

US welfare "reform" forces more children to separate from their parents

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In the two years that followed the ending of the guaranteed welfare benefits by the Clinton administration, one half million more children in the US were added to the nearly two million already living without either of their parents. By 1999 as many as 2.3 million children were in foster care or living in the homes of grandparents, other relatives or friends, according to a recent report by the RAND Corporation, the National Bureau of Economic Research and the University of California.

Among low-income children the share living without a biological, adoptive or stepparent in the household rose a full percentage point, to 6 percent in 1999, up from 5 percent in 1997. At the same time there was a decline in the number of single parent families.

President Bush, along with conservative and liberal politicians alike, hailed the reduction of the number of one-parent families as a confirmation that the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) promoted "family values." When the act comes up for reauthorization later this year, Bush wants Congress to divert \$100 million annually from federal welfare dollars to programs designed to promote marriage.

New research, however, indicates a large part of the decrease in the number of single-parent families was due to parents being forced to abandon their children so they could get a job under the welfare-to-work provisions of the new law. The decline appeared to be the greatest among black families and accompanied reports of record numbers of mothers entering the workforce.

By analyzing smaller demographic groups within the larger population categories used in earlier research, researchers produced evidence contradicting the one-sided optimism emanating from official Washington and establishing a direct connection between welfare reform and the breakup of families.

Recognizing that welfare reform actually began in

several states in the early 1990s, the researchers compared the family status of children in 1989 with data compiled up to March 2001. By looking back to years before any state had federal waivers in place, they captured effects of welfare reform missed in earlier studies.

By 1996 half the states were employing federal waivers to dismantle various aspects of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Federal legislation in late 1996 changed the name of the federally-funded AFDC program to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Funds were converted to block grants to states and strict work requirements and lifetime time limits were imposed.

In one population heavily impacted by welfare, black children living in the central city, the longer states had experimented with welfare reform and the more enthusiastically they enforced the new restrictions, the greater the increase in children living with neither parent. After taking into account other social factors, they estimated welfare reform led to a doubling of the percentage of black central city children living with neither parent, or an additional 206,000 persons. The authors note "it is rare in social science research to find such large effects of policy on behavior."

Another trend they identified indicates that welfare reform is forcing women into marriages that are likely to break up, with a higher incidence of separation and divorce.

One welfare official in the Bush administration cynically claimed welfare reform was exposing unfit parents. The researchers showed, however, that households where children went to live after being separated from their parents were no better off financially than the ones they left.

The economic stresses on low-income families are severe and increased between the mid-1990s and the end of the decade, despite the record stock market boom. In

April the Urban Institute published a report showing 300,000 more persons in single-parent families lived in extreme poverty in 1998 than in 1996. The researchers used a disposable income measure including wages, government benefits and costs such as childcare.

A family of three is considered extremely poor when its income falls below \$7,135 (in 2001 dollars) or one-half the official poverty level. Researchers acknowledged this threshold was probably too low because they did not factor in increased out-of-pocket costs for medical care borne by parents in low-paying jobs without health insurance.

July's issue of the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine reported on a survey compiled by emergency room doctors and others in several cities across the country. It showed increasing numbers of younger children unable to get enough nutritious food to stay healthy, and pointed to the effects of full and partial sanctions imposed on families by the 1996 legislation. The new law uses sanctions to terminate or reduce benefits for infractions of rules including those related to welfare-to-work. It also decreases benefits when changes in income or expenses occur.

Children three years old or younger in families whose welfare benefits had been terminated or reduced were found to have a 50 percent higher risk of being food insecure than those in families whose benefits had not been decreased. They also had a 30 percent higher risk of having past hospitalizations and a 90 percent higher risk of being hospitalized at the time of an emergency room visit.

In families where welfare benefits had been reduced but not eliminated, young children were still almost three times more likely to be admitted to the hospital at an emergency room visit. These findings were true even though 80 percent of the children were receiving supplemental food under the Women's, Infants and Children's (WIC) program and nearly all—94 percent—still qualified for government-subsidized medical care.

In Boston and Minneapolis researchers compared all US-born families, including both those that had or never used welfare. There was a 40 percent higher risk of being food insecure, a 30 percent higher risk of being underweight, and a 50 percent higher risk of being hospitalized during an ER visit in 2001 than there had been two years earlier.

The authors note that food stamps failed to mitigate the effects of sanctions or of reductions in benefits even when the reduction resulted from increases in earned income.

As alarming as they seem, the previous reports reflect

conditions before the recession began in early 2001, i.e., while the economy was still experiencing its longest expansion in postwar history. A report from the Children's Defense Fund, a liberal child advocacy group, indicates the situation has worsened considerably in the past 15 months.

There were high levels of unemployment among families with children by the end of 2001. From late 2000 to late 2001 the number of children with one or more unemployed parents rose by 1.2 million, or 41 percent. The one-year surge in children with an unemployed parent wiped out most of the reduction in children with a jobless parent that occurred during the previous five years of economic growth.

The percentage of single mothers employed had increased from 63 percent in late 1995 to 74 percent in late 2000, and had accounted for more than half the increase in working parents between 1995 and 2000. But between 2000 and late 2001 the number of unemployed single mothers rose by 25 percent, or 171,000 persons.

Thus former welfare recipients who were exploited as low-wage labor during the boom were among the first to be thrown out of work once the economic downturn began.

Despite the increase in need resulting from the effects of the recession, states actually spent \$546 million dollars less on cash assistance for low-income families with children in 2001 than they did the year before. By 2001 all but one state had families who had exceeded their time limits for TANF benefits and were eligible to be barred from any assistance for the rest of their lives.



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