

Seeing TANF from the Inside Out—Reconsidering the Program's Role in the Wake of Welfare Reform

by Fredrica D. Kramer

Welfare reform has so succeeded in taking center stage in our current discourse about poverty that we may now, perhaps mistakenly, expect Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) to be the lead program to redress child and family poverty. In fact, the breadth of research findings now emerging largely as a result of welfare reform suggests that a substantial subset of families will need episodic or sustained help for much longer than TANF time limits will allow, from a broader array of providers than TANF agencies consistently or effectively interact with, and that some may need help from outside the TANF system entirely. The challenge is to develop a more refined model of individual and family transformation and new ways to reconfigure human services to maintain an effective presence for fragile families over the long term. A quick review of recent

research indicates a real need to rethink the current emphasis on new *tools*, better *targeting*, and better *training* within the TANF agency, and consider a broader, system-wide, approach in which TANF is one of a well-coordinated set of players and funding options.

New data generated specifically to assess the effects of welfare reform on low-income families and communities will allow researchers, policymakers, and others to apply different lenses to understand who makes it off the rolls and what policy or program responses might better help those who do not. For example, new national household data from the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF); cross-city comparisons using multidisciplinary methodologies, such as the Project on Devolution and Urban Change of the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) and Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study of Johns Hopkins University; and findings from randomized experiments conducted prior to passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) will help us assess the impact of policy and program options now being used under welfare reform. Additionally, detailed portraits are emerging of recipient experiences in the welfare system, through program-specific recipient surveys and ethnographic observations.

Note from the Director—Barbara B. Blum

This issue of *the forum* synthesizes information from research projects studying the experience of participants in welfare-to-work activities. Drawing on the findings, the author, Fredrica Kramer, senior consultant in social welfare policy for the Welfare Information Network, The Urban Institute, and other nonprofit and government organizations, argues for significant structural and programmatic changes to provide needed supports for vulnerable individuals who otherwise will be unlikely to enter employment and/or remain employed. Her recommendations, which grew out of a presentation at the November 1999 meeting of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, mirror those suggested in the recent Children and Welfare Reform Issue Brief No. 8—*Promoting Resilience: Helping Young Children and Parents Affected by Substance Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Depression in the Context of Welfare Reform*—by NCCP's deputy director, Dr. Jane Knitzer, which addresses the needs of children in households headed by adults not well equipped to negotiate the TANF process. These two publications suggest that for some welfare participants an array of interrelated interventions will be necessary to achieve and sustain TANF's self-sufficiency objective.

Poor Families Face Diverse Work Obstacles

National survey data tell us that there is not one story of welfare nor one recipient profile, and getting off welfare does not always lead to economic or psychological well-being. Geographic differences are very important. Compared to those who have left the welfare rolls, current recipients are more likely to be from the Northeast and West—reflecting in part state policy differences—but also, perhaps, the particular challenge of large-scale bureaucratic reform. Approximately two-thirds of those who leave welfare are working, but typically in low-paying service jobs. The data also tell us that those who remain on the rolls are increasingly those with multiple challenges, but who works is largely unpredictable. Some presumed obstacles to work, such as the presence of young chil-

dren, may have less impact on the likelihood of working, although the more obstacles the harder it is to get off welfare and, certainly, the harder it is to stay off welfare.

Analyses using other national data sets suggest that psychological disorders and health problems among adult recipients and those they care for may be quite prevalent. Less documentation exists about other problems such as obesity, high blood pressure and the side effects of poor nutrition, protracted caretaker responsibilities, housing instability, persistent family problems, legal entanglements, and other assaults to basic coping. How these problems affect the lives of poor families is now largely only suggested by anecdotal or ethnographic work, and more research is needed.

In-depth analyses of recipient experiences are still scarce. What is available reiterates that many will need to access help for a long time, and that who will struggle is not easy to predict. Getting off welfare and becoming self-sufficient are different processes, the latter remaining elusive for many during a long and difficult period of transition. For example, researchers from Project Match, an employment program for the hardest to serve in Chicago, have followed participants, most of whom are welfare recipients, for an average of 68 months, and carefully graphed the employment process, fine tuning our understanding of the unsteadiness of transitioning off welfare. They find that even for those who obtain work quickly, job cycling is the norm—with most participants needing more than five years to permanently transition off welfare. Findings from the Postemployment Services Demonstration suggest that intensive monitoring and assistance may be needed for extended periods after recipients begin working. Also, consistent with other research, who will need services is difficult to anticipate.

Screening Tools and Targeting Have Limits

Welfare reformers often still assume that changes in organizational culture and staff roles *within the welfare office*, given the right tools, will allow clients to reach their goals of self-sufficiency. Thus agency reform is largely focused on assessment *tools*, client *targeting*, and staff *training*. The evidence so far calls this focus into question.

First, the complexity of the lives of many welfare recipients, especially those left behind on the TANF rolls, is still not widely appreciated. The transition to stable employment is an extremely unsteady process. For some, full self-sufficiency may be truly unachievable—not just due to psychological barriers or other difficulties—but because the wage levels they can obtain in the near-term will not allow it. Those with extremely low basic skills may be qualified for less than 10 percent of all available jobs.

Second, although program personnel want to make decisions based on objective criteria, they cannot isolate key variables, and presort and prescribe services. There are few

effective screening tools for many of the issues that may affect recipients' employability; many problems reveal themselves only over time, and even the best tools may not identify them. Some mental health issues, such as prior sexual abuse and its possible connection to long-term depression, may never be revealed to welfare agency staff. Individuals are unlikely to volunteer such information unless help, rather than punishment, is the reward. For example, substance abusers or victims of domestic violence are unlikely to disclose their situations in an environment in which they do not feel safe or which cannot protect them unequivocally from surrender of their children.

Third, the convergence of issues such as substance abuse and the ability to function in the workplace is not always clear. Drug testing may push out of the labor market just those individuals who can function with some drug use, and severe cocaine and alcohol users may be only a very small portion of the caseload. Further, exposure of mental health and substance abuse issues may make staff vulnerable to mislabeling, misdiagnosis, and inappropriate assignment on the one hand, and an obligation to treat on the other, and diagnosis may still require clinical psychologists or other experts.

Without effective screening tools to identify problems, and without clear guidance about who needs help, targeting services is also largely unachievable. Rather, agencies may need to respond to current and obvious needs, and let client experiences and program responses unfold over time. As the Project Match researchers argue, programs must assess and reassess based on what clients report, paying special attention to those who ask for little—a potential sign of problems such as substance abuse or domestic violence that will keep them at risk of dependency into the future. Such an approach requires proactive and often intensive staff/client interaction more sophisticated and more costly than welfare staff are used to providing. This is not easily achievable—even with current flush TANF budgets. Workforce development agencies are even less accustomed to serving individuals with multiple personal and family problems or maintaining assistance for protracted periods of time.

Internal Agency Reform Also Limited

TANF agencies, increasingly aware of these new challenges, are attempting to transform their eligibility workers into case managers, responsible both for identification and assessment of complex personal and family issues that impact recipients' ability to work and for maintaining responsibility for clients throughout the duration of TANF assistance. Common wisdom and some emerging research suggest that inadequate training, large staff caseloads, contradictory program objectives, and persistent rewards for speed and accuracy rather than social outcomes, may still dominate many welfare agencies. In one assessment of a major culture change within a state

Database Research Projects Examining Cross-City Effects of Welfare Reform

POSTEMPLOYMENT SERVICES DEMONSTRATION

Evaluator	Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
Research duration	April 1994–April 1999
Sites studied	Chicago, Illinois; Portland, Oregon; Riverside, California; San Antonio, Texas
Populations studied	Nearly 5,000 welfare recipients who had just found work, enrolled over a 12- to 18-month period
Primary program components	Focused on helping welfare recipients keep jobs via extended case management
Recent publication	<i>The Struggle to Sustain Employment: The Effectiveness of the Postemployment Services Demonstration</i> (April 1999)

PROJECT ON DEVOLUTION AND URBAN CHANGE

Evaluator	Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC)
Research duration	January 1997–December 2001
Sites studied	Cuyahoga County (Cleveland), Ohio; Los Angeles County (Los Angeles), California; Miami-Dade County (Miami), Florida; Philadelphia County (Philadelphia), Pennsylvania
Populations studied	All food stamp and TANF recipients in the counties being studied, in addition to, selected institutions that serve low-income populations in three “target” neighborhoods
Primary program components	Multidisciplinary study examining the implementation of welfare reform and its effects on poor families with children, the communities they live in, and the institutions that assist them in four of the largest U.S. urban counties
Recent publication	<i>Project on Devolution and Urban Change: Report on Hunger and Food Security</i> (January 2000)

WELFARE, CHILDREN, AND FAMILIES: A THREE-CITY STUDY

Evaluator	Johns Hopkins University
Research duration	June 1997–June 2003
Sites studied	Boston, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; San Antonio, Texas
Populations studied	3,000 low-income households with children in low-income neighborhoods (one-half welfare families)
Primary program components	Study to investigate the strategies used to respond to welfare reform, in terms of employment, schooling or other forms of training, residential mobility, and fertility. Also examines the effects of these strategies on children’s lives, with an emphasis on their health and development as well as their need for, and use of, social services.
Recent publication	<i>Welfare Reform and Children: A Three-City Study: Overview and Design</i> (February 2000)

TANF agency, managers expressed doubt, despite application of a sophisticated assessment tool and special staff training, that new case managers could recognize learning disabilities or substance abuse, understand latent issues like depression, or have adequate knowledge to make effective referrals for mental health, domestic violence, substance abuse, or other services.

Many agencies recognize their inherent deficiencies and are looking for ways to graft on expertise, using team case management, co-location with specialists from other agencies, and various collaborative arrangements with other agencies to identify, refer, and sometimes directly case manage TANF clients. Collaboration can expose historical differences between cash welfare programs and, for example, vocational rehabilitation and mental health programs. It requires serious staff training and often cross-training to make interaction with other agencies or experts effective.

Position TANF in the Larger System

The evidence suggests that policymakers may need to rethink the place of the TANF agency within the larger social welfare system and consider how cash assistance can be made part of a larger strategy to achieve individual and family transformation. Many recipients will need sustained access to help for a long time, and agencies need a way of staying connected to those families, both to assure they receive other entitlements (such as Food Stamps and Medicaid), and to provide the range of needed social, psychological, and tangible assistance, such as child care. In order to stay connected, services need to be delivered in a way that is destigmatized, both to minimize the disincentive of some former welfare recipients to seek help and to minimize the political vulnerability of cash assistance.

Current thinking about the TANF program design is essentially linear. Indeed, cash assistance (and the TANF

system) is still the most likely entry point and may be the only source of help for many poor families. As these families enter TANF, they may receive cash benefits, obtain other help, or be diverted out to other systems. But in the frame of time limits, TANF agencies with the best intentions will look to tools or experts to diagnose and triage out those with complex, long-term problems preventing self-sufficiency. Such agencies are likely to operate with a relatively short-term crisis management orientation.

Policymakers may need to turn the current model inside out, to make cash an adjunct service within a larger menu of program and service responses that are provided dynamically over time, so that the question that drives programmatic decisions for a family seeking help is not what can the TANF program provide under time limitations, but what can the larger system provide, and how can the variety of federal, state, and other reimbursements be used to underwrite each service decision. For practitioners, this means at a minimum rethinking the way case management is understood and configured, with responsibilities dictated by the long-term service needs of the family.

Although the challenge remains to maintain accountability to each service and funding source, some TANF agencies are beginning de facto to operate this way, as they apply diversion strategies and refer clients out for treatment and services. For researchers, it means asking questions that go beyond assessing TANF effects to assessing the experiences of poor families as they are or are not served by the various components of the social welfare system and other targeted programs. It also means assessing their progress within the larger economy, and the effects of larger urban and rural planning and development strategies on these families. Importantly, it means devising more effective ways to track those experiences, whether through new efforts to use administrative data or redesigning administrative tracking systems with that in mind. Research, whether large multi-site studies or studies of changes in the operation of TANF programs in single sites and from the front-line up, will be more informative the better it can assess the TANF program within this broader context.

RESEARCH FORUM ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND THE NEW FEDERALISM

The Research Forum, an initiative of the National Center for Children in Poverty, hosted at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, encourages collaborative research and informed policy on welfare reform and vulnerable populations. The Research Forum's ultimate goal is to identify and promote strategies that protect and enhance the well-being of poor children and their families.

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