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Is Welfare Reform Working? A Study of the Effects of Sanctions on Families Receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families

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This research provides a preliminary descriptive analysis of the impact of new welfare sanctions on recipients living in a southern metropolitan region. The data from this phone survey indicate that many families report considerable hardship no matter why they exited from welfare. Compared to those who left voluntarily, those who were sanctioned off welfare were significantly different in terms of having unmet medical needs, going without food, and having their utilities turned off. Given the high number of problems reported and the low income reported by these respondents, it is not surprising to find that only 10 percent of former recipients who were sanctioned off of welfare feel that they are better off now than when they received cash assistance. These problems can represent a significant disruption in the lives of children and their parents.

The passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) was hailed as the "end of welfare as we know it." Federal spending for AID to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was replaced with block grants given

to the states to create Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs. To “end welfare as we know it,” the major change from AFDC to TANF was the establishment of time limits whereby a parent may only receive cash assistance for a period of twenty-four consecutive months. Further, a lifetime limit of five years, or sixty total months, was instituted. Other changes enacted by the PRWORA include compulsory participation of the adult recipient in work and job search activities, mandatory provision of information for child support enforcement (i.e., the father’s name), and living arrangement and school attendance requirements for teenaged parents. Sanctions for non-compliance were increased so that benefits for the entire family could be ended, not just benefits for the parent or child.

In the year following the passage of PRWORA, welfare rates dropped 20 percent nationally, as reported by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (Children’s Defense Fund, 1998). As of March, 1999, all states showed a reduction in the number of recipients receiving benefits from the high period of 1993, with an overall average 48 percent reduction reported (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Thirty-five states had declines that were greater than the national average, and of these, thirty-one had declines of 50 percent or more, and nineteen states had declines of 60 percent or more. Table 1 shows the number of recipients served and the percentage change for the four states with the highest declines from January, 1993 through March, 1999.

Table 1

Welfare Caseload Declines (1993–1999)

<i>State</i>	<i>Pre-TANF Jan. 1993</i>	<i>Post-TANF March 1999</i>	<i>Percent Change</i>
Wyoming	18,271	1,770	–90%
Wisconsin	241,098	28,863	–88%
Idaho	21,116	2,897	–86%
Mississippi	174,093	38,246	–78%

Source: U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (1999)

Throughout the country, the declining rolls are partly attributed to the robust economy (Children's Defense Fund, 1998). Welfare administrators and politicians have claimed that these reductions are indicators that welfare recipients are obtaining work and no longer relying on federal assistance. Nationally, however, it is estimated that approximately 38 percent of those leaving welfare were terminated because they failed to meet requirements of the new law and were subjected to sanctions and involuntary case closure (Not So Welfare, 1998).

In this complex environment, there is little data post-PRWORA on exactly why families are leaving the welfare rolls, and whether these exists happen voluntarily because of employment or other income gains, or forced through the increased power of sanctioning. Further, what is happening to those families leaving welfare? What is their economic status after exiting welfare? Do they perceive themselves as better off? Are the problems that sactioned recipients face different from those who leave welfare voluntarily? This paper provides some preliminary descriptive information from a small sample of families who left welfare in the spring of 1998 in an urban area in the South.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The passage of the PRWORA highlights the tensions found between two competing schools of thought regarding the cause of poverty (Ellwood & Summers, 1986). Individual explanations for poverty concentrate on the personal characteristics of the population of people in poverty and propose causal relationships between what are seen as individual deficits and poverty (Herrnstein & Murrar, 1994; Mead, 1992). Although unproven from a scientific standpoint (Epstein, 1997), individual explanations of poverty are embedded in PRWORA which, according to its preamble, seeks to promote marriage and attachment to the work force as the solutions to poverty (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, 1996). Although individual explanations for poverty dominate the PRWORA, a more structural focus is also found in the law with regards to child care. Proponents of a structural cause of poverty see inadequate access to high quality, affordable child care as one of the impediments to a

parent's ability to enter the work force (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 1997). Other structural explanations for poverty, including the gender stratification of women into low paying jobs (Kemp, 1995; Sidel, 1992), the low level of the minimum wage (Schram, 1997) and the effects of domestic violence on the need for welfare (Brandwein, 1999) are not adequately addressed in the law.

Research on exits from welfare prior to the enactment of PRWORA suggested that those persons with the shortest history of welfare use will be among those who exit quickly through finding employment. One study found those women on welfare most likely to obtain employment were those with high school educations, previous work experience, family resources (such as income from other family members), and no infants or toddlers (Spalter-Roth, Burr, Hartman & Shaw, 1995). In a survey of nearly 3,000 Wisconsin AFDC families (prior to the TANF reforms), Rank (1994) found approximately a third of the families exited welfare because of increased income (primarily from employment), about a third left because of sanctions applied, and the other third left for other reasons. Many in this final third reported being less well off than when on welfare, with some reporting crises because of unmet medical needs or domestic violence.

Only a few studies are available that have examined the impact on families of the changes in welfare since the 1996 reforms, although many are currently in process. Studies undertaken by state agencies, advocacy organizations and policy groups have used mail, phone and personal interviews or analysis of administrative data to determine the reasons recipients have left the welfare rolls and their employment outcomes (Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, 1999). A summary of the reasons for welfare exit in these studies shows wide discrepancy in the number of people who report leaving welfare for a job, from 11.3% who were working (by administrative report) in the quarter after their welfare exit in Maryland (University of Maryland, 1998) to 67% of respondents who reported to interviewers leaving welfare for a job in Washington State (Washington Department of Social and Human Services, 1999). Outcomes beyond a former recipients' current employment status have not been summarized across studies.

The National Governor's Association (1998) reviewed reports from eleven states in which state agencies evaluated the impact of welfare reform. They found that between 50 to 60 percent of those who left welfare did so because of employment. Employment, however, was not necessarily an exit from poverty. As the report noted, most jobs pay more than minimum wage, but still leave workers with families below the official poverty line. Many families reported continued hardship and deprivation once off of welfare and most continued to need support through other governmental programs such as Food Stamps or Medicaid.

The state of Maryland analyzed approximately 33,000 cases that were closed—families or persons leaving welfare—during the period October, 1996, through June, 1997 (*Life after Welfare: An Interim Report*, 1997). The five major reasons for exiting (in order of frequency) were: receiving other income, not completing the redetermination process, failing to provide requested verification, starting employment, and failure to meet residency requirements. Thirty-nine percent of these recipients were terminated involuntarily for reasons of non-compliance.

Welfare departments have been rewarded for insuring that ineligible recipients are not provided financial assistance, but no penalty has been attached to those instances when welfare administrators have discontinued payments for still eligible families (Schram, 1996). "Churning" is the process of using non-compliance by recipients to deny payments while recipients are still financially eligible (Lipsky, 1984). When recipients do not produce requested paperwork, miss an appointment, or do not follow a rule of the department, assistance can be terminated until compliance occurs. In some cases, recipients report that they don't know why their benefits were ended (Schram, 1996).

PRWORA expanded the capacity of departments to disallow payments in a variety of circumstances, potentially increasing the churning of recipients. The act incorporated many of the experimental reforms established by states prior to 1996, including the use of a full family sanction as a deterrent designed to induce compliance with institutional regulations. A full family sanction allows the welfare agency to terminate benefits to an entire family for non-compliance, whereas previously, benefits for the non-compliant parent were withheld, but the children's

portion of the AFDC grant continued to be paid (Ferber & Storch, 1998). Philosophically, sanctions can be seen as motivational tools whose existence encourages welfare recipients to comply with regulations, or they can be viewed as a punishment for failure to comply with departmental rules (Kaplan, 1999). A recent review of state sanction policies indicates that many states are opting for more severe sanctioning (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1998), and suspending payments to families that are financially eligible, but who are unable or unwilling to comply with new departmental regulations.

Although federal law does not require that states assess the impact of sanctions on families, several governmental and advocacy organizations have begun efforts to do so. The Maryland study notes that a relatively small number (4.7 percent) of persons whose cases were terminated were sanctioned for failure to meet work requirements (*Life After Welfare*, 1997). A study in Montana found that 22.7 percent of cases in the state were terminated because of non-compliance with (unspecified) departmental regulations (*Coping with Block Grants*, 1998). During the first twenty-two months of the Montana TANF program, 36 percent of the caseload was sanctioned at least once. A similar smaller study conducted in Portland, Oregon, found that the majority of welfare recipients exited because they found employment or increased their income; however, 14 percent during the period of the study were terminated for failure to meet work search requirements (Multnomah County Department of Community and Family Services, 1997). Comparison of sanction rates across studies and states is impeded by disparities between reporting practice. While some states report the percentage of cases closed per month, others report the percentage of recipients sanctioned in a given time period (Kaplan, 1999).

A national study looking at the use of sanctions was conducted by the General Accounting Office (GAO, 1997). By analyzing approximately 18,000 cases terminated nationwide, the GAO found that from June to December, 1996, terminations for failure to meet work requirements increased from 34 to 47 percent. Other sanctionable offenses, such as non-compliance with child support enforcement, and teen parent school attendance and living arrangements, remained level at approximately 8 percent of

the terminations. Time limits accounted for less than one percent of the terminations, but the study was conducted before recipients would reach the first twenty-four month time period imposed by the PRWORA.

About 72 percent of the GAO sample came from three states with the highest case closure rates—Iowa, Massachusetts and Wisconsin. Each state had experimented with the use of a full family sanction. According to the GAO, one-third of terminated families in Massachusetts and Wisconsin were reinstated because of subsequent compliance, documentation of exemptions, or because the termination was due to an administrative error. Wisconsin, for example, reversed the termination of 44 percent of their cases because their record-keeping on hours worked in the previous month was in error. Iowa had a six-month waiting period before families could reapply, and about one-third did so and returned to AFDC rolls (GAO, 1997).

This review of recent literature related to reasons for exiting welfare and the outcomes for those who do leave indicates wide variation in the number of the people who actually leave welfare involuntarily because of sanctions, and the number of former recipients who are reported to be working after exiting welfare. Evaluation of other outcomes for families who previously received welfare has been negligible.

METHODOLOGY

The results of this telephone survey provide a preliminary descriptive analysis of the experiences of those persons living in a southern metropolitan region who left the welfare rolls in the spring of 1998. The study examines the demographic characteristics of these persons, their reasons for leaving the rolls, their work-related characteristics, and some of their current problems. This study was a one-time, cross-sectional telephone survey of former welfare recipients whose names were obtained from the state welfare department.

A survey instrument was designed by drawing on social science literature and by using similar surveys from recent research evaluating outcomes for welfare recipients. The survey asked former recipients about their reasons for leaving welfare, their

current work and income status, and whether they were having any of a list of several problems. The survey was piloted with ten former welfare recipients and given to key informants in the welfare arena who suggested modifications.

The research study was conducted over a one month period with a list provided by the state department overseeing welfare payments. The list consisted of the names and phone numbers of 1400 persons whose welfare benefits ended during a two month period in the spring of 1998, prior to the implementation of time limits on welfare benefits in the state. Of this list, 737 persons could not be contacted by phone because the welfare department had no phone number available, the phone had been disconnected, or the person was unknown at the number provided. Of the 663 persons available by phone, completed interviews were obtained from 347, for a response rate of 52%. Analysis of reasons for non-response by the remaining 316 subjects showed that 21 percent were unavailable because they were out of town, in the hospital or incarcerated. Another 19 percent were at supposedly valid phone numbers where no one answered calls that were placed at three different times during different days and times of the week. A small number of people refused to participate in the survey once they were reached (8%).

While the 347 responses obtained represent all known, reachable participants who were willing to participate in the survey, the sample is not a random sample. Therefore, generalizations to the population of interest are questionable because it is impossible to determine the characteristics of the unreachable portion of the population. Logically, however, one could assume that the population reached represents the most stable of the former welfare recipients, as they were reachable at a number they had previously given the department. All data collected from the interviews with former recipients were self-reported. No other outside sources were used to verify the validity of the data. The usual concerns about the validity of self-reported responses applies to this study.

FINDINGS

Demographic information on respondents to the survey showed that 91 percent were African-American, 8 percent were

white, and the other 1 percent were other races. All respondents were female, and the average age was 32 years. Ninety-four percent (94%) of the respondents were self-recipients or the identified parent or guardian payee for a child. According to information provided by the department about the typical characteristics of the TANF population, this sample is similar to the overall state statistics which report that 85% of TANF recipients are non-white with an average age of 33 years.

Table 2 reports the recipients' reasons for leaving welfare, which have been separated into two broad categories: voluntary

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages for Respondents' Primary Reason (Voluntary and Involuntary) for Discontinuing Welfare Payments

<i>Primary Reason—Voluntary</i>	<i>Percent (n = 347)</i>
Employed	21.0
Received Other Income	14.9
Other Voluntary Reasons	10.8
Too Much Hassle	9.0
Could Not Do Preferred School Program	3.2
Married and Spouse's Income Counted	1.7
Voluntary Sub-Total	60.6%
<i>Primary Reason—Involuntary</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Did Not Comply with DSS Rules	10.8
Did Not Meet Work Search Requirements	7.9
Recipient Didn't Know Why Terminated	7.6
Rules Changed—No Longer Eligible	7.0
Recipient No Longer Guardian of Child*	4.4
Child Not Meeting School Attendance Requirements	2.3
Did Not Meet Immunization Requirements	0.3
In Voluntary Sub-Total	40.3%
Total	100.0%

* Child aged out or was removed from parent's custody

leavers (generally, those who have left welfare because they have received some other form of income), and sanctioned leavers (those whose welfare payments were discontinued because the recipient did not meet certain guidelines). Table 2 shows that the most frequent reason for leaving welfare was that the recipient obtained employment (21%). The second most common reason for exiting was the receipt of other income (almost 15%). This category includes income from child support, unemployment insurance, Social Security and SSI (Supplemental Security Income). Altogether, 60 percent of the respondents stopped receiving welfare payments for what might be considered voluntary reasons, while 40 percent were terminated for largely involuntary reasons. Most categories of the involuntary reasons reflect new sanctions implemented under the PRWORA.

Table 3 compares all respondents by the voluntary/sanctioned leaver dichotomy. Mean differences in age, years of education, level of reported income, and the number of problems

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and T-Test Results Comparing Sanctioned and Not sanctioned Respondents on Age, Years of Schooling, Total Monthly Income and Number of Problems

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>t</i>
Age of Respondent				-2.155*
Sanctioned	137	33.82	12.38	
Not Sanctioned	203	31.25	9.57	
Years of Schooling				1.317
Sanctioned	137	11.50	2.36	
Not Sanctioned	199	11.84	2.34	
Total Monthly Income				5.599*
Sanctioned	131	304.22	421.19	
Not Sanctioned	192	691.58	711.14	
Total Number of Problems				-2.480*
Sanctioned	135	2.74	3.06	
Not Sanctioned	195	1.98	2.43	

* Difference significant at $p < .05$.

recipients reported were evaluated. A list of problems such as having difficulty paying bills, having to move, and going without food were presented to respondents who were asked if they had experienced the problem in the previous three months. Any "yes" answer was coded as "1" and then each problem noted by a respondent was summed to create a total. Thirty-two percent of all respondents indicated that they had none of the problems listed; 44.6 percent reported having from one to three problems, and 23.7 percent noted having more than three problems. Table 3 indicates that survey respondents who left welfare voluntarily were more likely to be younger, but they were not significantly different from those who were sanctioned in level of education. As might be anticipated, those who were sanctioned had significantly lower incomes and reported more problems than their counterparts who left welfare voluntarily.

Table 4 lists the specific problems asked of respondents, the percent of the sample that reported that problem, and the means for the voluntary vs. sanctioned leavers for each problem. Respondents who had been sanctioned reported a greater number of problems, and had higher means levels for all problems, except "had others move in to help pay rent". For four problem areas, sanctioned respondents had significantly higher mean differences as noted through the use of a t test: they were more likely to have been unable to afford needed medications and/or health care ($t = -3.317$), to have gone without food ($t = -2.486$), and to have other problems ($t = -3.304$) to have their heat or utilities cut off ($t = -2.525$) than were former recipients who had left welfare voluntarily. The mean number of problems for those who were sanctioned and those who left welfare voluntarily were not statistically different within the following categories: having to change their living arrangements, being unable to pay rent, having the phone disconnected, having to go to a food bank or soup kitchen, having their children change schools, having a child live away from the caregiver, being homeless, and having a child spend time in foster care.

Table 5 shows the results of two chi square tests of the relationship between leaving status (voluntary leavers vs. sanctioned) and 1) work status and 2) whether respondents saw themselves as being better off now than when they received welfare payments.

Table 4

Problems Encountered in Past 3 Months Since Recipient Stopped Receiving Welfare Payments

<i>Problem (n = 345)</i>	<i>Percent of sample Responding "YES"</i>	<i>Mean</i>	
		<i>Sanctioned</i>	<i>Not Sanctioned</i>
Couldn't Afford Medical Care or Medications	39.3%	.50*	.33
Went without Food	27.4%	.36*	.23
Unable to Pay Rent	22.8%	.26	.21
Phone Disconnected	21.7%	.23	.20
Had to Move in with Others	20.5%	.23	.19
Went to Food Bank or Soup Kitchen	17.6%	.23	.17
Heat or Utilities Disconnected	15.4%	.22*	.12
Family Had Other Problems	14.7%	.23*	.10
Had to Move because Recipient Couldn't Pay Rent	12.5%	.15	.12
Child(ren) had to Change Schools because Recipient Moved	11.6%	.14	.11
Had Others Move in to Help Pay Rent	8.1%	.08	.09
Child(ren) had to Live away from Caregiver	6.7%	.08	.07
Were Homeless during the Past 3 Months	4.1%	.06	.03
Child(ren) Spent Time in Foster Care	1.2%	.03	.009

* T test significant at $p < .05$

Those recipients who left welfare voluntarily were more likely to be working (28 percent of respondents) than were those who had been sanctioned (6 percent of respondents) ($X^2 = 40.766$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). (Thirty-four percent of those in the study were actually working at the time the survey was completed). The lambda test is a Proportion of Variance Explained (PVE) test used to calculate the amount of variance explained by a chi square finding. For the chi square of leaving status by work status, the lambda is .04, indicating that a respondent's leaving status explained only about 4% of the variance in their work status. Respondents were asked whether they felt like they and their children were better off now than when they were receiving welfare. Overall, only 46 percent of the total sample stated that they and their children were better off now than when they were receiving welfare payments. Table 5 shows that those who were sanctioned off of welfare were less likely to feel that they were better off ($X^2 = 32.281$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). The lambda statistic for this chi square is .22, indicating that 22% of the variance in a respondent's report of whether they were better off was related to their leaver status.

DISCUSSION

The passage of the PRWORA has ushered in a new era in which the increased ability of the state to end all cash assistance benefits to non-compliant, but otherwise financially eligible families, has become a significant tool used to enforce compliance with departmental regulations. Although many popular press accounts attribute the decrease in welfare rolls to the increased

Table 5

Chi Square Results of Leaver Status by Work Status and Report of Being Better Off Now

<i>Variable</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>X²</i>	<i>p value</i>
Work Status by Leaver Status	1	40.77	<.001
Better Off Now by Leaver Status	1	32.28	<.001

employment of impoverished parents (DeParle, 1998), the descriptive data provided by this survey indicate that these accounts may be based on inadequate research. A minority of the respondents in this survey (21 percent) actually left welfare because they had obtained employment. At the time of the survey, only about one third of the respondents were working, regardless of their reason for leaving welfare. Respondents who voluntarily left welfare reported an average yearly income of \$8,299—an amount that is 63% of the poverty threshold of \$13,133 for a parent with two children set by the U. S. Census Bureau for this time period (U. S. Census Bureau, 1998). For families that had been sanctioned off of welfare, their average yearly income was significantly lower—\$3,651, an amount which is 28% of the poverty level. Based on previous research documenting unreported income among welfare recipients (Edin, 1991), these figures must be viewed somewhat skeptically, but still indicate that leaving welfare is no guarantee that a family will escape poverty, regardless of the reason for leaving welfare. These findings also indicate that the use of sanctions as a motivation to increase workforce participation is ineffective. Contrary to the expectation of politicians, sanctioned families are not entering the workforce (only 6% were working after having their welfare payments terminated), but instead are slipping even deeper into poverty.

Prior to the passage of the PRWORA, sanctions could only be applied against a portion of the household, usually the parent, leaving some benefits available for the care of children. With the full family sanction made possible by the PRWORA, attention is needed to the effects of these new policies on impoverished parents and children. The data from this survey indicate that many families report considerable hardship no matter why they exited from welfare. Sanctioned families report an increase in the overall number of problems they are experiencing and an increase in the average number of problems in certain areas. Compared to those who left voluntarily, those who were sanctioned off welfare were significantly different in terms of having unmet medical needs, going without food, and having their utilities turned off. Each of these problems can represent a significant disruption in the lives of children and their parents. If the goal of the full family sanction is to increase the compliance of the adult payee

with welfare department regulations, then it is not clear from this study that this goal is being met. Given the higher number of problems reported and the decrease in income reported by these respondents, it is not surprising to find that only 10 percent of former recipients who were sanctioned off of welfare feel that they are better off now than when they received cash assistance. Sanctioning families for non-compliance may be viewed as a punishment for misbehavior, but is this punishment encouraging changed behavior or is it ensuring that poor children (the primary recipients of TANF dollars) are placed in even greater jeopardy?

This descriptive study provides information about problems that families report after leaving welfare. Further research is needed to ascertain the long-term effects of sanctions on families experiencing poverty. Research is needed to determine the characteristics of those who are most likely to be sanctioned. If sanctions are applied more readily to those people who face the greatest barriers to employment (those with mental illness, substance abuse problems, domestic violence), as some advocates fear (Coping with Block Grants, 1998), then sanctions may actually be ineffective in accomplishing the policy goals they have been designed to support. Sanctions may reduce the welfare rolls, but without reducing poverty and its concomitant difficulties, this represents a hollow victory.

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