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# Welfare and Family Economic Security: Toward a Place-Based Poverty Knowledge

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*The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 is viewed by many as a resounding success. Its success, however, is predicated primarily on caseload reduction rather than improvement of family well-being. In addition, provisions in the act ignore the importance of place in shaping one's life chances. Using Alice O'Connor's influential book, Poverty Knowledge, as a framework, we discuss findings from a qualitative study that examines how low-income families plan for a life without welfare in places with different opportunities and structural constraints. We find that returns to TANF are common among welfare leavers and that place plays a role in influencing the decision to use and return to welfare. The findings also suggest that states' "one size fits all" welfare policies fail to address the major needs of low-income women attempting to move off TANF and that, until adequate policies are created, economic insecurity and poor family well-being will remain the norm for many former TANF recipients.*

Key words: *welfare reform, poverty, qualitative, interviews*

## Introduction

It has been more than ten years since the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). PRWORA has been hailed by many as a resounding success and is credited with reducing caseloads of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program by more than 50 percent. This measure of success, however, says little about the effects of PRWORA on the day-to-day lives of low-income families and does not inform us on whether low-income women are able to escape poverty by finding jobs that provide economic security for themselves and their children (Lichter & Jayacody, 2002). What is needed is a new poverty knowledge that incorporates new methodologies and perspectives to provide a multi-dimensional view of the "success" of welfare reform and recommendations for ways that public policy can improve the lives of poor American families (O'Connor, 2001).

O'Connor (2001) suggests that to create a "new" poverty knowledge increased attention must be placed on historical and socioeconomic contexts to examine the rise and persistence of poverty. This includes considering research approaches that examine the qualitative aspects of poverty, along with its cultural, political, and geographic boundaries (Wint & Frank, 2006). In doing so, we can create a poverty knowledge that reflects its personal, institutional, and spatial roots. Under the new welfare reform system, a focus on context becomes even more important as states have greater authority in designing and implementing their TANF programs. States may, in fact, create homogeneous welfare policies that are unable to assist a heterogeneous population of welfare clients within diverse settings (Coulton, 1996).

Drawing from a study of welfare reform in two non-metropolitan Mississippi counties, we provide an example in which "place" is incorporated into a study of welfare exits and provides a view of barriers to work in these two distinctly different locales. Our primary goal is to highlight the complexities of leaving welfare and make linkages to how these difficulties are shaped by place. We use data from two case studies to provide insights into the lives of low-income women who

attempt to make permanent exits from the TANF Program and examine how the places in which they live constrain their ability to become economically secure. This illustrates how opportunities, place, and poverty are intricately linked in the lives of low-income women seeking to make a better life for themselves and their children and provides a contextualized view of poverty (O'Connor, 2001).

### Poverty Knowledge and Welfare Reform

In *Poverty Knowledge*, Alice O'Connor (2001) traces the evolution of U.S. poverty research over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She details how current poverty knowledge and its research approaches and policy orientations reflect a shift from broad, institutional-level questions about the nature of poverty and inequality to a conceptualization of poverty as an individual-level problem requiring the "reform" of the poor. O'Connor also discusses the focus on the primarily quantitative conceptions of poverty, namely the welfare caseload, and how poverty knowledge learned from other methodological approaches is often less accepted within the scientific and policy spheres of influence. With poverty conceptualized as an individual issue, policy and research look for solutions aimed at encouraging poor Americans to act responsibly—stay in school, avoid premarital pregnancy and childbearing, and obtain employment—with much less attention given to the economic and social conditions that make it extremely difficult for many poor Americans to achieve a life without welfare.

PRWORA represents a clear manifestation of a type of poverty knowledge that emphasizes one's personal responsibility to avoid and escape material and social deprivation (Parisi et al., 2006). One explicit goal of the legislation was to promote job preparation and work so that low-income families can rely on paychecks rather than welfare checks and move onto a path to self-sufficiency. Under TANF, low-income families are denied benefits if they do not engage in allowable work activities within two years of receiving assistance and are also limited to receiving TANF for five years over their lifetimes.

After ten years, PRWORA has been proclaimed a success insofar as it has reduced welfare caseloads across the nation.

The country experienced dramatic declines in welfare rolls with some states reporting caseload reductions of more than 80 percent (Lichter & Jayacody, 2002). Despite the fact that many welfare clients moved into the workforce, many others remain in poverty and continue to experience food insecurity and serious health issues that undermine their long-term well-being and that of their children (Kneipp, 2000; Latimer, 2004; Lichter & Johnson, 2007; Lindhurst & Mancoske, 2006; Loprest, 1999). Poor investment in human capital, such as the decision by many states to not accept extended post-secondary education as an allowable work activity, also compromised the ability of the poor to secure, keep, and develop jobs (Beaulieu et al., 2000; Pavetti & Acs, 2001). Similarly, underinvestment in local resources seriously diminished the opportunities available for the poor to become self-sufficient (Parisi et al., 2006). To be sure, the most vulnerable populations are located in those places with fewer opportunities and greater barriers to work (Latimer, 2004; Parisi et al., 2005). Such findings indicate that poverty is not simply a matter of personal responsibility but also a matter of the opportunities and structural conditions of the places in which the poor live. Thus, the assumptions that underscored the welfare reform process clearly call for a new poverty knowledge.

### The Importance of Place

The term "place" is most often used to refer to a particular geographic location. However, place also delineates the social and cognitive meanings of a local community (Wilkinson, 1991). Places have distinct normative environments dictated by their ecological, demographic, economic, political, and cultural characteristics. For low-income women, the places in which they are situated determine opportunities and constraints to planning a life that does not involve welfare (Wilson, 1987). For example, places with high concentrations and persistence of poverty, clear divisions along class and racial lines, and, most importantly, histories of underdevelopment provide limited prospects for low-income families to move onto a path of self-sufficiency. Unlike prospering places, distressed places undermine the very principle of the 1996 welfare legislation

in several important ways. First, poor single mothers can be denied assistance or benefits because of their inability to meet work requirements due to the lack of local economic opportunities. Second, in places with very unstable economies and labor markets that offer primarily temporary or part-time jobs, poor women are more likely to exhaust their time limits. Third, in poor places, women trying to leave welfare incur an additional cost to securing and retaining employment due to the lack of services such as childcare and transportation. Fourth, the absence of social support and civic organizations often makes welfare the only form of assistance to poor single mothers in poor places. Lastly, the absence of a middle class affects the cultural responses to welfare reform and reinforces the persistence of poverty, as low-income families become further removed from mainstream American culture (Wilson, 1987).

To be sure, the places in which poor single mothers are situated not only influence decisions regarding family, work, and welfare but also attitudes, norms, and values that influence such decisions (Blank, 2005). Unfortunately, current welfare policy fails to take into account the tremendous variations of conditions across places (Coulton, 1996). The accepted poverty knowledge has also paid less attention to place as an important contextual factor that impacts the continuation of poverty (O'Connor, 2001). Our research uses place as a conceptual and analytical tool to examine differences in processes and mechanisms through which low-income African American women engage in work and family decisions.

#### *Lee and Coahoma Counties*

We selected two non-metropolitan counties to serve as case studies for three primary reasons: 1) counties serve as the administrative unit for carrying out the policies of welfare reform; 2) county economic characteristics can provide a sense of the local labor market and indicate how well low-income women could transition from welfare to work; and 3) much of the welfare reform literature has been concentrated on urban areas and neglects to address the diversity of rural places which are most often county centered (Whitener, Weber, & Duncan, 2002). Lee and Coahoma County were selected to represent two non-metropolitan Mississippi counties with very different

socioeconomic conditions. Lee County is located in the north-eastern section of the state. The tremendous population growth in its county seat, Tupelo, has resulted in the non-metropolitan county's designation as a micropolitan<sup>1</sup> area. As a whole, Lee County has a population of 75,755 residents. According to the 2000 Census, the population of Lee County is 73 percent white, 24 percent black, and one percent Hispanic. Over one-fourth of the population in Lee County has less than a high school education. Thirteen percent of the county lives in poverty, and Lee County reported an unemployment rate of nearly five percent, which is lower than the state average. The economy of Lee County has seen growth in recent years, and the industry structure in Lee County is characterized by high percentages of residents employed in the manufacturing (28 percent) and service (27 percent) industries. Lee County is also known for its high levels of civic participation and its strong non-profit sector available to provide food, childcare, and other forms of assistance to its low-income residents (Grisham, 1999).

Coahoma County is located in the Mississippi Delta region, which has historically been characterized by poverty, under-development, and racial inequality. Coahoma County has 30,622 residents and is more traditionally nonmetropolitan than Lee County. The population of Coahoma County is overwhelmingly black (69 percent), with whites and Hispanics representing 29 percent and one percent of the population, respectively. Approximately 38 percent of Coahoma County residents report less than a high school education and about 36 percent of the population lives in poverty: both percentages are higher than the state average. Coahoma County is dominated by service sector employment with 42 percent of workers employed in this industry. Although Coahoma County has an unemployment rate greater than 10 percent, recent growth of the casino industry in neighboring Tunica County has provided job opportunities for low-income women in the area.

## Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with African American women living in these two non-metropolitan counties and who had experience using the TANF Program.

Twenty-six women were interviewed in Lee County and 30 women participated from Coahoma County for a total of 56 interviews. The participants were recruited via a snowball sampling technique that began with referrals from a local organization that served welfare clients. The researchers also used an internet telephone directory that listed the names and phone numbers of individuals living in subsidized housing complexes to recruit respondents.

The interviews took place between June and December 2003 and were conducted in participants' homes, homes of friends and family, workplaces, and the office of the local organization that assisted in recruitment. The interviews were semi-structured and included a section on demographic characteristics and household earnings and expenditures. Open-ended questions sought information about welfare entries and exits, welfare-exiting strategies, and barriers to exiting TANF and remaining off the program. To help structure the interviews, a life history calendar was used to facilitate recall and guide the women through the discussion about the timing and duration of their welfare spells, as well as events that occurred in relation to these time frames. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, and each of the participants received 20 dollars for their participation.

Each of the interviews was transcribed verbatim and analyzed for emergent themes. The researchers engaged in open coding, followed by guided coding informed by our interest in understanding the process of moving off welfare and the conditions faced by families who had left TANF. The researchers compared codes regularly to discuss data interpretation. Finally, our findings were compared across the two counties to better understand how distinct historical and socioeconomic conditions may encourage or thwart welfare exits and family well-being following an exit. In the analysis below, we rely upon the words of our participants to best illustrate the complexities of their lives.

### *Description of Participants*

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics of the 56 African American women who participated in our study. Lee County participants were, on average, 28 years old. Eighteen of the

Table 1: Characteristics of Study Participants by County, in Percentages

Variable	Lee County	Coahoma County
	N = 26 %	N = 30 %
<i>Average Age</i>	27.5	25.4
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Single	69.2	93.3
Married	0.0	0.0
Divorced/Separated	30.8	3.3
Cohabiting	0.0	3.3
<i>Number of Children</i>		
One Child	26.9	26.7
Two Children	38.5	36.7
Three Children	19.2	33.3
Four Children	15.4	0.0
Five Children	0.0	3.3
<i>Education Level</i>		
Less than High School	50.0	40.0
High School Degree	15.4	26.7
Some College	30.8	26.7
College Degree	3.8	6.7
<i>Current living situation</i>		
Living in Own Household	84.6	55.2
Living with a Partner	0.0	3.4
Living with Parents	11.5	20.7
Living with Friend/Relative	3.8	20.7

participants had never been married while eight had either separated from a spouse or divorced. Over half the Lee County participants had two or fewer children and only four participants had as many as four children. Half of the Lee County participants had not completed high school by the time of their interviews, but eight of the women had some college education, although none of these women had completed a degree. Almost all of the Lee County participants lived in their own household, with a few of the women living with either their parents or with a friend or other relative.

The Coahoma County participants were 25 years old on

average. Only one of the participants from Coahoma County had ever been married. One woman was cohabiting with her boyfriend, while the overwhelming majority had never been married. Eight of the women had only one child at the time of their interviews, while eleven women had two children and ten women had three children. Forty percent of the Coahoma County participants had less than a high school degree. Most of the remaining women were evenly distributed into the high school degree and some college experience categories. Two of the participants had completed a college degree. While over half the participants lived in their own households, over forty percent of the women lived with either their parents, a friend, or another family member.

Some differences between the two groups included age—the Lee County participants were, on average, older than the women from Coahoma County; marital status—the Lee County group included women with more diverse marital-relationship histories while in contrast the Coahoma County participants were predominantly single; and household composition—Lee County participants were more likely to have established their own households through the use of housing assistance programs, while more of the Coahoma County participants lived with family or friends. These differences arise from both the sampling procedure and conditions in the local communities. Our use of a snowball sample did not allow us to match clients from across the two counties. Additionally, conditions at the county level, such as the quality of the local marriage market and the availability of subsidized housing, may account for differences in marital status and housing choices between the two groups of participants.

### *Exiting Welfare in Lee County*

Our interviews with the participants suggest that leaving TANF was a complicated process, as each county contained a distinct context that affected how the women approached exiting welfare. According to the women in Lee County, recent economic growth did not necessarily result in increased opportunities for work. One woman recalled how manufacturing plants were “closing every day” leaving few options for those

with limited amounts of human capital. Another explained that the "medical field and restaurant [jobs are] about the only thing you can find." These jobs were typically low-paying positions in the service sector, such as fast food workers and nursing home attendants. Almost every Lee County participant had held one of these jobs at some point, which offered non-standard hours incompatible with raising children and demanding physical labor with few medical benefits.

Despite the problems with service sector employment, the women in Lee County expressed the belief that they had little choice other than to accept these jobs. There was limited job training offered to welfare clients in Lee County and job readiness classes focused on teaching the social norms of the job application process and on-the-job behavior. According to Broughton (2003) this focus is common among welfare training programs. For our participants, the information provided ranged from how to fill out applications to basic work ethic and hygiene issues. Women who had gone to such classes believed the training was a waste of their time, as many of them had already been successful at obtaining a job in the past. Participants expressed mild anger because of the simplistic nature of the material, with one woman stating vehemently, "I'm not gonna sit up in them classes and you tell me how to go get a job [when] I know how to GET a job." In her opinion, resources were better directed at improving the types of jobs available in Lee County in order to reduce welfare usage.

Job options were further limited due to state policy choices. In Mississippi, TANF rules focus on immediate job placement and do not allow most post-secondary education to meet TANF work requirements. This frustrated several of our participants who were attending programs at a local community college: these women believed that degrees in education and other fields would provide better long-term opportunities for their families than accepting the first service sector job they were offered. As one woman explained, "I really want to wait [to go back to work] until I get my degree and do what I really want to be doin' instead of, you know, maybe working at McDonald's." In her opinion, TANF policies should support poor single mothers who were trying to earn more education and continue to provide benefits to students. As she

emphasized, "It's not like I'm here in the bed all day, because I'm not."

### *Exiting Welfare in Coahoma County*

In Coahoma County, the major barrier to moving from welfare to work was the lack of jobs in the area. Many of the participants commented that quite simply "there's no jobs here." One woman recalled how she had waited for more than two years for a job to open up at a grocery store that was within walking distance to her home. This job never materialized and, at the time of her interview, she had switched her hopes to a coveted job at a new clothing store in town. If this job came through, she explained, "Then I'm a off of TANF."

While Coahoma County provided few jobs for welfare clients, neighboring Tunica County had experienced major growth in its casino industry and the casinos actively recruited welfare clients from Coahoma County to work in housekeeping, food service, and related service jobs. In fact, all of the training classes mentioned by the women in Coahoma County were aimed at teaching housekeeping and other skills needed for casino jobs. One woman explained, "If you go down here and take a class, eventually they gonna put you on a job somewhere at one of the casinos."

At first glance, casino jobs appeared to be "good" jobs because employees were paid more than minimum wage, sometimes 10 dollars per hour. However, few of our participants expressed a desire to go to work at the casinos. This was due to two major factors. First, new employees were often required to work graveyard shifts, requiring women to be away from their children overnight; these shifts were problematic because of the limited available options for nighttime childcare. One woman recalled how she had quit a casino job because it required her teenage children to be alone overnight: "[P]eople used to come out too much at the house at night and knock on the doors. So, I just started gettin' me a daytime job so I could be home with my kids at night." She was able to find another job as a custodian at a local school, although this job paid less than what she previously earned at the casino.

The second drawback to casino work was related to transportation. The casinos were located in neighboring Tunica

County, approximately 45 miles away. There was a bus service to transport workers to their jobs, but the limited bus routes did not include stops to pick up or drop off children at child-care providers. In addition, the routes were scheduled so that there were often several hours between the time buses would leave Coahoma County and when shifts began at the casino. One woman recounted some of the troubles she experienced with “going up the road” and recalled:

[S]ometimes you have to leave like two or three hours before you have to be at work [to catch a bus]...and then it'd take you about two or three hours to get back sometimes...that's a long time, especially when you have kids to see about.

For women who avoided casino work, it was very difficult to find jobs locally. When jobs did become available, the women were often expected to begin work immediately—something that was impossible to do without childcare and transportation assistance. Two of our participants recalled losing job opportunities because they could not find affordable childcare at the spur of the moment. According to the Coahoma County participants, there were few sources of assistance available outside of kin and friendship networks. Even women who used family members and friends to provide childcare or transportation found it difficult to continue working when their support networks were disrupted by changes in job shifts, health problems, or personal emergencies.

### Post-Welfare Experiences: A “Successful” Transition?

Once in low-paying service jobs, welfare clients in the two counties found themselves facing two likely scenarios. First, there was the possibility that they would not be given enough hours to meet their TANF work requirements and they would cease to receive benefits. This problem was mostly present in Lee County, where service sector jobs were more plentiful but rarely translated into full-time work. Several women described having to juggle multiple jobs just to meet their work requirements and one participant recalled how the TANF Program “dropped me because I wasn't getting' enough

hours." However, if the women were able to meet their work requirements, then their modest job earnings were sometimes enough to barely raise their families over the TANF eligibility threshold.

On paper, both of these scenarios would be recorded as TANF exits and therefore a success for welfare reform. However, following these exits, participants recalled a period of economic vulnerability often brought on by a loss of support services. A participant from Lee County, who had exited TANF only to return to the program later, explained her options: "[I]f I do get a job and I'm on TANF, they cut my food stamps and I have to buy food...buying food and all that stuff and my checks be only 200 dollars every two weeks? That's not...it ain't gonna do it." Another woman described how her income-based rent at her subsidized apartment jumped from three dollars a month to 94 dollars soon after she got a job at a local fast food restaurant. While her rent was still relatively low, this sudden increase proved to be a major burden. Other women discussed how reductions in support services did not allow families time to "get on their feet" during the welfare-to-work transition. Losing these benefits also made it hard to apply for better jobs. As a participant from Coahoma County explained, it was difficult to get "organized" without childcare and transportation assistance in order to line up better employment.

The women responded somewhat differently to these losses depending on their location. In both counties, the loss of transportation and childcare assistance led to piecemeal arrangements being made with friends and family. These arrangements were notoriously unreliable and their subsequent uncertainty could lead to job loss and returns to welfare. However, in Lee County, there were several nonprofit groups available to assist with family needs. Ten of the Lee County participants had turned to local non-profit organizations for help, while only five of the women from Coahoma County had done so. The type of assistance available also varied by county. The women in Lee County had access to organizations that provided childcare, clothing, transportation, and economic assistance with monthly bills. These services, however, were very limited in Coahoma County. Those from Coahoma County primarily turned to family and friends, which stretched available community resources even more.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings suggest that the focus on caseload reductions as an indicator of the success of welfare reform may not provide the full picture of either family sacrifices preceding welfare exits or family well-being following an exit. We offer evidence on how place matters for poverty policy by presenting data from two counties that offer different opportunities for women attempting to move off welfare. In Lee County, jobs were plentiful but often fell within the low-paying service industry. Our participants sometimes worked multiple jobs just to meet their TANF work requirements and then faced losing valuable support services if their income ever rose above the TANF eligibility threshold. State rules regarding higher education made it difficult for the women to increase their human capital levels while providing for their families. The major concerns in Coahoma County were centered around a lack of jobs in the area, as well as a need for reliable sources of public transportation. Without better transportation systems, the women in Coahoma County found themselves weighing the benefits of employment opportunities at the casinos in neighboring Tunica County versus long hours away from family.

The conditions in Lee and Coahoma County, and the choices welfare clients make in response to these conditions, represent long-term economic and social trends that have impacted the ability for low-income women to transition off of welfare and to secure jobs that provide economic security for themselves and their children. Policy responses to poverty must take these contexts into account. More attention, for example, should be given to increasing educational opportunities to ensure that low-income women in Lee County are not left behind due to industrial shifts. Conditions in Coahoma County suggest that a focus on local job promotion and local transportation infrastructure is needed to bring needed jobs to the area and provide the needed workers. Such place-based policies can help provide not just the means for welfare exits, but actual economic mobility for low-income families.

In *Poverty Knowledge*, O'Connor challenges poverty researchers to look beyond the easy answers and to focus on context and the application of new methodologies to address

issues of poverty. We have sought to do that. Although limited to two Mississippi counties, our research illustrates how aspects of the local context can be used in studies of poverty and welfare reform, especially to inform welfare policymakers on the importance of place in framing welfare policies and programs. Above all, welfare policy must be created with knowledge of the potential impacts it can have on low-income families. Future research can learn from this approach and seek to create a “new” poverty knowledge that acknowledges a diversity of methodological approaches and an understanding of contexts, including place-based contexts, to help incorporate the voices of low-income women into the research and policy debates.

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(Endnotes)

1) Micropolitan areas have at least one urban cluster of 10,000 or more inhabitants but less than 50,000 and often include more than one county. Any nonmetropolitan areas that fail to meet these criteria are defined as noncore areas, which are delineated by single county boundaries (OMB, 2003).

