Welfare Reform Essay, Research Paper

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Introduction

In August 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) passed. This legislation ended the Family Aid with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Unlike AFDC, TANF is not an entitlement program. This means that states are under no obligation to provide cash assistance to eligible families. Instead the federal government gives block grants to assist poor families with the emphasis on moving them from welfare to work or deterring them from applying for welfare in the first place. States are no longer obligated to match federal funds, creating an incentive to eliminate their previous portion of the funding for critical programs. Now due to less funding and no standard rules or regulations in place, thousands of families never find out that they still qualify for health insurance, childcare or food stamps. “By eliminating the whole architecture of the old entitlement program, the federal government eliminated a lot of the existing protections for people” (Cahn pg. 1997). A recent study found, 60 percent of former welfare recipients in South Carolina did not know a parent could get transitional Medicaid, and nine states have no outreach efforts to inform parents that they were still entitled to receive childcare assistance after welfare benefits were closed (Sherman, Amey, Duffield, Ebb, & Weinstein, 1998). By denying or reducing coverage the state creates surplus (left over) funds that they are allowed to be used in other programs. Some states even went further using part of its welfare surplus to fund tax cuts for the middle class (Rose 2000).

This new popular movement is in contrary to the original purpose of programs like TANF. Sixty years ago AFDC was created to enable women to stay at home with their children and remain homemakers (Gilens 1996). When highly paid professional women leave jobs to stay home and take care of their children they are considered “good mothers”. Also, when they do decide to work outside the home they are judged as “selfish” and “bad mothers”. However, the expectation of poor women is the exact opposite. Poor women are often criticized for staying home to take care of their children and are expected to leave the home and work for wage in order to receive the “good mother” approval from society.

One reform argument is centered on the “burden” for taxpayers to support people who are not trying to help themselves. Gilens reported, “The economic self-interest explanation of welfare reform is widely assumed to be true, and debates over public policy often remain on the assumption that the middle class resent paying for programs that benefit only the poor“ (Gilens, p. 2, 1996). Reform efforts often focus on general stereotypes of welfare recipients not wanting to work and preferring to take advantage of taxpayer money. Conservatives and liberals refer to “welfare spending” as excessive and unnecessary. However, prior to the popularity of welfare reform, the U.S. Bureau of Census reported actual money spent on AFDC was only 7% of the $613 billion spend on social welfare which included health care, veterans’ programs, education, housing, and pubic aid (tables 579, 583, 1993). With government statistics contradicting claims of excessive spending, there is legitimate suspicion regarding the real motivation for welfare reform programs.

Undeniably, current reform bills seem to target the narrow population of poor minority women. Ninety five percent of TANF recipients are single women with children (Sherman et al., 1998). So there is no question who is affected most by these reform bills. Also, there have been several studies that suggest welfare-reform laws are especially discriminating against lower income women of color (Gilens 1996). As reported in a study published by the Michigan Law Review, “While it is true that, proportionately, there are more African American recipients of welfare than white recipients, and proportionately, there are more blacks living in poverty than whites” (Cahn 1997). The media’s public picture of welfare recipients and images of poor people are not just class based; they also rely on stereotypes of gendered and raced behavior. In a recent study published in the American Political Science Review found, “Although blacks represent only 37% of welfare recipients, perceptions of black welfare mothers dominate whites’ evaluations of welfare and their preferences with regard to welfare spending” (Gilens, p. 601, 1997). For the purpose of this research, I will demonstrate how in contemporary culture, public welfare, race, class and gender are centrally connected.

Changing welfare to workfare

Despite promises of welfare reform “easing the transition from welfare to work,” the law has, if anything made the transition more difficult. Studies in nine states by the National Governors’ Association and other organizations found that between 40 percent and 50 percent of those who left TANF had no job at all (Sherman et al., 1998, 8, 49). Considering workforce discrimination and the lack of affordable childcare working outside the home is increasingly difficult for single mothers. If a key goal of welfare reform is to move recipients into jobs, they will need day care for their children. Studies show that working mothers with incomes below the poverty line pay a much greater share of their income for child care than do other working mothers. Overview of current federal initiatives finds that it is the working poor who receive the least child care assistance.

Federal involvement in the childcare market has been justified as a means of offsetting the cost of children, as a work incentive for low-income parents and as an investment in the education and development of children. On these grounds, the federal government provides support for childcare through tax credits, direct block grants, and supportive services. The largest source is the nonrefundable Dependent Care Tax Credit, which offsets the working parent’s childcare expenses via the tax system ( ). Most of the 6 million families receiving this credit are middle and upper class income, since the credit is not available to families too poor to pay taxes.

PRWORA fundamentally changed federal child care assistance programs for low-income families. The legislation created the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) by consolidating several major federal subsidy programs. Although PRWOCA has eliminated the entitlement to child care assistance as well, it also provided an increase in federal funding of 27% in its first year (Long, Kirby, Kurka, & Waters 1998). However, despite improvements in federal funding, the state have the authoritiy to independenly set the eligibility income as long as it does not exceed the federal maximum of 75% of the state medial income (SMI) (Long et al., 1998). With the exception of seven states,

Program eligibility rules and provider reimbursement rates vary widely across the states and in some cases across programs within a state (Sherman et al., 1998). The current system is criticized as unnecessarily fragmented due to multiple funding streams and program rules (Long, Kirby, Kurka, & Waters, 1998). Even in states that have effectively created childcare systems that are “seamless” to the families served, the system is complex and difficult to administer. Texas has maintained a waiting list of 40,000 poor children for daycare and California has maintained a waiting list of 225,000 poor children with low income mothers waiting up to two years to receive child care subsidy (Sherman et al., 1998).

Another factor that discourages many welfare recipients from working is their fear of losing health insurance coverage. According to one study, making generous health insurance benefits available to all female workers would raise the employment rate of all heads of family’s 16 percentage points and reduce TAFN caseloads by 20 to 25 percent (Sherman et al., 1998).

The Cooperation Requirement

Underlying the cooperation requirements are assumptions of noncooperation, irresponsibility, and immorality. Federal welfare reform bills have focused on parental responsibility in hopes of child support reimbursing welfare costs. The government also offers an incentive to the state in the form of bonuses for reducing the “illegitimacy ratio” (Rose 2000). An increasing number of women of all races and income levels are choosing to have children outside of marriage. Instead of policies acknowledging the changing lifestyles in society and creating social policies that would provide assistance to all types of families, welfare recipients have been made the target of punitive and problematic policies (Rose 2000). The stern sanction for failure to comply with the requirement assumes that mothers are not telling the truth or that they are deliberately with holding information about the father. Women are required to provide this information before they would be considered eligible to receive benefits (Cahn 1997).

This has transformed welfare into a condemnation of the mother’s morality, rather than a program for meeting the needs of children. The cooperation requirement is simply another example of an attempt to impose morality on women. Women must meet certain standards of responsibility not just how much she must report, but also in the behavior she is reporting. There seems to be no understanding of the loss of dignity that accompanies questions regarding the woman’s sexual history. Many states have developed paternity questionnaires that ask about sexual activity around the time that the child was conceived (Cahn 1997). Especially in light of the historical treatment of African-American women’s sexuality in this country, the cooperation requirement is particularly punitive.

Women are also required to relinquish their rights to receive child support and assign all rights to the state. Federal regulation requires the state to define “cooperation” to include providing information during an interview with the local child support office, and even testifying at child support hearings. Recipients may be excused from providing the necessary information by stating “good cause”. However, the burden of proof is on the recipient and often times it becomes an issue of the state worker determining if the cause is indeed legitimate. For example in one documented case, the recipients grant was cut by more than fifty percent because of her alleged noncooperation. The recipient reported the father’s name, birthplace, and previous work place, but did not have his social security number. Her “good cause” was the basic reason was simply not having knowledge of this information. The state worker then decided based on the length of the relationship between the recipient and the father, she should know more about the father and concluded that she was not cooperating (Cahn 1997).

Poverty does correlate with the absence of a father, which is the most common reason for women to begin receiving state assistance (Cahn 1997). This is due to women’s lower earning ability and the economic structure, rather than the absence of another parent in the family. African-American children in two-parent households still have much higher poverty rates than do white children who are in single-parent households (Cahn 1997). To simply require the paternal presence is not a guarantor of prosperity especially in light of the limited job opportunities for minority men. The other issue is a present father is not always a “good thing”. “More than half of all participants in welfare-to-work programs appear to be domestic violence victims” (Sherman et al., 1998). Numerous studies show that children are healthier in a violence free environment, even if it means one without a father. While the cooperation requirement includes an exemption for good cause, it is often not used (Cahn 1997).

The problems with child support collection efforts go far beyond issues of cooperation. One study of custodial parents who had not yet obtained a child support order found that all of the mothers had provided the fathers name, 75% had provided his home address, 54% had provided his social security number, and 50% had given his home address (Cahn 1997). The establishment of paternity appears to depend instead on the competency and efficiency of the child support agency as evidenced by the lawsuits against collection agencies and the studies on the amount of cooperation (1997). Given the above facts, noncooperation by the mother is not nearly as important as improving collection procedures within social service agencies.

Family Caps

Society views women who have additional children while on welfare as immoral, irresponsible, and undeserving, in contrast to wealthier woman who can “afford” to have children. The “family caps” policy prohibits the increase of payments for additional children born to a woman already receiving aid (Rose 2000). The inaccurate theory of poor women having more children because of the financial incentives has mandated such policies of obvious discrimination and control of poor women. Although the PRWORA does not require this program, it is a state option (Sherman et al., 1998). Enforcing such policies underlines the double standards applied to welfare recipients by the state in contrast to other recipients of government aid (like tax credits). Studies report, TANF recipients have 1.9 children, about the same as the national average ( ). It is assumed that failing to increase welfare payments for an additional child, $67 per month on average, is a sufficient incentive to prevent further pregnancies (Rose 2000). Repeated studies show no correlation between benefit levels and women’s choice to have children. States providing relatively higher benefits do not show higher birth rates among recipients (Rose 2000). More importantly the implication of incentives is also punitive. Non-welfare families do receive a premium for additional children, in the form of a $2,450 tax deduction per child and up to $ in childcare reimbursement annually. However, society does not label the women receiving these “incentives” for having additional children to decrease their taxable income. Considering the actual amount of increase of benefits for an additional child dose not support claims as incentive for women receiving welfare, therefore we must look deeper to reveal other possible motivations for this type of policy.

“Surveys show that racial attitudes are the most important reason behind white opposition to welfare programs” (Gilens p. 593). The history of AFDC shows repeated attempts to exclude African Americans through morality requirements. Although black represent only 37% of welfare recipients, perceptions of black mothers dominate whites’ evaluations of welfare and their preferences with regard to welfare spending (p. 601). The “welfare mother experiment”, conducted by Gilens in 1996, asked respondents their impression of a welfare recipient described as either black or white woman in her early 30s, who has a ten year old child, and who has been on welfare for the past year. Respondents were asked two specific questions, “how likely is it that the woman described will try hard to find a job, and “how likely is it that she will have more children to get larger welfare check” (Gilens 1996). Analysis of the responses showed a significant correlation between race and negative views of welfare recipients. “The results indicate that the influence of beliefs about welfare mothers is about twice as strong when she is black than when she is white.”

In Conclusion

Whether out of willful disregard or real misunderstanding, states are failing to fulfill their legal obligations to the poor. According to a report in 1988 put out by the Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative and Congregations for Children, 90 percent of the Mississippi children eligible for childcare vouchers do not receive them ( ). It is also estimated 675,000 low-income people in 1997 became uninsured as a result of welfare reform, 62% of those were children who should have never been denied their insurance (Sherman et al., 1998).

Welfare reforms affects all poor women, but given the influence of race, class, and gender in current society it appears to be the mythical information driving such reform bills. Various “incentatives” states are offered increase the probability that acutal spending in the supporting programs will be reduced. It is my opinion, considering the recorded facts, the real blame benefit for such reform bills clearly should be placed upon government acting on the opportunity to capitalize on stereotypes for economic gain.

The real information that people need isn’t coming from the system. And why should it? The object of the game is to get as many people off welfare as possible. So why should they share the rules of the game? Statistics and non-profit studies make evident the states unwillingness to spend necessary money for successful

Despite premature claims of victory, a recent investigation by the Children’s Defense Fund and National Coalition for the Homelessness found welfare reform to be responsible for extreme poverty growing among children, especially those in female-headed households (Sherman et al., 1998). This non-profit investigation recommended

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TANF law prohibits aid for a person who has not assigned support rights to the State and sets minimum penalties for failure to cooperate with child support.)