

2011

## Should I Stay or Should I Go? Why Applicants Leave the Extended Welfare Application Process

Marci Ybarra  
*University of Michigan*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Welfare Commons, and the Social Work Commons

### Recommended Citation

Ybarra, Marci (2011) "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Why Applicants Leave the Extended Welfare Application Process," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3584>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol38/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



# Should I Stay or Should I Go? Why Applicants Leave the Extended Welfare Application Process

MARCI YBARRA

University of Michigan  
National Poverty Center

*Since welfare reform of 1996, the use of extended application periods as a condition of welfare participation has become increasingly popular. Extended application periods include mandatory work activities and caseworker meetings for a period of time as a condition of and prerequisite to eligibility for welfare services. While much scholarly work has focused on welfare participants, we know comparatively less about those who apply for services but ultimately do not participate or receive benefits. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a random sample of twenty recent welfare applicants in the state of Wisconsin who did not complete the extended welfare application period. Beliefs about eligibility for a cash benefit, delayed welfare checks, and learning disabilities emerged as important factors that influence completion of extended welfare application periods.*

*Key words: welfare reform, welfare applications, learning disabilities, TANF*

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 transformed welfare from an entitlement program to a “work-first” model designed to compel employment by instituting time-limited benefits and mandatory compliance with work requirements. Since the enactment of PRWORA, extensive research has examined the dramatic decline of welfare caseloads and the increased employment among single low-income mothers who have left the rolls (Cancian, Haveman, Meyer, & Wolfe, 2002; Danziger, Heflin, Corcoran, Oltmans, & Wang, 2002; Moffit & Roff, 2000), although earning patterns are inconsistent (Wu, Cancian, & Meyer, 2008) and typically do not exceed the poverty threshold. Welfare applicants who apply for services but do not

enroll, or those who are diverted from welfare programs, are a group that has received far less attention. Diversion from welfare is intended to redirect applicants to employment prior to program enrollment to secure self-sufficiency and reduce dependency (Bane & Ellwood, 1994; Bruce, Barbour, & Thacker, 2004; Haskins, 2001; Holcomb, Pavetti, Ratcliffe, & Riedlinger, 1998; London, 2003) by aggressively promoting employment in lieu of cash welfare benefits. Critics argue, however, that diversion acts merely as a caseload restraint rather than an effective employment strategy (Meyers & Lurie, 2005; Ridzi & London, 2006).

Two common diversion strategies are lump-sum cash payments and extended welfare application periods. These two strategies are fundamentally different in that lump-sum payments forego substantial employment interventions altogether in favor of providing an immediate welfare check, equivalent to a corresponding number of months of cash welfare (London, 2003). In contrast, extended welfare application periods withhold cash welfare and rely on an extensive employment-seeking program as a condition of cash welfare eligibility (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [USDHHS], 2004). There is a burgeoning scholarly literature on the impact of lump-sum payments on recipient outcomes which has found differences in characteristics related to employability and education between recipients and non-recipients. For example, lump-sum recipients have higher proportions of those with both high and low levels of education, with poor health, and those who are married (Moffit et al., 2003). A noteworthy proportion are diverted from welfare for only a short time period suggesting both those who are job-ready and those who are less prepared for the labor market are diverted through lump-sum payments (Gonzalez, Hudson, & Acker, 2007; Hetling, Ovwigho, & Born, 2007; London, 2003). We know comparatively less about extended welfare application periods, with most research coming from descriptive, federally-commissioned, evaluations (Arizona Department of Economic Security, 2005; USDHHS, 2000; USDHHS, 2002; USDHHS, 2004).

The dearth of scholarly literature on welfare's extended application period is a particular cause for concern given that participants do not access cash welfare during the application

process and must engage in mandatory work requirements for the duration of the period. We know relatively little about how participants view extended application periods or if the lack of cash welfare acts as a catalyst to diversion. Welfare leaver studies have consistently found low cash benefit levels to be associated with program exits, often with discouraging economic outcomes; examining an extended period where applicants go without cash welfare but must fulfill mandatory work requirements is warranted.

This paper adds to the literature on diversion by investigating applicant perspectives on a full range of extended welfare application period requirements, applicant preferences concerning welfare receipt, and alternative sources of support available to the applicant, during a 12-day extended welfare application period in the State of Wisconsin. I also explore the role of cash benefit levels in welfare program diversion and consider whether Wisconsin's unique non-cash welfare benefit causes applicants to leave the application period. I employ semi-structured interviews with a random sample of twenty recent welfare applicants who left an extended welfare application period in the state of Wisconsin.

### Framework

There are differing views about why applicants do not complete welfare application periods. Some scholars cite the demanding and complex requirements of welfare, or the "hassle factor," as barriers to assistance rather than employment gateways (Meyers & Lurie, 2005; Ridzi & London, 2006; Soss, 2001). Others suggest that applicants with a wider range of resources choose to rely on alternative sources of support or become employed rather than complete the welfare application period (Moffit et al., 2003). The "hassle factor" of the welfare application period is present in a broad scope of requirements. For instance, during the application period, welfare applicants may face difficulty in submitting necessary documentation or adhering to strict job-search requirements. The demands of the welfare application period also increase assessment of compliance with work requirements by agency caseworkers. This raises the cost of applying for applicants who have

difficulty completing mandatory work search requirements (Besharov & Germanis, 2007; Meyers & Lurie, 2005; Riccio & Hasenfeld, 1996). Moreover, previous research, though limited, has found that the likelihood of having services denied increases with each additional assessment by agency staff (Ridzi & London, 2006). Further, bureaucratic demands, such as submission of extensive documentation, create an increasingly complex application process (Besharov & Germanis, 2007; Meyers & Lurie, 2005) ultimately resulting in the diversion of welfare applicants irrespective of an applicant's labor market opportunities.

In contrast, other scholarship suggests individual preferences rather than a complex application period play a key role in whether applicants enter welfare programs. Applicants have been found to weigh the cost of applying to welfare programs relative to other sources of available support or employment opportunities (Besharov & Germanis, 2007; London, 2003). For example, applicants with recent employment have reported they would rather work than participate in welfare (Gonzales, Hudson, & Acker, 2007). Other research has found that some of those diverted choose to rely on informal sources of support, such as help from family and friends (Moffit et al., 2003). Past research, however, has largely neglected to cumulatively assess the multiple demands of the welfare application process and applicant experiences with diversion during welfare application periods.

## Background

### *Extended Welfare Application Periods*

While extended welfare application procedures vary by state, they all share several characteristics (USDHHS, 2004). For example, extended application periods are coupled with mandatory up front job search activities for those applicants who do not have a documented barrier to work, such as a physical disability. Activities typically include job search workshops, soft skills trainings, and a series of appointments with caseworkers during the application period to determine compliance with mandatory requirements (Holcomb et al., 1998). The duration of the application period varies, with a

45-day maximum, although most states use a 30-day maximum (USDHHS, 2005). All applicants are required to sign a personal responsibility contract, cooperate with child support enforcement, and submit documentation such as birth certificates and immunization records for the applicant's children as a condition of eligibility (Holcomb et al., 1998).

Studies on welfare application outcomes report two primary reasons for diversion: difficulty in navigating bureaucratic obstacles and the inability to complete mandatory requirements during the application period. For example, Ridzi & London (2006) conclude that the demands of the application process are the primary reason applicants exit. They found that issues such as mandatory compliance with efforts to obtain child support from non-custodial parents and the submission of birth and medical records discourage applicants from completing the application period. Further, they found that compliance assessment of work search by caseworkers was a major obstacle to completing the application period (Ridzi & London, 2006). Similarly, Meyers & Lurie (2005) compared the demands of past and current welfare application procedures and found a substantial expansion of welfare application requirements since reform. They point out that increased documentation to certify eligibility and the multiple meetings with caseworkers create an intricate and complex process that only the most advantaged applicants are able to complete.

Gonzales and associates (2007) report that a substantial proportion of applicants seek employment rather than participate in application requirements, foregoing welfare altogether. In a related study, Moffit and associates (2003) found some respondents reported foregoing welfare because application requirements were "too much hassle." At the same time, they also found that access to other supports, such as SSI, other employed household members, and living with a partner, influenced a respondent's decision to forego welfare. This suggests that other resources play an important role. Another study, utilizing the same data source, found mandatory application requirements were not significantly related to application period diversion once applicant characteristics were accounted for (Moffit, 2003).

*Treatment by Caseworkers*

Scholars have long examined the interactions between caseworkers and clients during welfare participation and found that negative treatment by staff plays an important role in welfare program experiences. Moreover, caseworkers have been described as doing little more than “people-processing”—dispensing required paper work and strictly adhering to the stringent rules, irrespective of individual circumstances (London & Ridzi, 2006; Meyers & Lurie, 2005). Overall, relationships with caseworkers have been found to be a “gateway” to welfare entry, access to important resources, and overall applicant satisfaction with welfare services (Kingfisher, 1998; Riccio & Hasenfeld, 1996; Soss, 1999). Some pre-reform research found evidence that caseworkers treated applicants with a lack of respect during welfare application encounters, which in turn affected their beliefs about the program and services (Soss, 1999). More recently, scholars have found that former welfare participants report past treatment by their caseworkers contributed to their reluctance to reapply for welfare services (Anderson, Halter, & Gryzlak, 2004). We still know relatively little about post-reform welfare applicants’ assessment of caseworkers’ roles in shaping their decision to divert. Given that agency staff is responsible for securing compliance with program policy, rules, and procedures, it is important to account for their role in diversion.

*Policy Context: Wisconsin’s Extended Welfare Application Period*

The state of Wisconsin requires a 12-day extended application period for all welfare applicants without documented barriers to work, such as a physical disability or an infant younger than three months. Other documented barriers to work that may result in a work-exemption during the application period include: mental health treatment, domestic violence, pregnancy, alcohol and other drug abuse treatment, family member with a disability, or an applicant 19 years or younger that is still in high school. Similar to other states that utilize an extended welfare application period, Wisconsin’s welfare program, Wisconsin Works (W-2), requires a series of mandatory agency activities and appointments as a condition of program eligibility (Ybarra & Kaplan, 2007), as reflected in Table 1.

Table 1: The Extended Welfare Application Period in Wisconsin

12-day Period	Mandatory Meeting	Purpose of Meeting
Day 1	Program Orientation	Group introduction to the W-2 program, rules, requirements, and application process
Day 1	Resource Specialist	Initial assessment, assigned activities, assignment of subsequent application appointments
Day 5	Caseworker Meeting	Initial intake meeting to assess compliance with application process
Day 12	Caseworker Meeting	Final intake and assessment, Program eligibility determined

Applicants generally participate in four mandatory meetings over the course of the 12-day application period in which they are introduced to the program and assigned application period requirements.

Applicants may discontinue their application for several reasons. First, an applicant may be denied services due to non-compliance with work requirements (as assessed by the caseworker); they may decline services offered to them at the end of the application period; or they may fail to attend a meeting and not return for services. For applicants who complete the application period and enter the W-2 program, cash placements are reserved for those who do not have barriers to work, but have limited or no prior work experience, participants with a documented barrier to work, such as a disability, and those with a newborn infant younger than three months. The monthly cash welfare benefit in Wisconsin ranges from \$628 to \$673. Wisconsin's non-cash welfare placement is reserved for applicants who have complied with application period requirements and have a recent and consistent work history that causes them to be assessed as "immediately employable" by an agency caseworker. Participation in the W-2 non-cash welfare placement requires continued compliance with agency appointments, and offers access to employment resources such



as job leads or employment workshops, but does not include a welfare check.

### Data and Method

To understand why applicants leave the welfare application period, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty individual applicants who applied for welfare between April and May 2007 but left the application process. Interviews were conducted within six weeks of the applicant's decision to exit. Forty applicants were randomly selected using W-2 administrative data from Wisconsin's four largest (caseload) agencies. Twenty agreed to be interviewed, for an overall response rate of 50 percent. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview questionnaire (available upon request from the author). Respondents were asked a series of open-ended questions regarding their reason for applying for services, their experience with the W-2 application process, their decision to exit the application process, and other information on sources of income and general demographics.

All but two applicants were interviewed at a local restaurant and offered a meal before the interview. The remaining two applicants were interviewed in their homes at their request. Interviews lasted about forty-five minutes on average, and respondents received \$25 for their participation. All respondents agreed to allow the interview to be recorded. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were coded for primary themes reflected in the interview protocol. Original themes included: prior welfare experiences, mandatory agency requirements, treatment by caseworkers during the application period, and access to other resources. Comments and demographic characteristics were then cross-coded utilizing an analysis of response content described by Strauss & Corbin (1990), which organizes responses into thematic sections by recognizing response patterns among participants. Quotes were selected based on their overall representation of coded themes.

## Results

### *Interviews*

Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 46 years and had all left the application period within six weeks of the interview. Eighty-five percent of respondents were African American, which is similar to the racial composition at the four agencies from which sample members were selected (Ybarra & Noyes, 2008). Shared living arrangements were common; one-third reported they lived with a partner at the time of the interview while a few others lived with family or friends. Child support was an important resource for those who received it; a total of six respondents reported child support receipt in the year prior to the interview, although most was informal rather than formally paid through the family court system. Finally, one-quarter of interview respondents reported having a disability, with all but one reporting a learning or reading disability.

### *Overall Findings*

Respondents were asked if required work activities, caseworker meetings, treatment by caseworkers, or benefit levels shaped their decision to leave the application period. In general, respondents overwhelmingly reported leaving because they believed, or were informed by agency staff, they would be ineligible for a cash benefit because they were "immediately employable." Moreover, the impact of mandatory work requirements was overshadowed by their more immediate concerns about cash welfare eligibility. In other words, most respondents indicated a willingness to comply with application demands, including work requirements, if they would receive a welfare check during program participation.

Issues of child support enforcement and submission of other required documents were found to be of little importance to respondents during the application period. Moreover, in contrast to other research that has documented applicant dissatisfaction with agency caseworkers during application periods (USDHHS, 2002), most respondents reported neutral or positive interactions with their caseworkers, and all reported that treatment by staff did not play a role in their diversion from the application period. Of course, the application period

allows for only limited contact between caseworkers and applicants relative to the ongoing relationships forged during program participation. Thus, it may be that the likelihood of negative treatment is reduced, due to the shorter timeframe of the application period relative to interactions with caseworkers during ongoing program participation.

Respondent decision-making was, however, related to their perceived potential in the labor-market, views on welfare employment services, the availability of both formal and informal support, and individual characteristics. More specifically, younger respondents valued welfare employment services, older respondents reported more confidence in becoming employed without welfare, and respondents with greater access to resources more readily left the application period. Respondents with reported disabilities, specifically those with reading or learning disabilities, had more complicated lives and diverted due to inaccurate beliefs about the program and/or the difficulty of navigating mandatory requirements which often conflicted with personal circumstances.

### *Respondent Circumstances*

Most who reported applying to welfare due to difficulty becoming employed applied after they had already applied for a number of jobs. A number of these respondents reported brief or seasonal employment that left them ineligible for unemployment benefits, hastening their decision to apply for welfare. By the time respondents applied, they had been unemployed for a while and reported being in need of immediate assistance at the time of their application.

Several respondents reported a break-up with an employed live-in partner as the catalyst to their welfare application. The loss of a partner who provided considerable financial support, coupled with difficulty finding a job, largely shaped their decision to apply for welfare. The impact on the respondent's immediate economic picture was quick and significant, as illustrated by a 22-year-old African American respondent whose boyfriend was incarcerated. She had attempted to find a job prior to her application for services, but had little work experience:

I had somebody that was like helpin' me but I'm not with him no more so I needed financial help. I was with him since I was like sixteen ... he was a truck driver and stuff and then he turned around and got caught up on a incident on his job where he had went to jail. It was like he was payin' all the bills ... everything ... takin' care of me, takin' care of my daughter ... and I didn't have to work cause he was doin' it. And then he was gone and I had to move with a family member. I wanted to help out and my daughter needed stuff and I couldn't find no job so I had to turn to W-2 to find another resource.

An applicant's need for immediate financial help was often frustrated by the long wait for a welfare check once in the W-2 program. In Wisconsin, welfare applicants are not eligible for cash welfare until they complete the 12-day application period. Most initial welfare checks are only a partial payment, due to an administrative system that issues checks once per month. Thus, most W-2 participants receive a partial welfare check four to six weeks after they enter welfare. A full cash-benefit check will not arrive until the second month after program entry for most newly entering participants. Thus, even those expecting to receive a cash welfare benefit weighed the cost of participating in the application period relative to the wait involved for their welfare check:

And then it's like, for I think they said, for the first check or somethin' you get like only, you only get like \$150 and that's like after two months?! I'm waitin' for two months for my \$150? No! So ... especially right now, I'm like in an emergency type, you know, situation where I need some assistance right now. And it's like, that not helpin'. You know, especially when you give me a check, you know, months later.

Another respondent who had been unemployed for eight months and recently broke-up with a live-in partner indicated that without an immediate welfare check she was better off seeking employment on her own:

You know I needed emergency assistance at that moment. So I just felt like it was a waste of my time. If they couldn't give me emergency assistance, it was no need for me to be there. I was job ready and I knew I was and I needed to just go back out there and do what I was doin' ... which was job search on my own.

Overall, applications were typically preceded by a job loss, split with partner, or both, followed by an unsuccessful independent job search, resulting in an application to welfare when resources were exhausted. Additional time spent in the extended application period without a welfare check and the wait for a check upon program entry were the most important reported factors in decisions to leave the application period. Finally, the decision to exit was most related to ineligibility for a cash welfare benefit, rather than difficulty navigating the application process, attending appointments, or caseworker treatment of applicants.

#### *The Timing of Leaving the Application Period*

To examine the role of agency requirements and appointments, participants were asked if agency demands influenced their decision to leave the application period. Surprisingly, most applicants did not report difficulty in keeping up with required appointments, job search activities, or the submission of documentation as their primary reasons for in leaving the application period. Rather, their departure was related to the moment they came to believe they would not receive a cash welfare benefit. In fact, many who left the application period at a later stage expressed frustration with being informed they would only be eligible for non-cash welfare so late in the application process. For example, a respondent who declined non-cash welfare services after participating in the application period for a week reported she would rather have been told right away:

Umm ... was declined for what I wanted to apply for (cash benefit) and had I known, you know, ... from the first step, I wouldn't have to go through an orientation or meet with that first lady (caseworker). I could've saved me some time.

Similarly, a respondent who was informed at the end of the application period that she would only receive non-cash services, declined them and reported her decision would have occurred sooner had she known she would not receive a welfare check “and that’s when I found out I wasn’t gonna get any cash (laughs) ... I wish I hada known, I woulda left in the beginning.”

Even respondents who left after the first day of the application period reported their belief that they would be determined “immediately employable” and denied a welfare check. This led them to leave the application process: “The fact that I knew I was gonna be put in the placement of ‘job-ready’ (case management without a cash benefit), which I was (laughs).” When asked how she came to believe she would only receive non-cash case management services she reported it was the description of cash-benefit eligibility at the program orientation:

Umm ... because of the information that he (orientation facilitator) told us ... about ummm ... because of all the job experience I had and I wasn’t disabled. And so I knew that I would be put into that placement (case management only without a welfare check). He didn’t tell me but I just knew from the orientation that I was gonna be put in that placement...

### *The Role of Age*

Although most reported the lack of a welfare check as their reason for leaving, this was mitigated by what they thought of welfare employment services. Older applicants (twenty-five years and older) expressed little confidence in employment services provided by local welfare agencies and thus did not see the benefit of participating in them, particularly if they believed they would not receive cash welfare. Older applicants also viewed welfare application period job search requirements as a hassle to get through in order to participate in welfare, rather than as a pathway to employment as described by a 26-year-old respondent :

You know, I think, ... I think ... it’s somewhat reasonable (mandatory job search activities and agency appointments) but umm ... it’s like, okay, well if you

know that if ... if we need to be out, you know, lookin' for a job, why should we be sittin' up in your office? You know, why should we be sittin' up behind your computer? You know? When we should be out, you know, either fillin' out an application or seein' about an application or talkin' with someone about an application. Somethin' besides sittin' up in your office. So, it's okay, but I just can't see, you know, havin' to sit up there for no reason at all.

Another 28-year-old respondent, when asked if she thought the program could help her get a job, responded "they can't do it any better than I can. That's what I'm already doin' out here, applying for work. Why am I gonna keep goin' there with no money?"

In contrast to older applicants' views, younger respondents (those younger than 25 years of age) reported valuing the work-first philosophy of the program and viewed the program as a gateway to employment:

See, W-2 is like, basically helping you get a job. They help you get you a resume together, help you set up a e-mail account so you can, you know apply, for jobs online. Even if you get in the program and get cash, you still gotta do the job search until you get a job. (22-year-old respondent)

Younger applicants also expressed an appreciation for the soft skills training offered through agencies. Particularly employment workshops on resume development and interviewing techniques were valued, as evidenced by an 18-year-old respondents' description:

they help you out umm ... they show you how to go in, umm ... talk to a manager. I mean they show you how to do a interview. And I think that's a good thing cause some people don't know too many ... too much about a interview. They just go in and say whatever.

Younger applicants' positive views of welfare employment services overlapped with "buying in" to the overall work-first philosophy of welfare reform. For example, a 23-year-old

respondent described mandatory requirements and job search activities as a chance to demonstrate your commitment to employment rather than welfare reliance:

I like the fact that they make you work for your cash benefits now. Because before it was so easy. And now it's not and you have to work for the twelve days. You have to steady like ...you gotta show that you wanna work. And that's so much better because before it was just anybody can do it; anybody who needed it can do it. Not tryin' to show any effort that they wanted to work.

Another 22-year-old respondent reported that requirements worked together to compel employment for welfare applicants:

I think it's good because most people I know just want to collect the money. That's it. They don't wanna ... just be lazy ... don't wanna to go look for work ... just get the money. So I like how they did that. Because I know a lot of people who just ... just want the money. They don't want to go find no job or nothing...

Expectations of welfare cash-assistance and age are difficult to interpret, although other research has also documented younger welfare participants' endorsement of the work-first welfare philosophy (Lowe, 2008). Due to their young age and short work history, younger applicants may be more likely to receive a welfare check relative to older applicants in the W-2 program. In turn, this may influence their overall rate of diversion during the application period and their perspectives on the W-2 program in general. Further complicating matters, younger respondents were more likely to report having access to informal sources of support, particularly shared housing with family members. Thus, they were also less likely to report extreme financial hardship upon submission of an application for welfare. Overall, younger and older applicants sought welfare for different reasons, had divergent personal circumstances, and different expectations of the W-2 program overall, potentially impacting their reasons for exiting the application process and their likelihood of reapplying.



*Applicants with Disabilities*

Respondents with reported learning or reading disabilities differed from other applicants in several important ways. First, those with learning disabilities reported difficulty meeting the demands of the application period, especially mandatory job search requirements and appointments. Moreover, their circumstances were often the most complicated, with all experiencing recent housing problems, including homelessness. Part of their difficulty derived from their misunderstanding of W-2 rules and policies that applied to the application period. For most, incorrect application policy information led to their leaving the application period. Unlike their counterparts without reported disabilities, they were not actively weighing the costs of the program relative to benefit expectations, or labor market opportunities. Rather, they reported several attempts to apply for services from the time they submitted their original application to the time of our interview, suggesting a desire to participate in welfare, but an inability to successfully complete the application period.

An applicant with a reported learning disability informed us she declined non-cash services because she did not want to use any of her lifetime welfare eligibility limits if services did not include a welfare check: "you know I wanted to save that time for in case I get eligible for a cash-benefit. I didn't see why I should use up some time when I wasn't gonna get any financial benefit." According to W-2 policy, the 5-year federal lifetime benefit limit is only used when applicants receive a cash welfare benefit. When pressed further as to how this would affect her 5-year limits on welfare benefits, the respondent reported her caseworker had encouraged her to decline and "bank" her welfare eligibility for future use.

Similarly, another applicant with a reported learning disability also reported the overlapping impact of housing issues, and difficulty meeting agency requirements due to transportation and instability. She informed us that since she had to wait two weeks to reapply every time she missed a scheduled agency appointment during an application process, this extended the time she would have to wait to receive a cash payment.

Well you know since I applied that first time you're talkin' about (May 2007 application), I've applied like two other times. But you know I been stayin' with a friend, a nice friend, cause me and my kids ain't got nowhere else to go. I been lookin' for a place but I got to get W-2 and show some income and I got me an eviction from last year so it's like hard to get me a place right now. And then every time I miss an appointment I got to wait two weeks before I can go back and apply and then you know the time it takes to get the check ... it's makin' it real hard to get me a place.

According to W-2 policy, applicants may reapply the same day their initial application is denied or the application is closed for other reasons. When asked why she thought she had to wait two weeks between each application to W-2 the applicant responded "that's just the way it is when you applying for W-2, you gotta wait to get back in."

Finally, an 18-year-old applicant with a reported learning disability who was transitioning from her mother's W-2 case dropped out after using the full 30-day application period. This respondent's extension from a 12-day process to a 30-day process was related to issues of required documentation to transition to her own W-2 case at the County level office rather than the W-2 agency, suggesting that she experienced difficulty in navigating the bureaucratic requirements to open a new W-2 case.

I kept goin' back, tryin' to get it taken care of. I thought I had taken them what they wanted, but when I went back to the W-2 office my worker looked at the system and told me it hadn't been cleared up at the County. You know, she was tryin' to be nice, but she told me since I got through thirty days she couldn't do nothin' but deny me 'cause I hadn't cleared up things from my mother's case with the County. I'm back in applying again and got it cleared up so I think I'm gonna be okay this time.

These results suggest that applicants with learning disabilities have complicated lives, particularly related to housing, difficulty navigating the application process, and an impaired

ability to process policy information. Their disability status may play in a role in their inability to meet mandatory requirements, attend agency meetings, and ultimately complete the application process. Applicants with reported disabilities may be at a distinct disadvantage relative to other applicants in making it through the application process and ultimately participating in welfare programs.

### Discussion and Implications

Levels of human capital and the ability to access benefits immediately played key roles in diversion. Surprisingly, treatment by agency staff and bureaucratic demands were not reported as catalysts to diversion. Rather, respondent's continued participation in the extended welfare application period was related to how long it takes to receive a welfare check or if they would receive a cash benefit at all. In Wisconsin, monthly welfare checks are generous relative to other states (\$673 per month), but a participant will not receive a full-benefit check until about two months after program entry and only a partial benefit check in the month following program entry. Most respondents who reported the wait for a check as the reason they discontinued their application indicated they would have completed the process if they would receive a welfare check sooner.

In 2006, applicants who were assessed as "immediately employable" would be eligible for non-cash services, such as employment assistance, but not a welfare check. Not surprisingly, those who were assessed, or believed they would be assessed, as employable and not eligible for a cash benefit, did not see the purpose in completing the application or entering welfare without some financial assistance. While most reported becoming employed shortly after they left the application period, it was not uncommon for their jobs to be temporary or seasonal. Moreover, being assessed as employable was mitigated by age, with older applicants more likely to fall into this category due to the greater likelihood of having a work history. Further complicating matters for older applicants, they often felt that employment services offered through welfare would not assist them in finding a "good" job. Thus, participating

without a check and no perceived benefit from employment assistance may lead to older applicants foregoing welfare relative to their younger counterparts.

Administrative requirements, such as child support enforcement, the submission of mandatory documentation, and treatment by caseworkers, were not reported as primary factors in decisions to divert, as has been found in other studies (Anderson, 2001; Meyers & Lurie, 2005; Ridzi & London, 2006). Other research in this area has focused on welfare participation (Anderson, 2001; Meyers & Lurie, 2005; Ridzi & London, 2006; Soss, 1999). Welfare participants, relative to applicants, likely have greater exposure to bureaucratic and caseworker demands during ongoing program participation. It may be that once applicants discovered they would not receive an immediate check or would only be eligible for non-cash benefits, bureaucratic demands became less salient in their application experiences. Or, perhaps the limited meetings with caseworkers and short timeframe of the application period reduced the risk of having a negative experience. Nonetheless, results in this area should be interpreted with caution.

Applicants with learning disabilities reported inaccurate policy information that impacted their ability to complete the application period and enter welfare. Overall, this suggests that some target groups are unintentionally diverted due to complex rules and processes rather than better opportunities in the labor market. At the same time, it may be a specific group of welfare applicants—those with learning disabilities—who experience difficulty in completing application periods. While prior work has considered the role of learning disabilities on program participation and employment for welfare populations (Thompson, Holcomb, Loprest, & Brennan, 1998; Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 1996), we have not yet accounted for learning disabilities in the ability to process or understand policy information at the “front door” of public programs. This warrants concern, given that research has found individuals with learning disabilities are overrepresented in the welfare population (Johnson & Meckstroth, 1998).

Accounting for the role of learning disabilities as a potential barrier to program entry and participation is particularly

important, as current recommendations to improve policy knowledge among those likely to utilize public programs suggests time and exposure to correct policy information may help to reduce gaps in knowledge (Meyer et al., 2007). Yet, we do not know if such tactics are appropriate among those with learning disabilities. Applicants with learning disabilities may need specialized case management practices and improved agency assessment tools to address their learning disabilities as not only a barrier to work but a potential barrier to TANF compliance due to deficient understanding of program rules and requirements.

Finally, the reported need for an immediate welfare check among most respondents is similar to a lump-sum cash payment. Indeed, lump-sum payments are intended for those who are able to seek employment on their own, which many respondents reportedly preferred. At the same time, evidence of those diverted by lump-sum cash payments suggest small gains in employment, use of the grant by unintended groups, such as those with short or non-existent work histories, and quick returns to welfare by recipients, but at lower rates than non-users (London, 2003). Nevertheless, the use of lump-sum cash payments, particularly with older welfare applicants with recent work histories may be preferable to applicants, and agency resources may be conserved.

Acknowledgement: This study was conducted as part of the W-2 Applicant Study Project, Principal Investigator: Maria Cancian, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

## References

- Anderson, S. G. (2001). Welfare recipient views about caseworker performance: Lessons for developing TANF case management practices. *Families in Society*, 82, 165-174.
- Anderson, S. G., Halter, A. P., & Gryzlak, B. M. (2004). Difficulties after leaving TANF: Inner-city women talk about reasons for returning to welfare. *Social Work*, 49, 185-194.
- Arizona Department of Economic Security. (2005). *State of Arizona cash assistance entrance study*. Report to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/leavers99/state-rpts/az/AZ-CAEntranceStudy.pdf>.

- Bane, M. J., & Ellwood, D. T. (1994). *Welfare realities: From rhetoric to reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Besharov, D. J., & Germanis, P. (2007). Welfare reform and caseload decline. *Gender Issues*, 32-56.
- Bruce, D., Barbour, K., & Thacker, A. (2004). Welfare program reentry among postreform leavers. *Southern Economic Journal*, 70, 816-830.
- Cancian, M., Haveman, R. H., Meyer, D. R., & Wolfe, B. (2002). Before and after TANF: The economic well-being of women leaving welfare. *Social Service Review*, 76, 603-641.
- Danziger, S., Heflin, C. M., Corcoran, M. E., Oltmans, E., & Wang, H. C. (2002). Does it pay to move from welfare to work? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 21, 671-692.
- Gonzales, L., Hudson, K., & Acker, J. (2007). Diverting dependency: The effects of diversion on the short term outcomes of TANF applicants. *Journal of Poverty*, 11, 83-105.
- Haskins, R. (2001). Effects of welfare-reform on family income. In R. Blank & R. Haskins (Eds.), *The new world of welfare* (pp. 70-102). Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute Press.
- Hetling, A., Ovwigho, P. C., & Born, C. E. (2007). Do welfare avoidance grants prevent cash assistance? *Social Service Review*, 81, 609-631.
- Holcomb, P. A., Pavetti, L., Ratchliffe, C., & Riedlinger, S. (1998). *Building an employment focused welfare system: Work first and other work-oriented strategies in five states*. The Urban Institute. Washington, DC.
- Johnson, A., & Meckstroth, A. (1998). *Ancillary services to support Welfare to Work*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.
- Kingfisher, C. P. (1998). How providers make policy: An analysis of everyday conversation in a welfare office. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 8, 119-136.
- London, R. (2003). Which TANF applicants are diverted, and what are their outcomes? *Social Service Review*, 373-398.
- Lowe, S. T. (2008). "It's all one big circle": Welfare discourse and the everyday lives of urban adolescents. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 35(3), 173-194.
- Meyer, D. R., Cancian, M., & Nam, K. (2007). Welfare and child support program knowledge gaps reduce program effectiveness. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 26, 575-598.
- Meyers, M. K., & Lurie, I. (2005, June 26-28). *The decline in welfare caseloads: An organizational perspective*. Paper presented at the Conference on Mixed Methods Research on Economic Conditions, Public Policy, and Family and Child Well-being. Ann Arbor, MI.
- Moffit, R. (2003). The role of nonfinancial factors in exit and entry in the TANF programs. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 38, 1221-1254.
- Moffit, R., & Roff, J. (2000). *The diversity of welfare leavers. Welfare, children, and families: A three-city study* (Policy brief # 00-2). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.

- Moffit, R., Winder, K., Burton, L. M., Benjamin, A. F., Hurt, T. R., Woodruff, S. L., & Kolak, A. (2003). *A study of TANF non-entrants*. Office of Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from: [http://web.jhu.edu/threecitystudy/images/publications/16\\_moffit\\_final1.pdf](http://web.jhu.edu/threecitystudy/images/publications/16_moffit_final1.pdf).
- Riccio, J., & Hasenfeld, Y. (1996). Enforcing participation mandate in a welfare-to-work program. *Social Service Review*, 70, 516-542.
- Ridzi, F., & London, A. S. (2006). "It's great when people don't even have their welfare case opened": TANF diversion as process and lesson. *Review of Policy Research*, 23, 725-743.
- Soss, J. (1999). Welfare application encounters: Subordination, satisfaction, and the puzzle of client evaluations. *Administration & Society*, 31, 50-64.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Thompson, T. S., Holcomb, P. A., Loprest, P., & Brennan, K. (1998). State welfare-to-work policies for people with disabilities. *Urban Institute*. Retrieved from: <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/wel2work.pdf>.
- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. (2000). *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): Third Annual report to Congress*. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office. Retrieved from: <http://www.spdp.org/tanf/divover/divpymt.pdf>.
- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. (2002). *Texas families in transition. Surviving without TANF: An analysis of families diverted or leaving TANF*. Washington DC: Government Printing Office. Retrieved from: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/leavers99/staterrpts/tx/Families2002.pdf>.
- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. (2004). *Temporary Assistance for Needy families (TANF): Sixth annual report to Congress*. Washington DC: Government Printing Office. Retrieved from: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/annualreport6/Ar6index.htm>.
- Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. (1996) *Learning disabilities in the AFDC population: A preliminary report of the Washington State learning disabilities initiative*. Olympia, WA: DHHS.
- Wu, C. F., Cancian, M., & Meyer, D. R. (2008). Standing still or moving up? Evidence from Wisconsin on the long-term employment and earnings of TANF participants. *Social Work Research*, 32, 89-103.
- Ybarra, M., & Kaplan, T. (2007). *Wisconsin Works (W-2) applicant study: The W-2 application process*. Report to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.
- Ybarra, M. & Noyes, J. (2008). *Wisconsin Works (W-2) applicant study: Analysis of W-2 application-process drop-outs*. Report to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.