



Focus

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Introduction: Reauthorizing TANF

For the communities of scholars, policymakers, officials, and activists interested in the well-being of poor American families, the welfare reform legislation of 1996 was a watershed event, redirecting the flow of policy and funding and changing the terms of public discussion and the focus of social policy research on the poor.

How has the legislation affected the lives of poor families and how will it impinge on the next generation? It is still too early to give a definitive answer to this question. The reforms attempt to influence work, marriage, fertility—among the most complex of human behaviors. Design and implementation across states unfolded with differing speed and success. The processes of collecting and analyzing social data are frequently slow. And the changes are happening during a period that has seen a very strong economy and a great many other tax and program changes likely to affect work and family behavior. Nevertheless judgments, however hedged, must now be made because of the impending expiration and reauthorization of the 1996 legislation.

As part of its contribution to the discussion, IRP has undertaken to bring together, in this issue of *Focus*, articles that probe aspects of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. The scholars contributing to this special issue have spent the greater part of their professional careers in the study of poverty and welfare from varied disciplinary perspectives. We asked them, in light of the upcoming debate, to step back and give us their thoughts about the most important things that policymakers and others should know as they consider reauthorizing the welfare legislation.

The articles that follow are loosely grouped into five sections.

Devolution

We begin with the states, because the most momentous change of the welfare reform legislation was its decentralization of the responsibility to shape and implement policy. Articles by Thomas Corbett, by a group of midwestern state officials, and by Rebecca Swartz explore some consequences of the decision to devolve responsibility from the federal government to the states. Howard Chernick and Andrew Reschovsky ask if states can continue what they have begun as the nation moves into recessionary times and fiscal uncertainties. James Ziliak discusses caseload trends, the most visible indicator of the success of welfare reform. To what extent are the precipitous drops in caseloads since the middle 1990s a consequence of the welfare reforms, and to what extent a consequence of other events—trends in the American

economy, or changes in tax laws that have increased the economic returns to low-wage work?

Implementation

Now that welfare policy is radically decentralized, there are at least 50 different state policies, often implemented according to local agency understanding and capacities, instead of one welfare policy, implemented more or less according to rules from the center. What exactly is happening in a particular program as it is put in place in different states or local jurisdictions? What is happening within agencies, and have the relationships between agencies and those they serve changed as much in practice as in theory? Why have some states taken one path, some another; why have some moved ahead while others appear mired in controversy? These broad issues of governance are examined in articles by Thomas Kaplan and Lawrence Mead.

Equally important as understanding how programs have been shaped is understanding what they have accomplished. If we are to know with any certainty what is being done, and what the consequences are for families on which the legislation is having so powerful an influence, it is imperative that the states and the federal government improve their capacity to gather program and other social welfare data. Robert Moffitt and Michele Ver Ploeg examine some of the problems with existing data-collecting efforts and suggest remedies.

Work, earnings, and vulnerable populations

This section begins with work, now a focus of welfare policy. Articles by Joseph Hotz, Charles Mullin, and John Karl Scholz and by Melissa Wavelet and Jacquie Anderson ask basic questions about the employment of former welfare recipients. How well are they doing in the labor market, and what are their longer-range employment prospects? How best might employment be sustained and income increased among those who are working? David Autor and Susan Houseman explore the role of the temporary employment agencies, which have emerged as one of the most important labor market intermediaries. Are they a path to advancement or merely a way to shunt welfare recipients off the rolls and into dead-end jobs? And Harry Holzer examines the attitudes and actions of the employers who are most likely to hire low-wage workers.

Federal legislation explicitly recognized that some participants would encounter special difficulties in becoming self-supporting. The 1996 bill exempted 20 percent

of the welfare population from work requirements. Articles by Sandra Danziger and Kristin Seefeldt and by Sharon Ramey and Bette Keltner document the varied and often severe difficulties facing the “hard to serve” segment of the welfare population. Ramey and Keltner suggest that perhaps as many as 30 percent of all recipients may simply be unable ever to reach the levels of self-sufficiency demanded by the legislation.

Family matters

In passing the 1996 welfare reform legislation, Congress specifically addressed family matters that had been absent from welfare policy discussion for almost a generation—marriage and the responsibilities of parents. The extent and intensity of state efforts to respond to this aspect of the legislation have differed widely. Maria Cancian and Daniel Meyer set out what research has to say about changing family organization and the consequences of those changes for important goals of the welfare reform legislation. Irwin Garfinkel and Sara McLanahan report research findings regarding the characteristics of the unwed parents whose children are likely to constitute the bulk of the welfare population and examine what can be done to strengthen these “fragile families.” Kristin Shook Slack examines these and other equally fragile families from another perspective, exploring what we know about the interactions between the new welfare programs and the child welfare system.

On a more hopeful note, articles on child care by Barbara Wolfe and Deborah Vandell and on early childhood interventions by Arthur Reynolds conclude that policies to ensure that children in disadvantaged families begin school and adult life on a more equal footing with better-off children are both feasible and cost-effective.

Finally, Shawn Fremstad and Wendell Primus offer an agenda for a reauthorized TANF legislation that will, they believe, strengthen families and increase the number of children in stable two-parent families without disadvantaging or stigmatizing single-parent families.

Reshaping reform

If reform does need fresh ideas, it might prove helpful to look abroad for them. The United Kingdom has learned much from American models, and Robert Walker and Michael Wiseman suggest that it may in return offer novel approaches and useful models.

More than one in five low-income children in the United States now live in noncitizen families. The 1996 legislation imposed unprecedented restrictions on immigrants; though some of these have been rescinded, we still know

very little about the effects of those still in place. Shawn Fremstad discusses the effects of the legislation on immigrant families and suggests changes that will bring the restrictions more in line with the law’s overall emphasis on work-based reform.

Whatever the outcome of the debates over reauthorizing TANF, without adequate resources states will be unable to provide the necessary services and supports to low-income families. Zoë Neuberger, Sharon Parrott, and Wendell Primus discuss improvements in the funding mechanisms and structure that are needed to ensure that states can maintain existing services to families while building new initiatives to achieve the purposes of TANF.

In the 25-year history of *Focus*, this is the longest issue ever produced. Yet the issue considers just one subject, the reauthorization of the welfare legislation. Even there it leaves some key issues unexplored and it does not directly address closely related topics such as Medicaid and the State Children’s Health Insurance program. The U.S. executive and legislative branches clearly have large tasks ahead as they consider reauthorization. The 1996 legislation unquestionably changed the landscape of welfare. The challenge of reauthorization is to preserve the gains in a more troubled economic climate, while improving the economic and family conditions of clients who have not so far been helped by the program. ■