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Does temporary agency employment offer a way out of poverty?

Is temporary agency employment a good strategy for helping the poor and disadvantaged escape from their poverty? Resolving this question is no small matter. Although the temporary help sector accounts for less than 3 percent of average U.S. daily employment, it employs a disproportionate share of minority and low-skilled workers. And state administrative data show that between 15 and 40 percent of former welfare recipients who obtained employment after the 1996 welfare reforms took jobs in the temporary help sector.¹

Several recent studies present evidence that low-skilled workers who take temporary agency jobs are more likely than other low-skilled workers (particularly the unemployed) to later transition into stable employment.² These findings advance the intriguing possibility that it might be beneficial to encourage low-skilled workers to take temporary agency jobs as a ‘stepping stone’ into the labor market. However, it is not entirely clear that the positive correlation between obtaining temporary help agency employment and finding stable employment should be used to guide policy. In practice, it is difficult to disentangle the respective roles of worker characteristics and job characteristics in engendering success in the labor market.³ Thus, to establish the true effect of temporary help agency employment on labor market advancement, something akin to a randomized-controlled experiment would be ideal.

In the research summarized here, David Autor and Susan Houseman took advantage of a unique, multiyear policy “experiment”—the quotation marks are used to emphasize that the experiment was created by circumstance rather than by deliberate intention—to provide direct evidence on the longer-term labor market effects of tempo-

The research summarized here is reported at length in David H. Autor and Susan N. Houseman, “Temporary Agency Employment as a Way out of Poverty?” which appears as a chapter in *Working and Poor: How Economic and Policy Changes Are Affecting Low-Income Workers*, ed. R. Blank, S. Danziger, and R. Schoeni (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, December 2006; see box p. 7).

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rary sector employment. In particular, they used quasi-experimental data from a Michigan welfare-to-work program, “Work First.”

What might be the consequences of temporary help employment for poor and unskilled people? Some argue that temporary help agencies, which face lower employee screening and hiring costs than do direct-hire employers, may choose to hire individuals who otherwise would have difficulty finding any job at all. Such workers will thereby more quickly find work; they may begin to develop the skills and labor market contacts that ultimately lead to more stable and better-paying jobs. But a case can also be made that temporary help agencies provide few opportunities or incentives for workers to develop skills and networks, instead offering a series of unstable, low-skilled, low-paid, dead-end jobs.⁴ Worse, spells of temporary employment may divert individuals from more productive searches for stable, longer-term employment.

Both these scenarios could be correct. In some situations companies may use temporary agencies to screen individuals for permanent jobs with good pay, benefits, and career ladders. For social welfare policy, however, what matters is the effect of temporary employment on the low-skilled workers targeted by government programs. The empirical analyses Autor and Houseman report here suggest that short-term benefits from temporary agency employment do not persist, and that over the longer term—a year or more—participants placed in temporary jobs are no better off than if they had received no job placement at all.

The “Work First” program in Michigan

To meet the requirements of federal welfare legislation, most states, including Michigan, implemented a “work first” strategy after 1996. Applicants to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) who did not already meet mandatory work requirements were obliged to participate in welfare-to-work programs, called Work First in Michigan, to help them find employment. Michigan required most TANF recipients to work 40 hours a week to remain eligible for assistance.

In Michigan, the state Department of Human Services determined welfare eligibility and TANF benefits, but local agencies administered welfare-to-work programs. Autor and Houseman studied the Work First program operating in Detroit, which was divided into geographic districts; within each geographic district, one to three nonprofit private or public agencies contracted to provide employment services. When multiple contractors provided Work First services within a district, they took turns enrolling applicants. In these districts the distribution of participants among contractors was thus equivalent to random assignment.⁵ At the time this study was undertaken, Work First participants were required to treat the program as if it were a job and to spend 40 hours a

week in program activities or job search until they were successful. If they failed to meet their obligations, they were terminated from Work First and faced sanctions including, ultimately, an end to TANF benefits.

The Work First program structure and set of services were largely standardized among contractors. Contractors typically spent one week providing new participants with basic job search skills and strategies—skills assessment and employability planning, interviewing and presentation, and life-skills training. Except for “tech-prep” courses, which quickly reviewed skills that might be tested, they provided little in the way of remedial, vocational, or computer skills training. After the first week, participants were expected to look for jobs full time. Virtually all contractors provided individual job search assistance and referrals to specific employers. They accompanied participants to job fairs, brought employers on site to recruit participants, and sponsored activities such as job clubs. Participants were required to take any job offered them that paid the federal minimum wage and satisfied work hours requirements.

Once participants found suitable jobs, contractors had to follow up with them and their employers until the participant earned enough to terminate the TANF case or was terminated from the program (usually for noncompliance).⁶ The Work First provider’s contract with the city was for one year, and the contractor’s performance was evaluated by the fraction of participants who got jobs and the percentage who held those jobs for 90 days.

To examine the effects of temporary agency employment on the low-skilled workers in the Work First program Autor and Houseman drew on two types of evidence. The first is a telephone survey of Work First contractors operating in Detroit, conducted from fall 2004 to spring 2005. The second comprises state administrative and earnings data on all participants who entered the program from 1999 to 2003. The Work First data included demographic information on Work First participants and detailed information on the jobs they found. The state Unemployment Insurance records enabled the researchers to track the earnings and labor market histories of participants both during the program and earlier. In all, they examined some 36,000 Work First spells of activity.⁷ Their data covered 9 geographic districts in which 25 contractors operated programs.

The Work First participants in the sample were predominantly female (94 percent) and black (97 percent). Their average age was 30, and over a third had not completed high school. Slightly under half of the women found jobs while in Work First. Among participants who found jobs, about 20 percent held jobs through temporary help agencies while the remaining 80 percent obtained direct-hire jobs. Relative to those who obtained temporary help or direct hire-jobs, those who did not obtain any job were more likely to have dropped out of high school, had

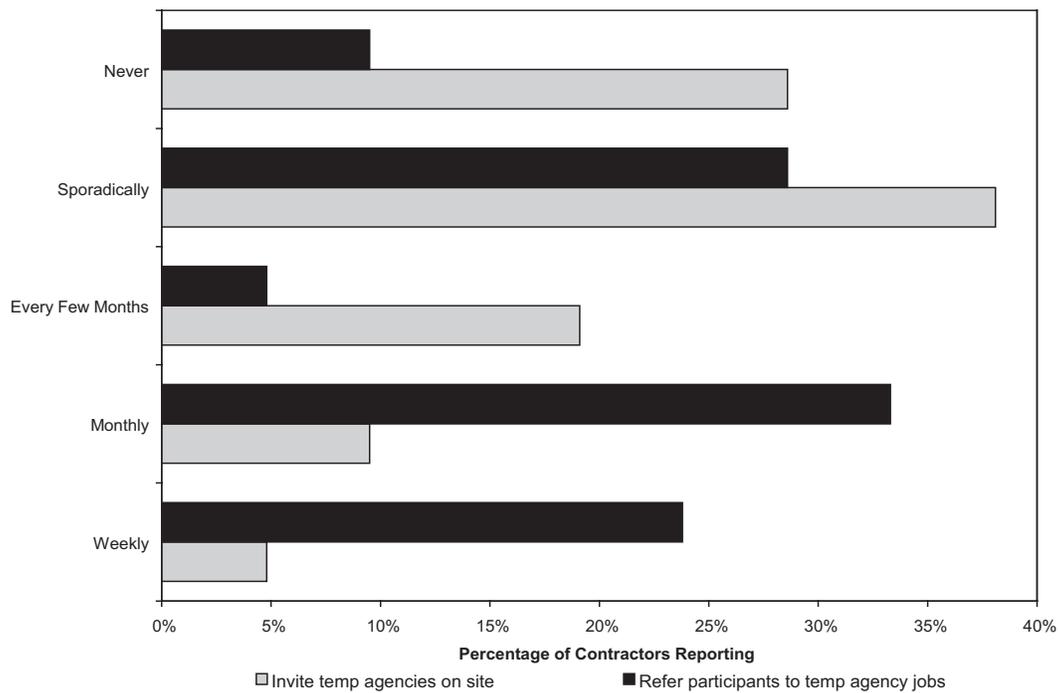


Figure 1. Contractors’ contacts with temporary work agencies.

worked fewer quarters before entering the program, and had lower prior earnings.

Contractors and temporary employment agencies: Findings from the survey

In the telephone survey, Autor and Houseman interviewed the heads of 21 contractor organizations that had operated programs when participants in the study were enrolled in Work First. They found almost no differences among contractors’ resources or program services that might affect what happened to participants. They sought to determine if contractors played a significant role in whether participants found jobs and, by implication, in where they found them. Contractors themselves estimated that they were directly involved in around 75 percent or more of job placements, through referrals, on-site visits, and the like. Most strikingly, contractors varied substantially in the amount of exposure to temporary agency work that they provided to participants and in the proportion they placed in such jobs (Figure 1). Among the 17 contractors who provided an estimate, the median placement rate of clients in temporary agency jobs was 15 percent; three contractors reported that 5 percent or fewer of job placements were with temporary agencies, and three others reported that agency placement accounted for a quarter, a third, and three-quarters of all such placements. Placement with a temporary agency was closely correlated with the frequency of agency visits and referrals—a finding that tends to confirm the significant influ-

ence of the contractors on whether or not clients obtain temporary help jobs (even allowing for some inflation in their reporting).

The variability in contacts and placement reflects large differences among contractors’ views of the value of temporary agency placement. Of the 21 contractors, 13 claimed to take a neutral stance on the issue, five discouraged temp jobs, and three reported that they encouraged such jobs. Over three-quarters of contractors thought that direct-hire jobs lasted longer and were more stable, and more than half thought they paid as well or about the same as temporary agency jobs. All who discouraged temporary agency jobs, and most of those who were neutral, believed that temporary agency jobs generally did not lead to permanent positions. Even two of the three who encouraged temporary agency employment said they did so only in cases when the position was explicitly “temp-to-hire” or when direct-hire options were poor. There was little disagreement about the benefits of using temporary help agencies for temp-to-hire placements. But interviewees noted that companies screening for permanent employees through an agency were usually looking for more skilled workers. Such workers would be relatively easy to place in either direct-hire or temporary agency positions.

Work First providers faced real difficulties in placing participants with very low skills, little or no work experience, or poor work ethics—individuals for whom direct-hire positions are often scant. Contractors were also under considerable pressure to increase their job placement rates. Given such constraints, over half the contractors thought that temp agency jobs were easier for those with

weak skills or experience to obtain; indeed, 43 percent viewed such jobs as the only realistic alternative to unemployment for some participants. These contractors believed that some clients were simply not ready to hold a permanent job, and that agencies could play a role in giving them work experience and an understanding of employers' expectations. Temporary employment allowed participants to sample different jobs, make contacts with many different employers and, if they did not like a particular job, request reassignment to avoid the stigma of quitting. Flexibility in work scheduling was also widely cited as an advantage of temp work—almost two-thirds of contractors thought that temporary agency jobs were better at accommodating participants' needs.

Contractors who worked with temporary help agencies tended to stick to one or more agencies with which they had developed specific relationships and clear understandings about the duration of job assignments and the prospects for permanence. They avoided agencies that offered very short-term employment, for example, assignments with day-labor agencies.

The long-term consequences of temporary agency placements

The most important question for welfare-to-work policy is whether temporary agency placements foster stable, longer-term employment, ideally at wages that can support a family. On this, contractors did not agree. More than half of the contractors believed that temp placements helped participants develop confidence, but there were offsetting effects. A majority thought that temp placements allowed participants to avoid making a serious commitment to employment. For one thing, a contractor commented, a temporary agency job “allows a person to stay compliant with Work First requirements, so they can't be terminated from the program. But unless the job is temp-to-hire, they will end up back in the program. It could be six months, it could be a year later, but they will end up back in the program, in the same place. They won't have made any advances.”

The divergent policies and practices of contractors who provided services to the same Work First population and operated in the same labor market resulted in different rates of placement into temporary-agency jobs, direct-hire jobs, or no job. Coupled with the random assignment of participants among contractors, these different practices enabled Autor and Houseman to identify the longer-term labor market effects of temporary agency placements, in particular, their effect on the probability of leaving welfare and escaping poverty.

What the administrative data say

A key challenge, as noted above, for any empirical investigation of this sort is establishing a chain of cause and

effect. It is not possible simply to compare subsequent employment and earnings among Work First participants who obtain direct-hire jobs, temporary jobs, or no job while in the program, because these participants have very different characteristics. Those placed in direct-hire and temp jobs had higher earnings during the next two years than those not placed in a job. But they also had significantly higher levels of education and earnings *before* they entered Work First. And because participants' observable characteristics—such as education and prior earnings—differed, it is highly likely that their unmeasured characteristics, such as motivation and employment barriers, also differed.

In the Autor and Houseman study, the quasi-experimental nature of the Detroit Work First program was key to identifying the true effects of placement into a temporary help job, a direct-hire job, or no job on subsequent employment, earnings, and welfare outcomes. As noted above, Work First participants were, in effect, randomly assigned to contractors, and so contractors operating in the same district had comparable populations (more precisely, identical populations in a statistical sense). These contractors had different job placement practices, however, but otherwise provided virtually identical services.

Estimating the longer-run effects of temporary sector employment

Using this quasi-experimental design, Autor and Houseman estimated how the Work First participants would fare over time if they were placed in a direct-hire or a temporary agency job, relative to no job at all.⁸ Both direct-hire and temporary placement significantly increased participants' employment and earnings (relative to no job placement) over the quarter following program entry. Direct-hire placements continued to do so for two years after program entry. In contrast, the early positive effects of temporary agency job placements were short-lived. Two to eight quarters following their entry into the program, the employment and earnings of those initially placed in temporary agency positions showed no increase at all in employment or earnings, relative to those with no placement. And those in temp positions had significantly lower employment rates and labor earnings than those in direct-hire jobs.

To examine whether temporary agency placements helped participants leave welfare and escape poverty, Autor and Houseman used several measures. First, they determined the proportion of participants who left Work First because they had obtained a job that paid enough to close their TANF cases. This is the immediate and explicit goal of the Work First program, so that a case closed because of earnings is considered to be an indicator of the success of the program. Overall, about 18 percent of Work First spells in the sample ended because of earnings. About 38 percent of participants with a direct-hire job and 33 percent of those with a temporary agency job achieved earnings levels sufficient to close their TANF cases during their Work First spell. Using the

Table 1
Participants with Earnings Sufficient to Escape Welfare or Poverty, during the Two Years after Their Work First Orientation

	Welfare Threshold, Family of 3	Welfare Threshold, Family of 4	Poverty Threshold, Family of 3	Poverty Threshold, Family of 4
Quarter 1 (N = 36,105)				
No job	6.7 %	5.4 %	3.4 %	2.1 %
Direct-hire job	21.3	17.0	9.9	5.2
Temp job	21.1	16.4	9.7	5.2
Quarters 1-4 (N = 36,105)				
No job	9.1	7.1	4.2	2.2
Direct-hire job	22.1	17.5	10.0	5.3
Temp job	21.3	17.1	9.5	5.4
Quarters 5-8 (N = 25,118)				
No job	12.2	10.1	8.8	5.1
Direct-hire job	19.8	16.5	15.0	8.5
Temp job	19.3	16.0	14.5	8.9

Note: Panels labeled Quarter 1 and Quarters 1–4 include Work First participants entering from the third quarter of 1999 through the second quarter of 2003. Participants in the last panel (Quarters 5–8) entered from the third quarter of 1999 through the second quarter of 2002.

quasi-random-assignment design, the authors find that direct-hire job placements significantly increased the probability of a successful case closure based on earnings, but temporary agency employment did not.⁹

The case-closure measure was important to contractors because they were evaluated by it, but from a broader policy perspective it is potentially flawed. Participants who do not find a job while in the program may find employment on their own and leave welfare, but are not counted as “successes” by this measure. And individuals who are terminated because of earnings might lose the job and be back on welfare and in Work First in a relatively short time. To overcome these difficulties, Autor and Houseman examined whether participants earned enough over a longer time to end their dependence on welfare and escape poverty. Because the data did not allow them to compute individual welfare and poverty thresholds for the sample, they selected several thresholds as measures of success. They used both welfare and poverty thresholds because the income threshold for welfare benefits is considerably below the poverty level for any given family size. In Michigan, earnings needed to cut welfare benefits for a family of three with two dependent children, for example, were \$9,504 in 2003, only 64 percent of the poverty level.

Relatively few participants attained earnings even above the lowest threshold, as Table 1 shows. In the first four quarters after program entry, for example, just over 20 percent of those with either type of job earned above the welfare threshold for a family of three. In the first year after they entered the program, around 5 percent of those working earned above the poverty threshold for a family of four with three dependent children.

Regression analyses which took advantage of the agency variation in placement rates to identify the effect of tem-

porary employment showed different short- and medium-term effects. They indicated that in the near term (the first quarter after program entry), both direct-hire and temporary employment significantly raised the probability that participants’ earnings would exceed the welfare or poverty thresholds. The picture was distinctly different when the time horizon was extended. Direct-hire jobs significantly increased the probability that earnings would exceed the income level necessary for a family of three or four to remain off welfare for the two years after entry. For example, the earnings of a woman placed in a direct-hire job were more likely to exceed the welfare threshold for a family of four by 5.9 percentage points in the first year and by 10.8 percentage points in the second year. In contrast, temporary agency placements did not appear to help participants stay off welfare. The effects of such placements on the probability of earning above the welfare threshold were insignificant and even negative (though very small).

For the higher poverty thresholds, neither temporary agency nor direct-hire placements helped participants escape poverty over the one-to-two-year period following their entry into the program. And relative to direct-hire placement and even to no placement at all, the effects of temporary agency placement on the probability that participants earned above the poverty threshold for a family of four in the year after entry were significantly *negative*, though again small.

Should employment programs use temporary agency placement?

These analyses found no evidence that suggests that employment programs would gain by increasing the use of temporary employment agencies as labor market intermediaries for low-skilled workers. Although such agencies

did raise the probability that Work First participants earned above the welfare and poverty thresholds over very short time horizons, these effects quickly dissipated. Over one to two years, temporary agency placements did not increase the chances that participants would earn enough to leave welfare and escape poverty, and by some measures they even reduced these chances. Raising the number of direct-hire placements is likely to be a much more effective means for job assistance programs to reduce welfare dependency over the short and the long term.

These results do not imply that temporary agency jobs never improve long-term outcomes for participants. Certainly such cases occur on a regular basis. What the Autor and Houseman analysis shows, however, is that, on average, the benefits of temporary help job placements induced by job assistance programs are nil. Thus, the Autor and Houseman analysis directly addresses the germane policy question “Can job assistance programs improve labor market outcomes for participants by placing more clients in temporary agency positions?” Their analysis suggests the answer is generally “No.”

Why should this be the case? The analysis suggests some plausible explanations. Contractors reported that temporary help jobs were more plentiful than direct-hire jobs, particularly for those with weak skills and experience, but generally did not lead to permanent positions. According to contractors, some temporary agency jobs could provide useful entrees into permanent placements with good employers. But these temp-to-hire jobs generally required skills and experience that their clients typically did not possess. The researchers’ estimates indicate that temporary agency placements subsequently resulted in increased earnings in the temporary help sector but reduced earnings in direct-hire jobs. This implies that many of the participants who obtained temporary help jobs through job assistance programs would have been likely to obtain direct-hire work on their own (perhaps after a longer period of job search). The analysis also finds some evidence that participants placed in temporary agency jobs are more likely than other participants to continue working in the temporary help sector and more vulnerable to frequent spells of non-employment and shorter periods of work. Indeed, participants placed in temporary help jobs during the first Work First spell were significantly more likely to be back on welfare within two years than were participants placed in direct-hire jobs.

Some of the contractors interviewed held the view that a certain segment of the temporary agency market accommodated individuals with very weak skills, experience, and motivation to work by providing them with jobs that required few skills and no long-term commitment. Yet these are precisely the qualities that tend to keep such individuals in poverty. It is plausible that job placements that might help individuals overcome rather than accom-

modate these barriers will be more beneficial in the long run. And to that end, an incentive structure for contractors that stresses longer-term outcomes might reduce welfare dependence and poverty levels by easing the pressures on program providers to move participants quickly into any job available, whether or not these jobs are likely to offer longer-term benefits to participants. ■

¹In 1999, African Americans were overrepresented in the ranks of temp workers by 86 percent, Hispanics by 31 percent, and high-school dropouts by 59 percent; college graduates, by contrast, were underrepresented by 47 percent (M. DiNatale, “Characteristics and Preference for Alternative Work Arrangements, 1999,” *Monthly Labor Review* 124, no. 3 [2001]: 28–49). On temporary sector employment among welfare recipients, see, e.g., C. Heinrich, P. Mueser, and K. Troske, “Welfare to Temporary Work: Implications for Labor Market Outcomes,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 87, no. 1 (2005): 154–73 (on North Carolina and Missouri); M. Cancian, R. Haveman, T. Kaplan, and B. Wolfe, *Post-Exit Earnings and Benefit Receipt among Those Who Left AFDC in Wisconsin*, IRP Special Report 75, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1999.

²Heinrich and colleagues, “Welfare to Temporary Work”; M. Ferber and J. Waldfogel, “The Long-Term Consequences of Nontraditional Employment,” *Monthly Labor Review* 121, no. 5 (1998): 3–12; and M. Corcoran and J. Chen, “Temporary Employment and Welfare to Work,” unpublished paper, University of Michigan, 2004.

³H. Holzer, “Encouraging Job Advancement among Low-Wage Workers: A New Approach,” Welfare and Beyond Policy Brief no. 30, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 2004; J. Lane, K. Mikelson, P. Sharkey, and D. Wissoker, “Pathways to Work for Low-Income Workers: The Effect of Work in the Temporary Help Industry,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 22, no. 4 (2003): 581–98.

⁴For discussions of the various hypotheses, see D. Autor, “Why Do Temporary Help Firms Provide Free General Skills Training?” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 116, no. 4 (2001): 1409–48; S. Houseman, “Why Employers Use Flexible Staffing Arrangements: Evidence from an Establishment Survey,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 55, no. 1 (2001): 149–70; and H. Jorgenson and H. Riemer, “Permatemps: Young Temp Workers as Permanent Second Class Employees,” *American Prospect* 11, no. 18 (2000): 38–40.

⁵For an analysis of the random nature of the assignment, see D. Autor and S. Houseman, “Do Temporary Help Jobs Improve Labor Market Outcomes for Low-Skilled Workers? Evidence from Random Assignments,” Working Paper 05-02, National Poverty Center, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, September 2005.

⁶The median Work First spell in our sample was slightly under 3 months, and 96 percent of participants were terminated from the program in less than a year.

⁷Many participants engaged in more than one Work First spell—36 percent of the sample reentered Work First within a year of their first entry and over half were back within two years.

⁸We estimated both OLS and two-stage least squares models; the latter permit a causal interpretation.

⁹Our two-stage least squares models indicate that direct-hire placement significantly increased (by nearly 25 percent) the probability that a participant would reach this earnings level. Temporary agency employment, although still positive (11.5 percent), is insignificant.

**Working and Poor:
How Economic and Policy Changes Are Affecting Low-Wage Workers**

Rebecca M. Blank, Sheldon H. Danziger, and Robert F. Schoeni, editors

Over the last three decades, large-scale economic developments, such as technological change, the decline in unionization, and changing skill requirements, have exacted their biggest toll on low-wage workers. These workers often possess few marketable skills and few resources with which to support themselves during periods of economic transition. In *Working and Poor* various scholars examine how economic and policy changes over the last twenty-five years have affected the well-being of low-wage workers and their families.

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Race and poverty: Divergent fortunes of America's children?

Daniel T. Lichter, Zhenchao Qian and Martha L. Crowley

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It is widely believed that children in America may be on separate tracks into adulthood.¹ On one track are economically advantaged children, many of whom reside with two highly educated parents. The other track typically includes poor children residing with a single mother or with two parents struggling to make ends meet in a changing global economy. In many ways, these tracks represent distinct fortunes along lines of racial and ethnic background. White children are proportionally over-represented among the more advantaged segments of the child population, while children of historically disadvantaged racial minorities and America's "new" immigrants make up disproportionately large shares of the economically deprived.

How true is this perception? In the study whose findings we summarize here, our goal is to document racial differentials in child poverty, while also evaluating the potentially divergent economic paths among America's racial and ethnic minority children. The key question here is not whether the children of racial and ethnic minorities are poor, but whether—and to what extent—they are joining the American economic mainstream. Our findings demonstrate that analyses of poverty, without attention to racial/ethnic diversity and inequality, misrepresent the changing circumstances of America's disadvantaged children.

Child poverty and racial inequality

The racial and ethnic makeup of the United States has changed dramatically over the last half of the 20th century, largely because of immigration from Latin America and Asia. In 1950, for example, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that nearly 90 percent of America's 151 million people were white, and blacks accounted for well over 90 percent of the nonwhite population.² Today, the white population share has fallen to 75 percent of the U.S. population, and about 8 percent of whites are of Hispanic origin. Hispanics are now America's largest racial or

ethnic minority—at 12.5 percent—whereas the black population has remained relatively constant at 10 to 12 percent since 1950. A diverse Asian population comprising many different nationalities accounts for about 4 percent of the U.S. population.³ Overall, in 2000, nearly 2 out of 5 children were members of racial/ethnic minority groups and/or immigrant families.⁴

Poverty in America has changed as well—becoming increasingly “juvenilized” over the past three decades.⁵ In the 1960s, the child poverty rate was only 60 percent of the poverty rate for the elderly, but was 180 percent of the elderly rate by the early 1990s. These same decades witnessed dramatic changes in family circumstances associated with child poverty. In the 1960s, most poor children lived in married-couple families. By the end of the 1990s, 57 percent of poor children lived in female-headed families.⁶ Research has suggested that about half of the rise in child poverty during the 1980s was attributable to shifts in the child population from married-couple families to “high-risk” female-headed families.⁷ These shifts slowed in the 1990s, and were no longer associated with increases in poverty, even among children.⁸

The child poverty rate peaked at 23 percent during the 1993 recession, subsequently declining to 16 percent at the end of the decade, the lowest level in 20 years. Yet, the overall decline in poverty and patterns of family change may conceal very different trends among subgroups of children, some of whom may not have benefited from economic growth in the 1990s. Large racial and ethnic differences in child poverty persist while racial diversity has grown rapidly.

Data and methodology

This analysis uses 1990 and 2000 U.S. census data weighted to correct for underrepresented populations in order to ensure a nationally representative sample including minorities and immigrants.⁹ Our sample is limited to

The ideas discussed in this article are developed at length in “Poverty and Economic Polarization among Children in Racial Minority and Immigrant Families,” included in *Handbook of Families and Poverty: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by D. Russell Crane and Tim B. Heaton (Sage Publications, 2007).

children age 17 or younger who are related to the head of the household, or whose parent is an unmarried partner of the head of the household.¹⁰ The total sample includes over 3 million children in both 1990 and 2000.¹¹ For each child, we have information on the family and the parents, including parents' marital or cohabiting partners.¹² Because parents may pool incomes with cohabiting partners, we include supplemental analysis in which we define unmarried partners and their coresident children as a family, and adjust child poverty statistics to account for these living arrangements.¹³

Child poverty

As suspected, the overall decline in poverty conceals very different trends among subgroups of children (Figure 1). Rates declined modestly for non-Hispanic whites and Asians, but significantly for African Americans and Native Americans. On the other hand, these historically disadvantaged groups had the highest child poverty rates in 2000—both exceeding 30 percent. Asian Americans had the lowest child poverty rate among racial minorities in 2000, and non-Hispanic whites had the lowest rate overall.

Family structure

Because children in married-couple families are less likely to be poor than those in female-headed single families, we asked whether poverty declines over the 1990s reflected changes in family structure. First, we estimated what poverty rates might have been if children lived in the same kinds of families in 2000 as they did in 1990; as Figure 2 shows, poverty would have fallen further if family structure had remained stable. These results indicate that changes in family structure slowed the decline in child poverty during the 1990s.

Second, we asked how changes in child poverty rates would have differed in the absence of race differences in family structure (Figure 3). In other words, what race differences would be apparent if children were uniformly distributed among married-couple and single-parent families (in rates reflective of the total child population)? In this case, child poverty rates would have been higher for whites and Asian Americans, who are more likely to live in married-couple families, but lower for blacks and Native Americans, who are more likely to live in single-parent families. Racial differences in family structure account for some, but not all of the differences in child

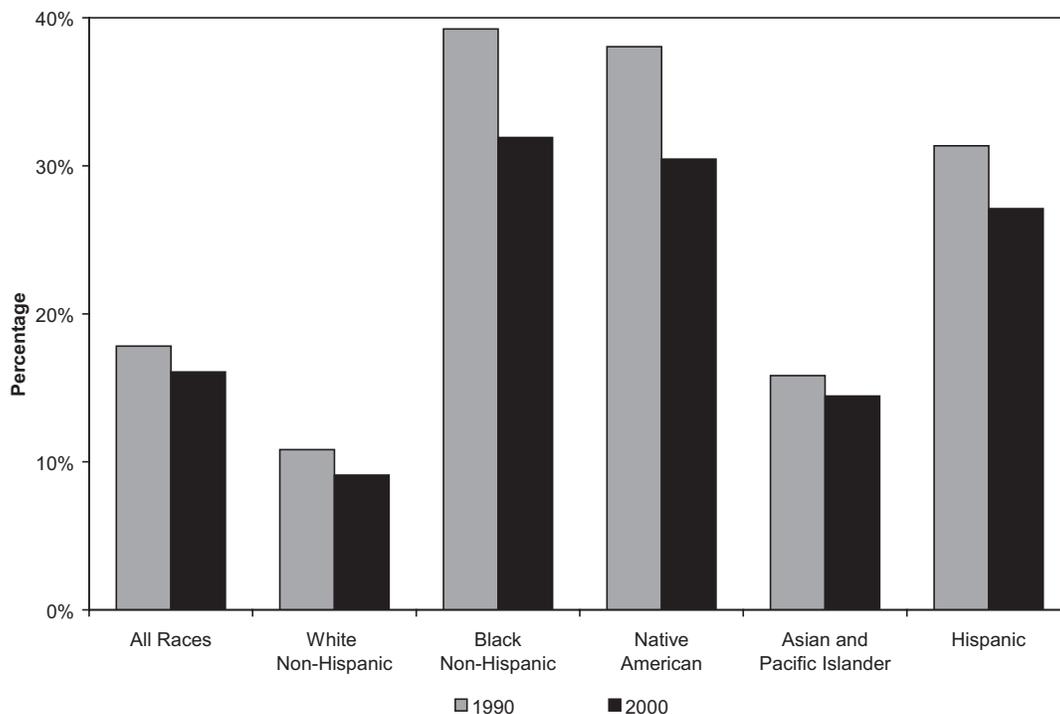


Figure 1. Child poverty by race, 1990 and 2000.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) 5 percent sample.

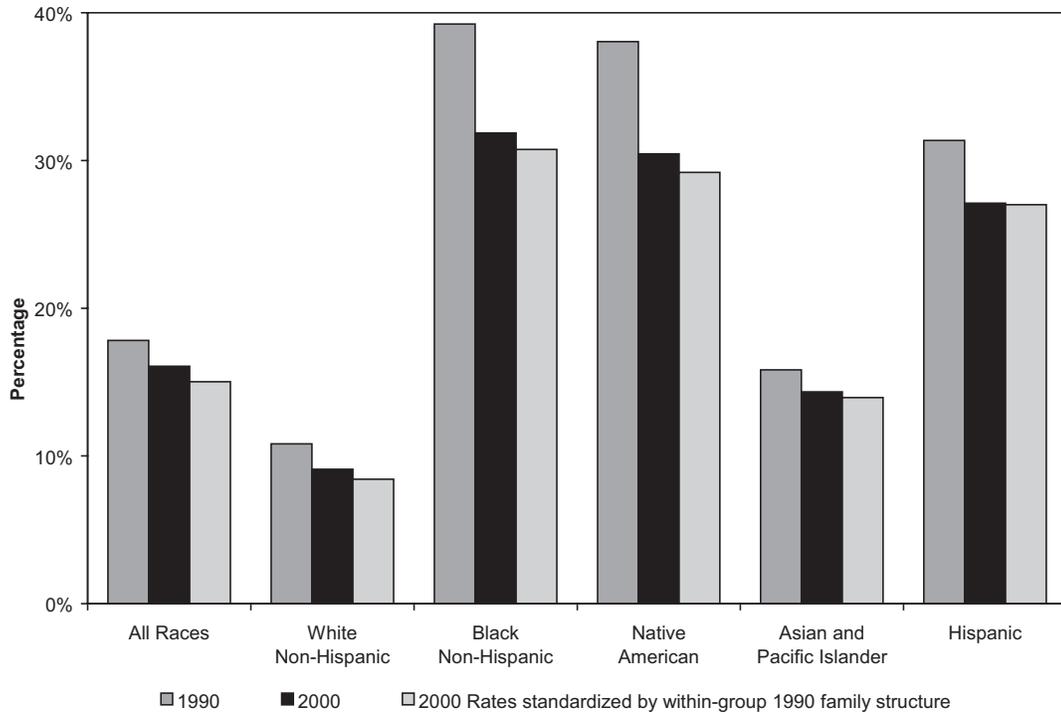


Figure 2. Estimated poverty rate change in the absence of family structure change.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, IPUMS 5 percent sample.

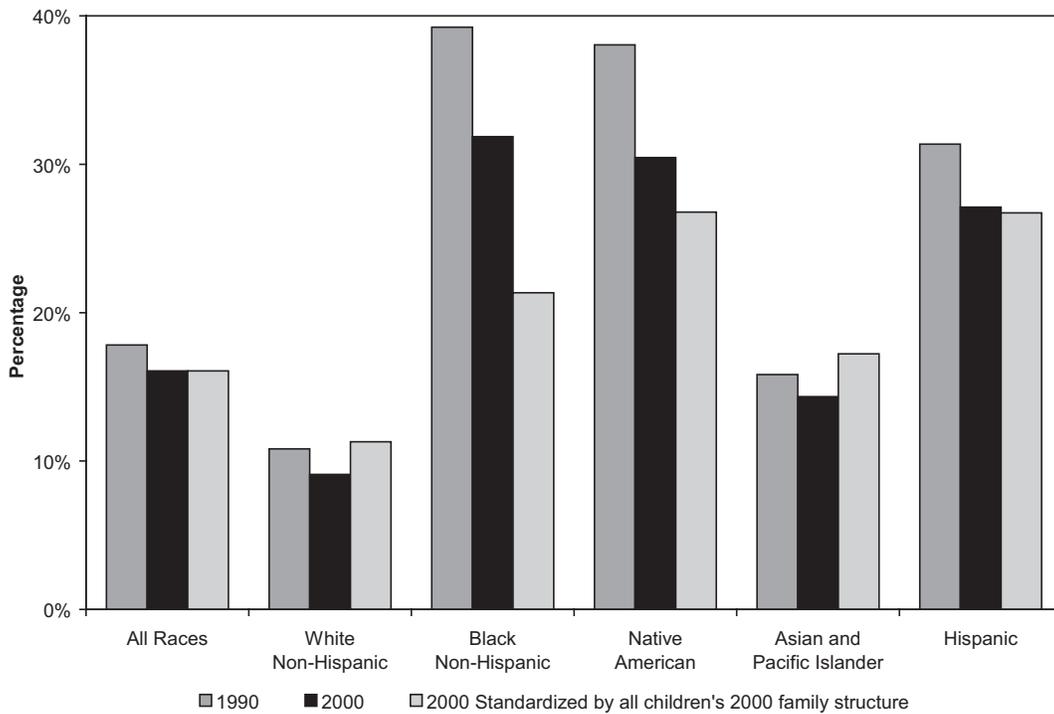


Figure 3. Estimated poverty-rate change if family structure did not vary by race.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, IPUMS 5 percent sample.

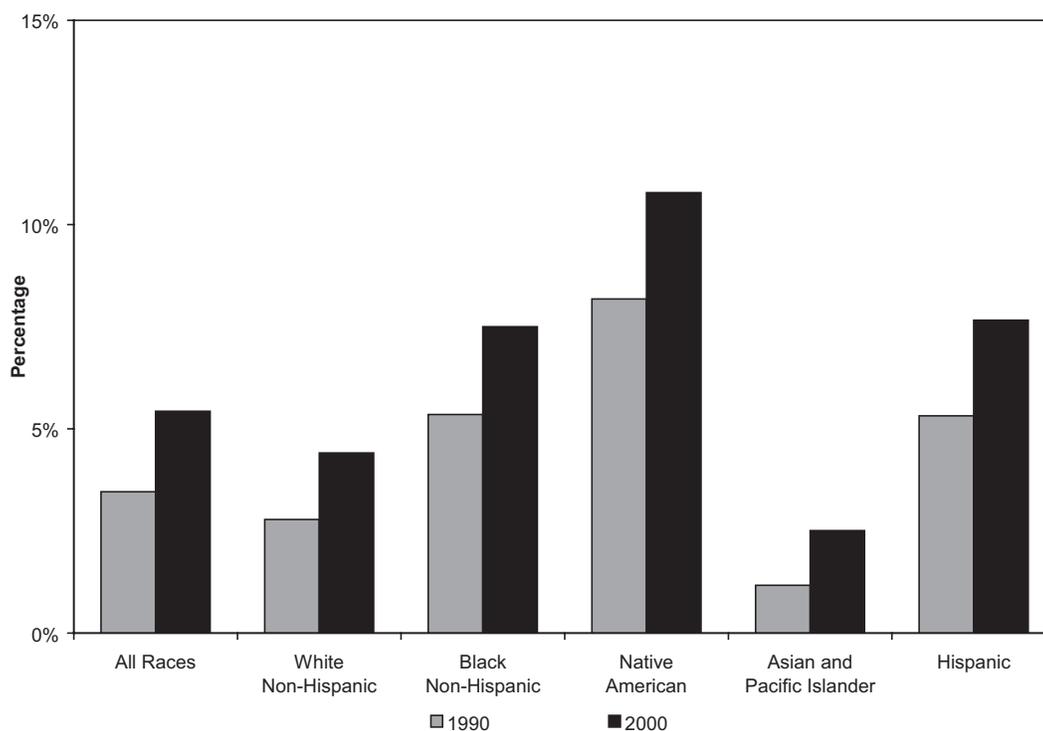


Figure 4. Percentage of children residing with a cohabiting couple.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, IPUMS 5 percent sample.

poverty. For example, if black children lived in married-couple families in the same proportion as whites, their poverty rates would still be nearly double those of white children.

Evaluating poverty among children living in single-parent families is increasingly complex because a growing number of children of all ethnic groups also live with a parent’s cohabiting partner. Our estimates suggest that the percentage of children living in cohabiting families increased from 3.5 percent to 5.4 percent from 1990 to 2000 (Figure 4). Although it may be unrealistic to assume that partners pool their incomes to the benefit of coresidential children, we ask how rates of child poverty would change if coresident parents married their cohabiting partners, and family configuration and income were adjusted accordingly (Figure 5). Our measure surely overstates the degree to which children benefit economically from cohabiting-parent relationships. Nevertheless, it demonstrates a potential benefit, and suggests that the family-based measure, which has not kept pace with children’s changing living arrangements, may overstate the number of children actually living below the poverty threshold.

Maternal employment

Family changes alone cannot explain recent declines in child poverty. Poverty has declined even within the most disadvantaged subgroup—children living in female-

headed families. Our estimates (Figure 6) show that the rise in maternal employment accounted for about one-third of the 9-percentage-point decline in poverty for children in single-mother families. This suggests that increases in maternal employment over the 1990s lifted many at-risk children out of poverty.

Do differences in maternal employment also explain large racial differences in poverty rates among children in single-parent families? To address this question, we calculated an “employment-standardized” rate of child poverty for 2000, which assumes that maternal employment patterns in each racial group were identical to those of all single mothers. Our results indicate that if maternal employment rates were the same for each group, blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics would have even higher child poverty rates relative to white or Asian children. Other explanations for these racial differences must be considered, such as differences in wage rates attributable to lower education, limited opportunities, or discrimination.

Income inequality

If we focus only on declining poverty rates during the 1990s, we may overlook evidence that poor children today may be poorer than in the past, or that the incomes of poor children may have increased in absolute terms while declining relative to the rising incomes of middle-class and affluent children. We asked whether income inequal-

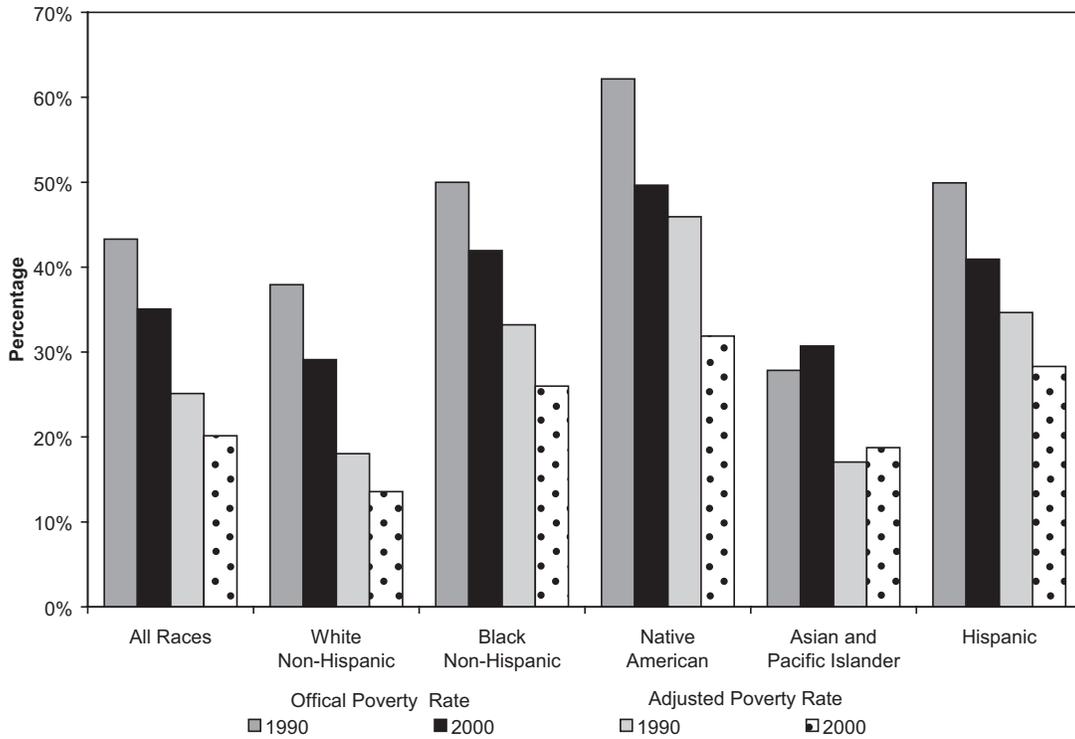


Figure 5. Official and adjusted poverty rates for children living with cohabiting parents.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, IPUMS 5 percent sample.

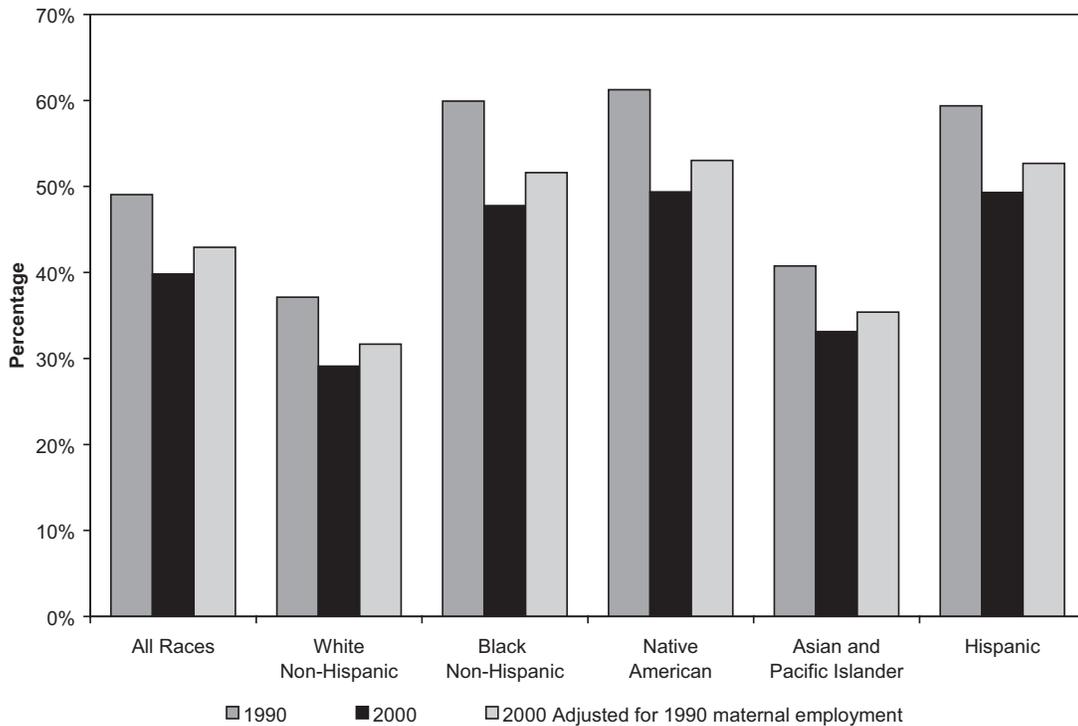


Figure 6. Poverty-rate changes for children living with single mothers, actual, and adjusted for maternal employment.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, IPUMS 5 percent sample.

ity among children changed during the 1990s, and whether growing racial diversity altered existing patterns of racial inequality. In other words, has the racial distribution of affluent children become “whiter” while the ranks of the poor increasingly comprise historically disadvantaged minorities or America’s “new” immigrants?

To address these questions, we first compared trends in children’s income-to-needs ratios (family income relative to poverty threshold) (Figure 7). Between 1990 and 2000, these ratios increased for every race group at the 20th, 50th, and 80th income percentiles. For example, family incomes for all children at the 20th percentile increased from 10 percent over the poverty threshold in 1990 to 19 percent over the threshold in 2000. Yet, racial differences in ratios were sizeable throughout the income distribution, with lower ratios apparent for blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics at each percentile.

To assess whether income inequality increased in the 1990s, we calculated the ratio of family income at the 80th percentile to family income at the 20th percentile; a higher ratio represents greater income inequality. As Figure 8 shows, the ratio of the family income of affluent to low-income children increased only slightly in the 1990s, from 3.92 to 3.98 (meaning that affluent children had about four times as much family income as low-income children in both 1990 and 2000). We find little evidence for large increases in income inequality over this period, at least as measured with these points in the income

distribution. For historically disadvantaged children such as blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics, income inequality appears to have actually declined during the 1990s. On a percentage basis, the incomes of minority children at the bottom of the within-group income distribution grew faster than the incomes of minority children at the top. The declines in child poverty among these children, accompanied by income growth and declines in income inequality, appear to mark a significant departure from the trends of previous decades.¹⁴

Distribution of children among income classes

Any interpretation of income growth must also take into account the changing percentages of children in particular income classes. Perhaps more poor children are deeply impoverished today, or families of poor children who rise above the poverty line still have quite low incomes. Figure 9 shows that overall, the percentage of children living in deep poverty declined from 1990 to 2000, but the percentage in marginal or near poverty remained largely unchanged.¹⁵ The overall decline in child poverty during the 1990s apparently reflected mostly the declining percentage of the most impoverished children. At the same time, the share of affluent children increased slightly, with a corresponding decrease in the middle-class share. The decline in the percentage in deep poverty is particularly evident for black children. Racial differences are also reflected in the composition of each income class. In 2000, nearly 70 percent of deeply poor

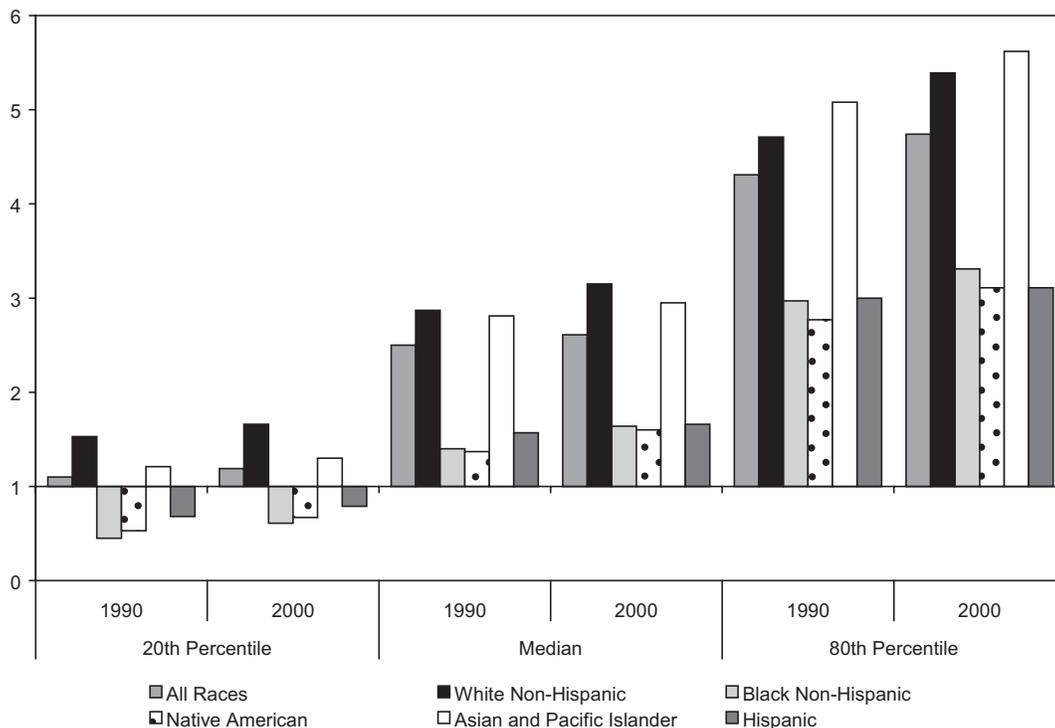


Figure 7. Income-to-needs ratios.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, IPUMS 5 percent sample.

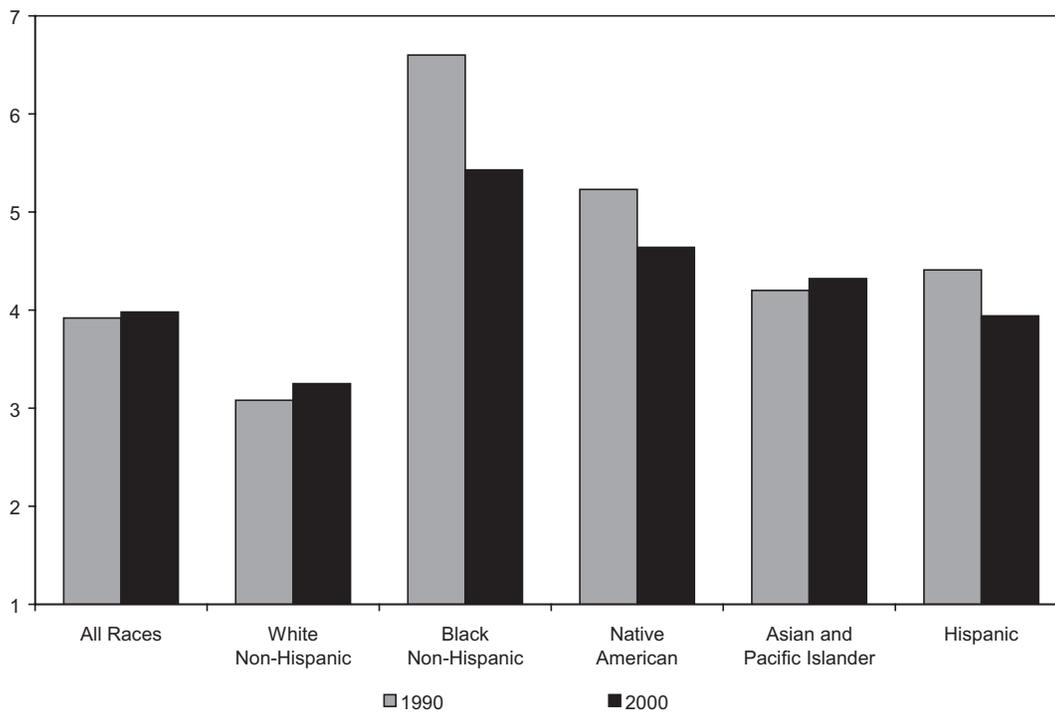


Figure 8. Ratio of family income at the 80th and 20th percentiles.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, IPUMS 5 percent sample.

children were racial minorities, whereas only 20 percent of affluent children were minorities.

How do families with children compare to those without?

Overall, families without children were more likely than those with children to be at the extremes of the income distribution. A higher and growing percentage of families without children lived in deep poverty. For families with children, the comparable percentages were roughly one-half as large, and declined over the decade. Similar patterns of inequality between families with and without children were evident across racial groups. Racial differences in poverty tend to be smaller when families rather than children are the unit of analysis. This is partly attributable to family size and composition differences among families of different races and socioeconomic status.¹⁶

Conclusion and policy implications

The current economic circumstances of minority children provide a window to the future of racial stratification and inequality. The 1990s were a period of widespread poverty declines for America's children. Each of the racial groups considered here appears to have benefited from this period of economic and employment growth. Our results suggest that this growth, particularly in maternal employment, accounted for the largest share of declines in the child poverty rate. In the past, changes in family

structure such as the shift from married-couple to single-parent families had affected child poverty rates, but the 1990s brought little change in children's living arrangements.

Our results with respect to racial and ethnic diversity in children's economic circumstances do not lend themselves to simple conclusions. On the one hand, maternal employment played a large role in accounting for declines in child poverty among minority children. On the other hand, high rates of poverty among children of minority families cannot be explained away by existing differences in employment rates or work patterns among children's mothers. Conversely, whereas changes in family structure cannot fully explain the trends in child poverty among population subgroups, racial differences in family structure continue to account for a significant portion of the differences in child poverty among minority groups. Our results confirm the view that differential child poverty rates by race cannot be discussed in isolation from the currently large racial differences in out-of-wedlock childbearing, marriage, and divorce.

Any analysis of trends in child poverty, if considered alone, may give a rather incomplete or even misleading picture of children's changing economic circumstances. Significantly, our results indicate that the family incomes of America's poorest children, regardless of racial or ethnic background, increased during the 1990s, at the same time as poverty rates declined. Rates of deep pov-

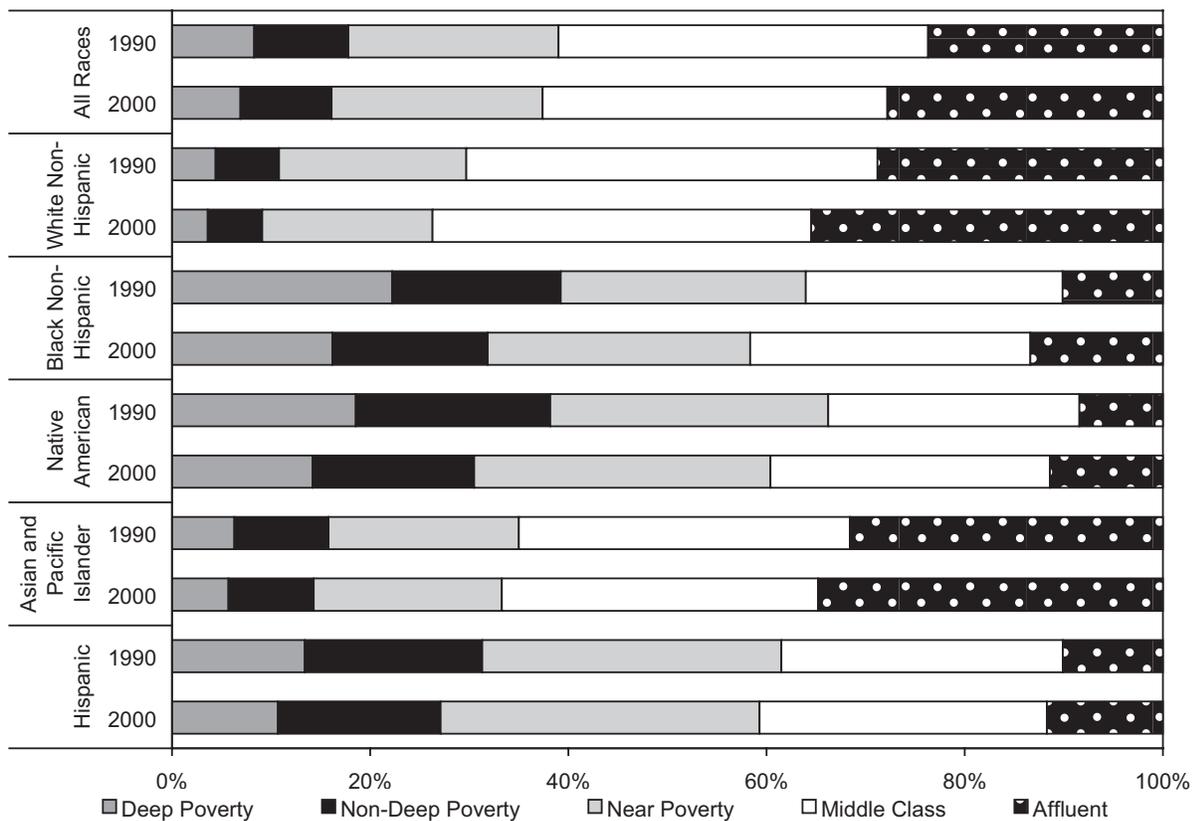


Figure 9. Child poverty and affluence by race.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, IPUMS, 5 percent sample.

erty also declined among children and families with children. The growth in income inequality among children also apparently slowed significantly during the 1990s. For most racial and ethnic groups, the incomes of the poorest children increased at a similar or faster pace over the past decade than the incomes of “average” or wealthy children. Still, it is also the case that the absolute dollar gap in income between America’s poor and affluent children increased during the 1990s. Whether trends and racial differences in poverty and income during the 1990s should be viewed largely with optimism or pessimism is a matter of personal judgment or emphasis. There can be no disagreement, however, that racial differences in economic well-being remain large in the United States. Few observers will disagree that any progress toward racial inequality has been slow, or that continuing high rates of child poverty today will reproduce existing patterns of racial inequality in the future. Only by severing the link between childhood and adult poverty through better education, a secure safety net, or economic opportunity will America’s future take a different or faster route toward racial economic equality. ■

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⁷D. J. Eggebeen and D. T. Lichter, “Race, Family Structure, and Changing Poverty among American Children,” *American Sociological Review* 56 (1991): 801–817.

⁸J. Iceland, “Why Poverty Remains High: The Role of Income Growth, Economic Inequality, and Changes in Family Structure, 1949–1999,” *Demography* 40 (2003): 499–519; D. T. Lichter, Z. Qian, and M. L. Crowley, “Child Poverty among Racial Minorities and Immigrants: Explaining Trends and Differentials,” *Social Science Quarterly* 86 (2005): 1037–1059.

⁹The data come from the Integrated Public Use Microdata (IPUMS) drawn from the decennial censuses, S. Ruggles, M. Sobek, T. Alexander, C. A. Fitch, R. Goeken, P. K. Hall, M. King, and C.

Ronnander, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3.0," Minneapolis: Historical Census Projects, University of Minnesota, 2003.

¹⁰Children who head households or who are married to heads of households are excluded from our analysis.

¹¹We also draw secondary samples for the purpose of comparing the income distributions of families with and without children. Individuals aged 12 to 59 not residing in group quarters are weighted with the person weight and aggregated to the level of the household and then the family. This sample includes 3,935,446 families in 1990 and 4,727,901 families in 2000. Children were present in 51 percent of families in 1990 and 46 percent of families in 2000.

¹²A small number of cases lacking basic demographic data for the head of household are excluded.

¹³Children are defined as poor when they live in families with incomes below the official poverty income thresholds for families with their specific size and configuration (i.e., adults and children), as determined by the Office of Management and Budget. Family income is measured in the year prior to the year of enumeration. Thus, poverty status for 1990 and 2000 is based on money income and poverty thresholds for 1989 and 1999, respectively.

¹⁴Studies that used data from before 1990 suggested that income inequality was increasing. For example, see D. T. Lichter and D. J. Eggebeen, "Rich Kids, Poor Kids: Changing Income Inequality among American Children," *Social Forces* 73 (1993): 761–780.

¹⁵All income classes are based on family income relative to the poverty threshold: "deep poverty" is under 50 percent of the threshold; "marginal poverty" is between 50 and 100 percent of the threshold; "near poverty" is between 100 and 200 percent of the threshold; "middle class" is between 200 and 400 percent of the threshold, and affluent is more than 400 percent of the threshold.

¹⁶Analyses for children weight families by family size, which is positively associated with poverty. For example, a poor single mother with three children is counted as one poor family, but three poor children.

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Welfare reform as a failed political strategy: Evidence and explanations for the stability of public opinion

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Public policies are the primary instruments governments use to address social and economic problems. Yet they also serve a second, more political function. Lawmakers are not just problem solvers; they are also political actors who, like good chess players, try to “think two moves ahead” before taking an action that could improve or undermine their strategic position going forward. Thus, as lawmakers try to gauge how a new policy might affect a particular social problem, they also contemplate its potential to mobilize or mollify the opposition, create pressures for further action, appease or outrage the party faithful, redistribute political resources, change the terms of debate, and so on. In the iterative game of politics, it pays to design policies in ways that yield advantages in the next round. As a result, students of poverty policy must analyze the initiatives that governments pursue, not just as efforts to achieve expressed social and economic goals, but also as forms of political action designed to enhance particular actors’ abilities to achieve long-term political goals.

In the decade since federal reform passed in 1996, most research on “the new world of welfare” has focused only on social and economic goals, such as those related to work and self-sufficiency, family and child well-being. Far less attention has been given to the political goals that motivated a significant cadre of reformers. In the 1990s, an influential group of political actors argued that, by reforming welfare and making aid recipients “play by the rules,” the Democratic Party could shed an electoral liability, free poverty politics from the crippling effects of racial resentment, and create a public opinion environment more favorable to antipoverty efforts. In the research summarized here we tested the prediction that policy reform would change the contours of American public opinion.¹ In what follows, we review evidence suggesting that this prediction largely failed and present a general set of theoretical propositions that explain the weak effects.

Welfare reform in the 1990s: The promise of a more generous public

For political liberals in the United States, the 1980s were hard times. The Republican Party controlled the White House and was winning support from traditionally Democratic voters in the white working class and the South. Efforts to cut back social supports instituted in the 1960s and 1970s were gaining steam. “Welfare”—which had once been a benign term applied to all public assistance, social insurance, and employment benefits—now carried a narrower and more pejorative meaning, tied in media coverage and in the public mind to images of lazy and dependent African Americans.² The stigmatized specter of “welfare handouts” seemed to have become a potent symbolic handicap for anti-poverty efforts and Democratic electoral fortunes.

Among liberals, these developments gave rise to intense self-reflection and, eventually, to a reformist impulse that has been labeled “progressive revisionism.” Progressive revisionists argued that Democrats had pursued divisive social policies in the 1960s, favoring the very poor and racial minorities over the white working-class mainstream. These policies, in turn, generated a public backlash against taxes and efforts to help the poor. Policy commitments symbolizing cultural and racial liberalism were now costing the Democrats at the polls and undercutting their more populist (and popular) economic agendas.³

Pronouncements by prominent policy scholars resonated with these political analyses. Some well-known liberal scholars argued that the social policies associated with the War on Poverty had “veered off course,” become mired in “helping conundrums,” and could never build a “bridge over the racial divide.”⁴ Conservative analysts reinforced these assessments with claims that permissive welfare policies had fueled racial stereotypes, bred pathology among the poor, and undercut public support for antipoverty efforts.⁵

To progressive revisionists, these arguments also suggested potential solutions. If the policies of the 1960s had moved public opinion in an unfavorable direction, perhaps Democrats in the 1990s could use policy proposals to signal renewed commitments to personal responsibility

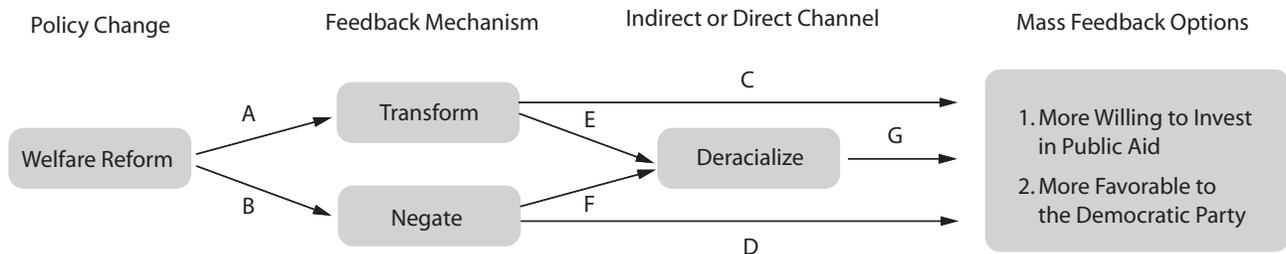


Figure 1. Path diagram of the Progressive Revisionist Thesis.

and the white working class. By ending “permissive” welfare, as conservatives had long sought to do, perhaps liberals could actually shift public opinion in a direction more favorable to liberal goals.

With poverty politics widely viewed as a frustrating and politically costly quagmire, centrists in the Democratic Party urged welfare reform as a strategy to move the public in a progressive direction and realign the image of the Democratic Party on social issues. Embracing this strategy, Bill Clinton made the pledge to “end welfare as we know it” a centerpiece of his 1992 presidential election campaign. Influenced by the arguments David Ellwood advanced in *Poor Support*, Clinton and his aides originally hoped to bargain for stronger social supports as a condition of imposing stronger work requirements and time limits on welfare receipt. After the Republicans captured Congress (and the reform agenda) in 1994, however, a more sequential political strategy emerged: restrictive behavioral rules passed now would make it easier to gain public support for social benefit expansions in the future. Dick Morris, Bruce Reed, and other centrist Clinton advisors argued that “the welfare restrictions—time limits and work requirements—would do more than revamp one discredited program. [They] would help create a political climate more favorable to the needy. Once taxpayers started viewing the poor as workers, not welfare cheats, a more generous era would ensue. Harmful stereotypes would fade. New benefits would flow. Members of minorities, being disproportionately poor, would disproportionately benefit.”⁶ President Clinton signed welfare reform into federal law in August 1996.

In the ensuing years, as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the signature program of welfare reform, came to be viewed as a policy success and public spending shifted from cash aid to work supports, the predictions of progressive revisionists morphed into claims of actual effects—sometimes cited to justify further “New Democratic” strategies. “The results so far have borne out the central New Democrat insight that inspired Clinton’s promise to end welfare: The way to

make U.S. social policy both more effective and more generous is to make it more morally demanding. . . . [Welfare reform is] visibly restoring public confidence in government’s ability to help the poor lift themselves up.”⁷

An analytic approach to the progressive revisionist thesis

We set out to test whether a decade of public opinion evidence supports such claims. To do so, we first translated the revisionist narrative described above into a model with direct, testable linkages. The path diagram in Figure 1 distinguishes between two variants of the progressive revisionist thesis. The first suggests that new policies would *transform* welfare into a program that would affirm majority values and present Americans with an antipoverty program they could support (Path A). By associating the poor with work, refusing to aid those who did not “play by the rules,” and publicly claiming credit for the policy, Democrats would cast themselves and future antipoverty efforts in a more positive light. By contrast, a second variant of the thesis implied that reform would move mass opinion by *negating* welfare—removing it, with all its pejorative meanings and heavy political baggage, from public discourse (Path B). With the distortions and distractions of “welfare” taken off the table, public attention would shift to more positive considerations regarding low-income families. For each variant in the model, there are direct paths for effects (Paths C and D), but there are also indirect paths of influence tied to deracialization of the poverty issue. In the transformative variant, the image of a “handout to lazy blacks” would be neutralized by a program design that clearly required work and responsible behavior (Path E). In the negative variant, removal of the racialized welfare issue would yield a similar outcome (Path F). With race removed from poverty politics, both the poor and the Democratic Party would benefit (Path G).

It is not possible to adequately test these predictions by comparing mass opinion in the final years of AFDC with

opinion after 1996. The heated campaign to reform welfare (1992 to 1996) had sharp but short-lived effects on mass opinion and, hence, would provide a misleading baseline for comparing post-reform opinion⁸ To obtain a more valid assessment, one must compare opinion at its “steady state” under AFDC, prior to 1992, with opinion at its steady state under TANF, after 1997. To do so, we treated the public opinion record as a simple interrupted time series, examining it for pre-post differences after discounting the years from 1992 to 1996. Our analysis relied on a variety of outcome measures rather than basing conclusions on a single measure, and we examined key relationships both with and without control variables.

Our data were drawn from both the General Social Survey (GSS) and the American National Election Studies (ANES). Both surveys are conducted on a biennial basis and offer nationally representative samples based on interviews with adults.

The direct channel of influence

Did work-oriented welfare reform improve public perceptions of welfare recipients, the poor, and welfare policy (Path A in Figure 1)? This prediction receives little support from the survey data. Certainly, a majority of the public expressed satisfaction with the policy: in 2001, about 61 percent of those who knew about welfare reform (about half of all respondents) said it was working well, and nearly two-thirds of these people said that the most important reason was that “the law requires people to go to work.” But expressing satisfaction with the general idea of “reform” is not the same thing as holding an improved view of welfare recipients or welfare policies. A closer look at the survey data suggests stability in Americans’ views of welfare. We find no significant change, for example, in the percentage of Americans who ascribe poverty to lack of effort and in the percentage who believe welfare recipients could do without the benefits they receive. Moreover, just as 64 percent of respondents in a 1989 Gallup Poll thought that “welfare benefits make poor people dependent and encourage them to stay poor,” 71 percent of respondents in a 2001 Pew Research Center poll thought that “poor people have become too dependent upon public assistance.” Attitudes toward the poor as a whole also remained stable.

By contrast, we do find some evidence that policy reform neutralized welfare as a salient object of public concern (Path B in Figure 1). From 1976 to 1986, between 8 and 12 percent of respondents volunteered “welfare” when asked, “What do you think are the most important problems facing this country?” In the political lull between the Family Support Act of 1988 and Clinton’s pledge to end welfare “as we know it,” this proportion declined. The reform campaign produced a large spike—rising to 26.6 percent in 1996. Thereafter, the importance of welfare declined equally abruptly—down to 4.8 percent in 2000, the most recent year the question was asked.

The ANES series also allows us to determine the proportion of respondents each year who volunteered “welfare” when asked, “Is there anything in particular that you [like/dislike] about the [Democratic/Republican] party?” From 1976 to 1986, “welfare” was named a basis of party evaluation by between 7.3 and 17.7 percent of respondents. The proportion naming welfare spiked as the welfare debate heated up in the early 1990s. But after 1996, welfare rapidly became less important, and in 2004, only 4 percent named it as a basis of party evaluation—even fewer than at the lowest point of concern under AFDC, in 1978.

Did other, more pressing issues, most notably terrorism and the Iraq war, contribute to the erasure of welfare from the public agenda after 2000? There is some evidence that they did. Public concern for a range of other domestic spending issues declined during this same period. Social Security, for example, was a major policy issue throughout this period, yet it faded from public attention in similar fashion. Yet the decline in welfare’s salience after the 1996 reforms was far greater than it had ever been before. Thus we consider these results at least consistent with the negative variant of the progressive revisionist thesis.

These and other similar findings from national polls suggest that welfare faded from the public agenda after 1996, but they offer little evidence that the underlying public images of welfare recipients and the poor shifted in any meaningful way.

The indirect channel of influence: Deracialization

Did welfare reform diminish the impact of race on poverty and welfare politics? The GSS, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center since 1972, includes a variety of measures that can be used to assess this issue. We examined, first, whether questions directed toward white preferences for spending on blacks were related to white preferences for spending on welfare and the poor.⁹ Between 1984 and 1991, whites who opposed efforts to “raise the living standards of blacks” were significantly more likely to oppose efforts to “raise the living standards of the poor.” Likewise, whites who opposed “spending to assist blacks” during this era also opposed “spending to assist the poor,” and whites who opposed efforts to raise living standards for blacks were significantly more likely to oppose welfare spending. We found no evidence that these relationships were weakened to any significant degree by the major changes in welfare policy during the 1990s.

There is further evidence of stability in white attitudes. In every GSS from 1985 to 2004, respondents were asked if they agreed that black-white living standard disparities existed because “most blacks just don’t have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of poverty.” A second measure, available only from 1990 to 2004,

asked respondents to rate “most blacks” on a seven-point scale running from “hard-working” to “lazy.” Neither measure showed a significant change in opinion correlated with the passage of welfare reform.

To analyze the sources of white welfare opposition, we constructed multivariate models that took into account respondents’ socioeconomic status, political affiliations, and core values. In these analyses we found little evidence that stereotypes weakened over these decades. Between 1985 and 1991, whites who believed that “blacks lack motivation” were significantly more likely to oppose welfare spending. The passage of TANF brought about no change in the statistical significance of this relationship. “Assistance to the poor” has historically drawn stronger public support than “welfare” and has been less centrally linked with racial views. We find some ambiguous evidence of weakening of this relationship after 1996. But the significant relationship between white preferences for aid to the poor and the belief that “blacks lack motivation” clearly persisted after welfare reform.

We turn to what is arguably the main prediction of the progressive revisionist thesis. Did the quieting of welfare disputes reduce public resistance to helping the poor?

Public generosity to the poor

The GSS has two items that measure willingness to help the poor: a five-point scale indicating support for the idea that government “should do everything possible to improve the living standard of all poor Americans” and a seven-point scale indicating support for the idea that government should “reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor.” We find that after 1996, opposition to improving the standard of living for poor Americans actually *increased* significantly, as did public opposition to reducing income differences between the rich and the poor. Moreover, when we used multiple regression analyses to test whether these policy preferences became less beholden to people’s views of “welfare” after 1996, we found no reduction in the relationship. To the contrary, regardless of the measure used, Americans who opposed welfare spending were significantly more likely to oppose helping the poor in 1984–1991, and this relationship became slightly *stronger* in the 1998–2004 period. These results proved robust for white respondents alone and for white respondents making below the median income.

In the wake of work-oriented welfare reform, then, the tendency to attribute poverty to lack of effort held steady, feelings toward the poor grew slightly cooler, and welfare retained negative connotations for large segments of the American public. Today, “welfare” remains deeply entwined with the idea of aiding the poor, with images of dependence and laziness, and with images of targeted aid to blacks. Thus, we find no evidence for the major out-

comes sought by progressive revisionists. The “end of welfare as we knew it” did not make Americans more willing to spend on the poor, on blacks, or on welfare, and it was actually followed by a decline in the public’s desire to reduce inequality and raise living standards for the poor. Although “the welfare issue” has become less salient, the basic configuration of public perceptions that existed under AFDC remains in place under TANF.

For space reasons, we will not review here in any detail our findings regarding the question of whether welfare reform drew new identifiers to the Democratic Party. Suffice it to say that welfare opponents remained just as numerous after 1996 as in the AFDC era, and that these individuals became no more likely to identify with the Democratic Party or vote for Democratic candidates. We find no evidence that the Democratic Party benefitted from welfare reform.

Why did welfare reform have such limited effects on mass opinion?

Progressive revisionists were right about many things. In the wake of political and policy changes in the 1960s, a racialized view of welfare emerged as a major contributor to negative views of the Democratic Party. Pre-1996 majorities did indeed want to reform welfare, and post-1996 majorities took a positive view of work-oriented welfare reform. Nonetheless, few of the opinion effects that revisionists predicted actually materialized.

Social welfare policies have, in the past, instigated major changes in mass opinion. New Deal policies, for example, encouraged new public beliefs about government’s responsibility for citizens’ economic well-being and new categories for perceiving and evaluating public policy—a “big bang” of opinion change.¹⁰ In the 1960s and 1970s, civil rights policies set in motion major changes in racial attitudes and political values. In light of those changes, the weak opinion effects associated with contemporary welfare reform pose a genuine puzzle for students of American politics and poverty policy. These weak effects invite an effort to explain the conditions under which policy changes should have stronger or weaker effects on public opinion. Is it possible to provide a general explanation for why the progressive revisionist thesis went wrong?

The primary problem, we argue, is that progressive revisionists focused on the *visibility* of welfare for Americans without attending to the fact that this policy had little *proximity* to the lives of most Americans. Regardless of this visibility in public discourse, policies may be distant from citizens’ everyday lives as a result of geography (as with some foreign policies), the patterning of social relations (as with an income-targeted policy in a class-segregated city), or time (as with policy effects that will be felt

personally but only at some remote date). When highly visible policies have proximate, tangible effects on peoples' lives, mass publics will experience them more directly and, hence, will gain greater ability to evaluate them through "individual observation rather than mass response to others' cues."¹¹ By contrast, when highly visible policies exist primarily as distant objects of perception for mass publics, they may elicit rapt attention and powerful emotion, but they will lack concrete presence in most people's lives. In such instances, claims and beliefs about policies cannot easily be tested against experience. As a result, public perceptions will depend more heavily on elite rhetoric, media frames, and widely held cultural beliefs.

Welfare reform, in our view, offers a paradigmatic example of the politics that surround distant-visible policies of this sort. As Jacob Hacker points out, AFDC was "a fiscally tiny program with ... a clientele that never exceeded 6 percent of the population," yet it became "liberalism's symbolic beachhead and conservatives' poster child for everything wrong with American social policy." Details of the AFDC policy design mattered greatly for recipients but very little in most Americans' lives.¹² "Welfare," on the other hand, symbolized to large numbers of Americans a deeply felt sense that government was giving special favors to a group of undeserving others. It evoked an image of easy living on government largesse, in contrast to the experiences of "normal, hard-working Americans."

Based on this "distant-visible" status, we outline four general propositions that explain why welfare reform had limited effects on public opinion.

1. When a policy exists as a potent but distant symbol for mass publics, the details of its material design will seldom anchor public understandings of the policy. Unaffected publics will rarely pay close attention to changing policy realities, and new facts on the ground will rarely force the abandonment of old myths. Before 1996, researchers repeatedly found that public perceptions of welfare had only the loosest relation to the AFDC program's actual features. A 1994 poll, for example, found that most Americans thought that AFDC—which, at its peak, cost less than 5 percent of Social Security—was one of the two largest items in the federal budget.¹³ In the TANF era, evidence suggests that 40 to 50 percent of Americans have never had a clear understanding of *how* welfare provision changed. For example, when asked in 2001 whether welfare had been reformed in any significant way over the past five years, 50 percent of respondents answered either "No" or "Don't Know."¹⁴ Thus, one part of our explanation is that, no matter how visible a policy may be in symbolic terms, changes to its material design will tend to go unnoticed if the policy affects few citizens' lives directly.

2. When policies are highly visible but have few concrete effects on most citizens' lives, they will often be valued less for what they achieve (in fewer people's lives) than for what they affirm (about society as a whole).¹⁵ Policy actions, in such cases, are valued primarily for what they say about who we are, what we stand for, and what we expect of one another. The fact that such actions express majority opinion does not mean that they will change majority opinion. In particular, when a policy action affirms dominant, widely held values by rewarding individuals who live up to them or by punishing individuals who do not comply with them, we should expect the policy to reinforce rather than disrupt existing patterns of mass opinion.

Here, we encounter a major problem in the progressive revisionist argument that a "work attachment" would make welfare recipients appear more deserving. The language of "work attachment" elided a crucial distinction between policies that reward work and policies that compel work as a condition of aid. In the politics that led to welfare reform, "work" was not identified as a prior status indicating the deservingness of recipients; it was cast as a behavioral standard that had been violated. For most Americans, welfare reform was about holding violators of the work ethic *accountable*. This observation helps to explain how revisionists could be right about the popularity of welfare reform but wrong to predict that reform would improve the image of aid recipients. Majorities may like it when legislators pass tough sentencing laws that hold criminals accountable, for example, but such policies rarely lead publics to view criminals in a positive light. Work requirements followed an analogous logic. "Legislation requiring welfare recipients to work engenders the belief that laziness is at the heart of the welfare problem and that jobs are plentiful."¹⁶

3. When a policy is not directly experienced by many in the public, it exists primarily as a symbol. So it is essential to recognize that symbols only *evoke* underlying beliefs; they do not account for their existence. The power of a symbol lies not in itself but rather in what it stands for. (Thus, a shrug of the shoulders may symbolize and convey the idea that "I don't know," but the absence of a shrug does not prevent this idea from being conveyed in other ways.) As long as there is a shared public understanding that two objects signify the same thing, they will suffice as substitutes.¹⁷ Drawing on this insight, we can see that the withdrawal of a distant-visible policy will only yield changes in mass perception if no alternative symbol is deployed as a substitute. Progressive revisionists were wrong to assume that beliefs about welfare could be banished simply by "ending welfare as we know it." Images of the poor as idle and immoral flourished long before the AFDC program, as did the idea that public aid perversely encourages dysfunctional behavior.¹⁸ Negative images of the poor can be, and at times have

been, successfully contested with alternative images and discourses. But they cannot be negated simply by removing any single symbol—even one as potent as “welfare.”

4. The material features of distant-visible policies do have consequences for mass opinion, even if these effects are mediated by the ways policies are portrayed in elite rhetoric, mass media, social conversation, and so on. The crucial point is that mass perceptions of public policies depend upon both a policy’s internal characteristics and its positioning within the larger structure of a policy regime. When policies are directly experienced, people will tend to judge them according to both their internal design characteristics (which they experience) and the contrast between this policy and others (which they observe). As the distance between policy and public grows, however, internal design characteristics fade from view, leaving perception more dependent on the contrast of one policy with another.

In this regard, state institutions and the structures of policy regimes may be quite important. The establishment of “separate departments of government to deal with ... supposedly distinct problems” presents the public with an organizing schema that helps to fix the meanings of particular social problems, social groups, and government activities.¹⁹ The bifurcated structure of the U.S. welfare state, for example, provides an institutional contrast—“Social Security versus Welfare”—that is frequently cited as a basis for public distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving. Public perceptions depend heavily on the symbolic oppositions conveyed by this contrast (contract versus charity, independence versus dependence, white versus black, masculine versus feminine, universal versus particular).²⁰

Thus, it is significant that welfare reform changed the conditions of public aid for the poor but did not displace or reconfigure this basic contrast in American social politics. As a result, welfare reform did not alter the way Americans distinguish the deserving from the undeserving or think about policies for the disadvantaged. Changes to welfare were far less salient to most Americans than the enduring distinction between this *type of program* and the policies that “deserving” Americans receive benefits from. Today, the positive image of Social Security is held in place, not just by its own policy design, but also by the idea that it is “not welfare.” Conversely, although the TANF program has restricted aid to those who “play by the rules,” its meaning remains tied to its contrast with programs that offer “earned, contributory” benefits.

Thus, the case of welfare reform, we believe, does not cast doubt on the idea that policy changes can move public opinion. Rather, it helps to clarify the circumstances under which such changes are likely to occur. It underscores that the categories of a policy regime can

structure public understanding in powerful ways, and that stable institutional contrasts can matter more than changes in the design of even a highly visible policy. When a policy change directly touches only a few citizens’ lives, when it is valued primarily as a symbolic affirmation, when it eliminates one symbolic distraction only to replace it with others, when it leaves salient categories of the regime intact, and when its introduction is framed in ways that reinforce prevailing discourse, we should not be surprised if it fails to shift entrenched public opinion. ■

¹The research summarized in this article is discussed in detail in J. Soss and S. Schram, “A Public Transformed? Welfare Reform as Policy Feedback,” *American Political Science Review* 101, no.1 (March 2007): forthcoming. For a broader introduction to how policies may shape the beliefs and behaviors of citizens, see S. Mettler and J. Soss, “The Consequences of Public Policy for Democratic Citizenship: Bridging Policy Studies and Mass Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 1 (March 2004): 55–73.

²M. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); M. Katz and L. Thomas, “The Invention of ‘Welfare’ in America,” *Journal of Policy History* 10 (December 1998): 399–418.

³H. Meyerson, “Wither the Democrats,” *American Prospect Online*, March 1, 1996, accessed May 25, 2006, at <http://www.prospect.org/web/page.wv?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=4945>; T. Edsall with M. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

⁴Respectively, T. Skocpol, *The Missing Middle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); D. Ellwood, *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); W. Wilson, *Bridge over the Racial Divide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵L. Mead, *The New Politics of Poverty: The Nonworking Poor in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

⁶J. DeParle and S. Holmes, “A War on Poverty Subtly Linked to Race,” *New York Times*, December 26, 2000, p. A1.

⁷W. Marshall, “After Dependence,” *Blueprint Magazine*, January 22, 2002, accessed April 14, 2006, at http://www.dlc.org/ndol_ci.cfm?contentid=250080&kaid=114&subid=143.

⁸S. Schneider and W. Jacoby, “Elite Discourse and American Public Opinion: The Case of Welfare Spending,” *Political Research Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 367–79.

⁹In these analyses we controlled for demographic differences over time in age, sex, education, marital status, and family income.

¹⁰F. Piven and R. Cloward, “The American Road to Democratic Socialism,” *Democracy* 3, no. 3 (1982): 58–69; T. Skocpol, “Bury It: Welfare: Where Do We Go From Here?” *The New Republic* 215 no. 7 (1995): 20–21.

¹¹M. Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Co., 1971): 51–52. The two-way relationship between public policy and mass opinion will proceed according to different logics depending on a policy’s location along these two continua for a particular sector of the public (see, e.g., V. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy* [New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964]). Policies are not encountered by “the public,” they are encountered in different ways by different publics, and a policy that is visible and proximate to one may be invisible and distant to another. For clarity, our discussion focuses on how public majorities encounter a given policy.

¹²J. Hacker “After Welfare,” *The New Republic*, October 11, 2004; see also J. Soss, *Unwanted Claims: The Politics of Participation in the U.S. Welfare System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

¹³Hacker, “After Welfare.”

¹⁴National Public Radio, Kaiser, and Harvard poll, 2001; see also R. Weaver, *Ending Welfare as We Know It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), p. 338.

¹⁵J. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

¹⁶M. Edelman, *Political Language: Words that Succeed and Policies that Fail* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), p. 149.

¹⁷M. Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964).

¹⁸See, e.g., L. Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: Free Press, 1994); M. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1989).

¹⁹Edelman, *Political Language*, p. 26

²⁰Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*; A. Schneider and H. Ingram, *Policy Design for Democracy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1997); S. Schram, *Words of Welfare: The Poverty of Social Science and the Social Science of Poverty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

Qualitative approaches to the study of poverty and welfare reform: Current challenges

This conference, held in Madison in March 2005, brought together scholars from around the country who are doing state-of-the-art qualitative research, practitioners in policy evaluation firms, and IRP's own substantial group of qualitative researchers. The presenters examined four areas in which qualitative researchers have made contributions and face challenges: the mapping of complicated family networks, the documentation of livelihood strategies, the dynamics of welfare provision, and analyses of neighborhoods and local organizations.

The past ten years have seen a remarkable increase in the use of qualitative research methods to answer public policy questions about poverty. Ethnographers from the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology have long studied people living in poverty, and many of these studies have influenced policy debates. Qualitative research methods have recently attained a new prominence in studies of poverty and welfare reform. Researchers have provided insights into how caseworkers interpret and implement welfare policy and into the dynamics of service provision. Others clarify how poor families negotiate and actively construct aspects of their neighborhood environments. Through the use of a wide range of techniques, qualitative researchers have generated an understanding of poverty as it is experienced and of the complex web of ideas and practices that surround policies designed to eradicate it.

The qualitative articles that appear in this issue represent recent work by researchers who participated in the conference.

Complicated families

Poor families, like other segments of the American population, have complicated family networks. Questions facing ethnographic researchers in this area include: What are the best strategies for documenting the kin and nonkin relationships that structure how resources and care circulate among the members of poor families? What combinations of interview-based and observational methods have proven most useful? What challenges do we still face in mapping these family relationships? How can we determine whether an extended kinship system is serving to protect its economically vulnerable members?

Sherri Lawson Clark (Pennsylvania State University) "Why Don't You Just Move? Documenting Family Networks in Small Rural Communities"

Waldo Johnson (University of Chicago) "Paternal Involvement in Poor, Urban Families: Qualitative Insights on Family Structure and Functioning"

Livelihood strategies

Questions facing researchers studying livelihood strategies include: What are the best ways to gather income and expenditure data? Are there ways to gain reliable information about these issues that are less expensive and time-consuming than a household budget study involving many visits to the family? What types of income and expenses are most difficult to document? How has welfare reform changed the kinds of questions we should be asking? What types of analysis, beyond simple income and expenditure calculations, can be used with these data?

Lisa Dodson (Boston College) "Motherwork in Wage-Poor America: You Choose Your Child Over the Job"

Margaret Nelson (Middlebury College) "Ongoing Challenges in the Exploration of Rural Livelihood Strategies"

Dynamics of welfare provision

As the philosophy behind welfare provision shifted to a welfare-to-work model in the late 1990s, so did the locations of service delivery and the types of services delivered. Questions facing researchers working in this area include: What special dilemmas concerning confidentiality face researchers who observe caseworker-client interactions? What combinations of observation and interviews work best in these contexts? How can the multiple perspectives of high-level administrators, caseworkers, and clients be accounted for in analysis?

Susan Gooden (Virginia Commonwealth University) "Observing Caseworker-Client Interactions in Qualitative Poverty Research"

Sandra Morgen (University of Oregon) "Iron Fists, Velvet Gloves and Rose-Colored Glasses: Welfare Administrators and Welfare Restructuring"

Neighborhoods and organizations

Ethnographers have done much to clarify the kinds of local organizations, networks, and neighborhood structures that provide support to individuals and the kinds of environments that offer few resources. Research on this topic is confronted by difficult questions of sampling: How do sampling strategies influence the view of neighborhood dynamics that is developed? What are the best strategies for gaining entry into neighborhoods? What are the advantages and disadvantages of network-based sampling?

Celeste Watkins-Hayes (Northwestern University) "The Baggage We Carry, The Tools We Use: Race, Class, and Gender in Institutional Ethnography"

Jeff Maskovsky (Queens College) "The Civic Life of the Poor: Accountability, Trust and Responsibility in the New Inner City"

After welfare reform: You choose your child over the job

Lisa Dodson

Lisa Dodson is Research Professor of Sociology at Boston College

“They pushed and pushed [me] to get a job. Yeah, like all of us here. But I don’t see how it’s going to work. I have this job, OK, but at the end of the month, there’s no way I can do it [cover all bills] it doesn’t go that far.”

“That’s not their problem, that there is your problem.”

“Yeah, well I got a big problem because this don’t work out and I can’t feed my kids on this.”

(From a transcript of a discussion with employed mothers who had previously relied on public assistance.)

For decades, low-income families in the United States used public assistance programs as an economic fallback to meet family needs because they did not have access to the resources that higher-income families use, such as savings from previous employment, spousal income, or access to family wealth.¹ After welfare reform, the use of public assistance for this purpose was greatly constricted, as employment became a primary focus. Lack of child care no longer justified absence from work, even while publicly funded child care served only a fraction of all eligible families.²

In this article, I argue that wage-poor mothers are guided by a version of “moral economy,” the idea that a job should provide a livelihood that, above all, allows them to take care of their families.³ When work does not meet this lowest bar, mothers choose children over jobs and by doing so, challenge contemporary U.S. norms of appropriate work behavior. In this research, which examined different types of low-wage jobs, in different areas, among diverse demographic groups, there emerged similar problems and some common strategies that reflect a critical view of society driven by “rational” economic customs. Working in retail, fast food, hospitality, cleaning, office, and health care services, mothers described ongoing conflicts between ensuring their children’s care and safety and completing the requirements of their often family-unfriendly jobs. I argue that in wage-poor America, many parents reject societal norms that put a premium on devotion to work, but they do so quietly, developing alternative work norms that value care and protection of children above all else.

A mandate to choose the market over children

Mothers using welfare faced a complicated set of tasks to meet the new social mandate to go “from welfare to work” or from performing daily motherwork to performing in the low-wage labor market. The new and more stringent requirements of public aid might well mean that mothers had to leave their children in inadequate and low-quality child care or with family members who faced equally harsh economic circumstances. But, as this research reveals, many parents refused to cooperate with a market-driven society that they believed did not ensure the safety of their children.

In contemporary American society the traditional wage debate over the value of “a fair day’s pay” has been transformed into a debate about the new service economy and a global “race to the bottom.”⁴ The gap between a federally approved minimum wage and a wage that covers basic human needs continues to grow, while the longstanding “motherhood exemption” from employment that poor mothers used to raise their children was lost with welfare reform. Poor mothers who had developed complex ways to survive through a combination of intermittent employment, social welfare programs, social networks, and informal entrepreneurial ventures saw a large part of their resources disappear.

Much has been written about how poor mothers, particularly mothers of color, make use of social networks and underground capital for survival; mixing public assistance with wages, help from family members, and informal as well as legal work. In this article I extend this discussion to illustrate how poor working mothers, faced with more restricted choices, have imported these creative habits into the workplace.

Findings from interviews and interpretive focus groups

The qualitative data used here come from three studies undertaken between 1998 and 2003 focusing on the daily lives of low-wage parents and used mixed (quantitative and qualitative) methods.⁵ While the studies varied in other ways (and included other groups of informants) each included open-ended interviews with low-wage mothers, and together provide a sample size of over 300.⁶

Care and protection of children

“I’m always afraid for my kids.” (Mother of two school-age children, working in a wholesale store in Boston)

The most common topic brought up by respondents was the care and protection of their children. Mothers spoke of poor and unavailable child care, children who had intermittent and chronic health problems, their goals and fears for their children’s futures, children’s schooling needs, and the need to monitor older children’s activities to keep them from “running with the wrong crowd.” Nearly half of the mothers mentioned that at times their children had been (or were currently) in poor care arrangements; they spoke of overcrowding, disturbing incidents, questionable caregivers, or lack of control over their children’s care needs.

Difficulty negotiating special care needs in understaffed child care arrangements was common. A mother spoke of her son’s allergies: “My son has special needs ... he has severe allergies to all milk and dairy and everything, and so that’s part of the reason why I work these night shifts, because I don’t want anybody else ... I mean, his throat closes up and everything. And so now when I ask for help [from state children’s agencies] finding special needs daycare, they send me three numbers and two of them is already disconnected... I need to know that my son is going to make it through the day.” While pediatricians, school nurses and teachers were pressuring mothers to attend “responsibly” to children’s special needs, overburdened and low-paid child care workers might treat extra demands as nuisances.

Another concern was having younger children in mixed age settings. A Denver mother of three said, “I seen a little incident in that daycare center in the bathroom with one of the older boys. I decided in that moment [my daughter] was not going back there and whatever else happens ... she was not going back.” In the two weeks it took her to find another child care arrangement, she lost her job.

Fears about children included concern about what would happen if negligent or risky child care arrangements were discovered by child welfare authorities, although these fears were not usually volunteered. Mothers often described their child care arrangements as adequate but then, when discussing their key anxieties, poor child care and thus problems “with the state” emerged. On the one hand children were thought to be unsafe but on the other, hiding risks to children was regarded as critical to avoid child welfare intervention and thus to keeping families intact. In the view of some respondents, given that “no one wants to see what’s going on,” hiding risky child care conditions may motivate parents to collude with what they view as a general disinterest in their children.

Many mothers reported that they resorted to children’s self-care; children left alone or with siblings. Mothers

acknowledged that these arrangements were risky; neighbors or relatives who were supposed to be checking up on children sometimes did not—or worse, they themselves proved to be threats to the children. Children sometimes made poor decisions and didn’t come home when they were supposed to or brought home friends whom mothers considered inappropriate companions.

Many respondents felt that their children were in risky care arrangements and that, as their mothers, they were responsible for ensuring children’s safety, setting their motherhood obligations in opposition to job demands. The studies did not systematically explore the emotional impact of this chronic worry, but many mothers referred to being depressed and angry about their care dilemmas.

Asserting the right to parent and defying “anti-child” jobs

“You have to choose and what mother’s choosing this job over her child?”

“They think they got you. But I say, I will always get another job but I can’t get another son.”

“I think that they made it just about impossible to be a good mom. You have to weigh everything, every move. This is going to cost you this and this is going to cost you that. You have to choose.”

As these and other comments from mothers reflect, many saw the culture of the low-wage labor market as anti-child. In response, they discussed strategies to take care of children yet also to try to keep jobs.⁷ The practices varied greatly, but all relied on an underlying belief in the right of mothers to reject work rules that kept them from protecting their children. Some of these strategies were more successful than others; and some, unsurprisingly, led to job termination. In some cases respondents suggested that a supervisor might be aware of what they were doing and “look the other way”; this was considered a key attribute of a good boss. However, the most common arrangements were represented as half-hidden or entirely underground, with mothers assuming that asserting their right to care for children would be seen by their employer as a violation of the terms of work.

“He’s coming with me and that’s all there is to it.”
(Boston mother of a five-year-old son)

Many mothers spoke of efforts that blurred the lines between caring for children and fulfilling job requirements. One example was designing work in a way that allowed mothers visually to monitor children while on the job. Two women described working in shopping malls specifically because children could be brought into the job “under the radar,” blending in to the mass of customers. One mother worked in the food court and could easily watch her children from the station. The other worked in a large retail store enclosed by floor-to-ceiling glass windows so she could observe her children from most of the stations at which she worked.

Some mothers worked in jobs in which bringing children with them was not an option, so they would resort to “phone parenting,” often surreptitiously. Many mothers reported using their own cell phones to monitor children’s activities throughout their shifts, although this was against rules that required them to be completely attentive to customers or clients. Other mothers would use phones in their place of work even though this was explicitly against company policies. One mother in Boston explained that she would call her teenaged son every 30 to 40 minutes just to be sure he was staying home with the younger one. If the older boy left she wanted to be sure that only a short time passed before she was on her way home.

“I make my own [flex] time.” (Mother of two in Milwaukee)

Flextime has become an important approach to managing job demands and family needs across income levels and job types. But mothers in retail, service sector, and other low-wage jobs face the least flexible work circumstances and frequently have schedules that interrupt or conflict with family care. Mothers often spoke of orchestrating their schedules based on children and family needs; working evenings so they could be home to take children to school, or working nights so they could be home when their children were awake. Yet low-wage mothers admitted that this meant their children might well be alone at night. Those who were juggling work and care with a spouse might alternate shifts with caring for children. For example, a taxicab driver in Milwaukee drove around with his son asleep in the car, unbeknownst to the cab company, and dropped him off at his wife’s workplace when she completed her shift.

Few mothers reported officially negotiating flexibility with employers other than exchanging shifts with co-workers, when permitted. Rather, some simply created their own “flextime” schedules. Self-styled flextime was often a bone of contention; supervisors were described as routinely interpreting mothers’ efforts to meet children’s health, school, or child care needs as tardiness, unexcused absenteeism, or truncated shifts. A mother working in an office in Denver argued with her supervisor about taking time off. “I call them and let them know. I call into work and let them know that I can’t be in; I have a sick child. They cannot go to day care because what if the stuff that she has is infectious? Look ... I don’t care about ‘do I have sick time ... do I have vacation time’—I got a sick child [and] I’m not coming. If you can’t understand that, fire me. My child comes first.”

A retail worker in Boston tried to rearrange her work schedule so she could get home within half an hour of her daughter’s arrival from the after-school program. Working overtime was common in that store and often unplanned. Her supervisor claimed he couldn’t accommodate her need to leave but she simply left the store, ignoring his threats. Eventually she was suspended. “He

wasn’t going to hear about my problems so I did what I had to do and just ignored him.” She abruptly quit the job one day when she found another that had a better schedule. “I didn’t owe him no ‘notice’ no how, no way.” Defiance of what were described as anti-child work rules contributed to the considerable job turnover reported by mothers in this research.

Sometimes mothers described their self-styled flextime as a kind of appropriation of “mother time” as they considered the job to be unreasonable in confiscating so much of their attention and energy when children needed it. Jobs, one mother explained, do not support you. “Any job nowadays is not enough to live regularly. You gotta always have a little hustle plan, or a little back-up or something, something to help you. You just can’t do it otherwise.” In discussion groups mothers exchanged their “little back-up plans” assuming, correctly it seemed, that everyone was doing them; the trick was successfully integrating them into their jobs.

A Denver mother working as a cleaner in private homes explained that her interpretation of a responsible job was producing a clean house. She described this as a professional consultant might describe a product, the quality of which could be evaluated by the client, but the production process of which was up to her. However, some homeowners insisted that she should work a certain number of hours; they “would sit me down and say ‘now, you work here four hours ... right?’ I say ‘is the house clean?’ I work fast to get home for an hour or two [to see her preschool child] before my next job ... the house is clean so it’s up to me how I spend that time.” She pointed out that one homeowner made time in *her* workday as a lawyer to “come watch me” and monitor the cleaning hours, and argued that type of job flexibility should apply to a cleaner as well as a lawyer.

“Trying to keep my health...” (A nurse’s aide near Boston, mother of two sons)

A few of the mothers in this research described designing work strategies to try to stay healthy and strong, anxious that overwork would lead to illness, job loss, and an inability to care for themselves and their families. Extracting rest from work hours was not easy. A nurse’s aide near Boston described working two full-time shifts every day (from 7:00 AM to 3:00 PM and then from 3:30 to 11:30 PM) to support her two sons and mother, who had moved in to care for the three-year-old. She admitted that she would take naps at the second job whenever possible since there was no supervisor on the evening shift. While she reported that in her view no resident had suffered from her rests, she considered the arrangement an unfortunate but necessary reaction to chronic exhaustion that was affecting her health. “I got to rest more and ... get less stress. I support four people; everyone counts on me. I have to look out for myself and my children.”

“You want me to leave my babies all alone?”
(Mother of three in Boston)

Over the studies several mothers talked about using public displays and even lighthearted banter as a way to bend rules openly. One respondent in Denver reported she would say to her supervisor, “Oh I know you don’t mean that. I know you wouldn’t fire me just because my bus is late...” This avoided overt confrontation and presented the issue of lateness in her own terms. A mother working the day shift in a retail store that stayed open until 9:00 PM took a similar approach to avoid being asked to stay late if someone called in sick. If approached, she would cut the supervisor off quickly saying, “Now I know you aren’t going to ask me to leave my babies *all alone*,” framing the impending request as an unfair thing to ask of a mother.

“She’s been there so she looks the other way.”
(Milwaukee mother, referring to her supervisor)

Most mothers had experienced one supervisor who made an effort to be flexible and understanding. In some discussion groups their names and business addresses were passed around as treasured information. Sometimes these people were described as having personal insight into the hardships of being poor or they were identified as being understanding because of their own race, ethnicity, or single-parent status. In some descriptions they were simply seen as decent people, as a working mother in Milwaukee put it, “he told me he was going to work with me as hard as he could ... so I could keep [the job].” After many months she became a postal worker, a job that created a dramatic change in her family’s status and that she attributed to both her own effort and the support of this supervisor, who “should have fired me half a dozen times” based on rules alone. In cases like this, the choices that individual employers made were seen as distinct from the company rules. Still, poverty wages, rigid job structure, and little room for advancement frequently trumped individually tailored accommodations. Even with a “good boss,” jobs often turned over or mothers were sanctioned for absences, losing pay and promotions.

Contemporary moral economy and family care

In this research, as in other studies, most of the respondents had a positive attitude toward having a job and interacting and socializing with other adults, as well as a desire to be earning their own way. But, caring for family emerged as the guiding force whenever children were in jeopardy. The strategies they used for survival also functioned as small protests against a wage system they considered indecent. Viewing their jobs in such a light, ordinary people may begin to regard everyday acting up as legitimate, a righteous response to an immoral economy.

I found that many mothers expected that in a moral economy wages should provide a living. But they demanded more than that. Believing that a moral economy

should go beyond market terms, they asserted the right to a *moral society*. In such a society working parents will contest unfair wages, but even before that resistance starts, a parent’s choices will be guided first and foremost by her child’s best interests. To many mothers this means that a mother has the right to refuse the terms of the labor market, the job schedule, the hours of work, and employers’ work rules if they threaten the safety of her children. A few mothers argued that contemporary work and family policy for low-income parents, particularly women of color, demands their collusion with a perceived societal lack of concern for their children. Again and again, many parents actively refused such terms.

Of course, there is a price to pay for this refusal; working-poor mothers are often described, not as devoted parents, but as deficient workers and people lacking a work ethic who are known for tardiness, absenteeism, and inability to stick to the job. Many of the participants in this research had been disciplined at work and many had lost jobs. But although this ascription of cultural deficiency and character flaws to the poor is prevalent in our culture, another social history is quietly underway. It is the narrative of those low-wage parents who regard much of contemporary work structure as anti-child, inhumane, and thus immoral, and who strive to defy this structure however they can.⁸ ■

¹The ideas discussed in this article are developed at length in L. Dodson, “Wage Poor Mothers and Moral Economy,” *Social Politics*, forthcoming.

²Mezey, J., R. Schumacher, M. Greenberg, J. Lombardi, and J. Hutchins, “Unfinished Agenda: Child Care for Low-Income Families Since 1996,” Policy Brief, Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2002.

³For a full discussion of moral economy see E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* no. 50 (1971): 76–136; S. J. Oliker, “Examining Care at Welfare’s End,” in *Care Work: Gender, Labor and the Welfare State*, ed. M. H. Meyer (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁴L. Mishel, J. Bernstein, and S. Allegretto, *The State of Working America*, Economic Policy Institute (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁵The three studies are the Welfare in Transition study, the Across the Boundaries study, and the Lower-Income Work and Family Initiative.

⁶Respondents included mothers who were making less than 200 percent of the national poverty threshold (but most made less than 150 percent) and were currently working. The large majority had used various kinds of public assistance over the previous five years. The combined sample was composed of African American (48 percent), white (24 percent), and Latino (21 percent) respondents with 7 percent who identified themselves as Asian, African, Caribbean, Native American or biracial/cultural. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 48 years; most mothers reported having two or three children in their care.

⁷None of the studies included a specific question about informal or underground child-protection strategies. This construction of the dilemma facing respondents came from the data, over time. Had the inquiries placed care and protection of children at the center of the studies as most mothers did, rather than focusing on welfare reform, job efforts and economic strategies, more may have been learned.

⁸The author is grateful to Ellen Bravo and 9to5 National Organization for Working Women for their collaboration, as well as all the people of the former Radcliffe Public Policy Center.

Observation in poverty research

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Nearly every aspect of a welfare program is affected by caseworker-client interaction. Caseworkers become agents of the policymakers and give a program model its concrete meaning. They provide the link between the client and the program by applying legislative and regulatory direction about who must participate, in what ways, and what support services they should receive. How case managers complete these tasks affects the program outcomes experienced by their clients. By design, public service workers have substantial discretion in their work; they are entrusted to make decisions that affect their clients' life chances. In the case of welfare policies, this means affecting the likelihood of achieving economic self-sufficiency.

Despite this possible influence, very little of what we "know" about caseworker-client interaction is learned through direct observation. When caseworker-client transactions are studied, data sources typically include self-reports from clients, caseworker interviews or focus groups, and agency administrative data including client file reviews. In this article I contend that observation is an important methodology critical to understanding caseworker-client interactions. I use an example from a welfare program study to show caseworker-client interactions can be empirically examined.

Observation as a critical methodology

In participant observation, the researcher is in a face-to-face relationship with the observed and gathers data in a natural setting. The goal of this observation is to obtain data about behavior through direct contact and minimal researcher interference, while also allowing for replication and/or verification.

It is often assumed that there is a simple correspondence between the occurrence of an event and the researcher's recording of that event. However, the process of observation is actually a succession of steps. These are (1) the split second subsequent to the event, during which an occurrence is registered; (2) an interpretation of its sig-

nificance in the context within which it occurred, resulting in a more expanded awareness of the event; and (3) the event is transcribed. Thus, observation is an analytical process of registering, interpreting, and recording.¹

The benefits commonly ascribed to participant observation include obtaining a deeper understanding of the subject than can be acquired by solely relying on participants' explanation of their actions and motivations. In poverty research, this is particularly relevant to understanding caseworker-client interactions.

Caseworkers and clients often have varying interpretations of key events including, for example, how program eligibility guidelines were explained, how assessments were performed, why sanctions were imposed, and reasons for case closures. Both caseworker and client reports can be subject to errors in recall, and biased towards providing socially desirable answers to sensitive questions. Caseworker responses to questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups may be affected by their desire to demonstrate both fair and consistent treatment of clients and a mastery of program policies. Similarly, client responses may be affected by their desire to present themselves as responsible, compliant, and cooperative to researchers.

Agency data is another common information source in welfare research, but it also has important limitations. Data may be missing or incomplete and definitions of data elements unknown or inconsistent. It may also be impossible to accurately link clients across agencies and over time.

Observations have important limitations as well. Researchers may misinterpret events, retrospectively expand or narrow an observation beyond its original occurrence, or become too involved or attached to the subjects. Subjects may also alter their behavior in the presence of the researcher.

A common concern across all of these data collection techniques, including observations, is the loss of objectivity. Research can be strengthened by using more than one source and considering how each source verifies or contradicts information from other sources, and by assessing the likelihood of losing objectivity. Researchers can use techniques such as making observation checklists using multiple researchers to address any concerns about objectivity.

Observing caseworker-client interactions in Wisconsin's welfare program²

Every welfare program must develop a client-assessment process to identify the appropriate services and participation expectations for its participants. The process of assessing and assigning clients to activities deserves attention because it affects the level of income support that the applicant receives (and that the agency must pay). Though caseworkers may later learn more about the circumstances and employability of participants and thus change activity assignments, the initial decision is important because it sets the ground rules under which a family enters the welfare program. Under Wisconsin's welfare program, Wisconsin Works (W-2), this decision must be made quickly during an intake interview also designed to impart general information about the program to clients.

The W-2 case manager has multiple responsibilities. In addition to interpreting and explaining policies that govern W-2 eligibility, the caseworker has primary responsibility for eligibility determination, assessment, employability planning, service referral, and ongoing case management. Initially, the caseworker conducts an informal assessment of the applicant's recent job search efforts, work history, education, skills, interests, and abilities to determine whether the applicant is ready for unsubsidized employment. In making placement decisions, the caseworker reviews the information collected in the W-2 application and considers the person's potential barriers to employment.

Researchers conducted field research on the intake and assessment procedures in Milwaukee County at several points in time, seeking to understand the assessment process and to compare observed practice with possible measures of good administration or appropriate service to applicants. The research questions included:

- Was the structure of the intake interview conducive to an exchange of important information?
- Were important topics discussed?
- Did the interview strike a balance between eligibility determination and service assessment and planning, or did one function dominate?
- Were issues that the applicant raised acknowledged?

The unit of analysis for the study is the transaction between the caseworker and the applicant.³ The field researcher served as an unobtrusive observer, using an observational form to document the general setting of the interview, the topics discussed, and how decisions were made. After each intake interview, a semi-structured interview was conducted to collect some background information about the caseworker and to understand the rationale behind any caseworker decisions made during the intake interview.

In this article I discuss what we found concerning the caseworkers' and applicants' discussions of specific program (income support) policies during the intake interview; I also consider our findings about the interview flow. These findings were particularly easy to assess because the *Wisconsin Works Manual* provided a general sense of the topical areas that may be discussed during the intake and assessment interview.⁴ The full study discussed in the paper from which this article is drawn also provides detailed findings on the assessment process, the interview setting, caseworker-client discussions, and the caseworkers' decision making process. Given the clear W-2 policy goal of allowing caseworkers discretion, we did not expect to find uniform coverage of any topic. Rather, we set out to identify and examine patterns of topic coverage that may vary based on agency norms and individual case circumstances.

Explaining key program areas

The caseworkers in this field research used one of three presentation styles to explain Wisconsin's welfare policy: written, written with verbal highlights, and written with extensive verbal comments. A few caseworkers used the written approach; they provided printed materials about W-2, asked the applicants to review the documents, and asked whether they had questions. The written-with-verbal-highlights approach proceeds similarly but adds the discussion of specific programmatic aspects, such as time limits. This presentation style was the most common.

Our field research examined how caseworkers explained specific components of the welfare program including the emphasis on work as the primary goal, the payment cycle, time limits, and sanctions. Some of our key findings include:

Emphasis on work. The message that the state's TANF program is focused on promoting work as the primary means of securing economic self-sufficiency was clearly conveyed in the vast majority (85 percent) of intake interviews observed. The majority of the caseworkers' questions to applicants related to employment. For example, applicants were asked about their employment history, recent job search activities, barriers to work, and short- and long-term employment goals.

Cash benefit payments. When the topic of the benefit payment cycle arose, as it did in nearly two-thirds of the intake interviews, applicants asked questions. Wisconsin's welfare program operates on a tier system with different payment levels. The payment amounts associated with each tier were routinely discussed during most of the intake interviews. Applicants expressed frustration with how long they had to wait to receive their first payment. Many applicants go to a W-2 agency when they are confronting an immediate financial hardship, so the payment cycle is an important concern.

Time limits. Time limits were discussed in about half of the intake interviews. According to state policy, caseworkers are required to review the participant's time-limit status at every review and at every new placement. Most discussions of time limits focused on explaining the differences between the federal 60-month lifetime time limit and the 24-month time limit for W-2 employment tiers. Caseworkers also emphasized to applicants the importance of keeping track of the number of months remaining and of saving months for when they are most needed.

It is unclear why time limits were not discussed more frequently during the intake interviews. In some cases, applicants were given printed materials that provided information about time limits, and it was implied that they could review it and ask their case manager questions during a future meeting. These materials included visual aids such as illustrations of clocks detailing the time-limit policies.

Sanctions. Sanctions for noncompliance with W-2 rules were discussed in about 30 percent of the intake interviews. W-2 participants who are placed in certain tiers and who fail to participate in assigned work-training activities have their payment reduced by \$5.15 per hour unless there is good cause for nonparticipation.

Under W-2 policy, caseworkers have discretion in deciding whether to waive nonparticipation sanctions for "good cause," and caseworkers seem to have developed individual criteria for making this decision. One caseworker's sanctioning policy was the following: "It's just like a job. I have to treat you like an employer. The first problem with attendance, you come in and discuss it with me. Second problem, we discuss it and we put it in writing. The third problem, we will have to impose hourly restrictions." Another caseworker took this approach to sanctioning: "If you have to miss an activity for any reason, I don't want to be the last to know. Sometimes what participants do is wait until after the adverse-action date to bring me a bunch of excuses. It's too late then, they have already been sanctioned." Yet another caseworker explained, "I don't sanction people right away. I will follow up with you even at your home before I take steps to take your money away."

Interview flow

W-2 intake interviews are frequently interrupted, usually by incoming telephone calls. More than 55 percent of the intake interviews we observed were interrupted at least twice. Across all of the interviews, interruptions typically occurred up to four times during the intake session, and 58 percent of the interruptions were caused by incoming phone calls. Other interruptions included inquiries from within the agency by another case manager, supervisor, or county worker. Interruptions can break the flow of the intake session, especially if the caseworker and applicant

are discussing sensitive topics. Interruptions may also increase the overall time needed to cover the details of W-2 and assess the applicant.

Although it may seem simple enough not to take incoming phone calls during an intake interview, doing so involves a trade-off to which caseworkers appear sensitive. Besides conducting intake interviews with W-2 applicants, a caseworker is also responsible for providing ongoing case-management services to enrolled W-2 participants, for whom the case manager is the central point person. Most of the observed intake interviews concluded with the caseworker providing contact information and encouraging the client to call with questions. Throughout their day, caseworkers frequently respond to phone queries, and they often end up playing "phone tag" with callers. Over time, W-2 applicants and participants have expressed frustration about the difficulty of getting through to their caseworkers by phone; thus promptness of responding to queries is now a common component in evaluating a caseworker's job performance. Although caseworkers typically schedule a block of time each day to respond to phone calls, they may not be able to reach callers during that time block, and thus have to find additional time to return calls.

The caseworker initiates most of the discussion in an intake interview, usually by asking the W-2 applicant a question, to which applicants reply briefly, often with a one-word response. During our post-observational interviews with caseworkers, some mentioned that they like to involve applicants in some aspects of decision making because it increases participation in activities after enrollment. When applicants do initiate a discussion, their concerns most often center on the W-2 payment cycle, current housing problems, medical issues, or applying for a Job Access Loan.⁵

In 17 percent of the observed intake interviews, discussions led to contention between the caseworker and the applicant, usually relating to child care issues, the W-2 payment process, or required documentation. A few applicants were reluctant to place their children in child care. Caseworkers generally explained that, in order to be eligible for W-2, they must engage in activities which would require them to be away from home at times. Applicants usually agreed to assess their child care options and make an appropriate placement.

Applicants also expressed dissatisfaction about delays in receiving their first payment. Caseworkers generally restated and explained the payment policy, after which some applicants compared W-2 to an actual job, commenting, "W-2 is worse than a job" or "I should just go get a job."

Discussions about required documentation and forms were also sometimes contentious. Applicants expressed

frustration about having to submit the same documents to both their caseworker and their county worker (who determines eligibility for Food Stamps and Medicaid). They did not understand why it was not sufficient to present the documents either to one caseworker or the other. Caseworkers usually responded by explaining the different functions of the county workers and caseworkers, and applicants reluctantly agreed to submit documentation as needed to both.

Conclusions

How did observing caseworker-client interactions increase our knowledge of Wisconsin's welfare program? We were able to directly examine what actually happens in policy implementation. We were able to see how clients and caseworkers relate to each other during the (then-early) phase of a new welfare reform program. In order to appropriately evaluate program outcomes, it is important to know whether a program has been implemented as intended. What aspects of the program are being explained? Is this congruent with policymakers and agency administrators' expectations? How are caseworkers making decisions about assessments and placements? What is the overall structure, flow, and list of topics discussed across interviews? How may program participants be experiencing the same program differently?

In addition to providing a direct assessment of program implementation, these observations yield important data for senior program administrators. For example, this study suggests that, given the competing demands on a caseworker's time, it may not be realistic to expect caseworkers to simultaneously manage face-to-face interviews and telephone inquiries. Senior administrators can learn from these observations and make adjustments to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery. Similarly, observation can be used to better understand how the client actually experiences a welfare program and whether this experience is as intended.

Although there is great potential benefit in increasing the use of participant observation in poverty research, it has been rather infrequently used. Significant obstacles to its use include the need for an extensive field presence, adequate budgetary resources, and careful training to ensure consistency across observers. However, many poverty studies have overcome similar challenges. A more important impediment may be the lack of well-developed techniques for taking program implementation issues into account in program evaluation. Observation may also reveal unwelcome truths—for example, that poverty programs were not implemented as intended, or that implementation has varied by racial or ethnic group or by clients' fluency in English. The difficulty of adjusting for such complications may undercut evaluators' appreciation for observation research and may account for its relatively rare use. More work is needed to devise methods that allow program evaluators to productively incorporate findings from observation. ■

¹M. S. Schwartz and C. G. Schwartz, "Problems in Participant Observation," *The American Journal of Sociology* 60 (1955): 343–53.

²This section is based on an MDRC study, abbreviated from S. T. Gooden, F. Doolittle and B. Glispie, *Assessing Welfare Clients: How Agencies Match W-2 Participants with Services in Milwaukee*. New York: MDRC, November 2001. The field research was done during May through August, 1999; 100 intake interviews were observed.

³In each observed intake interview, the interviewee was applying for welfare services (we did not track whether this was the person's first W-2 application). Each agency had a high percentage of applicants who did not appear for scheduled appointments, which made random selection based on scheduled appointments impractical. Instead, to minimize selection bias, the researchers attempted to observe the first applicants who met with a caseworker for an intake appointment, regardless of scheduling status.

⁴The Wisconsin Works Manual is available at: http://www.dwd.state.wi.us/dws/manuals/w-2_manual/default.htm.

⁵Job Access Loans are short-term, no-interest loans designed to assist eligible individuals in meeting emergency needs related to obtaining or maintaining employment.

New perspectives on the social and economic contexts of HIV/AIDS infection

In the United States, the HIV/AIDS epidemic was first associated most widely with a group that by many definitions was economically advantaged though often socially stigmatized—white gay males. Partly as a result, research has tended to focus on the psychological and medical plight of infected individuals and has somewhat neglected the employment, economic, and social consequences of the epidemic. But rates of HIV/AIDS infection are now rising disproportionately among low-income black men and women, who have very different social experiences, family circumstances, and employment histories and prospects from those who have historically received the most attention from researchers and policymakers. Researchers are just beginning to ask how they can best address the complex social, economic, and cultural contexts of this epidemic for economically disadvantaged groups and for racial and ethnic minorities.

This article reports work by two recent visitors at IRP who study the problems posed by HIV/AIDS from very different disciplinary perspectives. Both focus on the disadvantaged black men and women among whom infection is rising most swiftly. In a recent analysis, Rucker Johnson, an economist and public policy scholar, explored the incidence of infection among black women and men in conjunction with the higher levels of incarceration among black men. Are the two linked, he asks, and if so, how? He and his colleague Steven Raphael approached this question through an innovative quantitative analysis of national panel data. Sociologist Celeste Watkins-Hayes considers the aftermath of infection and in a recent piece reflects on how little we know about the experiences of HIV-positive black women in three crucial areas: employment, family dynamics, and intimate relationships. She argues for more intensive research using qualitative, mixed-method, and longitudinal work that examines HIV/AIDS not simply as a medical epidemic, but as a social and economic phenomenon that shapes relations with kin, work, and community. This *Focus* article summarizes her perspectives on work and economic issues.

Trends in HIV/AIDS infection among black men and women

African Americans represent about 12.5 percent of the U.S. population, but have disproportionately high rates of HIV/AIDS infection (Figure 1). Among black men, the annual rate of infection between 2000 and 2003 was 100 per 100,000, compared to fewer than 15 among non-Hispanic white men. Among black women, the rate of infection (55 per 100,000) was 19 times that among white

women, and the numbers carrying the infection were much larger. Rates of infection show little sign of slackening. Blacks accounted for 49 percent of all HIV/AIDS cases diagnosed in 2005.¹

The disparate incidence of HIV infection suggests that groups that have been socially or economically marginalized are particularly vulnerable. For Celeste Watkins-Hayes, the interplay between structural factors and individual behaviors in poor neighborhoods, identified by sociologists like William Julius Wilson, play a critical role.² Residential segregation, past and current racial discrimination, the targeted marketing of legal and illegal drugs in low-income communities, inadequate health care, and limited economic resources are all factors that conspire to perpetuate joblessness, drug sale and use, sex work, high incarceration rates, homelessness, and mental and physical illnesses among vulnerable urban and rural residents.

Black male incarceration and HIV/AIDS infection rates: Is there a link?

Among a number of potential explanations for higher infection rates, Johnson and Raphael focused on the relatively high level of black male incarceration. They did so for strong reasons. The prison system contains perhaps the highest concentration of HIV infection in the United States. In theory, the effect of an increase in male incarceration on HIV infection is ambiguous: incarceration of infected men removes them as a risk to the community at large. And as HIV infection rates rise, the perception of risk in sexual activity may be expected to rise and people may modify their behavior to counteract that risk. But there are offsetting factors: male incarceration in particu-

The research briefly summarized here is presented at length in two papers:

Rucker C. Johnson and Steven Raphael, "The Effects of Male Incarceration Dynamics on AIDS Infection Rates among African American Women and Men," Working Paper 22, National Poverty Center, University of Michigan, 2006.

Celeste Watkins-Hayes, "The Social and Economic Context of Black Women Living with HIV/AIDS in the U.S.: Implications for Research," in *Gender, Sexuality, and HIV/AIDS: The Caribbean and Beyond*, ed. R. Reddock, S. Reid, D. Douglas, and D. Roberts, forthcoming.

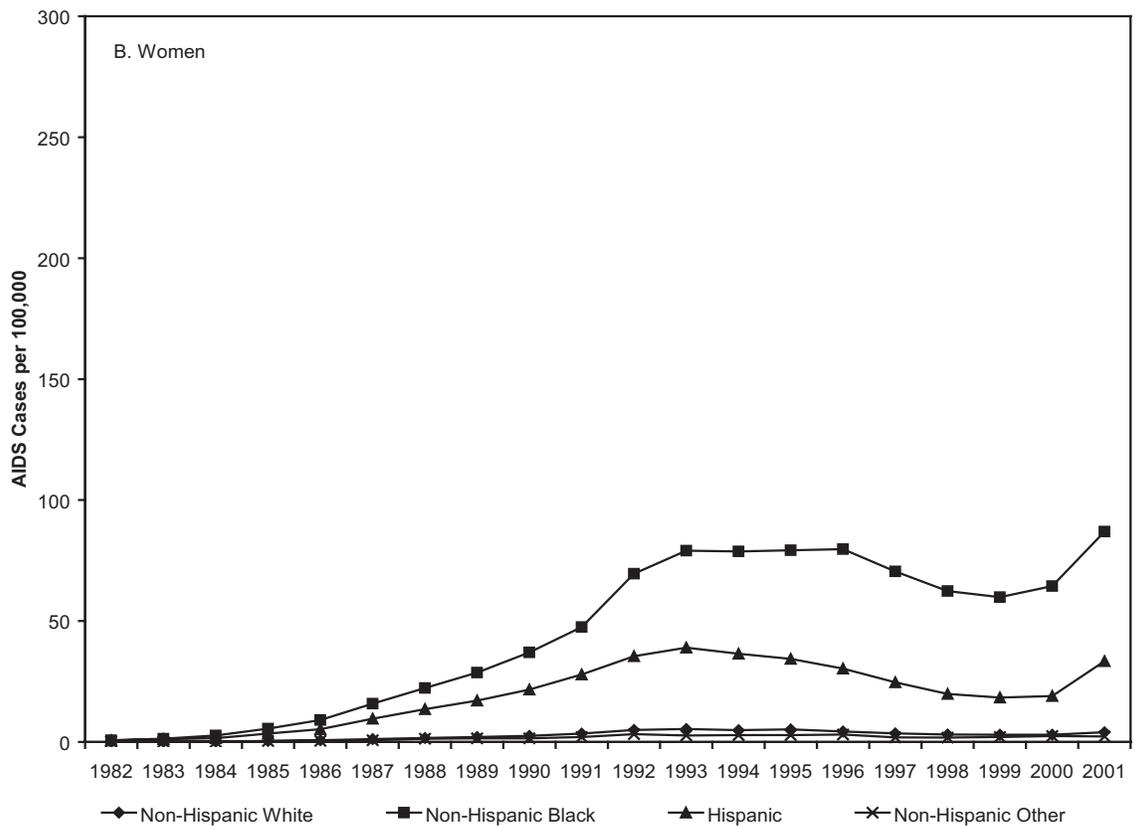
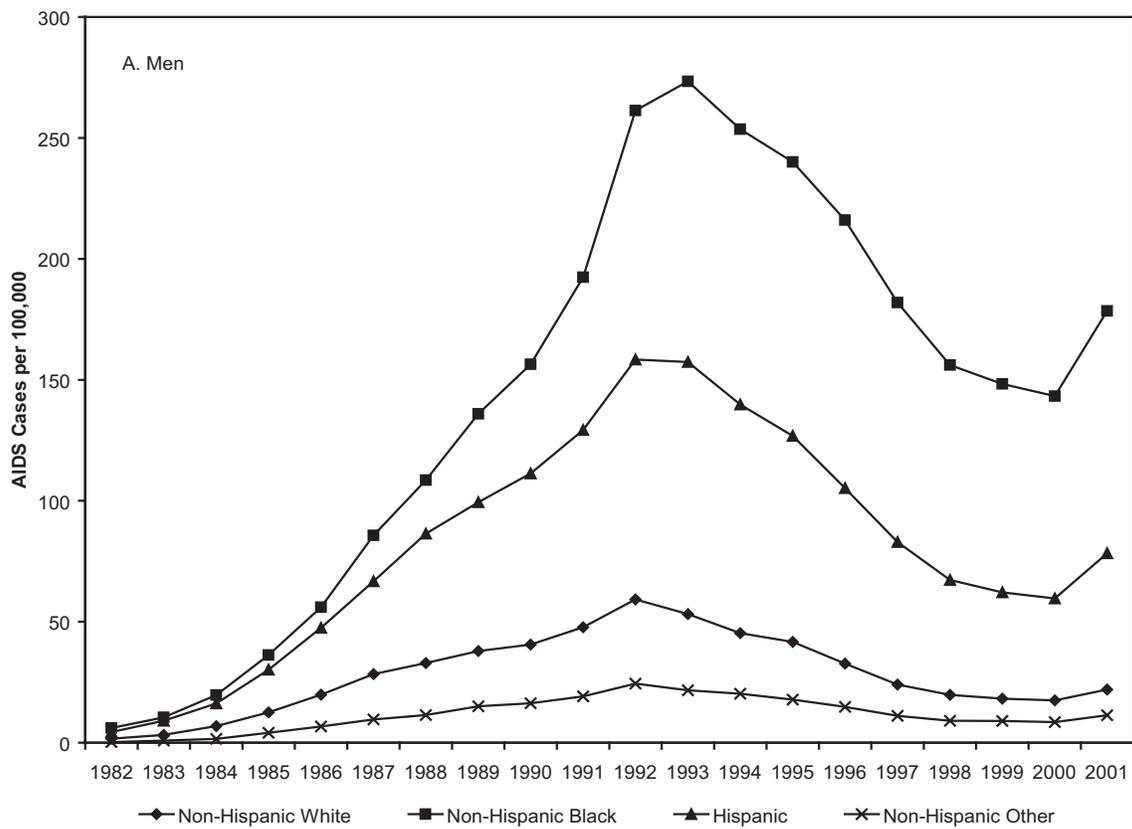


Figure 1. Annual newly diagnosed AIDS cases among those aged 20–64, by race and ethnicity, 1982–2001. A. Men. B. Women.

Source: R. Johnson and S. Raphael, “The Effects of Male Incarceration Dynamics on AIDS Infection Rates among African American Women and Men,” Working Paper 22, National Poverty Center, University of Michigan, 2006.

lar lowers the male-to-female sex ratio, abruptly disrupts the continuity of heterosexual relationships, and increases exposure to homosexual activity among the incarcerated.

These are risk factors to which the black community is particularly vulnerable. Roughly one-fifth of black adult males in the United States have served time, and many of these men have cycled in and out of correctional institutions in their early adult lives. The ratio of men to women among the noninstitutionalized population is markedly lower for non-Hispanic blacks than for non-Hispanic whites. Black women are nearly twice as likely as white women to have recently had concurrent partners, and on average have higher lifetime numbers of partners (both of these may be related to higher black male incarceration rates).³

The empirical strategy adopted by Johnson and Raphael relied on the fact that the overwhelming majority of marriages and, by extension, sexual relationships, occur between men and women of similar age, race, and ethnicity, living in the same area. The researchers were able to define sexual relationship networks using representative national data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They constructed a panel data set of AIDS-infection rates covering the years 1982–2001 (AIDS is used as the sample identifier because there are no national data for the early stage of HIV infection). Johnson and Raphael had information about the year of onset, the mode of transmission, and the residence, age, sex, and race or ethnicity of infected persons. Using U.S. Census data, they constructed a panel of male and female incarceration rates matched to the AIDS panel by state, year, race, and age. They then used these data to model the dynamic relationship between AIDS infection rates and the proportion of men in the matched cohort of those incarcerated at any point between 1980 and 1996. To allow for the often large lag between the time of infection and the development of a full-blown AIDS syndrome, they estimated the effects of increases in incarceration on the AIDS epidemic over the subsequent 13-year period.

The conclusions from this research are unambiguous. The authors found:

1. Between 1980 and 1996, male and female AIDS infection rates increased the most among demographic groups that experienced the largest increases in male incarceration rates. These effects persisted even after the authors included controls for characteristics of the specific relationship “market”—such as the prevalence of drug use or behavioral norms—and allowed for race- and age-specific trends.

2. The strength of the observed relationship between increases in male incarceration and AIDS infection rates increased with time, paralleling the time between HIV infection and the emergence of full-blown AIDS. That is, an increase in incarceration at one point generated very

few new AIDS cases immediately and an annually increasing number of cases over the next ten years or so.

3. The higher incarceration rates among black males over the period of study explain the lion’s share of the racial disparities in AIDS infection rates between black women and women of other racial and ethnic groups. Figure 2 depicts the actual black-white differences in infection rates and the difference after accounting for incarceration rates. For men, the disparity in infection rates would have greatly diminished; among black women, the rate would have been *lower* than for white women.

During the 1990s, infection occurring through heterosexual sex, not intravenous drug use, was the largest contributor to the growth of the racial disparities in HIV infection rates among women. Among men, the increasing black-white disparity in homosexually contracted AIDS infections is fully accounted for by the higher incarceration rates of blacks, providing further evidence of the link between incarceration and AIDS.

How robust are these findings? The authors examined the effects of state prison overcrowding litigation that resulted in short-run increases in prison release rates. They also investigated the effects of intrastate changes in sentencing and parole regimes on AIDS infection.⁴ The results suggest that prison release rates and state prison sentencing policy reforms had highly significant effects on subsequent AIDS infection rates. More prisoners released created spikes in AIDS infection rates that manifested themselves 5 to 10 years later, primarily for African Americans and women. These patterns lend further support to the hypothesized relationship between incarceration and AIDS infection rates.

These results, say the authors, suggest that there are large and unintended health consequences for former offenders and for unincarcerated members of communities that send disproportionate numbers of their young men into state and federal prisons. Beyond the immediate and severe effects on the health and happiness of the incarcerated and their partners in the community, these consequences include increased postprison medical expenditures for the larger numbers infected. Moreover, the empirical and theoretical analysis undertaken here can easily be extended to other communicable diseases that are thought to be transmitted among prisoners—tuberculosis and hepatitis B and C, for example. The authors assert that any comprehensive assessment of criminal justice policy in the United States should pay close attention to such considerations.

Women living with HIV/AIDS: Exploring the social and economic context

How do women fulfilling multiple roles as mothers, workers, family members, and intimate partners structure

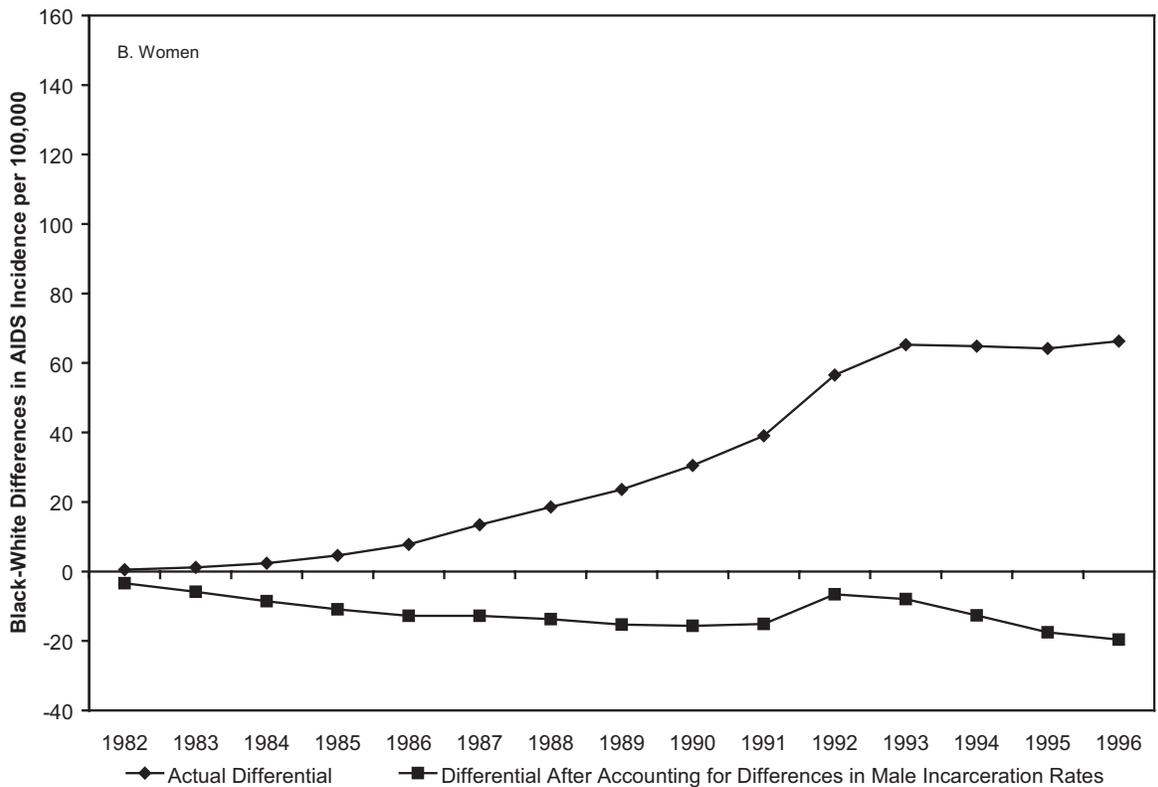
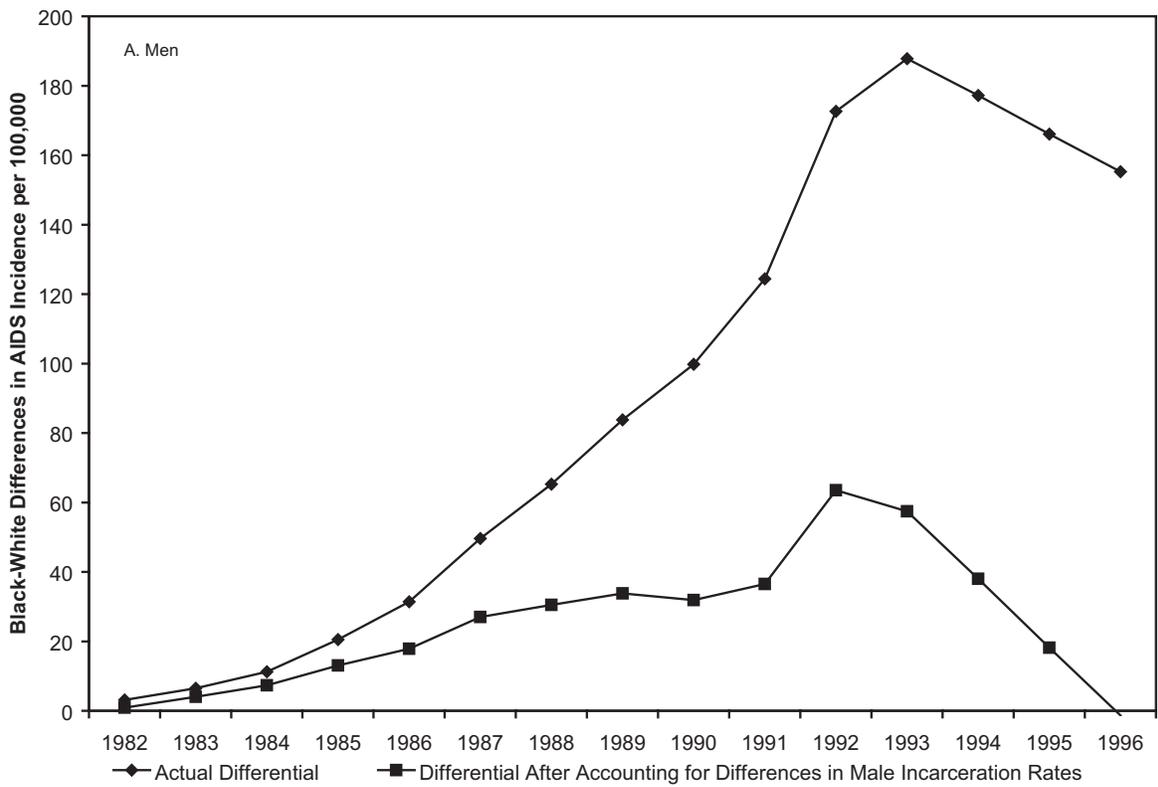


Figure 2. Actual black-white differences in overall AIDS infection rates, and the black-white difference after accounting for male incarceration rates. A. Men. B. Women.

Source: R. Johnson and S. Raphael, "The Effects of Male Incarceration Dynamics on AIDS Infection Rates among African American Women and Men," Working Paper 22, National Poverty Center, University of Michigan, 2006.

their lives following HIV diagnosis? The growing feminization of the HIV/AIDS epidemic worldwide, says Celeste Watkins-Hayes, only strengthens the argument that understanding social and economic factors is essential to the analysis of risk, prevention, and treatment. The persistent poverty and gender inequality found in the developing world where AIDS has spread so rapidly are manifest in U.S. society as well, albeit to a much less severe degree. In a context of clear economic, social, and political hierarchies, women's survival strategies may include transactional sex for money, food, accommodations, protection, and drugs; sexual relationships that involve deep power imbalances and silence around health issues; and coping with severe marginalization through drug use. These are realities that directly and indirectly contribute to rising rates of HIV infection. Race, socioeconomic class, sexuality, and the historical and social meanings they bear shape the filters through which individuals view and experience the world. These assumptions and perspectives are present when people negotiate condom use, digest messages about prevention, seek medical assistance, or determine how they will live their lives once infected.

It is this last issue with which Watkins-Hayes is particularly concerned. There is a growing body of research, she notes, that examines the risk of infection in the context of overlapping social roles and group memberships. And much previous research has explored the psychological impact of HIV infection—its impact on depression and coping ability, for example. The opportunities and restrictions that emerge from race, class, and gender status, from social affiliations and commitments, and from economic circumstances should become a clear focus of analytic attention, clarifying what it means to have HIV. Studies of individual behavior and experiences should explicitly consider the structural and historical contexts of people's lives, making it possible to draw out larger sociological and epidemiological meanings while respecting human complexity and individuality. Watkins-Hayes adopts this kind of conceptual approach in work on women living with HIV/AIDS during prime decades of childbearing and child-rearing, labor force participation, and family and community engagement, roughly from ages 18 to 45.

Employment and HIV/AIDS

In some countries with high rates of HIV/AIDS infection, the collapse of financial stability among families of the infected has led to overall economic decline in the hardest hit areas. The economic impact in the United States has not been so visible, yet it arguably remains a critical if neglected issue. Researchers, particularly at the beginning of the epidemic, conceived of infected individuals as medical subjects with limited life expectancy rather than as labor market actors. And indeed, labor force participation among those diagnosed did decline significantly in the early years of the epidemic. One study of San-Fran-

cisco-based individuals found that 50 percent of those who worked before being diagnosed with HIV had stopped working within two years, and all had stopped working within 10 years after onset of the first symptoms.⁵ Having jobs involving physically demanding labor, or jobs that created high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety, significantly influenced the likelihood that people with HIV/AIDS would stop working.

In recent years, advances in treatment—effective drug therapies, better monitoring of viral loads and T-cell counts, and adequate diets—have greatly improved the capacity of people with HIV/AIDS to carry out the normal routines of life and to extend their life expectancies. Yet returning to work is not inevitable, and it is not unusual for community-based social service agencies that provide information to the HIV-infected to construe work as a risky proposition in an effort to protect their clients. Concerns include the unpredictability of positive drug responses, potential medication side effects, insurance issues, the effects of long work hours and work stress on health, difficulty managing elaborate drug regimens and medical appointment schedules while working, and the fear that disclosure of HIV status might result in loss of the job.⁶ These worries conflict with both financial necessity and the value that individuals and American society as a whole place on work. Remaining in the labor force after an HIV diagnosis or returning after an extended absence thus involves a calculus that is both economic and personal.

However, the employment research that has explored the effects and implications of HIV/AIDS infection has focused almost exclusively on white, middle-class, gay men, a population likely to have greater levels of work experience and education than poor minority women with HIV/AIDS. The challenges faced by the HIV-positive regardless of race, class, or gender may become overwhelming. Yet, it would be surprising if the economic disparities—lower employment rates, wages, and occupational status as well as higher poverty rates—that are known to contribute to the disproportionately high HIV infection rates among poor and minority women did not also shape the everyday work lives of those infected.

Researchers seeking to explore the economic landscape of those with HIV/AIDS can draw upon existing hypotheses regarding the interactions of race, gender, and employment. Watkins-Hayes lists some instances. For example, there is apparently no significant difference in how long white men and less-educated minority women who are working at the time of diagnosis stay employed thereafter.⁷ But poor single mothers who do not possess partner support, access to pensions and financial assets, or eligibility for health and disability benefits may have no other choice than to remain in or reenter the labor market following an HIV diagnosis. The more economically advantaged, in contrast, can weigh their options and comfort levels with remaining employed. Another impor-

tant dimension of the issue of HIV/AIDS and work is that the low-wage labor market is a frequent destination for many poor women with HIV/AIDS. As it commonly offers jobs that are physically demanding, assign inflexible work schedules, and have no or few benefits, this challenges the abilities of infected women to effectively balance work and health. For the most economically marginalized, however, an HIV/AIDS diagnosis may reduce economic disadvantage by opening access to housing, health care, cash assistance, and other resources.⁸ Watkins-Hayes is currently conducting an analysis of the varying effects of HIV/AIDS on the lives of infected black women that considers these different vantage points.

In addition to the structural conditions of the labor market, research and policy addressing the economic disparities among people living with HIV/AIDS must also consider the human capital needs of infected job seekers. The very circumstances that increased their risk of infection might also make them less employable. Watkins-Hayes argues that successful policies are likely to require the coupling of drug and prisoner rehabilitation initiatives with training, employment support resources, and employer incentives for individuals whose social and economic disadvantages are compounded by chronic illness.

Economic instability is an ever-present concern for many women even if they are healthy. The economic support system of many low-income women is a patchwork of work; help from friends, family, intimate partners, and social service providers; and government assistance. This may be harder to assemble if a woman is HIV-positive, depending on whether and how she chooses to disclose her health status, the degree of acceptance by her family and others, and the resources they can provide her. Watkins-Hayes argues that to craft effective policy and program initiatives, HIV/AIDS research that has focused on the employment experiences of the relatively advantaged must be integrated with the sociological and economic research that focuses on the employment experiences of the disadvantaged.

Introducing the larger social, cultural, and economic contexts of the lives of women infected with HIV is complicated, says Watkins-Hayes, but we have many tools at our disposal. Longitudinal analyses allow us to capture how

labor market activities and economic survival strategies change over time. Ethnographic work, both interviews and observation, reveals not only what respondents say but what they do in the multiple environments within which their HIV status is salient. Mixed-method work encourages us to quantify social dynamics and to provide texture to our investigations through the words of subjects and the observations of researchers. Comparative work opens up the possibility of understanding how individuals in different communities and cultures fashion their lives after an HIV diagnosis. This kind of scholarship will help us more fully understand what mechanisms need to be shaped, what resources expended, and what attitudes promoted to improve the lives of those infected and affected by AIDS. ■

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, 2005*, vol. 17, <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/surveillance/resources/reports/>.

²W. J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

³S. Raphael, "The Socioeconomic Status of Black Males: The Increasing Importance of Incarceration," in *Poverty, the Distribution of Income, and Public Policy*, ed. A. Auerbach, D. Card, and J. Quigley (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, forthcoming); A. Adimora and V. Schoenbach, "Social Context, Sexual Networks, and Racial Disparities in Rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections," *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 191(S1) (2005): 115–22.

⁴These investigations are discussed at length in Johnson and Raphael, "The Effects of Male Incarceration Dynamics on AIDS Infection Rates" (see box, p. 33).

⁵E. Yelin, R. Greenblatt, H. Hollander, and J. McMaster, "The Impact of HIV-Related Illness on Employment," *American Journal of Public Health* 81, no. 1 (1991): 79–84; see also D. Ezzy, R. DeVisser, and M. Bartos, "Poverty, Disease Progression and Employment among People Living with HIV/AIDS in Australia," *AIDS Care* 11, no. 4 (1999): 405–14.

⁶S. Nixon and R. Renwick, "Experiences of Contemplating Returning to Work for People Living with HIV/AIDS," *Qualitative Health Research* 13, no. 9 (2003): 1272–90.

⁷M. Massagli, J. Weissman, G. Seage III, and A. Epstein, "Correlates of Employment after AIDS diagnosis in the Boston Health Study," *American Journal of Public Health* 84, no. 12 (1994): 1976–81.

⁸J. Crane, K. Quirk, and A. van der Straten, "'Come Back When You're Dying': The Commodification of AIDS among California's Urban Poor," *Social Science and Medicine* 55, no. 7 (2002): 1115–27.

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