data about sanction practices suggest.

5. Are welfare applicants and recipients being fairly treated?

All Things Not Being Equal: Differences in Caseworker Support Toward Black and White Welfare Clients by Susan T. Gooden of the Center for Public Administration and Policy at Virginia Tech University examines how welfare clients are treated by caseworkers. In five different categories, the report finds that white clients were given more support than African American clients. The study raises significant questions about how fairly welfare participants are treated by welfare offices based on race, a factor that most studies overlook in their assessments of caseload declines and welfare outcomes. A second study by Dr. Gooden, *Examining Racial Difference in Employment Status among Welfare Recipients*, explores the status of former welfare recipients in the low-wage labor market. It finds that among black and white welfare recipients with similar educational backgrounds, blacks were subjected to discriminatory treatment in the job application process, and, when they found jobs, blacks earned less than whites, were more likely to be employed part-time, and were treated in a discriminatory manner on their job sites. The study also points out that the state employment office was more successful in placing white job applicants than black, thoroughly documenting the fact that if anti-discrimination measures are not in place, TANF reinforces already existing patterns of racial discrimination.

Families Who Left Welfare: Who Are They and How Are They Doing? by Pamela Loprest of the Urban Institute examines the status of a representative sample of welfare recipients and other low-income families. Although this report goes to some lengths to describe how welfare recipients have similar experiences to other families in the low-wage labor market, it ignores entirely the role that existing race or gender inequities in that market may have on employment outcomes. Given the impact of racial and gender-based discrimination on employment outcomes for women of color, this omission is remarkable. The report certainly answers questions about public assistance and low-wage work, but it omits the analysis of a major contextual variable and renders nearly meaningless the discrimination that both welfare recipients and low-wage workers regularly experience.