



# Focus

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Celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2006, IRP has instituted a seminar series, “New Perspectives in Social Policy,” that will seek to reach beyond familiar and well-explored fields of poverty research, to challenge accepted paradigms, or open paths to new research models and methodologies. The first seminar in that series was delivered by Charles Murray, who offers a radical approach to the apparently intractable problems of economic insecurity in the United States. This issue of *Focus* includes his essay discussing that plan, which involves a basic cash grant to every American adult.

The idea of a basic income guarantee is a subject of lively discussion among economists and sociologists; thus we pair Charles Murray’s essay with another by sociologist and IRP affiliate, Erik Olin Wright. Also featured in this issue is a list of related resources—including links to Robert Haveman’s comments on Murray’s proposal and to earlier *Focus* articles on related issues, including the Negative Income Tax.

## A plan to replace the welfare state

Charles Murray

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Charles Murray is the W. H. Brady Scholar in Culture and Freedom at the American Enterprise Institute. He is the author of *In Our Hands: A Plan to Replace the Welfare State* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2006). In May 2006, he discussed his proposal in a presentation in the IRP Seminar Series, “New Perspectives in Social Policy.”

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This much is certain: The welfare state as we know it cannot survive. No serious student of entitlements thinks that we can let federal spending on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid rise from its current 9 percent of GDP to the 28 percent of GDP that it will consume in 2050 if

past growth rates continue. The problems facing transfer programs for the poor are less dramatic but, in the long term, no less daunting; the falling value of a strong back and the rising value of brains will eventually create a class society making a mockery of America’s ideals unless we come up with something more creative than anything that the current welfare system has to offer.

So major change is inevitable—and Congress seems utterly unwilling to face up to it. Witness the Social Security debate of last year, a case study in political timidity. Like it or not, we have several years to think before Congress can no longer postpone action. Let’s use it to start thinking outside the narrow proposals for benefit cuts and tax increases that will be Congress’s path of least resistance.

The place to start is a blindingly obvious economic reality that no one seems to notice: This country is awash in money. America is so wealthy that enabling everyone to have a decent standard of living is easy. We cannot do it by fiddling with the entitlement and welfare systems—they constitute a Gordian Knot that cannot be untied. But we can cut the knot. We can scrap the structure of the welfare state.

Instead of sending taxes to Washington, straining them through bureaucracies and converting what remains into a muddle of services, subsidies, in-kind support, and cash hedged with restrictions and exceptions, just collect the taxes, divide them up, and send the money back in cash grants to all American adults. Make the grant large enough so that the poor won't be poor, everyone will have enough for a comfortable retirement, and everyone will be able to afford health care. We're rich enough to do it.

Consider retirement. Let's say that we have a 21-year-old man before us who, for whatever reasons, will be unable to accumulate his own retirement fund. We accumulate it for him through a yearly contribution for 45 years until he retires at age 66. We can afford to contribute \$2,000 a year and invest it in an index-based stock fund. What is the least he can expect to have when he retires? We are ridiculously conservative, so we first identify the worst compound average growth rate, using constant dollars, for any 45-year period in the history of the stock market (4.3 percent from 1887-1932). We then assume our 21-year-old will be the unluckiest investor in American history and get just a 4.0 percent average return. At the end of the 45-year period, he will have about \$253,000, with which he could purchase an annuity worth about \$20,500 a year.

That's with just a \$2,000 annual contribution, equivalent to the Social Security taxes the government gets for a person making only \$16,129 per year. The government gets more than twice that amount from someone earning the median income, and more than five times that amount from the millions of people who pay the maximum FICA tax. Giving everyone access to a comfortable retirement income is easy for a country as rich as the United States—if we don't insist on doing it through the structure of the welfare state.

Health care is more complicated in its details, but not in its logic. We do not wait until our 21-year-old is 65 and then start paying for his health care. Instead, we go to a health insurance company and tell it that we're prepared to start paying a constant premium now for the rest of the 21-year-old's life. Given that kind of offer, the health insurance company can sell us a health care policy that covers the essentials for somewhere around \$3,000. It can be so inexpensive for the same reason that life insurance companies can sell generous life insurance cheaply if people buy it when they're young—the insurance com-

pany makes a lot of money from the annual payments before eventually having to write the big benefit checks. Providing access to basic medical care for everyone is easy for a country as rich as the United States—if we don't insist on doing it through the structure of the welfare state.

There are many ways of turning these economic potentials into a working system. The one I have devised—I call it simply “the Plan” for want of a catchier label—makes a \$10,000 annual grant to all American citizens who are not incarcerated, beginning at age 21, of which \$3,000 a year must be used for health care. Everyone gets a monthly check, deposited electronically to a bank account. If we implemented the Plan tomorrow, it would cost about \$355 billion more than the current system. The projected costs of the Plan cross the projected costs of the current system in 2011. By 2020, the Plan would cost about half a trillion dollars less per year than conservative projections of the cost of the current system. By 2028, that difference would be a trillion dollars per year.

Many questions must be asked of a system that substitutes a direct cash grant for the current welfare state. Work disincentives, the comparative risks of market-based solutions versus government guarantees, transition costs, tradeoffs in health coverage, implications for the tax system, and effects on people too young to qualify for the grant, all require attention in deciding whether the Plan is feasible and desirable. I think all of the questions have answers, but they are not one-liners; I lay them out in my book.

For now, let me turn to a larger question: Assuming that the technical questions have answers, do we want a system in which the government divests itself of responsibility for the human needs that gave rise to the welfare state in the first place? I think the reasons for answering “yes” go far beyond the Plan's effects on poverty, retirement, and health care. Those issues affect comparatively small minorities of the population. The more profound problem facing the world's most advanced societies is how their peoples are to live meaningful lives in an age of plenty and security.

Throughout history until a few decades ago, the meaning of life for almost everyone was linked to the challenge of simple survival. Staying alive required being a contributing part of a community. Staying alive required forming a family and having children to care for you in your old age. The knowledge that sudden death could happen at any moment required attention to spiritual issues. Doing all those things provided deep satisfactions that went beyond survival.

Life in an age of plenty and security requires none of those things. For the great majority of people living in advanced societies, it is easily possible to go through life accompanied by social companions and serial sex part-

ners, having a good time, and dying in old age with no reason to think that one has done anything significant.

If you believe that's all there is—that the purpose of life is to while away the time as pleasantly as possible—then it is reasonable to think that the purpose of government should be to enable people to do so with as little effort as possible. But if you agree with me that to live a human life can have transcendental meaning, then we need to think about how human existence acquires weight and consequence.

For many of those lucky enough to have advanced education or conspicuous skills, the focus of that search for meaning is bound up with vocation—for some, the quest to be rich and famous; for others, the quest to excel in a vocation one loves. But it is an option open to only a lucky minority. For most people—including many older people who in their youths focused on vocation—life acquires meaning through the stuff of life: the elemental events associated with birth, death, growing up, raising children, paying the rent, dealing with adversity, comforting the bereaved, celebrating success, applauding the good and condemning the bad; coping with life as it exists around us in all its richness. The chief defect of the welfare state from this perspective is not that it is ineffectual in making good on its promises (though it is), nor even that it often exacerbates the very problems it is supposed to solve (though it does). The welfare state is pernicious ultimately because it drains too much of the life from life.

The Plan returns the stuff of life to all of us in many ways, but chiefly through its effects on the core institutions of family and community. One key to thinking about how the Plan does so is the universality of the grant. What matters is not just that a lone individual has \$10,000 a year, but that everyone has \$10,000 a year and everyone knows that everyone else has that resource. Strategies that are not open to an individual are open to a couple; strategies that are not open to a couple are open to an extended family or, for that matter, to half a dozen friends who pool resources; strategies not open to a small group are open to a neighborhood. The aggregate shift in resources from government to people under the Plan is massive, and possibilities for dealing with human needs through family and community are multiplied exponentially.

The Plan confers personal accountability whether the recipient wants it or not, producing cascading secondary and tertiary effects. A person who asks for help because he has frittered away his monthly check will find people and organizations who will help (America has a history of producing such people and organizations in abundance), but that help can come with expectations and demands that are hard to make of a person who has no income stream. Or contemplate the effects of a known income stream on the young man who impregnates his girlfriend. The first-order effect is that he cannot evade child sup-

port—the judge knows where his bank account is. The second-order effect is to create expectations that formerly didn't exist. I call it the Doolittle Effect, after Alfred Doolittle in "My Fair Lady." Recall why he had to get to the church on time.

The Plan confers responsibility for dealing with human needs on all of us, whether we want it or not. Some will see this as a step backward, thinking that it is better to pay one's taxes, give responsibility to the government and be done with it. I think an alternative outlook is wiser: The Plan does not require us all to become part-time social workers. The nation can afford lots of free riders. But Aristotle was right. Virtue is a habit. Virtue does not flourish in the next generation because we tell our children to be honest, compassionate, and generous in the abstract. It flourishes because our children practice honesty, compassion, and generosity in the same way that they practice a musical instrument or a sport. That happens best when children grow up in a society in which human needs are not consigned to bureaucracies downtown but are part of life around us, met by people around us.

Simply put, the Plan gives us back the action. Institutions and individuals alike thrive to the extent that they have important jobs to do and know that the responsibility to do them is on their heads. For decades, the welfare state has said to us, "We'll take care of that." As a result, we have watched some of our sources of life's most important satisfactions lose vitality. At the same time, we have learned how incompetent—how helpless—government is when "taking care of that" means dealing with complex human needs. The solution is not to tinker with the welfare state. The solution is to put responsibility for our lives back in our hands—ours as individuals, ours as families, and ours as communities.

[This essay appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*,  
Wednesday, March 22, 2006 ]

## The concept of a universal basic income grant: Further information

For live links to the following resources on the basic income guarantee, go to the IRP Web site [<http://www.irp.wisc.edu>]. This site also includes remarks by Robert Haveman, the respondent at the IRP seminar presentation by Charles Murray.

The *Journal of Socio-Economics* published a special issue on the basic income guarantee, Volume 34, Issue 1, February 2005, with an introduction by Karl Widerquist, and articles by Almaz Zelleke, Michael Anthony Lewis, Diego Hernández, James B. Bryan, Karl Widerquist, Steven Pressman, and Joel F. Handler. Most of the papers in the issue come from the second conference of the U.S. Basic Income Guarantee Network (USBIG), which was held in conjunction with the Eastern Economic Association's Annual Conference in New York on February 21–23, 2003. The USBIG Conference was founded in New York in 1999 to promote further discussion of the basic income guarantee as a policy alternative, and since 2002, it has organized yearly congresses. The USBIG Conferences feature presentations by scholars in many academic disciplines and by nonacademic activists and authors.

The Web site of the USBIG Network [<http://www.usbig.net/>] contains links to discussion papers, an extensive bibliography of over 2,000 books and articles regarding the universal basic income, and links to other basic income Web sites.

For a discussion of the basic income guarantee in the context of welfare and social reproduction—understood as the maintenance and future of the common weal and the care of citizens—see Carole Pateman, “Another Way Forward: Welfare, Social Reproduction, and a Basic Income,” in *Welfare Reform and Political Theory*, ed. L. Mead and C. Beem (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005).

### The Negative Income Tax

In the 1960s and 1970s, IRP was deeply involved in the design, conduct, and analysis of a version of the basic income guarantee: the New Jersey Income Maintenance Experiment, followed by the Rural Income Maintenance Experiment. These random-assignment experiments studied the differential behavioral responses to varying minimum income guarantees. The experiments were important to the evolution of experimental methodology in the social sciences as well as to poverty research in general. The New Jersey experiment is regarded as an outstanding example of interdisciplinary research in close cooperation with government planners.

This experimental approach to poverty reduction is often called a Negative Income Tax and was the subject of the 2004 Robert J. Lampman Memorial lecture, by Robert A. Moffitt. A version of this lecture, “The Idea of a Negative Income Tax: Past, Present, and Future,” appeared in *Focus* 23:2, Summer 2004 [<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc232a.pdf>]. A full discussion also appears in Robert A. Moffitt, “Milton Friedman, the Negative Income Tax, and the Evolution of U.S. Welfare Policy,” IRP Discussion Paper 1260-03, Madison, WI, 2003 [<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/dpabs2003.htm#DP1260-03>].

The Negative Income Tax proposals were the inspiration for several comprehensive federal plans proposed during the 1970s: President Nixon's Family Assistance Plan, Senator George McGovern's universal demogrant proposal, and President Carter's Program for Better Jobs and Income. Programs to supplement the income of the working poor through the tax system (for example, the Earned Income Tax Credit) are a more recent version of the approach.

### The universal demogrant

Another variant of the basic income guarantee is the universal demogrant, a fixed sum of money given to individuals who meet specific demographic criteria (e.g., age), irrespective of income or wealth. Robert Haveman, Emeritus Professor of Economics and Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and an IRP affiliate, has long advocated a version of the demogrant as part of his approach to reducing inequality. He presented the proposal at length in his book, *Starting Even: An Equal Opportunity Program to Combat the Nation's New Poverty* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988). For a summary version, see “The Changed Face of Poverty,” in *Focus* 11:2, 1988.

# Two redistributive proposals—universal basic income and stakeholder grants

Erik Olin Wright

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Erik Olin Wright is Vilas Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and an IRP affiliate. His comments are adapted from his Introduction and his chapter, “Basic Income, Stakeholders Grants, and Class Analysis,” pp. 79–81, in *Redesigning Redistribution: Basic Income and Stakeholder Grants as Cornerstones for a More Egalitarian Capitalism* (2006), volume 5 in The Real Utopias project (<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/RealUtopias.htm>).

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There was a time, not so long ago, when the issue of the state’s positive role in shaping income distribution was at the center of political debate. In Europe, Social Democratic parties argued for the desirability of an activist, affirmative state engaged in policies that would generate income distribution far more egalitarian than those produced through market forces and a passive state. Even in the United States, advocating such a role for the state was part of the spectrum of ordinary political debate. In the early 1970s in the United States, in the aftermath of the major expansion of welfare state programs of the previous decade, there was a lively political debate over whether or not a negative income tax should be adopted as a centerpiece of policies designed to alleviate poverty and reduce inequality. In the end the Family Assistance Plan, as the proposal was known, was narrowly defeated in the U.S. Congress, and so the existing welfare mechanism of Aid to Families with Dependent Children remained intact. But still, in that debate of 30 years ago the issue was what sort of state intervention into patterns of income distribution would best serve broader social and economic goals, not whether the state should get out of the business of trying to affect distribution altogether.

The intervening three decades have witnessed a massive shift in the ideological coordinates of public policy discussions in the United States and elsewhere. By the early 1990s, particularly in the United States, defenders of traditional income support policies of the affirmative state were on the defensive and virtually no one in the public debate argued that shaping the income distribution was a worthy political goal. Instead of a political ethos in which the basic well-being of all citizens was seen as part of a collective responsibility, the vision was one in which each person took full “personal responsibility” for their own well-being. The nearly universal call was to “end welfare as we know it,” replacing it with a much reduced welfare state that at most would provide a minimal safety

net only for those people clearly incapable of taking care of themselves.

Given this ideological climate, it might seem like an unpropitious time to propose radical strategies for reducing inequality through new programs of income and wealth transfers. Government intervention to generate more egalitarian income distribution is now broadly regarded as antithetical to economic efficiency and thus ultimately self-defeating; there is no vocal political coalition demanding new efforts at egalitarian distribution; and talk of raising taxes and dramatically expanding the activities of the state are seen by most analysts as off the political agenda. The Real Utopias Project that generated this volume is based on the belief that it is important to engage in rigorous analysis of alternative visions of institutional change even when there seems to be little support for such ideas, since posing clear designs for alternatives may contribute to creating the conditions in which such support can be built.

In this spirit, two provocative proposals for radical redesigns of distributive institutions are discussed in the volume. They are the Universal Basic Income, as elaborated by Philippe van Parijs, and Stakeholder Grants, as elaborated by Bruce Ackerman and Anne Alstott. While both of these proposals contain a range of complex details, as ideals they are both based on very simple principles.

**Basic Income.** All citizens are given a monthly stipend sufficiently high to provide them with a standard of living above the poverty line. This monthly income is universal rather than means-tested—it is given automatically to all citizens regardless of their individual economic circumstances. And it is unconditional—receiving the basic income does not depend upon performing any labor services or satisfying other conditions. In this way basic income is like publicly financed universal health insurance: in a universal health care system, medical care is provided both to citizens who exercise and eat healthy diets and to those who do not. It is not a condition of getting medical care that one be “responsible” with respect to one’s health. Unconditional, universal basic income takes the same stance about basic needs: as a matter of basic rights, no one should live in poverty in an affluent society.

**Stakeholder Grants.** All citizens, upon reaching the age of early adulthood—say twenty-one—receive a substantial one-time lump-sum grant sufficiently large so that all young adults would be significant wealth holders.



Ackerman and Alstott propose that this grant be in the vicinity of \$80,000 and be financed by an annual wealth tax of roughly 2 percent. In the absence of such grants, children of wealthy parents are able to get lump-sum stakes for education, housing, business start-ups, investments, and so on, whereas children of parents who are not wealthy are not. This situation fundamentally violates values of equal opportunity. A system of stakeholder grants, they argue, “expresses a fundamental responsibility: every American has an obligation to contribute to a fair starting point for all.”

In some ways, basic income and stakeholder grants are not completely different kinds of proposals. After all, if one invests a stakeholder grant in a relatively low-risk investment and waits a number of years, then it will eventually generate a permanent stream of income equivalent to an above-poverty basic income. Similarly, if one continues to work for earnings in the labor market while receiving a basic income and one saves the basic income, after a number of years it will become the equivalent of a stakeholder grant. Nevertheless, the two proposals reflect quite distinct visions of what kind of system of redistribution would be morally and pragmatically optimal in developed market economies. Stakeholder grants emphasize individual responsibility and what is sometimes called “starting gate equality of opportunity.” Individuals get a stake, and if they blow it on conspicuous consumption rather than long-term plans, then this is their responsibility. Basic income envisions a system of redistribution that permanently guarantees everyone freedom from poverty and a certain kind of lifetime equality of minimal opportunity: the opportunity to withdraw from the labor force to engage in unremunerated activity.

There are, of course, many objections that can be raised against both of these proposals. Some of these objections are moral: basic income rewards people for being parasites; redistribution of wealth illegitimately takes assets away from people who have worked hard to build them up. Others are pragmatic: so many people would withdraw their labor from the labor market if there was a decent basic income that the economy would collapse; the rates of taxation required for basic income will undermine incentives; redistributions of wealth to create stakes will eliminate incentives to save and build up assets.

**What would society gain from the institution of an unconditional basic income?** A generous, unconditional basic income which would allow employees a meaningful exit from a particular employment situation, or indeed from paid employment itself, directly transforms the dynamics of the employer-employee relationship in a private market economy. First, in a capitalism with basic income people are free to engage in non-market-oriented, socially productive activity. There is a wide range of activities which many people want to do but which are badly organized by either capitalist markets or public institutions. Prominent among these is care-giving la-

bor—of children, of the elderly, and in many situations, of the ill. Engagement in the arts, in politics, and in various kinds of community service would also be facilitated by UBI. Frequently people with serious interests in these kinds of activities would be willing to do them at relatively modest earnings if they were provided through markets—witness the very low standards of living accepted (if reluctantly) by actors, musicians, political activists, and community organizers. The problem for many people is not so much the low earnings, but the inability to find employment in these kinds of activities. UBI makes it possible for people to choose to do this kind of activity without having to enter into an employment relation. In this way it contributes to a shift in the balance of power within class relations.

Second, for those people who still enter into ordinary private market employment relations, UBI would contribute to a greater symmetry of power between labor and capital even if workers did not engage in collective organization. This would be particularly salient for workers in low-skilled, low-wage jobs. Often workers in such jobs suffer both from low wages and from miserable working conditions. The realistic exit options of low-wage workers under a UBI system would increase their bargaining power with employers. Of course, this might mean that many such low-skill jobs would disappear, but since many low-skilled people will still want discretionary income above the no-frills UBI level, there will still be potential workers willing to take such jobs. The difference is that the balance of power within which the attributes of such jobs are determined would be shifted toward workers.

Third, an unconditional basic income could also contribute in various ways to increasing the collective strength of workers, not just their individual leverage within employment. Where workers individually have easier exit options, employers may have greater incentives to agree to new forms of collective cooperation with organizations of workers. Such collective cooperation is an element in what is sometimes called “high road” capitalism, a model of capitalism in which labor and capital engage in much closer collaboration over the design and regulation of work, production, and innovation than is characteristic of conventional capitalist organization in which employers have more or less unilateral control over basic production decisions.

If it is economically sustainable UBI seems likely to underwrite a set of social and institutional changes which more profoundly reshape the power relations of capitalism than will a program of stakeholder grants. The argument for basic income, in these terms, is more like a public goods argument than a simple individual social justice argument, since changes in power relations affect the overall dynamics and conditions everyone experiences in a society, not simply those immediately party to the power relation. Let me explain.

The ideal of “equality of opportunity,” as it is conceived in much liberal egalitarian discussion of justice, involves trying to distinguish between those conditions of life for which people can reasonably be held responsible and those for which they cannot. Social justice requires trying to minimize those inequalities outside of individual control, and redistribution is one way of accomplishing this. Both UBI and stakeholder grants can be defended as significant steps in the direction of remedying unjust failures of such equality of opportunity. On these grounds, in fact, some people might prefer a generous stakeholder grant system to UBI, insofar as it might be thought as better embodying the responsibility ideal of equal opportunity. In some ways UBI looks like a paternalistic program in which, to avoid the risk of individuals squandering redistributed resources, the state doles out a stipend to people rather than giving them a single, large lump-sum payment. In a UBI program people can still squander their basic income, but they can only do so one month at a time. If avoiding paternalism is a high priority within a conception of equality of opportunity, and if equality of opportunity is the central justification for redistribution, then stakeholder grants might be preferred over UBI.

The defense of UBI offered here is not, however, primarily about social justice as such. It is about creating the conditions under which a stable move toward more equal power within class relations can be achieved. The issue of equality of power has strong public goods features. Consider another context in which we worry about equality of power: the right to vote. We don’t allow people to sell their right to vote to anyone, even though many people would want to do so if given the opportunity and there surely would be a market for such sales if they were permitted. It could be argued that this too is paternalism: the state prevents people from engaging in a voluntary transaction in order to prevent them from doing things which, in the long run, would cause harms. The justification for this prohibition is not simply that it would ultimately be harmful to the particular persons who sell their right to vote in the same sense that taking an addictive drug might be harmful. Rather, the argument is that selling votes would undermine democracy and be harmful even to those who did not sell their votes. It would be harmful because of the concentrations of power that a free market in votes would create and this, ultimately, undermines the political ideal of political equality of citizens. Legal prohibitions on the selling of votes are defended above all because of a judgment about the collective consequences of alternative distributions of power within our political institutions. The monthly flow of income that is an essential part of UBI, therefore, is not simply a form of paternalism designed to prevent individuals from squandering their resources, but a way of insuring the stability of the social process by which power relations are shifted.■

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# Livelihood strategies and family networks of low-wage Wisconsin mothers

Jane Collins and Victoria Mayer

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Families have commonly relied on income pooling and networks of sharing to make ends meet when they hold low-wage jobs. In the study summarized in this article, we explored the work and family lives of women participating in Wisconsin's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.<sup>1</sup> Through ethnographic interviews, we gained greater understanding of the work environments they faced, the livelihood strategies they employed, the support networks on which they drew, and the social support programs in which they participated.

## Moving from welfare to work

Most women leaving welfare (between 66 and 80 percent) work in the first years after exiting, but poverty rates for this group remain high and the jobs women obtain are often low-paying and irregular, with inconvenient shifts and inflexible work rules that may be incompatible with family care responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> As women enter the workforce, they participate in several different patterns of employment: long-term attachment to a single job, a continuing series of jobs, chronic underemployment, churning (moving in and out of the labor market), and no or little employment.<sup>3</sup>

In evaluating the employment history of women who have used Wisconsin Works (W-2) services, we collected detailed employment histories for 42 women and used categories similar to these to assess patterns of attachment to the labor market. We looked at the kinds and quality of the jobs held by the women in our sample, whether those jobs were sufficient to sustain their families, and whether the women were on upward or downward mobility trajectories. We paid particular attention to the reasons that women gave for leaving or losing their jobs, and explored how these related to crises outside the workplace and the flexibility of work rules, in an effort to clarify factors that hindered development of secure attachment to jobs.

Women's social networks can be both a safety net and a source of stress through the obligations they create.<sup>4</sup> Our interviews explored how social networks both supported

and burdened women, and how social support was related to their ability to work and handle crises.

## Mother's livelihood strategies and family networks

Qualitative research of the type described here is intended to provide detailed information about people's lives, rather than to test associations between factors or assess causality. Ethnographic studies can suggest associations that may provide the basis of future quantitative research, and they can confirm and explain patterns already identified in quantitative studies.

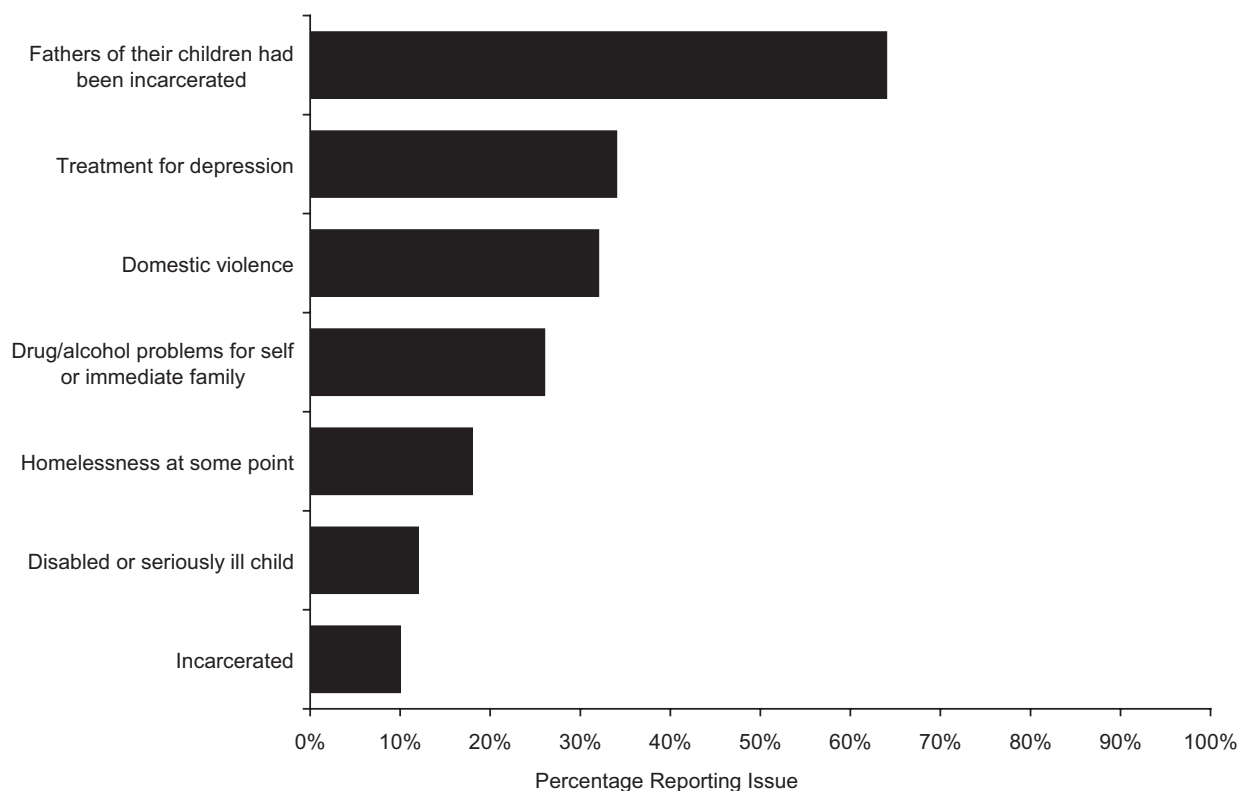
To collect the ethnographic data for this study, we conducted in-depth interviews with a random sample of W-2 participants from Dane, Racine, and Milwaukee counties. In order to include sufficient information on child care arrangements, we selected women with at least one child under age 5. All of the women were enrolled in a cash payment tier of W-2. We stratified our sample to insure sufficient numbers of African American, Latina, and white women; those with and without child support orders, and short- and long-term W-2 participants. The interviews were conducted between April and July 2004 and covered work history (focused especially on the last five jobs), family history, social program participation, and family networks. We had a response rate of 71 percent, and interviewed 42 women. In addition to the ethnographic interviews, we also reviewed legislative and administrative documents, and conducted interviews with TANF and child support agency workers and administrators in the three counties.

Welfare reform policies in Wisconsin have greatly reduced the caseload, but the remaining participants tend to have more intractable problems than those in earlier periods.<sup>5</sup> Although we did not ask specific questions about abuse, depression, domestic violence, or incarceration, many women mentioned these and other problems. Figure 1 shows some of the reported challenges. Thirty-six percent of the women in our sample reported more than one of these issues, and some reported as many as five.

## Employment and work

Welfare reform policies depend on the assumption that participants can obtain adequate employment, but many





**Figure 1. Challenges and crises reported by women in the qualitative sample.**

**Note:** These reports emerged in the context of the interviews; the women were not specifically asked about these issues. Thus, the percentages likely represent an undercount.

women in our sample were unable to do so, for a variety of reasons (Figure 2).<sup>6</sup> Of the 22 women who were not working, half were no longer receiving a W-2 payment, although they had been doing so at the time of sample selection. These women were relying on family or partner support, or informal income.

### Difficulty finding jobs

Women who were actively seeking work expressed frustration with the state of the job market in 2004. When asked “What things make it hard for you to take care of your kids the way you would like right now?” several answered, “the economy.” One said, “factories you can’t do because the factories are packing up and moving overseas” Another said, “people are expected to have more skills . . . which means you need more training, you know. So having your GED or high school diploma isn’t good enough anymore” A third said: “I know I need my GED, and with the Lord and time I’m gonna get that. But right now all I need is a chance . . . I ain’t been working in a long time. As you can see on that paper, I’m not scared of work. I am a hard working person, but I can’t do nothing without being given a chance.” Many other women complained about prevailing wage rates: “Yes, I could go to McDonald’s or Burger King and flip burgers or whatever,

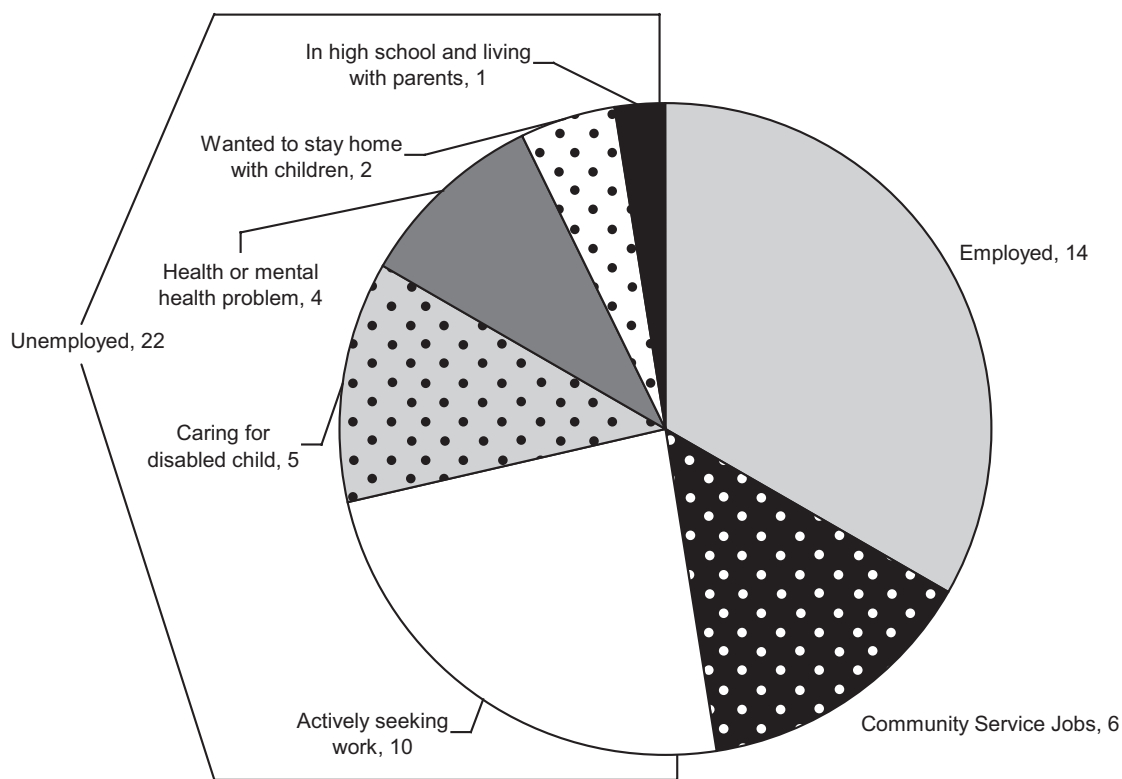
but realistically how am I going to send my children, my three children, to college off of \$6.75 or \$7 an hour pay?”

Several women argued that the state-mandated process of monitoring and tracking people who were in the W-2 system was an impediment to getting “real” jobs and to job mobility. One said:

I had been offered a position as an executive secretary, which is what I used to be. I let one of my caseworkers know that I had the job. She called the temporary service that I had signed up with and told them, “well she’s on welfare; we want to monitor her.” Because they found out I was a welfare recipient, I couldn’t get the job for \$15/hour. They . . . started offering me jobs for \$6/hour which was not enough for me to actually get off welfare and stay off. You know, I know what I’m worth and capable of doing and \$6 an hour was like a slap in the face.

### Kind and quality of jobs

The women we interviewed had held a wide range of jobs, but their work experience was clustered in low-end service work, in particular the retail and fast food sector (see Figure 3). Their wages in the job they were currently



**Figure 2. Employment status and reasons for unemployment.**

holding or last held ranged from \$5.75 to \$13.75 an hour, and averaged \$8.63 an hour. Only three women who were currently employed received benefits of any kind from their employers.

Women found a great deal of satisfaction in jobs that gave them more responsibility. One explained:

Executive secretary . . . that was the most fulfilling job I had. It was in a nonprofit agency. I used to help senior citizens to get repairs for their home, and we would set up summer programs. I helped design programs where teens in the summer could work and help the elderly repair their homes. I worked with the Share program and Second Harvest where we would help people get food, and my boss trusted me to handle money.

Another described her growing self-confidence in a sales position that required her to interact with clients from a range of backgrounds:

Because I got to meet a lot of different people, I learned a lot. I was meeting police officers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, you know. When I first started working there I used to feel intimidated by people that made a lot of money and stuff. I felt like they were superior to me or something. I was very uncomfortable being around them. So then after I

started getting to know them, I started realizing that they are just like me, and some of them are worse off, really. So it helped me to start looking at people at face value. It taught me to be a chameleon, to adapt to my surroundings, so I could talk to somebody from my background or I could talk to somebody who comes from a wealthy family and I could blend in with them too, you know.

### Patterns of work

All of the women we interviewed had been employed at some point in their lives. Indeed, a majority of our sample (26, or 62 percent) had held a long-term job, defined as working in the same place for a year or more. Many had even longer spells of employment, up to five years, and some had a history of promotions and very responsible managerial positions. For many of these women, employment was interrupted by personal or family crises such as physical or mental health problems, domestic violence, or family disruption. Although they had periods of employment stability, they may have also had lengthy periods of unemployment or underemployment, or of job churning—frequent movement in and out of employment and between jobs (see Figure 4). For nearly 20 percent of our sample, this churning was the predominant pattern, and some women had held as many as 25 jobs over a period of ten years. A similar number of women had difficulty

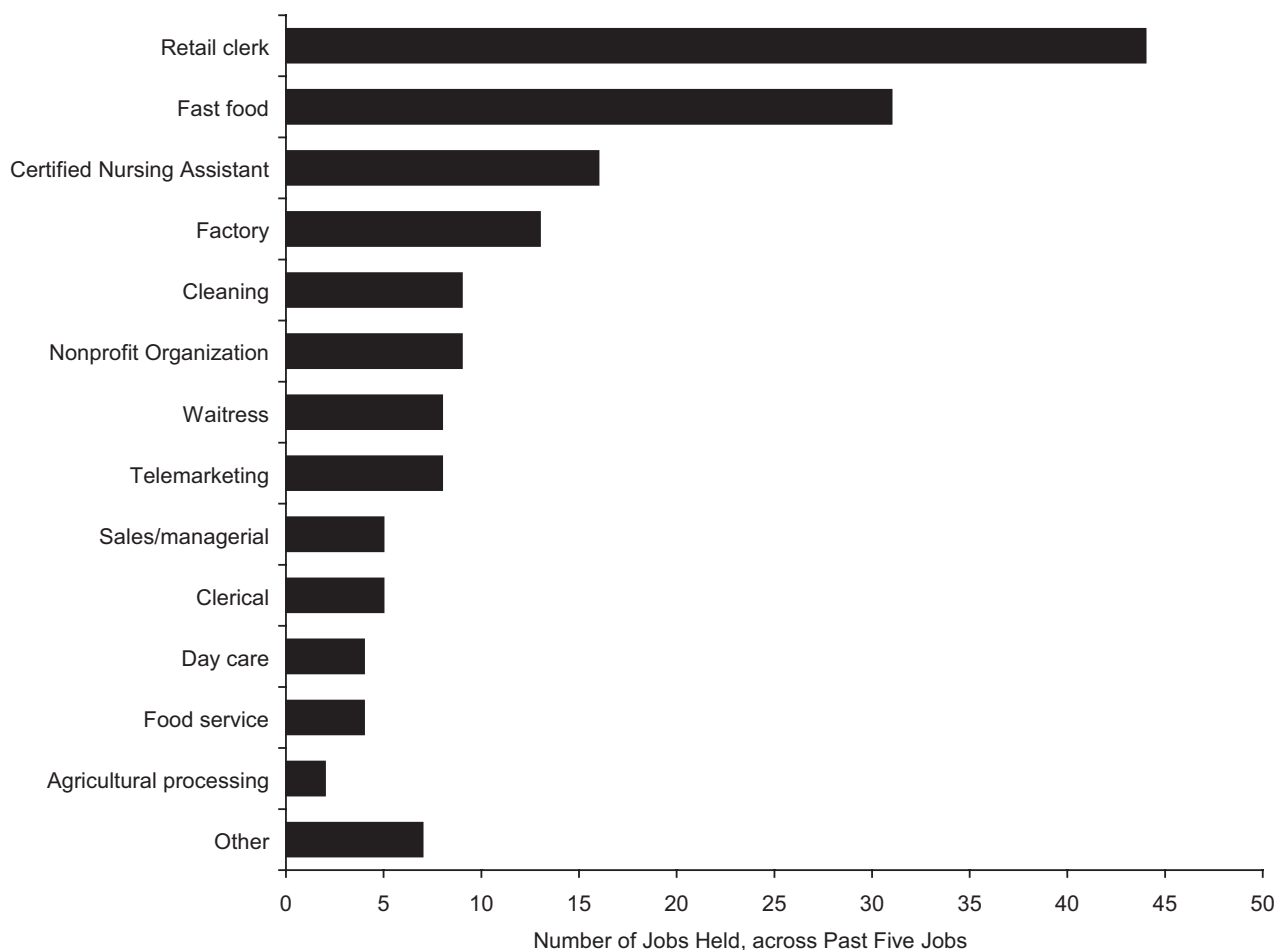


Figure 3. Kinds of jobs held by women in sample.

finding and holding work and could be characterized as chronically unemployed.

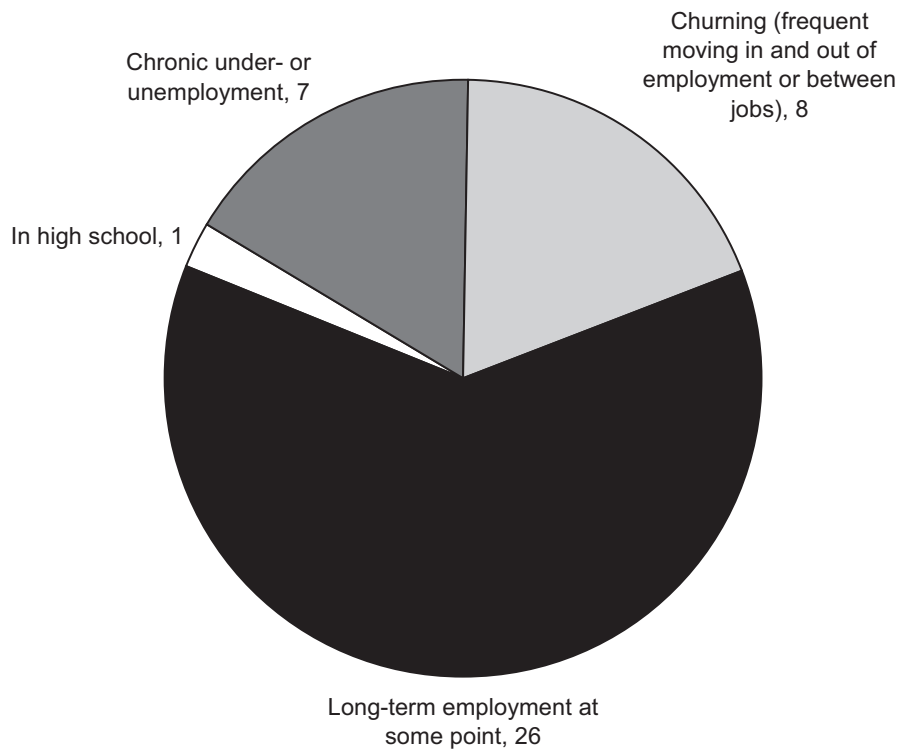
### Job loss and downward employment mobility

During the period of time covering these women’s last five jobs (roughly 1997 through 2004), there were a number of changes in the economy and job market, as well in social programs. Women who left or lost a stable job in the late 1990s could not always find an equivalent job, both because the labor market was weaker and the structure and quality of jobs had changed. In addition, training opportunities offered through Community Service Jobs became more limited during this period. A number of women in our sample left or lost responsible clerical or managerial positions and then entered a period of churning through less responsible and desirable positions such as Certified Nursing Assistants or retail sales. When they had trouble making ends meet and turned to W-2, they were placed in Community Service Jobs, which included clearing brush, maintaining plantings in median strips, sorting clothing at Goodwill, or working at a food bank. (See Figure 5.)

Downward trajectories were exacerbated in some cases by sanctioning. Agencies, and even staff members within

agencies, varied in how they used sanctions. Distressed families were sanctioned more often, and family care problems, health and mental health problems, and domestic violence were all correlated with sanctions.<sup>7</sup> This makes sense, because women who are experiencing stress have a harder time completing the activities they are assigned. When these women then receive a partial check, they may not be able to pay rent or electricity, leading to further crises. One woman we interviewed was struggling with the effects of severe domestic violence. She had a history of abuse as a child, had been badly abused by the father of her older children, and had recently been beaten by the father of her youngest, who had threatened to kill her. She told us:

This man almost killed me one time and in front of my son. He threatened to kill me again in front of a lot of people this time. So I really felt like in my heart that he was serious. I let my worker know that I was scared to leave the house. And I tried to ask them to put me somewhere else on the other side of town. Nobody could do that. None of them could put me nowhere else, but I was just being sanctioned. I’m already in an abusive relationship. I’m on my way to losing my home, you know. I done



**Figure 4. Predominant employment pattern.**

already lost my light and gas. Me and my kids is already struggling and now they're sanctioning me. Now I can't pay my rent so now I'm fixin' to be on the street.

After several months of receiving partial checks, this woman lost her apartment, moving in with her mother and sister.

We paid special attention to the reasons women left jobs that they had held for more than one year. For many, the loss of a stable job was caused by a crisis in their personal or family lives (their own or their children's health, or a divorce). For others, the loss of the job itself occasioned a crisis, as in the case of a woman who had simultaneously lost her apartment because of a conflict with her landlord and could not rent another because she had no income. She ended up in a homeless shelter, where she had spent time in an earlier period of her life. This exacerbated her depression and the post-traumatic stress she experienced as a result of domestic violence and violent rapes. In cases such as this, moving back to stable employment requires a comprehensive set of services that include income supports, medical assistance, mental health or family counseling, and employment counseling. Most women in these circumstances did not receive all of the help that they needed.

**Temporary jobs**

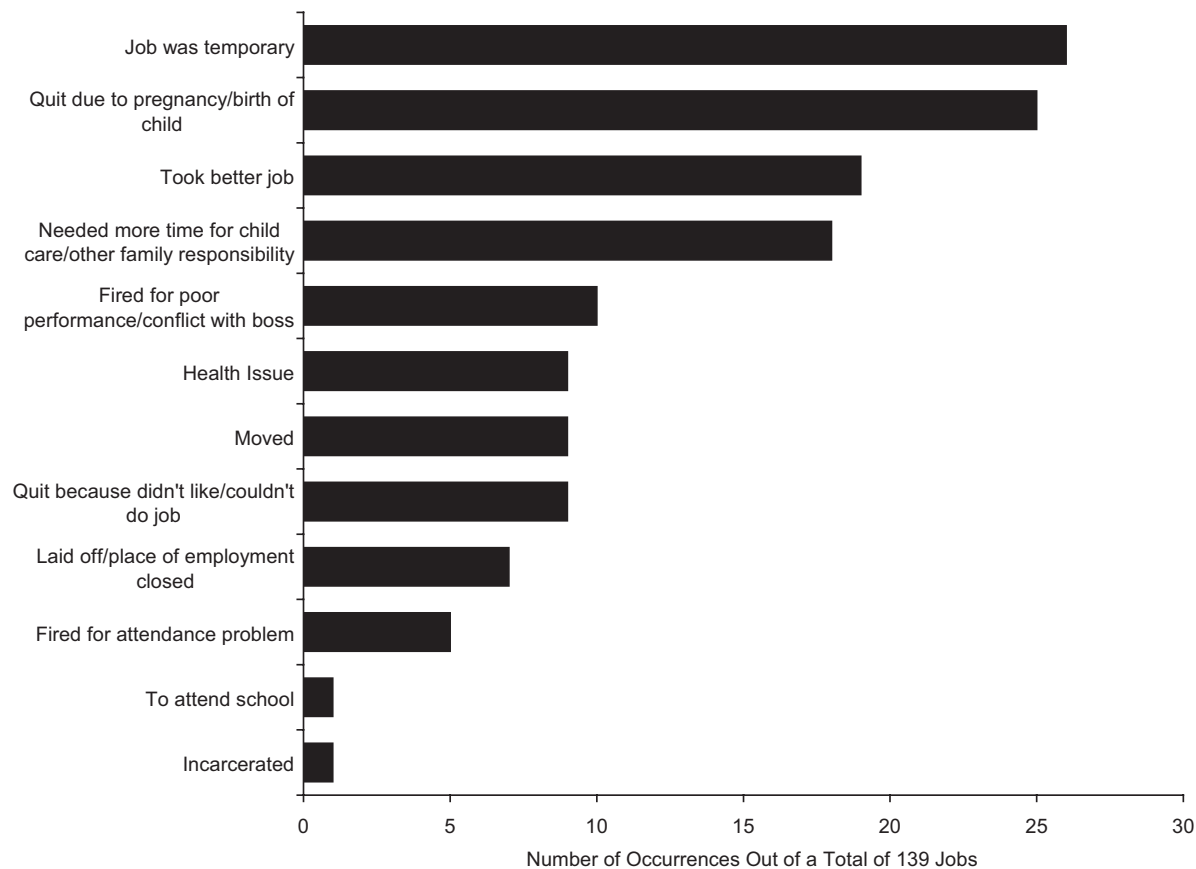
Nearly a third of the women we interviewed had worked for temporary service agencies, and a number of others

had worked in seasonal or temporary jobs for other kinds of employers. In most cases, they took these positions as a result of mandated job search activities. Several women had worked for the same temporary agency for one to two years, but more frequently they stayed several months. Wages in these jobs ranged from \$6.25 to \$9.75 per hour. In no cases did women move from a temporary placement to a permanent job with the same employer. Older women seemed to understand that this was the way the industry operated. One said, "And when you go through temp service, that's what they are, exactly—temp service. Most of the companies don't keep you full time, which is not a way to support a family." Some younger women had hopes of being made permanent in their positions, however. One woman, who was doing assembly line work through a temp firm, said: "I'm hoping they'll hire me in. That's something I could hold on to for a long time. He [the factory manager] joked around with me and said, hopefully you'll be here 25, 30 years, so hopefully he's saying he's gonna hire me in."

**Informal work**

Thirty women, over 70 percent of the sample, had held informal jobs at some point. By far the most common was babysitting; nearly half of the women reported such work. About a third reported earning money by doing hair and nails. The remainder ranged from car washing to preparing and selling food to preparing tax returns. For some, this was an important source of supplemental income: "When I don't have food, it feeds my son. It would help





**Figure 5. Primary reason women left or lost jobs.**

me out with my diapers when I needed diapers.” Only in rare instances did they consider these activities an alternative to labor market participation, however, saying “It has helped out a lot, but it wasn’t dependable.” Two women, both of whom were new mothers, reported selling plasma to tide them over after their Caretaker of Newborn benefits ran out and before they found a job.

### Factors affecting employment and livelihood

Important factors that affected the women’s employment and livelihood included child care, health concerns, social program participation, and social networks.

#### Work and child care

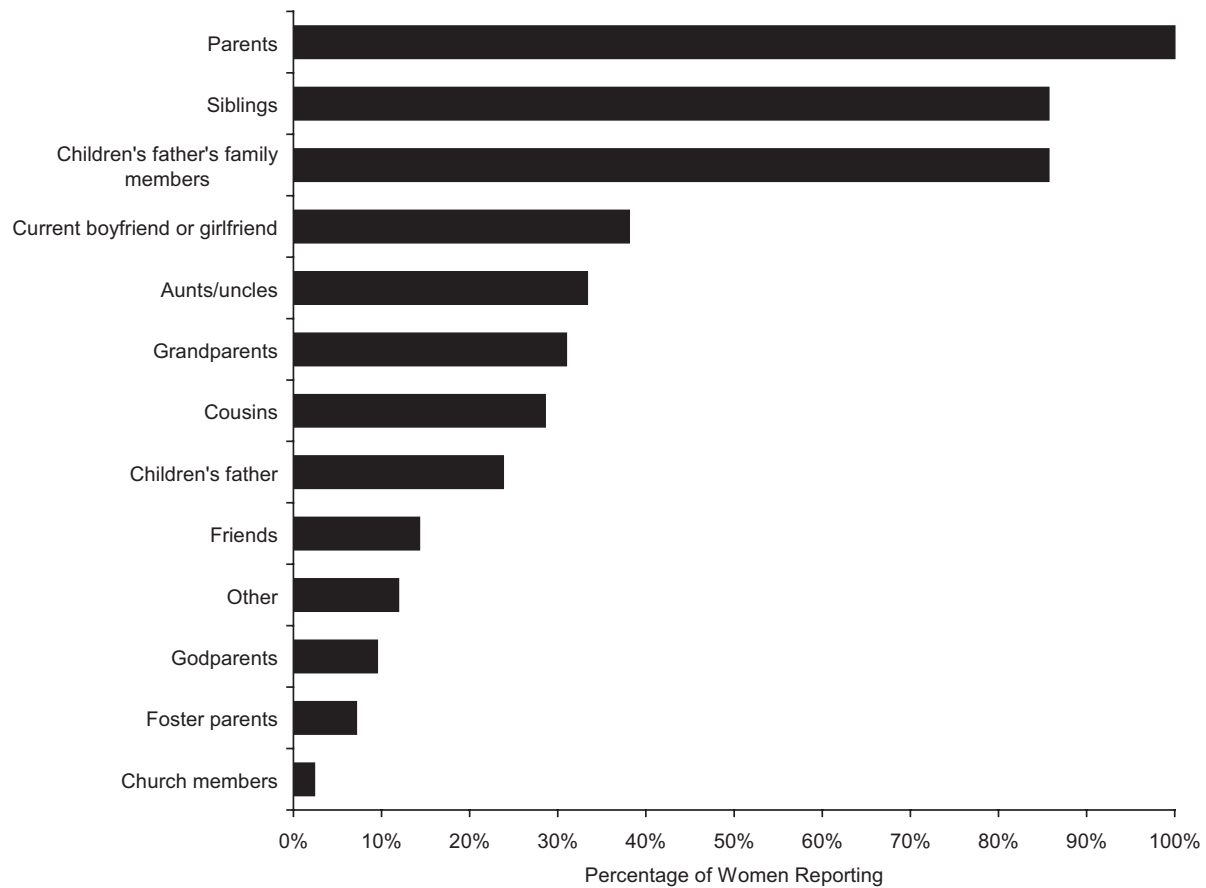
With the transition from Aid to Families with Dependent Children to W-2 in 1997, legislators made new resources available to low-income mothers and fathers caring for their children. Parents participating in the W-2 program and low-income working parents could, in many cases, receive a generous child care subsidy for the hours they were working, in addition to receiving the full amount of any child support paid by a noncustodial parent. At the same time that state legislators made these new resources available, they tightened eligibility requirements for cash

assistance by adding new nonfinancial eligibility criteria and required mothers with children over 12 weeks of age to participate in activities preparing them for full-time employment in order to receive a cash benefit.<sup>8</sup>

The women we interviewed who were working would not have been able to survive on their earnings if they had paid market rates for child care. All of the women stressed the importance of receiving child care subsidies, the value of the growing availability of transportation to and from child care, and alternative-shift child care opportunities. As one woman said:

I think one of the most important things that society needs to look at as a whole is having a place for these kids to go while these parents are trying to work. I would say that the most complicated thing for me has been child care. If I have the proper help when it comes to my children, that allows me to go out and make the money, you know, so that I can pay the bills.

A substantial number of women expressed satisfaction with the arrangements they had found, believing that their children were benefiting. One said, “I love her day care. They are so good with her! They were teaching her how to roll, do little things, pull things, lift herself up, sit herself



**Figure 6. Relationships of those giving support.**

back, sit her down.” But others had significant concerns about leaving their children in what they felt was substandard care: “You know, you have to send your kids off to child care with people that you don’t know anything about, people that you don’t have time to investigate. You know, you go in one day and they want you to find a day care by three days later, so how can you go and look at these people?”

Some women did not see problems with the quality of day care, but simply were reluctant to put their children in the care of others. “I just don’t want to leave my daughter right now, you know. I don’t want to put her in, you know, even though it is my auntie, I’m not ready for her to go into that kind of environment ‘cause she’s still little, you know.” And, “I really didn’t want to have to send my children off to day care until they got old enough to talk and walk . . . I would rather for him to be at least six or seven months before I send him off to day care.”

Still other women had problems with the bureaucratic procedures involved in getting care. The most frequently mentioned problem was delays in receiving authorization for subsidized child care under W-2. As one woman said: “I’ll be taxed and I’ll have to pay about \$30 because of her being late in the authorization. Or then I’ll be without child care ‘cause there’s no authorization. So it will keep me from working and it will keep me from my hours that I

would be getting.” Some discussed being caught between the need for a set schedule (both in order to receive authorization and because their providers required it) and the need to work odd hours if their bosses demanded it:

I kept insisting that they put me on a more accurate schedule because of child care, and they did, but every now and then, you know, they said they needed help and I needed to fill up this shift, these hours. That was part of the agreement to work for them, that they could schedule you whenever, so I had to work it.

Another explained:

You can’t get day care assistance that quickly. I had a job that I could have started, but I lost my day care. I had a home day care placement for her, and I got my authorization two weeks after I asked for it, but by then I lost my day care. She didn’t want to not get paid, she was a private in-home, this was her income. You know centers usually can handle the month lag, but private in-homes can’t.

Women who worked in temporary positions experienced particularly difficult child care situations, as they had very little notice about whether, when, or where they would be working. They could be offered a job shift during hours for which they did not have care. They

needed to get authorization for their providers to be paid, so they had to commit to care in advance, yet they did not receive advance notification of their own assignments. Thus, if no jobs were available for the week they had reserved care, they ended up paying for care they did not need.

As one woman described the situation:

They [the employers] tell me they don't really know, but probably yes. So I'd get hooked up. And then I call them the next day and, you know, there's no job—but next week. So then it was hard to get steady child care. You know, they [the care givers] want their money every week. So then why would I pay, you know, if I'm not working. It's really not worth it.

Women who did not want to put their children in child care, or who did not qualify because they were working “off the books” or at home, fell back on a range of strategies, including relying on family members and taking children to work. Several described coordinating the shifts that family members worked to take advantage of family care: “I worked from like 6:30 in the morning until 2, and then he [her partner] had to work at 2:30. Well since Mom works second shift and my husband works second shift and my mother-in-law works second shift, I have to find a first shift. And it's hard to find a first shift.”

Another described taking her child to her off-the-books cleaning job:

Yeah, I take my son with me. He's already sleeping, but I'll put him on one of the booths or lay him down with a blanket and then I'll clean. Sometimes it's hectic because he'll want to get up and be running around and it's a really huge place that I got to clean, so I have to chase after him. And then I have to make sure that I'm out before the workers come.

### **Health and family**

None of the jobs held by women in our sample provided maternity or parental leave; in some cases, they did not provide sick leave or personal days. Women who needed to take time off for these reasons had to quit their jobs. One woman reported: “With the chemicals we were using it wasn't agreeing with me being pregnant, so they let me go and they told me after I had my baby I could come back.” Several women who worked at stable jobs but did not have maternity leave stopped working just before the birth of a child, received W-2 support as a Caretaker of Newborn, and then returned to their jobs. Several claimed that their employers recommended this course of action.

The jobs these woman held also have some of the strictest work rules, leading women to be sanctioned and fired for taking a break early or leaving work early to pick up a sick child. As one woman noted: “They fired me from

there because my son got sick and I needed to take off several days in a row because he has chronic ear infections . . . he had to have surgery to get tubes in his ears.” Another said: “I ended up getting fired for taking my break 15 minutes earlier because I had to use the restroom. And I was pregnant, mind you.”

It is not surprising that when women were asked about good jobs, almost all responded with a story about an understanding boss. One woman, whose son had severe asthma, described having to leave work to pick him up at day care when he was having an attack: “And I was like, ‘oh god, I'm gonna lose my job!’ And she was like ‘I can understand.’ It's really hard when you don't have anybody. She was a very understanding boss and I was so happy, you know.”

### **Social program participation**

The women we interviewed could not have worked without child care subsidies, as their wages would have been insufficient to purchase these services on their own. The majority relied on food stamps, medical assistance, and WIC, and subsidized housing was important to many. These benefits continued to be important as women entered the workforce since their wages did not place them above the poverty level and their jobs did not provide benefits in most cases.

### **Social networks**

The ethnographic literature suggests that women with low incomes rely extensively on their networks of friends and families for the resources they need to get by, and our research confirmed this.<sup>9</sup> Figure 6 shows the most important support relationships of the women we interviewed and the number of women who relied on that relationship. All women reported receiving help from parents and 85 percent from siblings. Equally important, 85 percent reported receiving assistance from members of their children's father's family. More than one third received help from their current partner, regardless whether he was considered the father of any of the children. The kinds of help that women received from family and friends included (in order of frequency mentioned) emotional support, cash loans or help paying bills, child care, gifts of clothing or food, providing rides, care during an illness or after an injury, doing hair, and car repairs. Women reciprocated for the aid they received, providing very similar kinds of support to the people who supported them.

Women who had extensive and reliable support networks were clearly better off than those who did not. This was particularly true when a housing crisis arose, since sleeping on a relative's floor was safer and more comfortable than a shelter. One very young woman reported that after her electricity was turned off: “I had to be in the dark and, um, all my food spoiled in my freezer and everything. I had to throw it out. I had to go to my grandmother's house and stay with her for those two weeks, because I didn't

want my kids to be in the dark.” She added, referring to subsequent crises: “I stayed with my grandmother, I stayed with my great-grandmother. And I’ve stayed with my auntie before.” A woman with four children described how, after her divorce, “for three weeks I couldn’t go to my house. We all had to live with my mom in a two-bedroom house which was already occupied with my grandmother in one bedroom and my little niece and my mom in the other.” Another described staying with her former partner’s grandmother after her apartment burned. Imposing on relatives who had little space themselves, particularly when relationships might already be strained, could be awkward. But women who had relatives to take them in during a shelter crisis were in a much better situation than those who did not.

Women also relied extensively on relatives for short-term and occasional child care. Even those who had state-subsidized care faced times when their authorizations had not been completed, when they had to work unexpected hours or shifts, or when they needed to buy groceries or take a child to the doctor. Women who had friends or family they could rely on could leave their children with peace of mind. As one said:

Yeah, we’ve been friends forever and she’s just, she’s always been there for me and she takes really good care of her kids and I know she will take really good care of mine whenever they’re in her care. Make sure their hands are always clean, and their faces, and make sure they’re fed, and she’ll watch them constantly and make sure they’re not doing, you know, something wrong.

Women who did not have social support networks faced an especially difficult situation. One described how her son had been abducted by a neighbor who had offered her help. Other women in this situation talked about the temptation to leave their children at home alone when they had pressing tasks, even though they knew they should not.

For many women, particularly those who had experienced abuse or deprivation as a child, negotiating relationships with their parents posed a great challenge. One said: “Now my mother, she was a drug addict. She still is a drug addict. I was given up as a child, young. Basically my family, they’ve all been on drugs or they’ve sold drugs to financially be stable, so really I’ve never had like anybody. I’m in the process of just learning the whole meaning of being a mother.” Another woman told a story that illustrates the sometimes hidden cost of reliance on family networks:

My sister was 17. And she decided that she didn’t want to be a mother. So one day she brought our niece over and she said she was coming back and she never came back. She did not come back. For a while, we thought she was dead. We lost all hope that we was gonna ever see her again. . . . My

mother, she was trying to get herself together at the time. She was still doing drugs that she was trying to get off. . . . And my brother had already went to selling dope because my mom couldn’t do nothing for him . . . I had to drop out of school to take care of my little niece . . . I regret how I get treated now in 2004 because of that decision that I made back then, but I really felt like that was the best decision I could have made. Her daughter knew me as momma.

In addition to informal support from former partners and their families, many women also relied on state-required child support. Twenty-six women had a child support order for at least one of their children. Of these women, 18 had received child support at some time, and 15 reported that it had been a useful resource. One woman said: “It’s somewhat important because those checks come once a week and I get paid every two weeks. So in between it does help out with bread and eggs and milk or trying to get them what they need for school and stuff.” In all cases, while mothers were attesting to the significance of the income, they were also emphasizing that it did not meet the most basic needs, such as rent or utilities. Child support went for “extras” rather than essentials. Several women told us that they always spent the money on things that were directly consumed by their children; one said that she used each check to buy clothing specifically for the child whose father sent the check. One said: “\$240 a month does not support a roof over your head. It doesn’t pay the rent. It doesn’t pay the electricity bill. It doesn’t pay for all the diapers or clothes. It doesn’t pay for food. That’s not even one-quarter of what it takes to support a child.” Child support income, although a welcome resource, was clearly not sufficient to prevent major crises resulting from job loss, illness, or the dislocation caused by domestic violence. In three cases, women who were receiving child support (with orders of \$220, \$450, and \$612 a month) lost their housing; two ended up in homeless shelters and one moved in with her mother. In one case, the woman had lost her job and her apartment at the same time and landlords did not consider her child support income reliable enough to rent her a new place. In the other cases, child support income was not sufficient to support the women’s families during periods of unpaid job search or when they were being sanctioned for not showing up at job assignments. Women who received child support were not immune to food crises either, occasionally using food pantries or borrowing from friends at the end of the month.

## Conclusions

The qualitative research that we report here offers sobering insights into the vulnerability of low-wage working women with small children, and the problems of navigat-



ing social programs that were at once more directive and more discretionary in structure than previous welfare programs had been.

As training opportunities for these women became more limited and good jobs scarcer over the period we examined, even women who were working 40 or more hours a week found that the wages they were able to command did not meet their basic needs. They thus continued to depend on food stamps and on subsidized medical benefits, child care, housing, and transportation. But the very social programs upon which they depended often compounded the difficulties they faced. Child care subsidies were essential to women's ability to retain jobs and survive on their earnings, but obtaining child care could present substantial bureaucratic challenges, and good care was sometimes hard to find and to keep. Child support might be a valuable income source to those who received it, but was also unreliable. Medical care might be subsidized, but low-paid and irregular jobs, often with strict work rules, did not offer much flexibility in the event of family illness. Small disruptions arising from illness or family responsibilities could quickly result in women being sanctioned or fired. Under such circumstances, many women relied on networks of friends and family, and those who had large and reliable networks were better off than those who did not, and were more likely to be able to recover from temporary crises. But social networks and the obligations they incurred sometimes proved to be a burden. Overall, our research revealed a lack of fit between the lives of women leaving welfare, who were raising children and often coping with physical or emotional illness, and the lack of flexibility and benefits in available jobs. ■

<sup>6</sup>E. McCrate and J. Smith, "When Work Doesn't Work," *Gender & Society* 12, no. 1 (1998): 61–80.

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., C. Wu, M. Cancian, D. Meyer, and G. Wallace, "How Do Welfare Sanctions Work?" IRP Discussion Paper 1282-04, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2004, and A. Cherline and R. Moffitt "Three-City Findings Reveal Unexpected Diversity Among Welfare Leavers and Stayers" *The Forum* 4(1): 1–5.

<sup>8</sup>The tightened eligibility requirements include new lifetime limits on receipt of cash assistance and a determination by the W-2 agency of inability to find employment, made on a case-by-case basis.

<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., K. S. Newman, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999). For a different viewpoint on social networks, see S. Oliker, "Examining care after welfare ends" *Focus* 20, no. 2 (1999): 36–39.

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<sup>1</sup>This study was completed as part of the Child Support Demonstration Evaluation (CSDE), and thus sets the ethnographic results in the context of child support enforcement policy. For more information on the CSDE, see <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/research/childsup/csde.htm>. For the complete report, see [http://www.irp.wisc.edu/research/childsup/csde/publications/collins\\_mayer\\_06.pdf](http://www.irp.wisc.edu/research/childsup/csde/publications/collins_mayer_06.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., M. Cancian, R. Haveman, D. Meyer, and B. Wolfe, "Before and after TANF: The Economic Well-Being of Women Leaving Welfare," IRP Discussion Paper 1244-02, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2002, and S. Lambert "Lower-Wage Workers and the New Realities of Work and Family" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 562 (1999): 174–90.

<sup>3</sup>L. Lein, A. Benjamin, M. McManus, and K. Roy, "Economic Roulette: When Is a Job Not a Job?" *Community, Work and Family* 8(4), forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup>K. Edin and L. Lein, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997), and S. Oliker, "Proximate Contexts of Welfare and Work," *Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1995): 251–72.

<sup>5</sup>T. Kaplan and T. Corbett, with V. Mayer, "The Implementation of W-2," in *W-2 Child Support Demonstration Evaluation, Phase 1: Final Report*, ed. D. Meyer and M. Cancian, Institute for Research on Poverty, Madison, WI, 2001.

# Work, parenthood, and the idea of reciprocity in American social policy

Christopher Beem

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The welfare reform legislation of 1996 signaled a profound shift in policy toward the poor. One year later, President Clinton signed into law the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). This act was part of an equally dramatic, though perhaps less controversial change in federal policy; it addressed child protection, foster care, and adoption. These two acts involved ostensibly separate policy arenas. But I argue that taken together, they reflect a fundamental philosophical change in American social policy.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and ASFA both reflected and reinforced the idea that all Americans have minimum civic responsibilities. Both acts greatly expanded the government's ability to outline these responsibilities, make moral judgments about individual behavior based on conformity to those norms, and enforce or at least constrain behavior through the mechanism of the state. PRWORA established work as part of an individual's minimum civic responsibility. ASFA helped establish that good parenting—providing a safe and decent upbringing for children—was another such responsibility.

In PRWORA, the state ended entitlement to cash welfare, mandated work in exchange for benefits, and set time limits upon the receipt of benefits. In so doing it assumed the right to enforce the expectation that each recipient of

## Economic justice as “fair reciprocity”

In his book *The Civic Minimum: On the Rights and Obligations of Economic Citizenship*, Stuart White, a political philosopher at Oxford University, explores some very large questions: “What are the proper distributive goals of the state in the economic sphere? Do citizens have certain rights that derive from, or which constrain the pursuit of, these goals? What responsibilities do citizens have to make productive contributions to their society? To what extent may and should the state enforce these responsibilities?”

White offers a conception of economic justice as “fair reciprocity”: “Stated in its most general, abstract form, this principle holds that each citizen who willingly shares in the social product has an obligation to make a relevantly proportional productive contribution to the community in return.... In rough, intuitive terms: in a context of otherwise sufficiently fair economic arrangements, everyone should do their bit.” [p. 18]

For its part, society must create and sustain those arrangements. “[O]ne attractive approach is to ask what these institutions would have to achieve so as to enable all citizens to avoid the bads classically associated with the proletarian condition: brute luck poverty, market insecurity and consequent domination by an employer, a lack of opportunity to treat one's working life as a site of intrinsically valuable challenge, and the more general life-shaping effects of being disadvantaged in access to education and wealth. The institutions that govern economic life must eliminate these bads. . . . The civic minimum is simply that set of institutions and policies which satisfy the demands of fair reciprocity in its non-ideal form.” [p. 96] Achieving this arrangement thereby creates a reciprocal responsibility for the citizen to give something back: to contribute to the community. “How can citizens satisfy this contributive obligation? Thus far we have assumed that they can meet this obligation through work or labour. . . .granting this assumption for the moment, what kinds of work can plausibly be seen as satisfying this obligation? For labour to count as contributive in this sense it must be what I shall call *civic labour*: roughly speaking, labour that provides a significant service for, or on behalf of, the wider community. . . . It is not enough that I regard the work I do as valuable to others. It must indeed be so, and indeed it must be recognizable as such by them.” [pp. 98–99]

*The Civic Minimum: On the Rights and Obligations of Economic Citizenship*  
(Oxford University Press, 2003)

assistance should make an effort to contribute to his or her own economic support. “As a matter of equal justice,” says Stuart White (see box) “other citizens have the right to expect you to make this effort. Failure to do so . . . exploits them”[p. 62]. At the same time, by making aid conditional, the government also accepted responsibility to help ensure that recipients could meet those conditions. For example, Congress recognized that if single mothers were going to work, they would need child care, and between 1994 and 1999 child care funding rose by 60 percent. During the 1990s, significant increases in the Earned Income Tax Credit and in the minimum wage lent support to the underlying principle of welfare reform that families should be better off working than receiving cash assistance. Welfare reform, then, established a framework within which government and recipient were understood to have reciprocal responsibilities.

ASFA manifested these same features. Its underlying assumption is that taking responsibility for one’s children is part of what constitutes minimal citizenship in the United States. ASFA established standards for these personal responsibilities; if these standards were not met, comparatively severe and time-sensitive consequences ensued. As with welfare reform, many critics question whether the state’s actions sufficiently meet their reciprocal obligations. Nevertheless, seen against previous child welfare legislation, ASFA articulated a new ethos.

### **Family privacy and cultural pluralism: Child welfare legislation and practice before ASFA**

In the United States, the right of parents to raise their children as they see fit has long been established in law and custom. Taking a child away from a parent is universally regarded as among the most severe interventions that the state can undertake; “only the death penalty is a more severe intrusion.”<sup>1</sup> During the 1970s, this longstanding concern for privacy and parental rights combined with a newfound and hard-fought awareness of cultural pluralism. In particular, the adoption of black children into white families was decried as tantamount to “genocide.” The National Association of Black Social Workers, among others, asserted that any black child adopted into a white family would grow up confused about racial identity and ill-prepared to deal with the realities of racism and segregation. Transracial adoptions also harmed black people as a group, because they ignored the fact that black culture was different. Black families did not necessarily correspond to the nuclear model, extended families frequently lived together, children lived with different family members, and black communities routinely if informally took in children when parents fell into difficulties of one sort or another. As a result of these arguments, transracial adoptions, never numerous, came under heavy attack.

Concern for the realities of cultural pluralism and eagerness to take seriously the legacy of oppression in American society was manifested in one of the first federal pieces of legislation regarding adoption and child welfare, the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, which reversed long-standing patterns of removing Native American children from their families and placing them in boarding schools or with white parents. The act defined Native American culture as unique, and Native American children as the most important means by which that culture might sustain itself. In consequence, it became more difficult to remove a child from a Native American family. Further, Native American children put up for adoption had to be placed in Native American homes. By accepting the claim that Native American and black children had distinctive needs that could really only be understood and met by members of the same community, the federal government raised the bar against breaching the privacy of the family. The long-standing legacy of family rights was now reinforced by concerns regarding cultural diversity.

In this intellectual and political climate, Congress in 1980 passed the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, which established federal standards for child welfare that prevailed until the passage of ASFA some 17 years later. Confronted with rising numbers of children in foster care and the rising length of their stays, Congress passed the 1980 law in order to reduce out-of-home care and increase “permanency planning”—children needed to be kept or reunited with their families, or they needed to be adopted. States were required to make “reasonable efforts” both to keep families together and to return children who had been removed. Federal funds were allocated to preventative and reunification services. In 1993, the Family Preservation and Family Support Program appropriated nearly \$1 billion nationwide over a five-year period to “promote family strength and stability, and . . . reduce the need for out-of-home placement of children.”<sup>2</sup>

Adoption, not long-term foster care, was clearly the preferred option for children who could not be reunited with their families. In actual practice, however, the family preservation requirement of the legislation became the predominant emphasis of child welfare services, and the adoption provisions very largely fell by the wayside. This was perhaps because the “reasonable effort” requirement, reinforced by the newfound concern for cultural pluralism, fitted naturally into the longstanding American emphasis on privacy and parental rights. But as a result, the state became more reluctant to intervene in family crises, and less able to establish the universal standards of child welfare that might justify intervention.

### **The crisis in foster care**

Between 1983 and 1993, reports of child abuse and neglect nearly doubled, and foster care caseloads grew by

two-thirds. Families entering the child welfare system were more troubled and had more complex needs than before. More toddlers and especially infants were entering the system; the percentage of children under a year old also increased by two-thirds between 1983 and 1990.<sup>3</sup> In this overburdened system, with its large caseloads, high staff turnover, and inexperienced caseworkers, African American and other minority children were dramatically overrepresented at all stages, waited far longer than white children for adoption, and were at far greater risk of never being adopted at all. Meanwhile, white couples wishing to adopt African American children were rejected as unsuitable. Vituperative debate surrounded the reasons for the exploding foster care population—the crack cocaine epidemic and the onset of AIDS were often cited—but whatever the causes, racial and ethnic matching policies clearly did not promote increased adoption or reduced use of foster care. States that continued to observe same-race placement policies experienced even longer waiting periods for minority children than states where policies were less rigorous.

At this point some researchers began to challenge the idea that transracial adoptions undermined children's sense of identity or were contrary to children's best interests, citing longitudinal research that extended back to 1972.<sup>4</sup> So, at a moment of systemic crisis, there emerged an intellectual argument that the effects of transracial adoption were largely benign, and certainly better than long-term foster care.

The immediate legislative response to this crisis was the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994. The act acknowledged that the foster care population was out of control and that children who stayed in the system confronted ever-diminishing chances for adoption. Yet the act's objectives were narrow. It did not directly challenge the idea that same-race placement was preferable for children. It simply sought to outlaw the consideration of race as a reason to halt or delay the adoption of a child. At best, the act merely enabled parents to adopt children of another ethnicity or color who were languishing in foster care. But it failed to meet even these minimal objectives—neither foster care rates nor transracial adoptions changed notably. By the end of 1996, there were half a million children in foster care, and rising rates and inevitable scandals led to public and congressional demands for change. In the words of Senator Mike DeWine of Ohio, "there are too many children in this country today being returned to the care of people who have already abused and battered them. . . . Children are being returned to homes that are homes in name only and to parents who are parents in name only."<sup>5</sup>

At just this time, in the mid-1990s, major changes in American politics and social policy thinking came together to impel the legislative and public action that led to both PRWORA and ASFA.

## The politics of child welfare reform

The midterm elections of 1994 returned the first Republican-led Congress in four decades. They also set in motion dramatic changes in social policy that had been prefigured in the Republican Party's political platform, "A Contract with America." In that document, Congressional Republicans presented an account of the problems of the inner city and an argument for the overhaul of welfare—Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—that linked the issues of poverty and child welfare.

In so doing, the Contract drew upon arguments put forward principally by the prominent conservative scholar, Charles Murray. For Murray, the key to every major problem in the inner city was the rise of out-of-wedlock childbearing: "Illegitimacy is the single most important problem of our time—more important than crime, drugs, poverty, illiteracy or homelessness because it drives everything else."<sup>6</sup> Since illegitimacy was at the heart of poverty and poverty was at the heart of welfare, Murray proposed that the only way to change the lives of poor was to end welfare for unmarried mothers. Murray's proposal was clearly radical, but it reflected a central political dilemma of AFDC: adults usually bear some responsibility for their circumstances, but children manifestly do not, so that "policymakers usually cannot take the politically popular step of helping poor children without the politically unpopular step of helping their custodial parents."<sup>7</sup> If the prescription was to eliminate all economic support for single mothers, what was to become of the children of those mothers? Murray's answer was more and easier adoptions—streamlined procedures, elimination of restrictions on interracial adoptions, and rapid surrender of parental rights—and for those unadoptable or not adopted, "the government should spend lavishly on orphanages."<sup>8</sup>

In terms that directly echoed Murray, the Contract for America maintained that the problem of poverty was the result of illegitimacy, and that Congress needed to change the perverse incentives operating under AFDC. Its solution: a "Personal Responsibility Act" that cut unwed teenage mothers off welfare, and refused additional payments for any child born while a mother was still on welfare or for whom paternity had not been established. The bill proposed that the savings so generated be used to expand programs to prevent out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish orphanages and group homes for unwed mothers. Finally, the Contract included provisions for interracial adoptions.

The orphanage proposal, mercilessly attacked from the right and the left, was rapidly dropped. Even so, issues associated with child welfare remained active. From the first bill introduced into the House to the legislation signed into law, each version included the demand that mothers establish paternity and pursue child support as a



condition of aid. By focusing on “dead-beat dads,” Congress was able to show itself as tough on welfare and address the illegitimacy issue, yet avoid confronting the dilemma of enabling the sins of the parents while helping the children.

President Clinton’s words reflected this pattern. He was especially virulent in rejecting the orphanage proposal. But he supported the child support provisions. Further, he accepted and even reinforced the notion that all parents must meet minimum standards for raising their children. The president stressed that work and parenthood both were integral parts of the American notion of responsibility:

We have to change the welfare system so that it demands the same responsibility already shouldered by millions and millions of Americans who already get up every day and go to work and struggle to make ends meet and raise their children. Anyone who can work should do so. Anyone who brings a child into this world ought to take responsibility for that child.<sup>9</sup>

The debate over welfare brought into light the parlous state of the American child welfare system; it also raised questions about what children need and the degree to which the government is responsible for abused and neglected children. Most important for the future of child welfare legislation, it showed that one aspect of the child welfare issue was not in dispute: parenthood as well as work were understood to be responsibilities that all Americans should meet. And the standards for parental responsibility that emerged in the welfare reform debate influenced Congressional understanding of what a parent was, and who could legitimately lay claim to that title.

One additional factor changed the policy climate surrounding child welfare. Contemporary trends in research regarding early brain development lent strong support to the argument for moving children out of foster care and into permanency.<sup>10</sup> This work suggested that the years from birth to age three were critical for children’s cognitive and emotional growth, and that if developmental milestones for these years were not met, they would be very difficult to reach later, even with intense and expensive interventions. Yet the stress on family preservation in current child welfare law and practice meant that children often spent those early years in a series of temporary foster care placements, as the state made “reasonable efforts” to keep families together. Family preservation, in the view of some legislators, had come to swamp any other consideration, including the best interests of the child. In light of the parental responsibility debate, thinking about the rights of parents had begun to change. Once it came to be believed that any person could be a good parent to any child, the standards for what might be considered “reasonable effort” also began to change.

## **The Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997**

A system in crisis, new data on child well-being, changing views of family privacy and parental responsibility, and a turnover of power in Congress thus came together in the mid-1990s to generate a demand for political intervention. In 1996 bills regarding adoption were introduced in both houses of Congress, and the president issued a memorandum on the subject. Each one declared that the safety of the child was the paramount consideration, that foster care ought to be temporary, and that children should be moved quickly toward permanency.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (PL 105-89) expressed a fundamental preference for the safety and well-being of the child even over family preservation: “nothing in federal law requires that a child remain with or be returned to an unsafe home.” For children in state custody, the act set standards for the licensing of foster care homes and mandated criminal background checks on all prospective foster parents. It also sought to make it easier for children to exit foster care through adoption. Permanency hearings were to be held no later than 12 months after a child’s “original placement;” moreover, the act established one uniform national definition of “entry into care” so that the time limits were general and uniform.

ASFA also set limits to the meaning of “reasonable efforts.” Under previous law, “reasonable efforts” had meant that recruitment of a permanent adoptive home began only after reunification efforts had been exhausted; often an agency might have spent one to three years providing services to parents. Under ASFA, even if birth parents were actively seeking reunification the state was required to identify and recruit qualified adoptive families, so that no time should be lost if reunification efforts failed. States were further required to initiate termination of parental rights if children had been in the foster care system for 15 out of the preceding 22 months. Finally, the law established an incentive program for states—the more children placed in adoptive homes, the higher the next year’s federal grant. Each of these provisions was designed to move a child out of an untenable family or foster care situation and to a permanent home as quickly as possible.

To balance more stringent standards for parents of at-risk children, ASFA increased the funds available for family preservation, reauthorizing (and renaming) the Family Preservation Program, which became the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program. Congress also called for a report from the Department of Health and Human Services concerning the extent and effects of substance abuse in populations within the child welfare system (such problems appear to be implicated in some 70–80 percent of child abuse or neglect cases).<sup>11</sup> The call for a report at least acknowledged the government’s responsi-

bility to address the connection between substance abuse and parental failure. But although ASFA set stricter time limits for parents to deal with the problems impeding their parental responsibilities, no funds for remedial efforts were included in the legislation.

## **The first shoe . . . and the other shoe**

By outlining expectations regarding work in PRWORA, and making aid conditional to those expectations, the state assumed the right to make and enforce moral judgments about individual behavior. But the expectations constituted a reciprocal agreement. If the conditions imposed on the recipient were not met, aid would be reduced or eliminated. In return, government accepted that it had some limited responsibility to help ensure that recipients could meet those conditions. Under the welfare reforms, work, “doing one’s bit” in White’s term, was not just a condition for aid; it was a precondition for full membership in society. On the Senate floor, Senator Howell Heflin (D-AL) explicitly connected the terms of work and citizenship. Outlining his support for the bill, Heflin lauded reforms in the law that would “empower recipients to break cycles of dependency, to focus on work and responsibility, and to become successful and productive citizens.”<sup>12</sup>

ASFA, I believe, evidences these same features. It argues, first, that parenthood is not simply a biological concept; it is also a moral one. Within broad but not unlimited terms, all parents must strive to ensure that children are safe and provided for. Under the prevailing interpretation of preceding law, government had been too slow to respond to parental failure, and as a result children were suffering. In the welfare reform debate, fathers who had failed to provide for their children were “dead-beat dads” who had failed to live up to the very concept of fatherhood. Under ASFA, this notion was extended. One is only a parent if one meets certain standards of behavior. If a child is abused or neglected, the parent has failed to meet those standards and thereby risks losing parental rights.

As with welfare reform, however, developing tougher standards means that the state has reciprocal responsibility. That responsibility is twofold. First, if parents fail in their parental duties, the state must move quickly to help the child find new parents who will meet those standards. And if the state is raising the standards under which people can keep their own children, then it must make sure that parents at risk have access to resources that might help them meet the requirements. This is why ASFA increased money for prevention services, and why Congress requested an investigation of the link between child welfare and parental drug and alcohol abuse. Reciprocity demands that if the government is going to tighten time limits for termination of parental rights, it is morally obligated to address the reasons why parents may be failing.

To be sure, the government’s response in this case was very limited. For a parent at risk of losing parental rights, it is little help to know that a study has been undertaken. Parental drug abuse reveals both the government’s burden of reciprocity and the limits placed upon it. Addiction is a chronic condition, often requiring extensive, long-term treatment, but the interests of the child are seen to demand rapid resolution. In a classic instance of the dual clientele trap, “there is an irreconcilable clash between the rapidly ticking clock of cognitive and physical development for the abused and neglected child and the slow motion recovery for the parent addicted to alcohol and drugs.”<sup>13</sup>

The preliminary data regarding ASFA are positive: adoptions are up, and the total number of children in foster care is down. But here I am less concerned with those effects than I am with another issue: What might the new climate of opinion mean for policy advocates and others concerned about child welfare issues?

My first point is largely empirical. ASFA and PRWORA marked the end of the entitlement regime. Seven years later, virtually no one claims that either policy shift is a failure. Given the at least modest successes associated with both laws and continued public support of these changes, return to the status quo ante is unlikely. Regardless of how one views the laws, they will set the frame for future policy discussions. Most important, the new policy climate opens up new ways of advocating for poor children and families. By accepting the idea that work and responsible parenthood constitute a civic minimum, the political climate may become more receptive to initiatives to support poor Americans who meet it.

If, after ASFA, the state is going to diminish the standing of parental rights, and speed up the process by which it takes children away from their parents, then reciprocity means that the state is morally obliged to make it possible for individuals to meet their parental responsibilities. There are two aspects to this strategy, one within the context of the law, and the other as part of a broader program agenda.

First, if the child’s best interest requires that the bar for parental performance be raised and time limits be imposed, then the state cannot be indifferent to the quality and availability of treatment for the addiction problems that are at the root of so many cases of child abuse. If government is to demonstrate good faith, it needs to go beyond the gestures toward research outlined in ASFA. It must take seriously the problem of addiction and the failure of most addiction treatment programs. Legislation to do so, the Child Protection Alcohol and Drug Partnership Act was introduced into the Senate in 2000, and every session since, but has gone nowhere. This failure is fundamental. For if reciprocity does not work both ways, it does not work at all. If government is going to require more of poor parents, it must require more of itself.

There is a broader issue, raised by Stuart White, among others. PRWORA, by stipulating that work only “counts” if it is compensated, undermined the idea that care work is civic labor; the civic value of care is only acknowledged if the family is able to support itself. Yet the work that parents do has a public value that extends to all citizens: “Parents should see themselves, in part, as trustees for the wide community who, in return for public support, are responsible for raising children in ways that serve the public good.”<sup>14</sup> By setting behavioral standards for parenthood, ASFA reinforced the connection between parenthood and the public good. In doing so, it also raised the government’s responsibility to support the care work of parents. A whole litany of policy initiatives follows from this linkage: at-home infant care, an end to mandatory overtime, paid sick leave, universal health care for children, and so forth. Just as work expectations make demands for opportunity more viable, expectations for parents make support for poor families more viable. Viability does not lead inevitably to enactment, but the least one can say is that the civic minimum creates arguments—and thus, opportunities for advocacy—that were not available under an entitlement regime. ■

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<sup>1</sup>C. Hewitt, quoted in D. Lindsey, *The Welfare of Children*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 78.

<sup>2</sup>Mary Jo Bane, Assistant Secretary for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services, quoted in a press release on Tuesday Oct. 4, 1994. Accessed at <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/pre1995pres/941004a.txt> on April 24, 2006.

<sup>3</sup>U.S. General Accounting Office (now U.S. Government Accountability Office), *Child Welfare: Complex Needs Strain Capacity to Provide Services*, GAO HHES-95-208, September 1995, <http://www.gao.gov/archive/1995/he95208.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., R. Simon, H. Altstein, and M. Melli, *The Case for Transracial Adoption* (Washington, DC: American University Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup>Congressional Record, S11175, October 24, 1997.

<sup>6</sup>Charles Murray, “The Coming White Underclass,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 1993.

<sup>7</sup>R. Weaver, *Ending Welfare as We Know It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), p. 45.

<sup>8</sup>Murray, “The Coming White Underclass.”

<sup>9</sup>Presidential Radio Address, December 10, 1994, Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, pp. 2491–2492. Accessed April 25, 2006, through <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/wcomp/index.html>

<sup>10</sup>See, e.g., R. Shore, *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development* (New York: Families and Work Institute, 1997).

<sup>11</sup>E. Bartholet, *Nobody’s Children: Abuse and Neglect, Foster Drift, and the Adoption Alternative* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), p. 207.

<sup>12</sup>Congressional Record, S9387, August 1, 1996.

<sup>13</sup>CASA (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University), *No Safe Haven*, New York, 1999 (p. iv).

<sup>14</sup>White, *Civic Minimum*, p. 111.

# How does race influence judgments about parenting?

Lawrence M. Berger, Marla McDaniel, and Christina Paxson

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Disproportionately more black families than white families are reported and investigated for child abuse and neglect. And reports are more often substantiated for black children, who account for about a quarter of all substantiated victims of child maltreatment, and only 15 percent of the population of U.S. children.

The reasons for this disparity in maltreatment rates are much debated. Are rates driven by differences in poverty rates among racial and ethnic groups? Black families are much more likely to be poor, and poverty is highly correlated with child maltreatment. Do parenting behaviors differ according to race and culture? Or is there racial bias within state and local child protective services? Are black parents, that is, more likely to be charged with, and substantiated for, child abuse or neglect than white parents who act in the same way?

Despite discussion and speculation, there has so far been relatively little empirical investigation of racial bias in child maltreatment reporting. To be sure, empirical investigation is complicated by the heterogeneous nature of such reporting. Child protective service (CPS) systems rely on an army of volunteers—doctors, social workers, teachers, neighbors, relatives, and strangers—to report maltreatment. In 1999, only 55 percent of referrals came from professionals who had experience working with families and children. No studies have examined whether individuals without expertise, who comprise nearly half of all reporters, make racially biased judgments.

Those questions—how individuals form judgments about the parenting behavior of others, and whether these judgments are influenced by race—form the subject of the research summarized here.<sup>1</sup> Using data from a study of parents with young children, we explored if, and how, race enters into parents' self-reports and interviewers' assessments of parenting practices. We investigated the extent to which the race of the interviewer, in itself, and

in combination with the race of the parent, affects interviewers' judgments about the parenting behaviors they observe. What we found provides evidence of racial bias in assessments of some, though not all, measures of parenting behaviors.

## Defining racial bias in investigations of child maltreatment

Substantiating child maltreatment is a complex process. First, a family must come into contact with someone who will potentially report an alleged incident of abuse or neglect to CPS. Second, that person must decide whether or not to file a report. Third, if a report is made and investigated, CPS must decide whether to substantiate the allegation of maltreatment. At that point, family court judges and caseworkers decide how the case should be resolved. Bias may come into play at any of these stages.

Race and class bias in child maltreatment are conventionally defined according to the points at which they occur. "Exposure bias" occurs when contact with potential reporters varies systematically according to race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. For example, a higher proportion of black children may be more likely to come into contact with mandated reporters because of their greater rates of involvement with the welfare system and other government programs that serve the poor. "Reporting bias" describes whether members of some racial, ethnic, or income groups are more likely to be reported than members of other groups, even if their actions are no different. "Substantiation bias" carries this second form of bias through to the investigation phase—bias occurs if allegations are more likely to be substantiated for members of some groups than others, even if the information uncovered by the investigation is identical. Bias may likewise creep in when courts and officials decide whether to remove a child from the home, and for how long.

## The sources of racial bias in child welfare cases

To help us understand the roots of racially biased decisions, theories of statistical discrimination offer a useful framework. These theories start from the premise that observers who have incomplete information about what has actually happened to a child in a particular situation



may rely on their assumptions about how parents of a particular group “typically” behave to infer whether or not a child has been maltreated. For example, a potential reporter may encounter a child with an injury that might have resulted either from an accident or from maltreatment. Reporters who believe, correctly or not, that black families are more likely to use physical discipline may be more likely to infer that the child has been maltreated if the child is black.

Reporters’ beliefs about typical behaviors may, in fact, be based on the true distribution of those behaviors in the population. If so, then reporters observing others of the same race would be no less likely to display racial bias than reporters of another race. But even reporters who do not hold stereotypical views of other racial groups may be ill-equipped to interpret cultural cues or to understand the meaning of behaviors they observe in families of a different background. If so, bias may be most common when families are being judged by observers of another race.

These perceptions suggest two important implications for racial bias in reporters’ judgments. The first is that judgments concerning an ambiguous situation are more likely to be racially biased than judgments in a clear-cut situation. The second is that the amount of racial bias will depend on the race of the observer *relative to the race of the observed*, because observers hold varying stereotypes about people of other races or groups. So we can learn quite a lot about the degree of bias in judgments by comparing white and black observers’ ratings of black and white families.

## Testing for racial bias in judgments

Two distinct approaches have previously been used to examine the extent to which race enters into reporters’ judgments about family behavior. In one method, individuals such as medical professionals, teachers, or social workers are given a set of vignettes and asked to indicate whether a particular scene constitutes maltreatment. To test for racial bias, the researcher changes the race of the child, without altering any other element in the vignette, and examines whether this alters judgments about whether the vignette describes maltreatment. In the second method, the researcher reviews actual case decisions made by professionals who come into contact with children and families, to investigate whether children with similar situations but of different racial or ethnic backgrounds are treated differently.

The vignette method allows for better control over all elements of a scenario, but case reviews are likely to provide better information about actual behavior.<sup>2</sup> In general, vignette studies of hypothetical cases have found little evidence of racial bias in judgments, whereas evidence from case review studies has found evidence of bias. For example, one case review study found that mi-

nority toddlers with skull or long-bone fractures are more likely to be reported to CPS than white toddlers with the same type of injury.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, black and low-income infants are more likely to be tested at birth for drug exposure than are infants from white or more affluent families, even though rates of prenatal substance use among racial and economic groups are similar.<sup>4</sup>

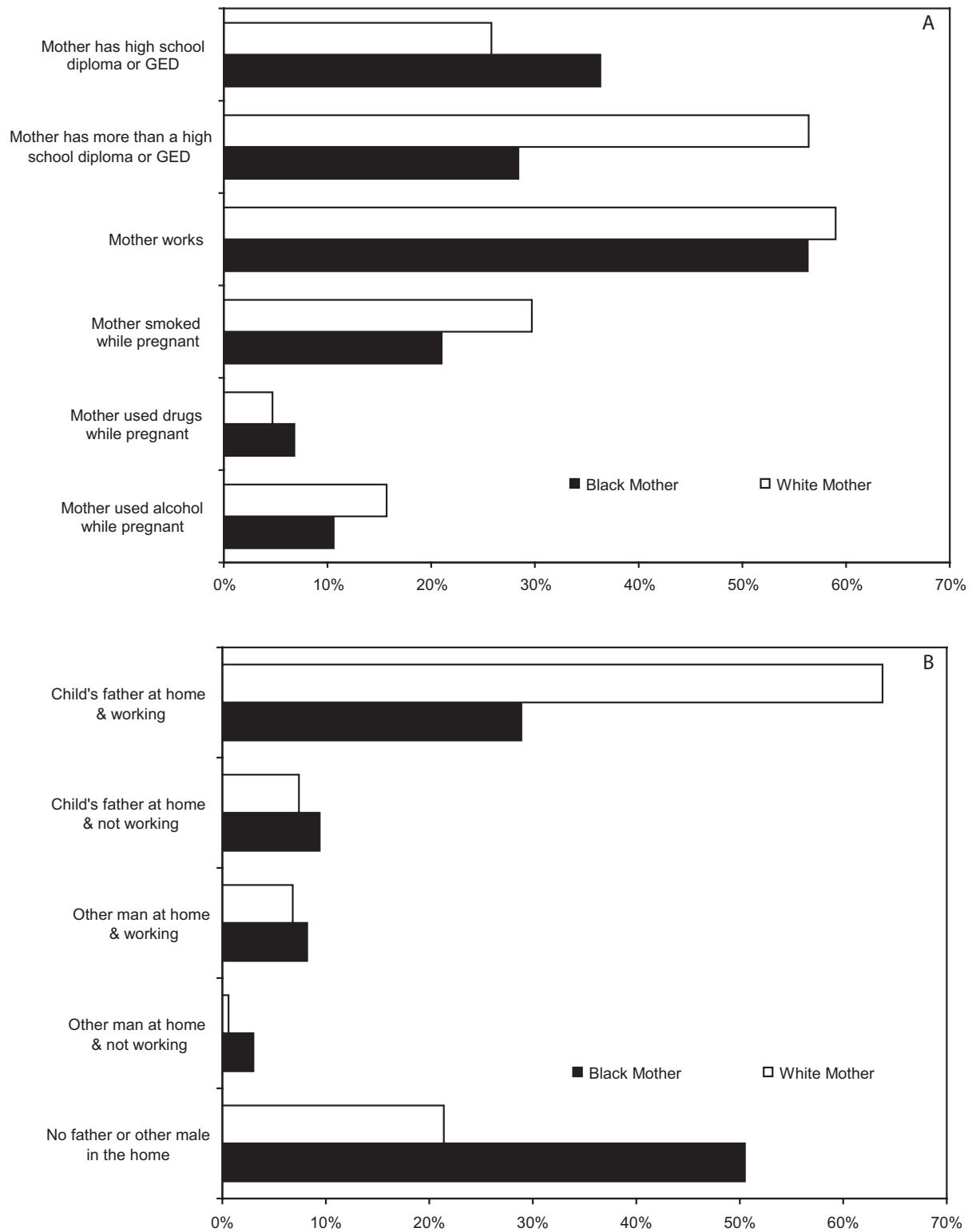
The empirical analyses we report here follow in the tradition of case review studies by examining actual judgments made by interviewers about the parenting behaviors they observed. The data were drawn from telephone surveys and in-home assessments conducted as part of the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study. This longitudinal study began in 1998 with a baseline sample of about 4,800 births in 20 U.S. cities. The sample is racially diverse: 47 percent of the mothers in the original sample identified themselves as non-Hispanic black, 27 percent as Hispanic. For this study, we restricted our attention to non-Hispanic black and white families. Because the project oversampled nonmarital births, children in the sample are more likely to be poor, to have absent fathers, and to have mothers with low levels of education than children in a nationally representative sample. Children with these characteristics are more likely than others to be reported to CPS agencies.

These data have several advantages for our analyses. First, the data contain parents’ reports on their own behaviors; racial differences in these measures cannot easily be attributed to racial bias on the part of the interviewer. Second, they contain information on a large sample of black and white interviewers, most of whom interviewed both black and white parents. We can thus examine whether the judgments of individual interviewers vary depending whether a family is of their own or a different race.

The in-home assessment was conducted approximately three years after the child’s birth, and used both a questionnaire and a set of interviewers’ observations to assess many aspects of parenting, the child’s home environment, and mother-child interactions. There was no attempt to match black and white respondents with same-race interviewers; thus these matches were essentially random.<sup>5</sup> Our analyses were based on a subsample of interviews involving 1,417 children (1,080 black and 337 white) for whom we know the race of the interviewer. Of these interviewers, 42 percent were black and 58 were white. From the in-home data we drew ten measures. Three of them were parents’ reports of the discipline strategies they used with their children; two reflected interviewers’ assessments of mothers’ interactions with their children. The other five measures comprised interviewers’ assessments of the characteristics and behaviors of mothers and children.

Because racial differences in parenting behaviors may be due to racial differences in income, education, family structure, maternal characteristics, and the like, our





**Figure 1. Some characteristics of Fragile Families survey participants, three years after child's birth. A. Mothers; B. Fathers.**

analyses controlled for measures of family socioeconomic status and maternal characteristics: adjusted family income, numbers of children and adults in the household, mother's education and employment, and information regarding maternal depression and risky behaviors during pregnancy (Figure 1A). We included information on whether or not the mother lived alone, was

married, or cohabiting; and whether the father or other adult male living in the household was employed (Figure 1B).

In general, there were large differences in household and maternal characteristics between black and white households. Black families had more children (an average of

**Table 1**  
**The Effects of Maternal Race on Assessments of Parenting**

OLS Models	Mother's Report of Lack of Nonviolent Discipline Strategies		Interviewer's Assessment of Maternal Harshness	
	Above 75th Percentile	Above 90th Percentile	Above 75th Percentile	Above 90th Percentile
Model 1: Mother is Black	0.139**	0.052*	0.078**	0.068**
Model 2: Add sociodemographic characteristics to (1)	0.093**	0.019	0.021	0.023
Model 3: Add maternal depression and risky behaviors to (2)	0.085**	0.013	0.023	0.022

**Note:** Each cell shows the coefficient for “mother is Black” from a single OLS regression. \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01. City of residence is included in each model.

2.43 versus 1.96 in white households) and fewer adults (1.84 versus 1.99). They had considerably lower incomes than white families (mean household income of \$22,658 versus \$54,912), although just over half of mothers in each group were working. White mothers were better educated; twice as many white as black mothers had more than a high school education. Black mothers had higher mean depression scores; they were less likely than white mothers to smoke and drink and a little more likely to use drugs during pregnancy. Black mothers were also far more likely to be neither married nor living with a man.

### How large a role does race play in assessments of parenting?

#### *Are racial differences in outcomes explained by sociodemographic factors and maternal characteristics?*

Using a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models, we examined whether there were racial differences in the outcome measures that mothers and interviewers reported (see the box on p. 29 for a brief outline of these measures). We then asked whether such differences could, in part, be explained by characteristics other than race. When we took only the mother's race into account, ignoring sociodemographic and personal characteristics, we found that blacks were more likely than whites to have problematic scores on most parenting measures. This was true for both mothers' own reports and interviewers' assessments. For example, as shown in Table 1 (Model 1), black mothers were significantly more likely than white mothers to be at the high end of the scale (that is, to fall into the 75th or the 90th percentile) on both lack of nonviolent discipline strategies (mother-reported) and maternal harshness (interviewer assessed). However, when parents' socioeconomic circumstances were taken into account (Model 2), statistically significant racial differences largely disappeared. As might be expected, these sociodemographic characteristics did a better job of explaining the racial differences in the interviewer-assessed

measures than in the mothers' own reports. In contrast, maternal characteristics (Model 3), such as depression and risky behavior during pregnancy, explained very little of these racial differences. We found similar patterns across most of the other measures (not shown on table). For example, black mothers were more likely to be assessed as having lower verbal and social skills and less understanding of the interviewers' questions, but these effects were largely explained by sociodemographic characteristics.

#### *Does the race of the interviewer affect assessments?*

We used a similar set of ordinary least squares regression models to explore whether the race of the interviewer affected the assessments. Our analyses indicate that the race of the interviewer did indeed matter, although more for interviewer-assessed measures than for measures based on mothers' own reports. For example, the interviewer's race was associated with only one self-reported parenting measure (lack of nonviolent discipline at the 90th percentile) but with all of the interviewer-assessed measures of parenting, such that black interviewers were significantly less likely to rate mothers in the problematic range for both harshness and lack of warmth. The same pattern held when we examined interviewers' assessments of maternal and child characteristics: for nine of the ten measures, black interviewers rated parents or children as having significantly lower—that is, less problematic—scores than did white interviewers. The effects of the interviewer's race were generally large and were often greater than the effects of the mother's own race.

This finding does not confirm the presence of racial bias, but it does have implications for racial differences in reporting of child maltreatment: if families are more likely to come into contact with reporters of the same race, which may be the case for reports by “nonprofessionals,” black families may be judged less harshly, on average, than white families. Furthermore, research estimates of racial differences in outcomes may be quite different, depending on whether interviewers and interviewees were matched on race in a particular survey.

**Table 2**  
**The Effects of Interactions between Interviewer Race and Maternal Race on Assessments of Parenting**

OLS Models	Mother's Report of Lack of Nonviolent Discipline Strategies		Interviewer's Assessment of Maternal Harshness	
	Above 75th Percentile	Above 90th Percentile	Above 75th Percentile	Above 90th Percentile
Mother is Black, interviewer is white	0.084 (0.039)	0.000 (0.026)	0.057 (0.033)	0.058 (0.027)
Mother is Black, interviewer is black	0.107 (0.047)	0.073 (0.031)	-0.058 (0.039)	-0.013 (0.032)
Mother is white, interviewer is Black	0.021 (0.057)	0.044 (0.038)	-0.035 (0.048)	0.017 (0.039)
Test for bias (p-value)	0.966	0.439	0.096	0.023

**Note:** For each column, rows 1 through 3 present coefficients from a single OLS regression in which the reference group is “mother is white, interviewer is white.” Row 4 presents the p-value for a test of the null hypothesis that:  $(\beta[\text{respondent is Black, interviewer is white}] - \beta[\text{respondent is white, interviewer is white}]) = (\beta[\text{respondent is Black, interviewer is Black}] - \beta[\text{respondent is white, interviewer is Black}])$ ; where  $\beta[\text{respondent is white, interviewer is white}]$  has been normalized to zero. Sociodemographic characteristics, maternal characteristics, and city of residence are included in each model.

*Does the race of the interviewer, relative to the race of the mother, affect assessments?*

Racial interactions did not appear to influence how mothers responded to interviewers' questions about their parenting strategies. In other words, black mothers gave similar responses regardless of whether they were interviewed by black or white interviewers; the same was true of white mothers. But the interviewers' assessments of parenting showed strong racial influences. Consider, for example, the results for lack of nonviolent discipline strategies and maternal harshness, presented in Table 2. For the measures assessing nonviolent discipline strategies, differences between black and white mothers' self-reports to black and white interviewers were not statistically significant (as indicated by the p-value for the “test for bias”). For the interviewer-assessed measure of maternal harshness, however, we found that black mothers interviewed by white interviewers were viewed more critically than black mothers interviewed by black interviewers; they were 11.5 percentage points more likely to score above the 75th percentile and 7.1 percentage points more likely to score above the 90th percentile on this measure. This is not merely because white interviewers viewed all mothers, black or white, more critically than black interviewers did. White mothers interviewed by white interviewers were only 3.5 percentage points more likely to fall above the 75th percentile and were 1.7 percentage points *less* likely to fall above the 90th percentile than were white mothers interviewed by black interviewers. The hypothesis of no racial bias was thus rejected at the 9.6 percent level for the 75th percentile measure of harshness and at the 2.3 percent level for the 90th percentile measure.

The evidence of bias was less clear in interviewers' assessments of maternal and child characteristics. True, black mothers were somewhat more likely to receive

problematic scores on their maternal and social skills when interviewed by white interviewers. And according to the interviewers, black children displayed more behavioral problems with white interviewers than with their black counterparts (the race of the interviewer made no difference for white children). But white interviewers were more likely to note problems with the appearance of white children than black children, and black interviewers were slightly more likely to note problems with the appearance of black children. These differing responses may give us some clue to the complex interactions of race and judgment when it comes to parenting.

One possibility is that black and white interviewers may judge parents and children with similar behaviors in different ways. Or, if the differences in children's behavior are real, black parents may have had reason to display more punitive behavior during interviews conducted by whites.<sup>6</sup> In either case, a racial dynamic is present in, and is influencing, assessments. Consistently, black mothers interviewed by whites were less likely to receive positive ratings than white mothers interviewed by whites; black mothers interviewed by blacks were rated similarly to white mothers interviewed by blacks.

We noted earlier in this article that racial stereotyping may be more likely to come into play when circumstances call for greater personal judgment on the part of the interviewer. We found some support for this (results not shown) when we investigated the possibility of bias regarding the individual items that made up our measure of harshness (see the box on p. 29 for a list of items). Consider two of the “harshness” items, for example: whether a mother slapped or spanked her child during the interview and whether she expressed annoyance toward the child during the interview. An interviewer reporting whether a mother slapped her child has little room for subjective judgment. But an interviewer reporting

## Parenting and Maternal and Child Characteristics Measures

### Parenting Measures

Self-reported: (1) use of nonviolent discipline strategies; (2) use of psychological aggression; (3) use of physical assault. These measures are drawn from the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale. See M. Strauss, S. Hamby, D. Finkelhor, D. Moore, and D. Runyan, "Identification of Child Maltreatment with the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales: Development and Psychometric Data for a National Sample of American Parents," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 22, no. 4 (1998): 249–70.

Interviewer-assessed: (1) harshness (e.g., mother shouts at, slaps, criticizes, restricts child excessively); (2) lack of warmth (e.g., whether mother spontaneously talks to child, responds to child's words, introduces the child to a person or object, praises or hugs the child). These measures are drawn from the HOME scale. See B. Caldwell and R. Bradley, *Administration Manual: HOME Observation for Measurement of the Home Environment* (rev. ed. Little Rock: University of Arkansas, 1984).

### Maternal and Child Characteristics Measures

Interviewer-assessed: (1) mother lacks verbal and social skills; (2) mother does not pay attention and lacks understanding; (3) mother is hostile and suspicious; (4) problems with child's appearance (e.g., condition of clothing and cleanliness); (5) problems with child's behavior (e.g., persistence, cooperation, and displays of emotion).

Because none of these scales has a standard threshold, to denote problematic behavior we constructed two discrete indicators for each scale: whether a family scored in the 75th or 90th percentile on each parenting measure.

whether the mother expressed annoyance toward the child will necessarily make such judgments. Our statistical tests revealed evidence of racial bias in the items assessing parental annoyance, hostility, scolding, and criticism. But no such bias was found for more objective items—whether the mother shouted, slapped, spanked, interfered with, or restricted the child.

## Conclusions

The families in this study were not the subject of CPS investigations, nor were the interviewers asked to look for evidence of maltreatment. Our findings nevertheless provide insight into possible sources of reporting bias within the child welfare system, and into the workings of racial dynamics in assessments of parenting behaviors.

First, it is clear that there are racial differences in many measures of parenting. A large portion of these differences, however, is explained by measures of socioeconomic status that are correlated with race. This finding suggests that reporting bias may be driven in part by statistical discrimination. Race may become a proxy for socioeconomic status because it is more likely to be visible to observers than family income, maternal education, and the like. Potential reporters who lack information about other characteristics of families may therefore focus on race as an explanation of what they see, and may attribute poor behavior to blacks, in general, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Second, race matters when people are assessing the parenting behavior of others. There are systematic racial differences in how black and white interviewers rate parenting techniques, mothers' characteristics, and the behavior and appearance of children. These differences call into serious question the idea that reports of child maltreatment are colorblind.

Third, although the results of this study indicate that race influences judgments, we cannot take them as evidence that higher rates of maltreatment reports among black children are simply due to racial bias. We also found racial differences in mothers' reports of their own parenting practices, suggesting that higher rates of reporting for blacks may, in part, reflect genuine differences in parenting behaviors. Nevertheless, we stress that none of the parenting measures we examined are extreme enough to warrant a CPS report, and it is possible that there are no racial differences in measures of actual maltreatment. It is also unclear how racial bias may affect the judgments of potential reporters confronted with behavior that is extremely inconsistent with "parenting norms."

Finally, for researchers, these findings underscore the importance of considering the race of the interviewer, and the relationship between the races of interviewer and respondent, when studying the determinants of parenting. This does not argue for race matching in surveys; to the contrary, the finding that black and white interviewers assess families and children differently implies that race matching might yield misleading results. Rather, it is an

argument for examining whether the conclusions of a study are sensitive to the assignment of interviewers to respondents.

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<sup>1</sup>L. Berger, M. McDaniel, and C. Paxson, "Assessing Parenting Behaviors across Racial Groups: Implications for the Child Welfare System," *Social Service Review* 79, no. 4 (December 2005): 653–88.

<sup>2</sup>Examples of vignette studies include G. Zellman, "The Impact of Case Characteristics on Child Abuse Reporting Decisions," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 16, no. 1 (1992): 57–74; C. Egu and D. Weiss, "The Role of Race and Severity of Abuse in Teachers' Recognition or Reporting of Child Abuse," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 12, no. 4 (2003): 465–74. Case review studies include R. Hampton and E. Newberger, "Child Abuse Incidence and Reporting by Hospitals: Significance of Severity, Class, and Race," *American Journal of Public Health* 75, no. 1 (1985): 56–60; W. Lane, D. Rubin, R. Monteith, and C. Christian, "Racial Differences in the Evaluation of Pediatric Fractures for Physical Abuse," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 288, no. 13 (2002): 1603–09.

<sup>3</sup>Lane and others, "Racial Differences."

<sup>4</sup>I. Chasnoff, H. Landress, and M. Barrett, "The Prevalence of Illicit-Drug or Alcohol Use During Pregnancy and Discrepancies in Mandatory Reporting in Pinellas County, Florida," *New England Journal of Medicine* 322, no. 17 (1990): 1202–06; I. Sagatun-Edwards and C. Saylor, "Drug Exposed Infant Cases in Juvenile Court: Risk Factors and Outcomes," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 24, no. 7 (2000): 925–37.

<sup>5</sup>In all there were 91 interviewers for our sample, 42 percent black and the remainder white; 79 percent of black and 66 percent of white interviewers interviewed both black and white mothers. Our analyses indicated that racial differences in the assignment of interviewers to mothers were completely accounted for by the racial composition of the cities studied. For this reason, a set of city indicators was included in our models. Because Hispanic respondents, for language reasons, were often purposely matched with Hispanic interviewers, they were excluded from the analysis.

<sup>6</sup>The idea that individuals may behave differently when being assessed by interviewers from different racial groups is supported by evidence in H. Kim, N. Baydar, and A. Greek, "Testing Conditions Influence the Race Gap in Cognition and Achievement Estimated by Household Survey Data," *Applied Developmental Psychology* 23, no. 5 (2002): 567–82. This paper shows that black children perform more poorly on cognitive tests that are administered by whites.



# Can we improve job retention and advancement among low-income working parents?

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Employment rates among low-income parents have risen quite dramatically in the past decade. Among single mothers, labor force participation rose from about 67 percent in the early 1990s to 78 percent by 2000; among those who had been on welfare the preceding year, labor force activity rose from about 30 percent to nearly 60 percent.<sup>1</sup> But the annual earnings and income of many parents remain stubbornly low, even though their employment rates are now fairly high. For instance, a study of people starting low-wage jobs in 1996 found that, three years later, about 50 percent of male workers and 60 percent of female workers still had annualized earnings below the poverty level for a family of four. Among those leaving welfare, average earnings remain below \$10,000 a year. For parents with less than a high school diploma, weak skills, and limited or spotty work experience, the prospects of providing stable family incomes are very limited, especially if they are single.<sup>2</sup>

At least two factors limit the annual earnings of less-skilled adults in the U.S. labor market. First is *low job retention*. Some of these workers lose or leave jobs frequently, and may experience long periods of time between jobs. This joblessness directly reduces their annual earnings and inhibits wage growth. Second is *slow or no advancement*. Even when these workers are steadily employed, their wages and benefits are very low and their prospects for advancement, either in their current job or by switching to a better job, are poor.

What public policies—federal, state, or local—might help improve retention and advancement among low-wage workers? To what extent might these initiatives involve the private sector? What does the evidence from research and evaluation show, and are there promising models that deserve more attention? This article summarizes our exploration of such questions.<sup>3</sup>

## Job turnover and retention difficulties among low-wage workers

In any given year, about 20 percent of the U.S. workforce begins a new job; the median length of time on the job is

4–5 years. Rates of turnover are highest among young workers, who frequently work part time while in school or engage in “job-shopping” early in their careers. But turnover is also relatively high among particular groups of youth or adults: high school dropouts, those with weak cognitive skills, minorities, women with young children, and the formerly incarcerated.<sup>4</sup> About 40 percent of low-income families with low employment levels are headed by high school dropouts; they tend to have high rates of voluntary and involuntary job turnover, and are especially likely to leave a job with no other work lined up. Low-income single mothers have high rates of turnover even after accounting for their lower educational attainment, and the more children they have, the more frequently they quit or change jobs. African Americans quit jobs somewhat less frequently than other workers at similar wages, but are much more likely to be discharged. Average job tenure among adults in single-parent families, and among those with low incomes, is only one-half to two-thirds as long as in two-parent or middle-income families.

Job tenure among current or former welfare recipients is well below that of the typical U.S. worker. Among recipients who entered the job market in the 1980s and early 1990s, job turnover often occurred within nine months or less after the new job was accepted. As many more recipients left welfare and entered the strong job market of the later 1990s, average tenure improved somewhat, eventually averaging well over a year per job spell. But large majorities of former and current welfare recipients participating in the five-year National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (NEWWS) experienced some time without work even during the fifth year of the study. High rates of absenteeism, often associated with child care, health, and transportation problems, sometimes result in women quitting or being fired.<sup>5</sup>

Most workers make large wage gains early in their careers, sometimes by changing jobs early and then settling in and accumulating tenure with specific employers. Wage gains moderate over time, but remain positive for most workers over much of their working lives. Yet this is less true for less-skilled workers such as those without high school diplomas; their wages grow more slowly with time or work experience. In a study of low earners over an eight-year period, from 1993 to 2001, researchers found that few seemed permanently to escape their low-income status. When they restricted the study sample to those with poor education, low wages, or in low-income families, only 15–20 percent of those consistently earning less

**Table 1**  
**Examples of Programs Providing Financial Incentives to Low-Wage Workers**

Program and Dates of Operation	Target Group	Financial Incentive
Earned Income Tax Credit (1975–); a federal program	Low-income tax filers with earnings	Initially provides 40 cents per additional dollar of earnings; credit diminishes by up to 21 cents with each additional dollar earned. Maximum credit of about \$4,000 for family with two children
New Hope Program, Milwaukee (1994–98); a private initiative	Adults with a household income no greater than 150% of poverty level	Monthly earnings supplement for full-time work (average benefit \$1,500 a year), subsidized health insurance and child care; community service job if full-time employment unavailable
Minnesota Family Investment Program (1994–98); a state program	Cash assistance applicants and recipients	Individuals remained eligible for assistance until their income reached 140% of poverty level (average benefit \$1,800 a year)

than \$12,000 a year at the beginning were earning above \$15,000 at the end.<sup>6</sup>

The difficulties low-wage workers encounter because of their poor education and skills and their often limited work experience are compounded by the characteristics of their jobs and their employers. Low-skilled workers are less likely to find employment in large firms, in unionized firms, and in firms paying higher wages and offering better benefits. Low earners who do get jobs in higher-wage sectors of the economy—such as construction, manufacturing, transportation, and health services—have higher rates of advancement than those employed elsewhere. Lower-wage workers with part-time jobs or working nonstandard shifts have higher turnover rates.

Even within specific sectors of the economy and particular geographic areas, firms often pay different levels of wages to workers with similar skills, depending on the employment model they adopt. Some seek to be competitive through a low-wage, low-cost strategy (the “Walmart model”); others rely more on improving productivity by training and policies encouraging higher worker retention. Whatever the merits of either strategy from the employer’s perspective, employment in the higher-wage firms undoubtedly is to the advantage of the worker. But the ability of many low-income workers to obtain such jobs may be limited. Compounding workers’ skill problems, such firms tend to be located relatively far away from the geographic neighborhoods where most low earners live; therefore, many will lack information about and access to informal job networks or may not have reliable transportation. For minorities and especially those with criminal records, these “spatial mismatch” problems may be compounded by employer discrimination in hiring.<sup>7</sup>

### **Policies for improving retention and advancement**

The litany of difficulties we have laid out above suggests that job market strategies for improving the earnings and

job stability of disadvantaged workers should seek to (1) directly supplement their low wages and benefits; (2) address personal/family needs and workplace problems through case management or service provision; (3) improve work-related skills; and (4) improve access to and interactions with employers that offer better opportunities. We examine these issues below.

### **Supplementing low wages: Financial incentives and supports**

Many different kinds of financial incentive programs for work have been tried since the 1990s. Evaluations of these efforts generally support the view that they can raise employment rates and earnings among low-wage workers. Here we briefly discuss three different types of programs (see Table 1).<sup>8</sup>

The clearest example of a financial incentive program is the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which now provides a roughly 40 percent earnings subsidy to low-income working parents up to about \$10,000 of earned income. Research suggests that the EITC has in particular raised employment levels among single mothers.<sup>9</sup> Many states established an earned income disregard under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); these provided welfare recipients with a different type of financial incentive to increase work effort. One such successful effort was the Minnesota Family Independence Plan (MFIP); under MFIP, large gains in earnings and employment and reductions in poverty were directly attributable to the financial incentives. Among private initiatives, New Hope, a pilot project in Milwaukee that offered health, child care benefits, and community service jobs in addition to the earnings supplement, enrolled a broad range of low-income parents, not just welfare recipients. But New Hope’s initial gains in employment and earnings faded over time, in part because the control group also experienced gains.<sup>10</sup>

Research on MFIP and programs like it indicates that they are most successful when subsidies are tied to full-time work in the labor market or are accompanied by other

**Table 2**  
**Examples of Programs Providing Case Management and Services to Low-Wage Workers**

Program and Dates of Operation	Target Group	Services
Portland NEWWS Program (1993–96)	Cash assistance applicants and recipients	Pre-employment program providing job search, education, training, and case management. Strong employment focus with emphasis on high-quality jobs
Post-Employment Services Demonstration (1994–96)	Cash assistance recipients who found jobs	Counseling and support, job search assistance, resolution of benefits issues, and service referral
Illinois Employment Retention and Advancement Program (2002– )	Employed cash assistance recipients working at least 30 hours a week for 6 consecutive months	Job matching, job placement assistance, career and personal counseling, and service referral

work or job search requirements. Unless the subsidies are permanent, their positive effects on work tend to fade over time, though they do not entirely disappear. And the budgetary costs of permanent subsidies for low-wage workers can be substantial, especially in their more generous forms, such as New Hope.

There are some other disadvantages as well. Tax credits or subsidies that phase out as income rises may create incentives for those in the phase-out range, especially two-earner married couples, to reduce rather than increase work effort. Perhaps the largest question involves the extent to which financial incentives improve retention or advancement for those already in the labor market. Evidence from MFIP and from a similar program, the Canadian Self-Sufficiency Program (1992–99), does indicate that the subsidies generated more consistent work over the course of a year. But modest improvements in job retention are likely to have even more modest effects on advancement, given that work experience produces only limited wage growth among low-wage workers.<sup>11</sup>

### Case management and service provision

Many local programs provide a mix of pre- and postemployment services and case management to aid unskilled workers in moving into the workforce and to enhance their prospects for retention and advancement. Welfare-to-work studies provide some evidence that combining pressure to find a job with a mix of services, including job search, education and training, and case management might be more effective in moving people into employment than a set of services or treatments that are provided separately. The Portland site in the NEWWS evaluation used this approach to generate large increases in employment, earnings, and job stability. This site was also notable in its encouragement of participants to find higher-wage jobs and employers, wherever possible.

For-profit temp agencies or not-for-profit groups often provide some pre-employment services, particularly in job search or job readiness. From our perspective, the key question is whether these groups can improve the quality of the jobs to which low earners have access—their starting wages and benefits, or potential for advancement—

beyond what individuals achieve on their own. Research to date does suggest that labor market intermediaries, including private temp agencies, might have some positive effects, though we need more evidence on the effects of services provided by for-profit and not-for-profit job developers generally.<sup>12</sup>

Case management services provided after individuals find jobs do not seem to have produced results. In the Post-Employment Services Demonstration, welfare agency staff sought to provide counseling and support, job search assistance, and service referral. The project did not promote greater job retention. But implementation was unsatisfactory: employment services were quite limited, case workers carried very large caseloads, and services were poorly targeted to those needing help.<sup>13</sup> Several sites in the national Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Project are currently testing the effectiveness of postemployment services.<sup>14</sup> One Illinois project (Table 2) targeting a group of TANF recipients who appear to be stuck in low-wage jobs is providing services to help them increase earnings in their current jobs or find better jobs. Early results have been positive, but it is too soon to draw firm conclusions about the effects of ERA programs.

### Improving work skills

Like other employment-related services, education and training can be provided before employment or after individuals are working. Among existing institutions and systems that can play a role are community colleges, local one-stop centers created under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), the adult education system, and nonprofit and for-profit private educational providers.

Particularly before employment, programs with a strong focus on basic education but only limited links to employment and job training—an approach more common before the implementation of TANF—have not generated significant earnings gains. Most have performed worse than mixed-service or job-search interventions.<sup>15</sup> These programs, which focus on building basic skills and obtaining a high-school equivalency diploma (GED), provide too little knowledge related to the local job market,

**Table 3**  
**Examples of Programs Promoting Skill Development among Low-Wage Workers**

Program and Dates of Operation	Target Group	Services
Riverside, CA, Employment Retention and Advancement Program (2000–)	Newly employed welfare recipients working at least 20 hours per week	Two programs to promote participation in education and training in combination with employment are being evaluated; one requires individuals to work 20 hours a week, the other has no requirements
Center for Employment Training, San Jose, CA (initial program 1982–88, replication program 1995–)	Low-income youth; single mothers on welfare	Basic skills and training provided in worklike setting; full-time commitment by participants; employer involvement in design of training; job placement full-time commitment by participants; employer assistance
Kentucky Community and Technical College System (1997–)	Low-wage workers	Systemwide adaptations to accommodate working students: rapid course and program approval, academic credit for workforce training, fractional credits, and incentives to develop and offer for-credit courses

and their credentials are often not recognized or rewarded by private-sector employers.

Job training, in contrast, has shown somewhat stronger positive effects, particularly on earnings among disadvantaged adult women. This emerged clearly, for example, in the national Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), the forerunner of WIA. The effects on the earnings of the women were fairly large relative to the costs per trainee, and on-the-job training produced larger earnings gains than standard classroom training.<sup>16</sup> The effects upon men’s earnings were smaller, though still often substantial relative to costs.

Training that leads to established credentials that are valued by employers has produced particularly strong results. Returns to Associate degrees and other certification from community colleges have been positive. The success of the Portland NEWWS program may be due to its emphasis on increasing the number of high school dropouts who obtained both a high school diploma or GED and a second education or training certificate, or a trade license. Efforts to ensure that the training is relevant to local employers with available jobs have paid off. The Center for Employment Training (CET) in San Jose, California, which integrated basic education and job training with such links, produced strong results in early studies (Table 3).<sup>17</sup>

There have been fewer studies of postemployment training strategies. One effort in Riverside, California (see Table 3) targets welfare recipients who are working but remain on assistance. Early evidence from experimental studies of this and other similar programs suggests they are not affecting labor market outcomes. One major limitation to this kind of program is that workers who might want to go to school may already be overloaded with family and work obligations. Workers with low skills or little English may also find that their access to such programs is limited. To make these programs more accessible to low-skilled working adults, states and localities

have introduced curriculum and instructional reforms such as “bridge” programs to prepare workers for training, accelerated programs, and programs subdivided into modules that can be completed at different times. Kentucky, for example, launched a series of reforms to make the community college system more responsive to the needs of low-income working adults (Table 3). Most such initiatives have not yet been evaluated.

A very different variant of such training is aimed primarily at the “hard to serve,” those with multiple barriers to work. This “transitional jobs” approach combines training and support services with paid work experience for some period of time, usually less than a year. One such project is the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) program in New York for ex-offenders. The best evidence for this general category of programs comes from the National Supported Work Demonstration project from the mid-1970s. In that controlled experiment, the postprogram earnings of welfare recipients increased quite substantially relative to those in the control group. No overall effect was observed for adult men or youth, but a recent reexamination suggests more positive results for adult men with criminal records.<sup>18</sup>

### Employer-focused efforts

Efforts to tie the disadvantaged more closely to employers, especially those that pay higher wages, can have important payoffs. Labor market intermediaries, including temp agencies and other nonprofit organizations, often play this role. These agencies seek to improve the access of less-skilled individuals to better employers, and some provide training to improve the quality of the “match” between employers and potential employees. But such training must be at least partly general in nature, so as not to diminish the worker’s ability to move among employers.

Broadly speaking, there are two categories of employer-focused efforts: (1) those that provide services and train-



**Table 4**  
**Examples of Employer-Based Strategies for Low-Wage Workers**

Program and Dates of Operation	Target Group	Services
Cleveland ACHIEVE Program (2002– )	Entry-level workers under 200 percent of the poverty line in nursing homes who have been in their current jobs less than 6 months	Regular on-site office hours for counseling, case management and support services, meetings for social support and life skills, training for supervisors
Project QUEST, San Antonio, TX (1992– )	Low-income individuals	Provides training tracks for numerous occupations within several industries, including health, business systems, and maintenance. Occupations are targeted based on demand by local firms
Kentucky Career Pathways (2004– )	Low-wage workers in targeted industries	Grants provided to partnerships of businesses and community colleges to develop and implement career pathways in a range of occupations

ing to potential workers for jobs with specific employers, and (2) those that also try to influence employers' human resource policies—recruitment, training, compensation practices, and job restructuring.

The efforts of temp agencies and training programs like the San Jose CET (Table 3) clearly fit into the first of these categories. So, too, do some postemployment services, such as the Cleveland ACHIEVE program (Table 4), that address employees' needs and provide supports in the workplace. Preliminary results from the evaluation of ACHIEVE suggest the program improved retention rates within the first 30 days but that gains began to diminish over time.<sup>19</sup>

In the second category are postemployment programs generally known as *incumbent worker training*. Originating more than 30 years ago, these programs are typically operated by states; they provide employers with grants to partner with training providers and to offer specific training to their incumbent and, in some cases, new employees. These programs are generally designed to provide opportunities for career advancement within the firm or industry, and many are funded directly by employer tax revenues.

Few incumbent-worker training programs focus specifically on low-wage workers, though a handful of states have set aside funds to provide basic skills and English literacy training.<sup>20</sup> The evidence is clear that such programs have benefitted employers by raising productivity and lowering costs.<sup>21</sup> Apprenticeships and internships (which are traditional school-to-career pathways for youth), privately provided training programs, and occupational training in vocational schools and community colleges broadly fit into this category. These have generally shown strong returns on investment. It is less clear from the evidence to date that these programs have benefitted low-wage workers, though it is plausible to assume that they can.

*Sectoral strategies* aim to directly improve matching of low-income or other targeted job seekers to employment opportunities in local and regional economies, particu-

larly in large and growing job sectors. Project QUEST in San Antonio, for instance, works with employers in the health care and financial sectors. A central focus of many such efforts is to restructure recruitment, training, promotion, and compensation practices. The aim is to improve the access of low-income workers to existing jobs and to raise the quantity and quality of jobs available within those regional labor markets. No sectoral initiatives have yet been rigorously evaluated, although some longitudinal studies have shown improvements in employment and wage rates.<sup>22</sup>

A subset of sectoral initiatives seeks to build *career ladders* in low-wage occupational categories. Career ladders offer a sequence of connected skill upgrading and job opportunities, generally in private-sector employment. Each step on the ladder leads to a job and to further education or training. Career ladder efforts are generally not geared toward a specific employer, but typically apply to a certain sector or industry, such as health care. Several states have recently undertaken regional career ladder initiatives. In 2004, for example, Kentucky enacted such a program, which awards grants to develop career pathways to help low-income workers advance in occupations that meet employers' needs (Table 4). The grants are awarded to local partnerships of businesses and community colleges; most commonly, firms in health and manufacturing are involved.

In all of these efforts, third-party intermediaries attempt to bridge the mismatches that separate employers from potential employees.<sup>23</sup> Some intermediaries work with particular groups; others focus on particular industry sectors. For example, CEO in New York and the Safer Foundation in Chicago work exclusively with ex-offenders, while Focus: Hope in Detroit specializes primarily in training machinists and other skilled workers for the auto industry. The credibility of the intermediaries is critical to such efforts; they must be perceived as "honest brokers" who try to meet the needs of both sides in the employment relationship, and not merely as advocates for the disadvantaged.



There has been little rigorous evaluation of publicly supported, employer-focused strategies or of intermediaries for the disadvantaged, but the evidence that does exist suggests that employer-focused activities can have quite positive effects. Nor have there been many efforts to bring the role of intermediaries to a scale where they might really have an effect on local labor markets (though the Annie E. Casey Foundation's "Jobs Initiative" in six large cities has attempted to do so).<sup>24</sup>

## Some conclusions

Our review of the policy evaluation literature revealed no "magic bullets." Relatively few of the programs or efforts we examined can with certainty solve the problems of unskilled and disadvantaged workers in ways that improve job retention and advancement. In general, we conclude that, for low earners:

1. Financial incentives seem to generate more steady employment, especially if they are tied to full-time work; but these supports must be permanent, and their effects on advancement are likely very limited.
2. A range of labor market intermediaries, including temp agencies, can improve access to the sorts of higher-wage firms in which retention and advancement are both stronger.
3. Education and job training are most successful when they provide workers with credentials that employers recognize, such as Associate degrees, and when the training provides skills that match private-sector demands in the local labor market.
4. The returns to privately provided employer training are high, though such programs have in general not been specifically targeted to disadvantaged workers.
5. Programs based on mixed strategies—including training, various supports and services, financial incentives, and better access to employers—have worked well, especially in an environment where the pressure to get a job is strong.

Promising approaches that are not yet formally evaluated include sectoral strategies, efforts to build career ladders, and those that improve employers' human resource policies. Other supportive public policies might also include higher minimum wages, greater support for (or less opposition to) collective bargaining, tax credits for companies that recruit and train the low-skilled, and TANF or WIA performance bonuses for states that improve retention and advancement rates. These policies could be parts of comprehensive efforts by the federal or state governments to encourage the creation of more jobs at firms that offer higher wages and advancement opportunities for less-educated workers, rather than merely to ration a

fixed number of better jobs across a larger number of deserving applicants. ■

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<sup>1</sup>R. Blank and L. Schmidt, "Work, Wages and Welfare," in *The New World of Welfare*, ed. R. Blank and R. Haskins (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>G. Acs and P. Loprest, *Leaving Welfare: Employment and Well-Being of Families That Left Welfare in the Post-Entitlement Era*, Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, Kalamazoo, MI, 2004, and "Who Are Low-Income Working Families?" paper prepared for the Working Families Roundtable, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2005; P. Schochet and A. Rangarajan, *Characteristics of Low-Wage Workers and Their Labor Market Experiences: Evidence from the Mid- to Late 1990s*, Mathematica Policy Research, Washington, DC, 2004.

<sup>3</sup>The extended analysis is presented in H. Holzer and K. Martinson, "Can We Improve Job Retention and Advancement among Low-Income Working Parents?" IRP Discussion Paper 1307-05, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005.

<sup>4</sup>H. Holzer and R. Lalonde, "Job Stability and Change among Less-Educated Young Workers," in *Finding Jobs: Work and Welfare Reform*, ed. D. Card and R. Blank (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000).

<sup>5</sup>G. Hamilton, *Moving People from Welfare to Work: Lessons from the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies*, Final Report to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC, 2002; H. Holzer, M. Stoll, and D. Wissoker, "Job Performance and Retention among Welfare Recipients," *Social Service Review* 78 (2004):343-69.

<sup>6</sup>F. Andersson, H. Holzer, and J. Lane, *Moving Up or Moving On: Who Advances in the Low-Wage Labor Market?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005).

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., H. Holzer, S. Raphael, and M. Stoll, "How Willing Are Employers to Hire Ex-Offenders?" and D. Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," both in *Focus* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 40-46.

<sup>8</sup>Other efforts to provide better financial incentives to low earners, beyond the programs we discuss here, include the Jobs Plus program in low-income public housing projects. See H. Bloom, J. Riccio, and N. Verma, with J. Walter, *Promoting Work in Public Housing: The Effectiveness of Jobs Plus*, MDRC, New York, 2005.

<sup>9</sup>Fourteen states and the District of Columbia have also implemented state EITCs (K. Ross Phillips, *State Policies That Affect Working Families*, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2004). See also N. Eissa and J. Liebman, "Labor Supply Response to the Earned Income Tax Credit," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 111 (1996): 605-37.

<sup>10</sup>G. Berlin, *Encouraging Work, Reducing Poverty: The Impact of Work Incentive Programs*, MDRC, New York, 2000.

<sup>11</sup>T. Gladden and C. Taber, "Wage Progression among Less-Skilled Workers," in *Finding Jobs: Work and Welfare Reform*, ed. D. Card and R. Blank (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000).

<sup>12</sup>Evidence that temp agencies can improve the access of low-income workers to higher-wage employers is summarized in Andersson, Holzer and Lane, *Moving Up or Moving On*. Other recent evidence on this issue appears in D. Autor and S. Houseman, "Temporary Agency Employment as a Way Out of Poverty?" National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper, 2005. The latter paper, based on data from one welfare-to-work office in Michigan, finds that the positive employment effects of temp agencies faded over time, though those achieved by other welfare-to-work intermediaries were more persistent.

<sup>13</sup>A. Rangarajan, *Keeping Welfare Recipients Employed: A Guide for States Designing Job Retention Services*, Mathematica Policy Research, Princeton, NJ, 1998.

<sup>14</sup>This multistate project is being managed by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services. For further information, see the Web site: [http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/opre/welfare\\_employ/employ\\_retention/index.html](http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/opre/welfare_employ/employ_retention/index.html)

<sup>15</sup>K. Martinson and J. Strawn, *Built to Last: Why Skills Matter for Long-Term Success in Welfare Reform*, Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington, DC, 2003.

<sup>16</sup>The generally modest investments in such training generated comparably modest increases in earnings—R. Lalonde, “The Promise of Public Sector Training Programs,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 9 (1995): 149–68; and see also J. Bos, S. Scrivener, J. Snipes, G. Hamilton, and others, *Improving Basic Skills: The Effects of Adult Education in Welfare-to-Work Programs*, MDRC, New York, 2001.

<sup>17</sup>J. Burkhardt, A. Rangarajan, A. Gordon, and E. Kisker, *Evaluation of the Minority Female Single Parent Demonstration*, Volume 1, *Summary Report*, Mathematica Policy Research, Princeton, NJ, 1992. More recent efforts to replicate CET in other locations have also been evaluated by MDRC, and look less positive, at least partly because the control groups received community college training at high levels.

<sup>18</sup>C. Uggen, “Work as a Turning Point in the Life Course of Criminals: A Duration Model of Age, Employment, and Recidivism,” *American Sociological Review* 65 (2002): 529–46. And see G. Kirby, H. Hill, L. Pavetti, J. Jacobson, and others, *Transitional Jobs Programs: Stepping Stones to Unsubsidized Employment*, Mathematica Policy Research, Washington, DC, April 2002. A new evaluation of programs for the hard to serve, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is now under way.

<sup>19</sup>G. Hamilton, “The ACHIEVE Program: A Unique Model for Promoting Retention at the Workplace,” presented at the Annual Research Conference of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, New York, October 2004.

<sup>20</sup>A.-E. Duke, K. Martinson, and J. Strawn, *Wising Up: How Government Can Partner with Business to Increase Skills and Advance Low-Wage Workers*, Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington, DC, 2006.

<sup>21</sup>R. Moore, D. Blake, G. Phillips, and D. McConaughy, *Training That Works: Lessons from California’s Employment Training Panel Program* (Kalamazoo, MI: Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2006).

<sup>22</sup>M. Conway and I. Rademacher, “Sector Strategies: A Synthesis of Findings from the Aspen Institute’s Sectoral Employment Development Learning Project,” unpublished report, Aspen Institute Washington DC, 2004.

<sup>23</sup>R. Giloth, *Workforce Intermediaries for the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004).

<sup>24</sup>On the Jobs Initiative, see the Casey Foundation Web site, at <http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/fes/jobs/>. CEO is one of several strategies for the “Hard to Employ” that is being evaluated by MDRC for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

# IRP-USDA Small Grants Program

The Institute for Research on Poverty and the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture have since 1998 sponsored a competition that provides small grants for research on poverty and food assistance programs. The intent of the competition is to stimulate new areas of interest in research on programs such as Food Stamps, school lunch and breakfast programs, the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. Information about the competition, including current and past recipients, and guidelines for application, is on the IRP Web site at <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/initiatives/funding/usdasgp.htm>

## Reports from grant recipients, 2004–05

### Local-Level Predictors of Household Food Security

*Judi Bartfeld and Lingling Wang*

The prevalence of food insecurity varies substantially across states; most of this variability is accounted for by differences in the demographic composition as well as the economic and policy contexts of states. Food insecurity is not merely an indicator of economic hardship but rather the result of a more complex interplay among personal resources, public resources, and the economic and social contexts in which a household resides. This study examined factors affecting food security among households with elementary school children in Wisconsin, focusing on several components of the food security infrastructure, including housing, transportation, food outlets, nutrition assistance programs, and local labor markets. The full report will appear as an IRP Discussion Paper.

### Why Did the Food Stamp Caseload Decline (and Rise)? Effects of Policies and the Economy

*Caroline Danielson and Jacob Alex Klerman*

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is intended to help low-income households afford a nutritionally adequate diet. Since 1990, the FSP caseload has varied widely—rising sharply in the early 1990s, dropping sharply in the late 1990s, and then rising again in the early 2000s. Welfare and food stamp policy changes, as well as the changing economic climate, are plausible candidates for explaining the path of the caseload over time. We estimated the effect of these three factors. We found that welfare reform and the improving economy explained all of the FSP caseload decline during the late 1990s, and that policies aimed at increasing access to the FSP and the weakening economy explained about half of the FSP caseload increase in the early 2000s. The full report appears as IRP Discussion Paper 1316-06.

### Dynamics of Material Hardship in the Women's Employment Study

*Colleen M. Heflin*

I examined the dynamics of specific forms of material hardship, analyzing data from five waves of the Women's Employment Study (WES) concerning six different forms of material hardship (food insufficiency, telephone disconnection, utility disconnection, unmet medical needs, improper winter clothing, and housing problems). Although the cross-sectional reports of material hardship were comparable to those found in other studies, the level of women ever reporting each form of hardship was substantially higher in the WES. Furthermore, women were likely to experience multiple forms of hardship over the observation period, suggesting that overall quality of life within these households was quite low at some point(s) during the transition from welfare to work. The full report appears as IRP Discussion Paper 1315-06.

### Assessing the Association among Food Insecurity, Child Feeding Practices, and Obesity in Low-Income Latino Families

*Patricia Crawford*

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of past and current maternal food insecurity on child feeding practices that encourage weight gain among children in WIC-enrolled families. Knowledge about factors influencing child feeding practices is relevant to WIC nutrition educators, who educate mothers about effective child feeding strategies. Rates of child overweight in this pilot study population exceeded the national norms for low-income Hispanic 2–5-year-olds by more than 100 percent (40 percent versus 17 percent). However, this convenience sample of WIC-eligible urban and rural mothers of 2–5-year-old children is not representative of either California or urban and rural low-income Latino populations. We found few parenting differences between past and current food-insecure mothers. The study's sample size was small and multiple tests done on the data could have created some false-positive findings. However, there were trends among mothers who reported experiences with *past food insecurity* that suggest possible differences in factors associated with obesity. Past food-insecure mothers tended to be less likely to be obese than mothers who had not experienced childhood food insecurity. Among past food-insecure mothers, there was a tendency for mothers to be less likely to believe that their children should eat all of the food on their plates. They also had a tendency to be more likely to serve their children larger portions of some foods, notably orange juice and corn. In addition, they were less likely to worry that their children ate too much. The full report will appear as an IRP Discussion Paper.

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