



ILLINOIS FAMILIES STUDY

policy brief

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Identity, Work, & Parenting

Implications for welfare reform

Summary

Drawing upon qualitative interviews conducted in 2000 and 2001 with 58 current and former welfare recipients, this policy brief looks at how parents' identity and their ability and willingness to balance work and family determine how they will respond to the incentives and penalties associated with welfare reform. Parents who are strongly committed to staying home with their children and can marshal informal and familial means of support tend to disregard work requirements and penalties. Others are compelled by extreme financial need to change their behavior to meet work requirements, despite a strong preference to stay home. Almost half of the parents, however, enthusiastically enter the workforce and strategize ways to balance work and family. They rely on transitional supports and incentives to bolster their strong desire to leave welfare behind. A much smaller group of parents is overwhelmed by the new requirements and unable to cope with the pressures of parenting or working.

Introduction

The “work-first” approach of welfare reform requires most welfare recipients to combine work and parenting. As mostly single parents, they are faced with the challenge of balancing their often-competing roles as “providers” and “nurturers.” This policy brief draws upon qualitative interviews conducted in 2000 and 2001 with 58 current and former welfare recipients in Chicago to explore how a parent’s primary identity as a provider or a nurturer shapes his or her response to welfare reform.

Researchers identified three main groups of parents: nurturers (19%), providers (69%), and the disaffected (12%) (see Figure 1). The providers included two subgroups: strivers (47%) and reluctant providers (22%). At an average age of 39, the disaffected were considerably older than the

strivers or reluctant providers, whose average age was 31. Reluctant providers had an average of three children, while the other three groups had an average of two children. Most providers were off welfare by the time of the second interview, while about a quarter of nurturers and nearly half of the disaffected were still receiving cash benefits.

Nurturers

Nurturers see raising children as their primary purpose, and assert that working outside the home conflicts with parenting. They are often reluctant to leave their children in the care of others.

I don't believe in my job taking over my life. I don't need work. I want to spend quality time with my kids.

—Ginger, 34-year-old mother of five

Placing little value on formal work, they depend on support from spouses or partners, family members, and informal work, such as hairdressing. Some also receive Medicaid, food stamps, or cash assistance, although they generally resist meeting work requirements because they see them as conflicting with their parenting duties.

I don't go to the job training programs [the welfare program offers] because they are at the wrong times with my son's school schedule, and I don't trust anyone in the house with my children.

—Mary, 42-year-old mother of two

Many nurturers seem to view welfare reform as irrelevant to their lives. They intend to stay home with their children, regardless of the welfare rules.

Strivers

Working outside the home gives strivers a great deal of self-esteem and sense of accomplishment.

I'm running the department, doing the work of three people.... I like the position. I'm comfortable there. I want to be loyal and make it work, as it is rewarding for me.

—Janet, 27-year-old mother of one

[Now that I am working, I am] more motivated, more outspoken. I was a homebody. Now I go out more and am more self-motivated.... It's not just the pay, but the job that I want.

—Jean, 25-year-old mother of two

Strivers focus on their career path and proactively strategize ways to meet their employment, education, and child care needs. They generally report a sense of balance between their work and parenting responsibilities, and even report that formal employment has helped them become a better parent.

Most strivers see welfare as a temporary support and want to become self-sufficient as soon as possible, although many still depend on transitional supports.

I can't go back to public assistance because I have to move forward and keep accomplishing my goals, you know. That's the type of person I am.

—Rachel, 31-year-old mother of one

Overall, strivers represent welfare reform's "success stories"—the parents who have enthusiastically chosen work over welfare. We suspect that many of these parents would have succeeded regardless of the 1996 reforms.

Figure 1: **Characteristics of the sample**

	Nurturers	Providers		
		Strivers	Reluctant Providers	The Disaffected
Number in sample	11 (19%)	27 (47%)	13 (22%)	7 (12%)
Working or in school*	0%	100%	100%	29%
On welfare (TANF)*	27%	11%	8%	42%
Primary source of identity and motivation	Raising children	Work and career path	Raising children and economic survival	Day-to-day survival
Work/family balance	Choose stay-at-home parenting over formal employment (as long as supported by others)	Able to balance work and parenting	Torn between desire to stay home with children and necessity to work	Overwhelmed; not able to meet requirements of parenting or work

*at second interview

Reluctant providers

Reluctant providers value parenting over work and aim to be full-time stay-at-home parents. Unlike the nurturers, however, they do not have spousal or family sources of economic support on which to depend, so they must work. They are not interested in a career path and work does not lead to a sense of personal pride or accomplishment.

I was just working to pay bills and not enjoying it.

—Jane, 34-year-old mother of one

They find it difficult to balance work and family and feel that work negatively affects their ability to parent. Consequently, they seek out part-time jobs and try to work around their children's schedules.

They continue to need public assistance, but resent the work requirements and the caseworkers who enforce them. Welfare reform has impacted their behavior, causing them to spend less time with their children than they would have otherwise. Given their reluctance to work full time or invest in career development, these parents will probably need to rely on public supports until their children are grown up.

The disaffected

Respondents in this group appeared to be overwhelmed and unable to cope with the pressures of raising children or making a living. Health, mental health, and substance abuse problems are common in this group, and many view themselves as victims of an unfair and confusing system. They often have a passive view of life and are unable or unwilling to meet welfare requirements. Minor setbacks often become major obstacles and many fail to capitalize on available help.

Most of the time I can't get to an interview because I don't have the money or I don't know how to get there. I don't want to get lost because I don't have the money to get home again.

—Mary, 63-year-old mother of four

Welfare reform has heightened existing problems for the disaffected. Most are unable or unwilling to change their behavior in response to the new rules, although many still need welfare benefits to survive.

Implications for welfare reform

These four diverse groups of parents illustrate that welfare recipients are not a homogeneous group. Each person's identity as a parent and a worker, and his or her ability and willingness to balance work and family shape that person's response to the new welfare rules. The behavior of those in the nurturer group is not likely to be altered by incentives or penalties. The new rules, however, may serve to bolster pre-existing tendencies among the strivers. Welfare reform has the biggest impact on the reluctant providers, who struggle to change their behavior to meet requirements, and on the disaffected, who are overwhelmed by the new system and are in danger of losing vital services and sources of support.

Recommendations

- Transitional supports such as food stamps, Medicaid, and housing subsidies appear to be vital for all four groups. Access to these programs should be improved, especially for those no longer receiving cash benefits.
- Child care subsidies, earnings disregards, and access to education are important supports for the strivers and reluctant providers. These benefits should be easily accessible for workers.
- Policies that allow parents to combine part-time work with full-time parenting will help reluctant providers. Illinois' "stopped clock" provision—which allows single parents who work at least 30 hours per week to continue receiving cash benefits without counting the months against their lifetime limit—is a step in the right direction.
- Sanctions and time limits should be used very carefully, recognizing that they may have unintended consequences. While some parents respond to them by looking for work (reluctant providers), others simply disregard them (nurturers) or are overwhelmed and harmed by them (the disaffected).
- Investments in mental health and substance abuse treatment, intensive job training and placement, and individualized case management are needed for those who are currently unable to fully understand or comply with the new rules. The truly disabled should be identified early and enrolled in Social Security (SSI/SSDI). This is a small group, but one needing a great deal of assistance.

Note: All respondent names have been changed.

This policy brief summarizes a working paper by Dan A. Lewis, Irene Carvalho, and Bruce Nelson, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University. The paper is available at: www.northwestern.edu/IPR.

About this study

The goal of the Illinois Families Study is to inform policymakers about how Illinois families have been faring since the implementation of welfare reform. The study is being conducted by a consortium of researchers from five Illinois universities: Northwestern University, Roosevelt University, Northern Illinois University, University of Illinois at Chicago, and the University of Chicago. The interviews are conducted by Metro Chicago Information Center (MCIC).

A total of 1,362 current and former welfare recipients from nine Illinois counties were interviewed at Wave 1 of the study (November 1999-September 2000). The overall response rate was 72%. All analyses are weighted to adjust for regional stratification and non-response. The study will continue to follow these families for six years.

This policy brief reports the results of a supplemental qualitative study supported by the Searle Fund.

For more information about the study:

www.northwestern.edu/IPR/research/IFS.html

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