

US families forced off welfare face struggle for basic necessities

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For many families who have left welfare in the US since 1996 income from work alone is not enough to prevent many hardships, according to a study conducted by the Children's Defense Fund.

The report— *Families Struggling to Make It in the Workforce: A Post Welfare Report* —is based on interviews with over 5,200 families and individuals at over 180 soup kitchens, food banks, homeless shelters and other public and private agencies that provide emergency assistance throughout the country.

The study focused on the lives of more than 506 families and their children who had left welfare since 1996. Almost two-thirds of them had left welfare for work, yet for them, their income was not enough to feed, clothe and shelter their children. Most ended up moving from one low-paying job without benefits to another. Many were forced to seek emergency services to provide food, had their utilities cut off, were evicted from where they lived, or ended up in homeless shelters.

Only a very small number of former welfare recipients were actually doing slightly better than before. Those with more than two years of college or a vocational degree were the only ones who could rely upon their earnings alone to put them above the poverty level.

For the majority of those leaving welfare, most continue to live in poverty or very near poverty. One third of those who left welfare for work were no longer working at the time of the survey. Among those who are still working the vast majority have had several jobs since leaving welfare, making it impossible to provide a stable living for themselves and their children.

Of those working, more than half earn below the poverty level, with an average pay of \$7.00 an hour. This wage is higher than that found in several other studies, but only barely enough to raise a family out of poverty if the person worked 40 hours a week, 50 weeks out of the year—something very unlikely for those interviewed. In

fact, one third of those who left welfare for work had lost their jobs in the last six months and many cycle in and out of the workforce.

Despite work, more than half of those who were working had been unable to pay the rent, buy food, afford needed medical care, or had had their telephone or electric service disconnected at some point during the past six months. Many families were evicted or otherwise forced to move, causing their children to change schools in the middle of the school year.

Of the 965 children of former welfare recipients included in this study, the following numbers had faced these hardships during the past six months:

- * 366 children lived in families who could not pay the rent;
- * 320 children lived in families who could not buy food;
- * 216 children had to change their school as a result of changing homes;
- * 205 children lived in families who could not pay for their children's health care;
- * 202 children lived in families who were evicted from their home;
- * 178 children lived in families whose phone was cut off;
- * 103 children lived in families whose electricity was disconnected.

By interviewing people at locations where people are already seeking emergency assistance, the survey does not purport to represent the general picture of the post-welfare population. Rather, the CDF report seeks to present the hardship felt by many people who have been left out of other studies. By interviewing people at assistance locations, the CDF was able to gather information from people who no longer have telephones or have moved and can no longer be located by those conducting studies.

As a result of its method the CDF study provides a worst-case scenario of what has happened to people who

have left the welfare rolls. While not necessarily representative of everyone who has left welfare, it can be inferred that there are hundreds of thousands of other people in the same situation as those surveyed by the CDF.

Furthermore, comparison of the CDF results with the results of many other national and local reports conducted over the last few years shows a high level of correlation between the findings. For instance, the CDF study found 44 percent of former welfare recipients working while many more representative studies show 61 percent working. Rates of people without health insurance and not receiving Food Stamps are the same for other studies.

The CDF study found a higher rate of homeless among women with children than previous national studies, which could either be the result of the method they used or represent an increase since the changes in the welfare laws. Most studies of people who have left welfare have found that those working are at low wages without benefits and that most have not been able to escape poverty.

The CDF study also challenges much of the conventional wisdom about those still on welfare and those who have been “pushed off”—that is, those former welfare recipients who have been cut from the welfare rolls because they did not comply with one or more of the various state requirements for maintaining benefits.

In 1996, when Congress and the Clinton administration passed and signed into law the series of bills changing welfare, states were required to have a growing percentage of those still on welfare work in order to collect benefits. People who did not meet their work requirement had their benefits cut off.

Up until recently researchers, caseworkers, writers and others involved in the welfare system assumed that those still on welfare were what is termed the “hardest to employ.” Due to lack of education, job skills and work experience, combined with higher rates of physical and mental illness, this was the hardest group to place in jobs.

Nearly one in five (19 percent) of those in the CDF study were “pushed off” because they missed an appointment or did not comply with one or more of the program's rules. The CDF study, along with several others reports that have looked at those who have been “pushed off” welfare, have found that these individuals face the same if not greater difficulties in finding jobs as those still receiving benefits. In fact, according to the report, “Families who were ‘pushed off’ the welfare rolls for non-compliance with the new rules were more likely to be

burdened by educational deficiencies and health problems than current recipients.”

In other words, many of the same problems that make it difficult for someone to find and retain a job also make it difficult for a person to meet the burdensome requirements of the welfare bureaucracy. Moreover, when passing welfare reform, the imposition of tough sanctions was presented as a way of forcing people on welfare to get jobs. In reality, a study of those “pushed off” welfare in Delaware found that less than one third of those sanctioned by the welfare system returned to welfare after correcting the problem. The other two thirds dropped off the welfare rolls, but not out of poverty.

A third aspect of the survey was to compare former welfare recipients who are working—but not receiving any other benefit such as Food Stamps, Medicare or child care—with those who are working but still receiving other forms of benefits. Not surprisingly, those receiving Food Stamps, Medicare or child care assistance report they are doing better than those who are not receiving any benefits.

Despite the fact that their low earnings make most former welfare recipients qualified, more than half were not receiving any Food Stamps. Only one third were receiving assistance with child care and one third reported that at least one member of their household had no health insurance. Nationally, only one in ten low-income families with children who qualify for assistance with child care are receiving any. Those in the CDF study who are no longer working cite lack of child care as the main reason.

The CDF study found that the most important factor in determining if former recipients received other federal or state benefits was whether they were informed of these benefits at the time they left welfare and if their caseworker was supportive in obtaining those benefits. Only one in four reported being informed of and receiving assistance in obtaining any of these benefits.

While the report did not ask why three-fourths of the caseworkers did not notify former recipients of other benefits, many other national studies and several lawsuits have pointed to the deliberate policies of many states cutting people from these programs.



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