

US welfare reform: behind the hype

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The following article was sent to the World Socialist Web Site by Ayanna McManus, a US high school student from Massachusetts. It was originally published in the September/October issue of Rising Times, as well as on the web site of the American Civil Liberties Union.

I recently talked to Mary, a mother of three from Marlboro, Massachusetts. “With \$446 a month,” she told me, “it is hard to buy diapers, pay rent, pay utilities, and get your kids the things they want.”

Susan, a mother who is going to school to get her GED (General Educational Development or high school equivalency diploma), reported that welfare is the only thing that is keeping her afloat. “If I didn’t get the money, I’d be starving,” she said. “But you’re not getting enough money, and even when you get the money, you still do stuff like run out of food.”

So is welfare reform actually working? The effects of the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996,” which President Bill Clinton signed into law on August 22, 1996, are now beginning to be apparent, as the results of new studies and surveys are being released.

Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which originated with the Social Security Act of 1935, was the government program called “welfare” that gave income assistance to people living below the poverty line. Under AFDC, anyone who met the requirements was entitled to income assistance for as long as they needed it. States were given funding for cash assistance, based on their caseload, which they then had to match with state funding.

AFDC had a lot of shortcomings. Inflation had driven down the value of payments to the 9.2 million children and 4.4 million adults—mostly mothers—who made up the welfare caseload in 1992. Even with food stamps, and other government benefits included, an average AFDC family would only receive benefits bringing

them to 42 percent of the poverty line—in other words, less than half of what was needed to live in poverty.

In 1996 AFDC was replaced with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF gives states block grants, which means the states only get a certain amount of money per year, no matter how many people need it. TANF requires that recipients work 20 to 35 hours per week. Even when the work requirement is met, there is a federal absolute limit of 60 months’ eligibility over a lifetime.

Welfare reform is about making the “transition to work.” State governments have been quick to give the “good news” about declining numbers on the welfare rolls. But what is behind these numbers?

A report released on August 20, 1999 by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found worsening conditions for the poorest 20 percent of female-headed families. Though their incomes rose substantially from 1993 to 1995, before welfare reform, their incomes fell from 1995 to 1997, during the period when welfare reform kicked in. One study of Census Bureau data found that the mothers who had received welfare held, on average, 1.7 jobs; 44 percent held two or more jobs. Forty percent of the women who have made the “transition to work” still remain poor.

Child care is obviously a key part of making the transition to the world of work. Studies show that where full child care subsidies are available, there is a dramatic increase in labor force participation among the poor. However, child care across the country is scarce, considering the demand. In some states, low-income working mothers have waited as long as two years to receive a child care subsidy for a toddler, and as long as one year for an infant.

In Massachusetts it took Susan from September 1998 to January 1999 to get child care. She has to travel, without a car, to a community 10 miles away to renew her voucher periodically.

Life is a struggle for kids and their working mothers. An Urban Institute Study found that more than a quarter of former recipients are working, mostly night hours, with most of those surveyed giving the need to juggle child care arrangements as the reason. And just because women are no longer receiving assistance, this does not mean they have found work and can provide for themselves. According to the Urban Institute Study, about a quarter of the women who left the rolls were not working, and had no partner working.

No wonder that nearly one out of every four children in the United States is growing up in a family whose income falls below the federal poverty line—a far higher percentage than in other industrial countries.

We're told that the economy has never been so good. Tell that to the third of families who are now off welfare, but who have been forced, according to the Urban Institute Study, to cut the size of meals or skip meals in the last year because there wasn't enough money for food.

Last December, the US Conference of Mayors released a report noting a 16 percent increase in emergency food requests. Nearly a quarter of these requests had gone unmet because the cities had inadequate supplies of emergency food.

Although people living below the poverty line are supposed to be still eligible for food stamps, they are being told that they are not eligible for any government benefits after being cut from welfare. According to Susan, “they lie to me all the time.”

Grace Grasti works in Boston with Sisters Together Ending Poverty (STEP), a women's self-advocacy organization. She told me that “a lot of women are running scared and taking any job, because of the time limits.”

It is ridiculous to think that individuals can be thrown into the job market untrained and succeed. A study by the Preamble Center for Public Policy entitled “Welfare Reform, the Jobs Aren't There” found that nearly half the states provide less assistance to welfare recipients in achieving job readiness and obtaining jobs than was provided under previous welfare policies. The same study concluded that because of a shortage of entry-level jobs and the low pay associated with them it would be impossible for hundreds of thousands of welfare recipients to lift themselves out of poverty once they were removed from the program. Most former

recipients will likely join the working poor.

Teenage welfare mothers who combine work with welfare instead of finishing school stay on welfare longer than those who stay on welfare and finish school. But it isn't easy to get an education if you are poor. Maria described trying to get help earning her GED and instead getting the “runaround.” At first they were going to pay for the GED, and then they weren't. Susan was more fortunate, and eventually was put in touch with an agency that got her a grant to go to school to get her high school equivalency.

The statistics and “success stories” being cited by the government paint a picture of welfare reform as a success. But the numbers I have looked at speak for themselves. It is clear that welfare reform has hurt more than it helps.

Rather than eliminating the need for welfare, the new laws limit access to it, which doesn't solve the problem of the devastating effects of poverty, especially on poor women and children. It's too bad the government didn't heed the advice given by Ms. Grasti of STEP: “Instead of having people who don't know what it's like being on welfare making the laws, people who have experienced welfare should help make the laws.”

See Also:

Poverty and hunger worsen under US welfare reform
[12 January 2000]

Further evidence of the impact of welfare reform—2.7 million US children living in extreme poverty
[10 September 1999]



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