

Welfare Reform at 15 and Beyond: How Are Low-Income Women and Families Faring?

It has been more than 15 years since the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA, P.L. 104-193) changed the structure of public assistance in the United States. Ending welfare's status as an entitlement program, PRWORA's passage fulfilled former President Clinton's 1992 campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it" by ushering in a new era of social policy for poor women and families. PRWORA replaced the unpopular cash assistance program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a cash support program that includes time limits and work requirements for families receiving aid. TANF was reauthorized in 2005 as part of the Deficit Reduction Act (DRA, P.L. 109-171) and since October 2010, Congress has extended TANF several times, authorizing it through March 2013.

At welfare reform's 10th anniversary in 2006, caseloads had dropped by 54% from 12.2 million in 1996 to 4.5 million (Clinton, 2006). Both policymakers and social scientists passionately debate the impact and meaning of this decline. In this highly politicized arena, proponents of "reform" equate declining caseloads as evidence of its success, while critics cite high poverty rates, particularly among welfare "leavers," as indicative of its failure. In the wake of the Great Recession, the meaning of low welfare rolls have come under even greater scrutiny with, in some cases, both advocates and critics of reform expressing concern that the program no longer reaches a sufficient number of eligible families. Despite significant increases in poverty and unemployment, TANF receipt only increased 12% between December 2007 and September 2009, the first 22 months of the recession (Legal Momentum, 2010a). During this same time period, recipients in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, commonly referred to as "food stamps") increased by 35%, and the unemployment rate increased by 96% from 5.0% to 9.8% (Legal Momentum, 2010a). According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP, 2012a), in 1996, 68 families received

TANF for every 100 poor families but in 2011, this number had dropped to only 27 families receiving TANF for every 100 poor families.

This chapter draws on quantitative and qualitative research to explore debates about declining welfare rolls and evaluate the impact and success of welfare “reform.” The scope of welfare reform is broad and only selected key features are reviewed with emphasis placed on the understanding the consequences of current policy on women’s financial and psychological well-being. Contemporary welfare reform and the historical foundations of cash assistance in the United States are analyzed using a critical lens to deconstruct underlying racism, sexism, and classism in federal law and state programs. Feminist and critical analyses of the history of the US welfare system reveal longstanding bias, competing beliefs about the limits of social responsibility and understandings of “citizenship,” and conflicting attitudes toward women’s paid employment outside the home (see Gordon, 1994; Katz, 1986, 1989, 2001; Piven & Cloward, 1993). These tensions and biases continue to define US welfare policy, particularly public support for restrictive reform regulations (e.g., time limits on aid, work requirements, sanctions, “family caps,” and restrictions on immigrant applicants), and the discourse that surrounds cash assistance.

Welfare Reform: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

In August 1996, Congress passed welfare reform legislation that replaced AFDC with TANF. TANF differs markedly from the AFDC program. PRWORA ended welfare’s status as an entitlement – a shift that is of great philosophical and practical significance (for a summary of policy changes and trends, see Martin & Caminada, 2011; Schott, 2012). PRWORA ended the “guarantee” of cash aid to eligible low-income families. As such, states may turn away needy families even if they meet eligibility criteria. Moreover, spending on the program is no longer automatically associated with the number of recipients but is instead subject to annual appropriation via block grant funding (Martin & Caminada, 2011). Progressive poverty scholars consider the loss of federal entitlement status as a fundamental blow to the safety net and a severing of the social contract because need no longer ensures support. During an economic recession (or any time of increased need), the practical implications of this change would be acutely felt if the welfare rolls were to rise but federal block grant funds did not increase to meet current demand (Zedlewski, 2008).

Under the TANF system, states receive block grant funds from the federal government to design and operate their own cash assistance programs for low-income families. TANF funds must be spent in ways that are consistent with the primary goals of the federal law to:

- (1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
- (2) end the dependence of needy parents

on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; (3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and (4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. (PRWORA, 1997, SEC 601)

Notably, poverty alleviation is not identified as a program objective.

In terms of concrete programmatic changes, PRWORA expanded welfare-to-work programs and imposed time limits on welfare receipt (2 consecutive years or a lifetime limit of 5 years). States have the authority to set shorter time limits if they choose to, and 8 states have time limits between 21 and 48 months (Danziger, 2010). Thirty-five states maintain the federal standard of 60 months, and six states have no time limits (state funds can be used to provide benefits beyond the federal limit) (Danziger, 2010). However, states continue to change their policies. For instance, as of July 1, 2011 an adult caregiver (e.g., parent) can only receive 48 months of cash aid through CalWORKs, California's TANF program. Other changes include the denial of federal public assistance to most legal immigrants during their first 5 years in the United States; and allotted federal funds for marriage promotion and sexual abstinence programs (Reese, 2007).

To discourage TANF recipients from having additional children while on assistance, "family cap" regulations permit states to maintain a family's current cash benefit levels rather than increasing them when a new child is born to the family (US General Accounting Office (GAO), 2001). Incentives for states to reduce "out-of-wedlock" births were also built into the law through the establishment of so-called illegitimacy reduction bonuses to high performing states. For four years beginning in 1999, a cash award was granted to states with the largest decline in births to single parents and abortion rates that fell below 1995 levels.

TANF is a "work first" program, favoring work requirements over investment in human capital through education and job training. Despite requiring that TANF recipients meet strict work requirements to receive benefits, work programs were not funded under the law. After 24 months of assistance (or earlier at a state's discretion), recipients must engage in an acceptable "work activity" to continue to receive their benefits. PRWORA designated the following activities as eligible to count toward meeting work requirements: unsubsidized employment, subsidized public or private sector employment, work experience, on-the-job training, job search and job readiness assistance, participation in community service programs, vocational education training (not to exceed 12 months), job skills training directly related to employment, attendance at a secondary school or a program leading to an equivalency certificate, education directly related to employment, or the provision of childcare services to individuals participating in a community service program (CBPP, 2012a). Many states rejected English literacy, basic education, and citizenship preparation as work participation activities (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Educa-

tion (WICHE, 1998). Single teen parents are required to attend school, obtain a high school diploma or GED, or be enrolled in an approved alternative education program.

Not only must recipients work outside the home, but a specified number of work hours must also be met. In 1997 and 1998, recipients were required to work outside the home at least 20 hours per week (WICHE, 1998). This requirement increased to 25 and 30 hours per week in 1999 and 2000, respectively. Two-parent families were required to work 35 hours per week in 2000 and thereafter (WICHE, 1998). Parents of children up to 1 year of age and disabled adults are exempt from work requirements. Recognizing that workforce participation requires child care, PRWORA established the Child Care and Development Block Grant to support childcare programs (GAO, 1998).

PRWORA sets state goals for work participation by making receipt of federal funds contingent on increased work participation rates over time. One-half of all single-parent families were required to work by 2002, and 90% of two-parent families by 1999. No more than 30 percent of the TANF families that a state counts toward meeting its federal work rates can do so through vocational education (Schott, 2012).

PRWORA allows states to sanction recipients who fail to meet work requirements or other program regulations (e.g., missed appointments with caseworkers and noncompliance with state requirements, such as children's immunization and school attendance, cooperating with establishing paternity, and obtaining substance abuse treatment). Sanction policies vary from state to state and entail a partial or full family loss of TANF benefits and potentially other forms of assistance. Under TANF, all states have policies requiring sanctions when a family does not comply with work requirements (GAO, 2000). Thirty-six states call for a partial sanction (i.e., a reduction in family cash benefits) the first time a family does not meet program requirements, with 37 states requiring a full-family sanction (i.e., the loss of cash benefits) for repeated "noncompliance" (GAO, 2000). The length of sanctions varies considerably, with first sanctions lasting up to 1 month or until the family member begins to comply with work requirements (GAO, 2000). For repeated infractions, sanctions last for at least 3 months, even if the family comes back into line with program requirements (GAO, 2000). In addition to sanctioning access to TANF, approximately one-quarter of states disqualify adults from receiving Medicaid and one-third of states disqualify the entire family from the Food Stamp program when the head of the household does not meet TANF work requirements (GAO, 2000).

These policy changes were, for the most part, supported by a broad range of stakeholders, including Democrats and Republicans, employers, and conservative corporations and organizations albeit for different reasons (Reese, 2007). As Reese (2007) observes:

Large sectors of the business community supported welfare reform as part of a broad neoliberal agenda intended to minimize labor costs and taxes; politicians viewed it

as a way to compete for corporate campaign contributions and the votes of traditional white voters; conservative Christians promoted welfare reform as part of a broad agenda for promoting Christian churches and traditional ‘family values,’ while anti-immigrant groups viewed restrictions on legal immigrants’ welfare use as a way to reduce future immigration into the country. (p. 50)

When assessing TANF’s impact, “success” meeting both overt policy goals and the potentially less overt objectives of various stakeholders is important.

Contextualizing Welfare Reform Evaluation Research

Has welfare “reform” succeeded? Longstanding debates about the root causes of poverty and the function and impact of public assistance make this seemingly simple question far more complex than it may appear at first glance. Welfare policy has long been a heavily politicized “hot-button” issue defined by liberal and conservative ideological boundaries (e.g., the merits of bigger versus smaller government and comprehensive versus minimal social programs). These tensions as well those that transcend traditional partisan lines pervade research in this area. As historian Michael Katz (1989) aptly observes, “Three major issues have dominated both conservative and liberal poverty discourse for centuries: the categorization of the poor; the impact of poor relief (welfare) on work motivation, labor supply, and family life; and the limits of social obligation” (p. 4). Since the end of the nineteenth century, social scientists in industrial societies, including psychologists, have amassed a large body of research addressing these core areas (O’Connor, 2001; Zuckerman & Kalil, 2000). In PRWORA’s wake, researchers continue to be guided by these same age-old concerns but with even greater urgency, given the establishment of time limits and welfare reform’s work-first philosophy. These areas of study and the research questions derived from them are of considerable import but also may often carry with them unarticulated assumptions and values (e.g., judgments of deservingness and implicit beliefs about social responsibility).

These concerns are not the only factors that inform the evaluation of welfare reform or research in this area. As with all research endeavors, investigators bring their own values and assumptions to the process, and the methodologies employed also possess strengths and shortcomings. Researchers inevitably face tradeoffs in their attempts “to balance theory, substance, and method” but these aspects of the research process are typically left unacknowledged (Soss, Condon, Holleque, & Wichowsky, 2006, p. 798). Feminist scholars have persuasively argued for greater self-reflexivity among researchers (e.g., considering the impact of differential status among participants and investigators and identifying one’s own political viewpoint and social location), however, such practices have yet to become normative (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Equally important is the acknowledgment of the important role that social scientists play in

assessing welfare reform and whether it is judged a “success” or a “failure.” And, although rarely made explicit by mainstream researchers, social scientists have the power to identify and define both “problems” and “solutions” via the questions they chose to ask, the hypotheses they test, and the interpretations they advance (Steinitz & Mishler, 2001).

Some critical scholars assert that the underlying design of welfare reform evaluation research, itself, may carry with it particular interpretations and biases. Nelson’s (2002) analysis of the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation’s (MDRC) of Vermont’s Welfare Restructuring Project (WRP) highlights the subtle and not-so-subtle biases embedded in the larger welfare reform literature. Among the overt biases Nelson (2002) identifies is an overreliance on experimental methods in welfare reform research. Experimental research, while powerful, is not without its limitations, especially when used to the exclusion of other approaches. The power of experiments is their ability to potentially identify cause and effect relationships through random assignment and the control of confounding variables. Yet it is the interplay of intersecting variables that is crucial to understanding welfare reform and its impact. Recipient characteristics associated with difficulty securing employment and exiting the welfare system (e.g., domestic violence and mental health) and key contextual variables (e.g., economic conditions) are frequently stripped from experimental analysis because random assignment is believed to control for their effects (Nelson, 2002). This was the case in MDRC’s analyses of Vermont’s reform efforts, in which time limits were credited for reduced caseloads, while the role of a strong economy was dismissed (Nelson, 2002).

A less overt but equally troubling issue is the direct translation of dominant “reform” discourse into empirically tested variables without identifying or considering the possibility of alternative research questions, measures, or constructs (Steinitz & Mishler, 2001). Language is a powerful symbolic tool, and the association of welfare with “dependency” evokes images of long-term, intergenerational welfare receipt and ineffective policy (Bartle, 1998; Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Stryker & Wald, 2009). Mainstream constructions not only seep into everyday understandings of the welfare system but also evaluation efforts. For example, by defining “dependence” solely in terms of welfare receipt and “success” as reduced caseloads, researchers grant credibility to these constructions and the research questions derived from them (Steinitz & Mishler, 2001). The failure to propose and test alternative interpretations restricts how we think about the “causes” and “solutions” to poverty. Describing this problem as well as the limitations of strict adherence to experimental methods, Nelson (2002) explains:

In a world where only one kind of dependency is bad, poor people can become the objects of experimentation rather than the subjects of their own lives. And in a world where the concern of those who evaluate welfare reform is the (statistically significant) differences among those receiving different mixes of triggers and incentives, the only kind of applied research that will be acceptable will be that which

fits within the boundaries of ‘conventional wisdom or common sense of the moment.’ (p. 23)

Collectively, these critiques underscore the importance of attending not only to the research questions posed but those that remain unasked or unexamined. In the case of welfare reform, this also means considering progress toward the stated goals of the 1996 legislation and potentially worthy aims that were not part of the legislation. Critical scholars argue for careful analysis of what narratives are left untold, whose voices are rendered invisible, and the power inequities maintained by the inclusion of some perspectives and exclusion of others (Limbert & Bullock, 2009). People of color and women, especially women of color, are likely to be excluded or presented in ways that support race, class, and gender inequities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Wing, 2003). Building on these concerns, the remainder of this chapter synthesizes what we do and do not know about the impact of welfare “reform,” with a critical eye toward exposing implicit values and unspoken assumptions in social science research and the role of these biases in maintaining class, gender, and race-based power inequities.

Is Welfare Reform a Success?

Providing for Needy Families?

Among TANF’s four stated goals is the provision of support to needy families so that children can stay in their own homes or with relatives (PRWORA, 1997). Economic hardship is a tremendous stressor on family well-being. Poverty and financial difficulties are related to family stress and dissolution (see Conger et al., 1990; Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2009). TANF provides much needed cash aid to poor families, but the minimal level of support falls far below the true costs of raising children and caring for a family.

Relative to other programs that assist low-income families (e.g., food stamps, Medicaid), the proportion of funds spent on cash assistance has decreased over time. Federal and state TANF spending on assistance dropped from \$13.9 billion in 1997 to \$9.6 billion in 2011 (CBPP, 2012b). To document the decline of cash welfare, Danziger (2010) contrasts how spending on low-income families has shifted over time. She notes that in 1987, 29% of such spending was dedicated to cash aid, 29% to medical care, 11% to food assistance, and 11% to work/training programs. In 2002, the proportion spent on cash assistance had dropped to 20% and the proportion spent on medical services had grown to 54% (Danziger, 2010). Only 1.5% was spent on work/training programs. Poor families now receive proportionally less of their income from public benefits than in previous decades, with public cash benefits contributing about half as much as was previously the case (Danziger, 2010). In 1979, 25.4% of the post-tax income of single-parent families came from government sources (e.g., cash assistance, food stamps, disability, and Earned Income Tax Credit); this figure dropped to

13% by 2006 (Danziger, 2010). And states are making due with less. The annual \$16.6 billion annual federal TANF block grant allocation has not been adjusted for inflation, and states now receive 30% less in real dollars than they did in 1997 (CBPP, 2012b).

Cash benefits vary considerably across the United States, with assistance lagging far behind inflation. TANF cash benefits are below half the poverty line in all states (CBPP, 2012b). For example, in Alabama, a low benefit state, a single-parent family of three was eligible for a cash grant of \$164 in 1996, \$215 in 2008, and \$215 in 2010. A similar family in a higher benefit state, such as Massachusetts, was eligible for \$565 in 1996, \$618 in 2008, and \$618 in 2010 (Schott & Finch, 2010). Even modest increases over time are not universal. In states such as Arizona and Florida, cash grants were frozen between 1996 and 2005 at \$347 and \$303, respectively, for a single-parent family of three. In 2009, Hawaii and Arizona reduced benefit levels by 20% (Schott & Finch, 2010). In 2011, California cut its TANF benefits by 8%, reducing monthly cash aid for a family of three from \$694 to \$638 (Schott & Pavetti, 2011).

In 2011, only two states had higher TANF benefits in 2011 than in 1996 (CBPP, 2012b). Recipients in other states were less fortunate. Since 1996, TANF benefits have declined 0–10% in 8 states, 10–20% in 7 states, 20–30% in 28 states, and more than 30% in 6 states (CBPP, 2012b). With many states facing enormous budgetary shortfalls and help from emergency TANF funds set to expire, states may consider further benefit reductions. Already, state TANF offices nationwide have cut back on staffing due to the Great Recession. The US Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2010c), found that of 31 states reporting changes to local offices, 22 had decreased the number of TANF staff, 11 had reduced work hours, and 7 had decreased the number of offices – all changes that likely mean reduced access to services and staff availability, and longer processing and wait times for clients.

Not surprisingly, TANF benefits do not lift a family out of poverty. In 2008, Alaska was the only state that provided cash benefits that were greater than half of the federal poverty level (FPL; \$1,467 for a family of three per month in all states except Hawaii and Alaska, which have higher FPLs of \$1,833 and \$1,686, respectively; Schott & Levinson, 2008), but by 2010, this was no longer the case (Schott & Finch, 2010). In 2010, cash benefits were below 30% of the FPL in 29 states. Even when TANF benefits are considered along with food assistance, only a handful of states have benefit levels that extend above 75% of the poverty line (Schott & Finch, 2010). Keeping benefits low ensures that cash assistance does not compete with the low wage labor market, thereby maintaining a pool of low-wage workers (Piven & Cloward, 1993).

It is important to note that low benefit levels are not unique to TANF. TANF's precursors – mothers' pensions, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), and subsequently Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) – were not generous programs. For example, the maximum monthly ADC grant established by the Social Security Act of 1935 was \$18 a month for a first child

and \$12 for a second child compared with the \$30 per month received by elderly Social Security beneficiaries (Blank & Blum, 1997). And, as remains the case today, benefit amounts varied dramatically across states, with states with higher percentages of Black residents providing notoriously limited support. In 1940, the national ADC payment averaged approximately \$13.00 per month per child, but in Arkansas, Black families received just \$3.52 per month per child and slightly above \$4.00 per month in South Carolina (Gilens, 1999). These low benefits were institutionalized by legislators who successfully advocated for the removal of a clause from the Social Security Act of 1935 mandating that ADC provide “a reasonable subsistence compatible with health and decency” (Gilens, 1999, p. 105).

That TANF does not provide the financial support necessary to lift a family out of poverty is indisputable. What is less clear is the extent to which TANF helps keep children living with their parents or relatives, another goal of the legislation. Compared with other dimensions of welfare reform, TANF’s impact on child–family arrangements has been the focus of less empirical attention. However, some research suggests that low TANF benefits undermine this goal. For instance, Brandon and Fisher’s (2001) analysis of data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) found that in lower benefit states, the risk of children living apart from their parents was greater than in states with higher benefits. Newborns and teenagers were found to be at greatest risk of living apart from their parents, as were children with a parent with a disability (Brandon & Fisher, 2001). Based on these findings, the researchers conclude that poor single parents are more likely to seek alternative living arrangements for their children when cash benefits are low.

Other studies seek to disaggregate such findings by examining similarities and differences across states, ethnic and racial groups, and various regulations (e.g., time limits and sanctions). Bitler, Gelbach, and Hoynes’ (2003) analysis of national data on children’s living arrangements between 1989–2000 illustrates the complexities of evaluating reform across diverse groups and state policies. Post-reform, they found an increased probability of Black children living with neither parent, but this was not the case among Hispanic and white children. Such findings speak to the heterogeneity of the welfare population and the importance of examining the underlying causes of changes in living arrangements but leave many questions unanswered – most notably, the potential harm and benefits associated with various living arrangements.

Ending “Dependence”: At What Cost?

TANF’s most fundamental goal and the criteria upon which it is most commonly judged is its ability to “reduce the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage” (PRWORA, 1997, SEC 601). From this vantage point, it is reducing caseloads, not poverty, that is of central importance. If declining caseloads alone are the measure of success,

welfare reform has succeeded. Between 1996 and 2002, TANF caseloads dropped from 4.6 million to 2.1 million families (Urban Institute, 2006). At end of fiscal year 2006, TANF caseloads stood at approximately 1.9 million families nationally (US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 2009). Despite skyrocketing rates of unemployment rates and deep economic recession, 18 states reduced their TANF caseloads during 2008, and the number of cash aid recipients remains at or near the lowest rates in more than 40 years (DeParle, 2009). In September 2009, 1.8 million families received TANF benefits (HHS, 2012); during an average month in 2011, 1.95 million families received TANF (Loprest, 2012).

Many factors have contributed to declining TANF enrollment. The strong economy of the 1990s undoubtedly played a significant role in boosting the earnings of some low-income families; however, more than half of the drop in caseloads since the mid-1990s is attributed to declines in the share of families that received support from TANF rather than a decline in the number of poor families who were eligible for assistance (Parrott & Sherman, 2006). According to one estimate, 87% of the drop in welfare caseloads can be explained by the decline in eligible families participating in the program (GAO, 2010c).

Declining access is vividly illustrated by comparing program participation rates in AFDC versus TANF. In the early 1990s, more than 80% of eligible low-income families were served by the AFDC program, compared with the 48% of low-income eligible families receiving TANF in 2002 (Parrott & Sherman, 2006). Under TANF, the percentage of poor children receiving welfare has declined, falling from 62% in 1995 to 24% in 2007 (Legal Momentum, 2009). The impact of declining rolls is made “real” by considering that if the same 62% of poor children continued to receive TANF in 2007, then 8 million children would have received TANF benefits instead of the 3.1 who did (Legal Momentum, 2009). A GAO (2010a) report estimates that 800,000 fewer children would live in deep poverty (i.e., below half the federal poverty threshold) if TANF participation rates rose to their pre-PRWORA 1995 level of serving 84% of eligible families. Mandatory work requirements, time limits, state diversion strategies (e.g., the provision of one-time benefits instead of TANF enrollment), and sanctions for not meeting work and other program requirements are all posited to play a role in the declining enrollment of needy families (GAO, 2010a).

When Work Does Not “Pay”. TANF’s “work first” policies position work outside the home as central to ending welfare “dependency.” TANF promotes workforce participation by requiring recipients to take part in designated “work participation” activities, short-term training, and/or educational programs that can lead to immediate work placement, and through time-limited benefits. The value that TANF places on paid “work” is not solely about reaping the rewards of increased earning power, it is also about promoting work, in and of itself, as good and morally righteous regardless of wages per se. The Protestant work

ethic, the belief that hard work is laudable and will ultimately be rewarded, provides ideological justification for requiring paid labor force participation even if tangible monetary benefits are not immediately (or ever) realized (Christopher, Zabel, Jones, & Marek, 2008). Moreover, work requirements deter program enrollment, with strict regulations and unappealing options, preventing some eligible parents from applying for benefits. Work requirements, particularly “workfare” programs in which TANF recipients essentially work for their benefits, may encourage recipients to leave the program even if they do not have other sources of income.

In the years immediately following TANF’s implementation, work requirements increased, ultimately reaching a maximum rate of 50% for single-parent families and 90% for two-parent families (GAO, 2010b). As such, at least 50% of all TANF families were expected to participate in one or more of the 12 permitted work activities for an average of 30 hours per week. Under PRWORA, states failing to meet work requirement rates could be subject to federal penalties (e.g., reduced block grant funding). Most states were able to lower their required work participation rates well below 50% – in some cases to zero – through credit granted to states for recent caseload declines (GAO, 2002). As a consequence, mandated work participation rates have varied considerably across states. Moreover, state interpretations of eligible “work” activities have also varied. Nevertheless, nationally approximately 30% of adult TANF recipients met federal work requirements (GAO, 2002), suggesting that states, overall, adhered to TANF’s work mandates to a greater degree than was required.

When TANF was reauthorized as part of the DRA of 2005 (2006), a top priority for some policymakers was enforcing higher state work participation rates, and the adoption of stricter work activity definitions and a new formula for calculating work participation credit has helped to advance this objective (GAO, 2010c). However, actual work participation rates did not significantly rise. In fiscal years 2007 and 2008, the 2 years following TANF reauthorization, approximately 29–30% of TANF families met their work requirements (GAO, 2010c). Post-DRA work participation rates have been attributed to the economic downturn as well as tougher federal work activity definitions (GAO, 2010c). Both with TANF and after its reauthorization, the most common work activities have remained the same: unsubsidized employment, job search and job readiness assistance, vocational training, and work experience (GAO, 2010b).

Following PRWORA’s adoption, labor force participation among single mothers increased from 44% in 1994 to 66% in 2001 (Blank, 2006). The overall health of the US economy in conjunction with the “push” provided by TANF’s “work first” policies are generally credited for higher employment rates among single mothers. Yet despite this growth, poverty did not decline as rapidly as might be expected, and women’s participation in the paid labor market outpaced exits from poverty, making it clear that employment in and of itself does not necessarily mean an end to poverty. With the favorable economic conditions of

the late 1990s long since cooled, unemployment rates among female-headed households have increased. In 2009, 49.4% of households headed by women were unemployed (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010a). Indeed, it appears that any early labor gains among single mothers during TANF's early years have disappeared (CBPP, 2012b).

In weaker and stronger economic times, primary labor force participation has not necessarily translated into greater financial stability, or relief from poverty, for female-headed households. From the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s, single mothers earned an annual average income of approximately \$18,000; this figure rose to approximately \$23,000 between 1995 and 2001 (Blank, 2006). In 2011, the median income for female-headed households was \$33,637 (US Census Bureau, 2012a). Gender and ethnic disparities contribute to women's low earnings. In 2011, women who worked full-time earned 77 cents for every dollar earned by men (US Census Bureau, 2012a). This gap is even larger for women of color with African American women earning 64 cents and Latinas bringing home 55 cents for every dollar earned by white non-Hispanic men (National Women's Law Center (NWLC), 2012). The wage gap is evident across all educational levels. In 2007, the median income for women who completed high school was \$21,219, while their male counterparts earned \$34,435; at the associate's degree level, women earned \$27,046 to men's \$41,035; and women with bachelor's degrees earned just \$38,628 compared with \$57,397 for men (Mink, 2010). Again, when ethnicity is considered, these gaps grow even wider. In 2006, white men with a high school diploma earned \$36,539, almost as much as white women who had graduated from college (\$39,006; Mink, 2010). These disparities persist.

Although not a panacea, education is one of the few routes to higher wages and upward mobility. Better job opportunities, higher self-esteem, and an enhanced sense of contributing to society, as well as improved study habits and better grades among children are frequently reported benefits of college attendance (Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), 2006). Yet by emphasizing work over educational attainment and making higher education difficult to pursue, TANF does little to prepare low-income women to successfully compete for higher paying jobs. And, with states required to engage at least 50% of TANF families in approved "work" activities or face financial penalties, there is little incentive to encourage higher education. Vocational training can count toward meeting all of a recipient's work participation hours but only for 12 months – an insufficient amount of time to gain significant skills. After 12 months, states can only count a recipient's hours in higher education toward meeting required participation rates if she *also* participates in a "core" work activity (e.g., subsidized or unsubsidized employment or work experience) for at least 20 hours per week (Hamilton & Scrivener, 2012). The dilemma is obvious – how to balance the demands of school, required work activity, and family responsibilities? Not surprisingly, the number of welfare recipients enrolled in postsecondary degree

programs has significantly decreased since TANF's adoption (IWPR, 2006; Mazzeo, Rab, & Eachus, 2003).

Job readiness programs are not a substitute for formal educational opportunities. Such programs, which typically last between 1 and 6 weeks, are mandatory in some regions. Basic skills, such as preparing resumes, interviewing skills, dressing appropriately, and the importance of getting to work on time are typical curricular units (GAO, 1999a). Perhaps women with extremely limited work experience could benefit from such training; however, it seems unlikely that most program participants would gain much new knowledge from these remedial classes. Low-income women are well aware that many training programs are a dead end. For example, in Latimer's (2008) analysis of 665 West Virginian welfare leavers' responses to open-ended questions about their state's welfare program, access to useful training and better educational opportunities were among the most commonly identified needs. Computer skills were viewed as particularly important because as one respondent explains, "as it is now the only job skills provided is to work 35 hours per week cleaning schools" (Latimer, 2008, p. 82).

Critics contend that limited access to education and work requirements, in conjunction with time limits, leave low-income women with no choice but to take low-paying jobs. Viewed through this lens, a punitive welfare system and weak safety net function to provide employers with a plentiful low-wage labor force rather than serve the needs of poor families. Low paying jobs in retail, food preparation, temporary agencies, and clerical support are common among TANF recipients and leavers (Parrott, 1998). These same jobs are the bedrock of the working poor labor force. In 2008, "service occupations with 2.9 million working poor, accounted for nearly one-third of all those classified as working poor" (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010b, p. 2).

During the 1990s, the ranks of the working poor grew, and in 2008, 8.9 million adults were considered "working poor," meaning that these individuals spent at least 27 weeks in the labor force (working or looking for work) during a given year, but still had incomes below official poverty thresholds (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010b). In 2008, female-headed households and Blacks and Hispanics were twice as likely as their counterparts, male-headed households and whites and Asians, respectively, to be among the ranks of the working poor. With job growth in the low-wage service sector outpacing other areas, the number of working poor is likely to further increase. Between 2008 and 2018, it is estimated that very low (less than \$21,590) and low paying (\$21,590–\$32,380) jobs will account for 55% of the growth among those occupations with the largest anticipated increases (Metzgar, 2010).

These are the labor market realities that greet so-called welfare "leavers." A GAO (1999b) report on the status of former welfare recipients released just several years after PRWORA's passage provided early evidence of the economic hardship confronting welfare leavers. In the GAO's eight-state review, the average quarterly earnings of former recipients ranged from \$2,378 to \$3,786.

Annual average family earnings, assuming these wages were continuous, would range between \$9,512 and \$15,144. Only if these wages were coupled with food stamps and other supports would these earnings be sufficient to lift a family above poverty thresholds. Findings from Acs, Loprest, and Roberts' (2001) national study of "welfare leavers" are similarly troubling. Employed "leavers" averaged between \$7.00 and \$8.00 per hour, earnings above the federal minimum wage at the time but still far below self-sufficiency wages. For most "leavers," employment was unreliable. Following their exit from TANF, approximately three-quarters of all "leavers" were employed at some point during the year, but only a little over one-third were employed during all four quarters (Acs et al., 2001). Few find jobs that provide health insurance, paid vacation, or sick leave (Parrott, 1998). Loss of other benefits also limits economic well-being. In Moore and Arora's (2009) analysis of Wisconsin's highly acclaimed welfare program, earning gains were eroded by losses in benefits and, as a consequence, there was no significant change in the average incomes of poor female-headed households between 1993 and 2006.

In sum, although some modest gains in earnings are found among welfare "leavers," most families continue to experience economic hardship and live in poverty or near-poverty conditions (Cherlin, Frogner, Ribar, & Moffitt, 2009; Parrott, 1998; Parrott & Sherman, 2006; Slack et al., 2007). Among former welfare recipients only one-fourth to one-fifth are likely to qualify for unemployment benefits (Boushey & Wenger, 2006). Not surprisingly, many return to welfare. Since PRWORA's adoption, the probability of returning to TANF within 2 years of exiting the system has increased – a likely outcome of leaving TANF for reasons other than secure employment (e.g., sanctions) and the tough economic climate. About one-quarter to one-third of families return to TANF within a year of leaving the rolls (Acs et al., 2001).

Barriers to Work. A sizeable body of literature has sought to identify the factors that distinguish welfare "leavers" from nonleavers. Much of this research focuses on "barriers to work," with the aim of designing interventions to move recipients into the workforce. Mental health issues, physical health concerns, disabilities, limited educational attainment, and little or no work experience are consistently identified as significant obstacles to finding and keeping a job (Kissane & Krebs, 2007). In Danziger, Kalil, and Anderson's (2000) analysis of survey data from 665 former and current welfare recipients in Michigan, human capital (e.g., not completing high school or an equivalency degree and employment in fewer than 20% of years since the age of 18), physical health (e.g., self-reported poor health and being in the lowest quartile of physical functioning), and mental health and substance dependence (e.g., presence of depression, generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and alcohol or substance dependence) barriers were present among slightly more than half of the sample (52.6%). Among those with barriers, 34.7% met the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress, generalized anxiety, or depression; 18.7% reported having physical health

difficulties; 16.2 reported human capital limitations; and 5.6% experienced substance abuse problems (Danziger et al., 2000). Women with co-occurring human capital, physical health, and mental health barriers had significantly longer welfare histories than other groups and also had the lowest employment rates at each of the two assessment points. Such findings underscore the need for supports (e.g., education, mental health services, and sound health care) to help women move into the workforce, as well the reality that paid labor force participation may be unlikely for some recipients. Although states are permitted to exclude a percentage of their caseload from meeting work requirements while receiving TANF, the high prevalence of workforce barriers belies TANF's fundamental premise that *all* recipients can and should work outside the home.

Questions about the ethics of work requirements and time limits are explored in Hildebrandt and Ford's (2009) longitudinal interview study of 41 former TANF recipients in a Midwestern city who had "timed out" of welfare and not successfully transitioned from welfare to work. Respondents described complex, intersecting barriers to economic security ranging from health problems to limited education and skills to domestic violence. Discussing the obstacles that she confronted, one former recipient explained:

I went through a domestic violence situation from [my children's] dad. He was drinking heavily because he was unemployed and I guess he started trying to take it out on me. . . . So he had to do six months and I didn't have a job. I had been unemployed for about six months at that time myself. He ended up in jail and I ended up in a shelter. He'd had his job for 13 years. (Hildebrandt & Ford, 2009, p. 299)

Such complex life circumstances are not amenable to quick or easy solutions. Commenting on TANF's shortcomings, the researchers' observe,

'Fixing' their job skills did not fix a domestic violence issue or their chronic health problems or meet the special needs of their children . . . multiple barriers to work that cannot be adequately addressed within the narrow get-a-job scope of current TANF programming. There is reason for logical and ethical concern here. (Hildebrandt & Ford, 2009, p. 301)

Women with multiple barriers are at heightened risk of becoming "disconnected" – being without "work and welfare income over the entire past year" and not reporting education as a "primary activity" (Blank, 2007a, p. 186). More "generous" definitions also consider women with very limited income or public assistance support as "disconnected." The number of "disconnected" mothers has risen dramatically, with the percentage of low-income single mothers reporting no income rising from 11.6 in 1995 to 19.6 in 2004 (Blank, 2007a).

Loprest's (2011) comprehensive review indicates that 20% to 25% of low-income single mothers are disconnected from both TANF and work. Relatively little is known about how "disconnected" families make ends navigate such extreme hardship, but there is growing concern that in the coming years, more low-income women will lack all income support as they hit welfare time limits and are unable to find work. Ninety-seven percent of "timed out" former TANF recipients in Hildebrandt and Ford's (2009) study lived below official poverty thresholds. Moreover, changes made to federal TANF policy in January 2006 mandate higher work participation rates, and as a consequence, states may find it preferable to drop hard-to-employ families from the rolls rather than provide training and comprehensive support services or grant work requirement exemptions to long-term recipients (Blank, 2007a).

How federal and state welfare policy should address the improbability for many participants of "work first" (as well as "work eventually") is contested. Among those who believe work requirements should be upheld, creating a temporary partial waiver program for women with multiple barriers to work is an appealing solution. Under such an initiative, program participants would receive support services to bolster "work readiness," be granted income supplements for part-time employment, and participate in periodic assessments to gauge potential to fully meet work requirements (Blank, 2007a). Although labor intensive and costly, such a program would have the advantage of allowing states to assist more long-term recipients without hitting their allowed percentage of caseload exemptions (Blank, 2007a).

Feminist and critical scholars contend that work requirements themselves are problematic, and that changing program rules to accommodate "hard-to-employ" recipients may bring immediate relief to families but fail to address the underlying structural roots of inequality and poverty. By equating "work" with labor outside the home, TANF excludes caregiving within the home as a form of labor. One consequence of this devaluation is that caring for one's own children does not count toward meeting TANF work requirements. Ironically, however, caring for other women's children (e.g., providing child care) could meet TANF regulations. This double standard reflects the deep-rooted devaluation of the daily labor that women perform in their homes and in caring for their families, and although women across social classes, most notably mothers, are affected by the failure to recognize and compensate caregiving labor, poor women bear much of the financial and social brunt of these expectations. Middle-class women, especially white middle-class women, are encouraged to stay home and care for their children full-time (and are sometimes chastised for "choosing" to work outside the home and placing their children in daycare); however, TANF recipients do not have this option. This double standard is aptly summarized by a welfare recipient and mother of three in Gemelli's (2008) semi-structured interviews examining single mothers' attitudes toward work and family:

It's funny that low-income women or women living in poverty can stay at home and be a bad role model, but a middle class mother or wealthy mother is not a bad role model when they stay home. It's like America has two standards and it's based on class. Why can't a mother who lives in poverty have the same things as a middle-class mother? (pp. 101–102)

Multiple aspects of this dilemma are expanded upon by Mink (1998a):

. . . lacking earnings for their economic and social contributions, women who work full- or part-time as caregivers for their children are ideologically unequal in a political culture that prizes income-producing work as the currency of virtue. Further, unwaged mothers do not have marital freedom: lacking the financial means to exit marriages, they lack the freedom to choose to stay in them. When they do dare to exit or avoid marriage, mothers do not enjoy vocational liberty: unpaid for their work in the home, they are forced either by law or by economic circumstance to choose wages over children. (p. 58)

Interviews with TANF recipients make clear that low-income women are well aware of these limitations. This is powerfully communicated in women's belief that mothers should be able to stay home with their children full-time if they wish to. A 49-year old TANF recipient and mother of three aptly summarizes this perspective:

There are a lot of parents out there – it would drive them crazy to stay home and take care of their kids all the time. . . . But if a certain person does not want to work, I don't think she should be forced to have to go to work. If your choice is to stay home and be a *good mother*, take care of your baby, then that should be your choice. And you don't have that choice anymore, it's gone. (Hennessy, 2009, p. 164)

This sentiment is echoed throughout Hennessy's study of 39 low-income respondents residing in a northeastern city. Informants consistently described TANF policies as unfairly requiring poor women to pursue paid work outside the home at their children's expense, with one respondent simply summing up the overriding message from caseworkers as, "Work first, kids second" (Hennessy, 2009, p. 166).

Further insight into the barriers confronting working mothers is revealed in Dodson's (2007) analysis of data from approximately 300 low-wage mothers pooled from three qualitative studies. Respondents described jobs that failed to provide economic security and that placed them in unhealthy working conditions and their children in substandard, dangerous child care. In response to these unacceptable conditions, some women asserted their right to parent by blurring the lines between home and work (e.g., finding surreptitious ways to monitor their children while working), creating their own "flectime" (e.g., arranging schedules to accommodate children's needs as much as possible), and prioritizing

personal and family well-being over workplace demands (Dodson, 2007). The high priority placed on family responsibilities is reflected in one respondent's comment, "You have to choose and what mother's choosing this job over her child?" and another informant's observation that, "They think they got you. But I say, I will always get another job but I can't get another son" (Dodson, 2007, p. 266). Dodson (2007) sees these responses as reflecting a shared "moral economy" in which mothers prioritize children over jobs when work fails to provide even the most basic resources needed to care for loved ones (p. 259).

In doing so, low-income women value that position income and the market over family, relationships, and well-being (Dodson, 2007). Poor women's refusal to tolerate risky working conditions is recounted in a story by Dorothy, a participant in Dodson's (2007) study, who quit her job rather than jeopardize her health:

The thing you have to remember is that they don't care . . . if your child is safe or out in the street alone . . . they don't care if you are pregnant and the job is going to make you sick. . . . Okay, I was five months pregnant last year working at a (fast food restaurant) doing cashier and cooking. So I cleaned bathrooms too but the point is they said I have to use bleach . . . to mop the floor . . . and the (toilet). So I need a brush . . . (but) he's going to tell me to put my hands . . . to get my nigger hands and get a towel and wash out the inside of the commode . . . it was the men's bathroom, it was filthy. I said 'I can catch hepatitis . . . but he's like 'oh yes you are going to do that' and, yeah, I quit. I walked out to his face. (p. 273)

Narratives such as this stand in sharp contrast to stereotypes of welfare recipients as lazy or disinterested in work, or as passive victims. They are also a powerful reminder of why we must delve deeply into work participation and separation statistics to understand the employment trajectories of low-income women and barriers to employment. Moreover, if moral economies or alternative understandings of dominant paradigms are ignored or dismissed, social policy, whether progressive or conservative, cannot succeed (Dodson, 2007). Listening to the concerns of poor women, it is clear that TANF's emphasis on work over family and use of "sticks" (e.g., deterrents such as sanctions) for enforcement is guided by assumptions about the motives, values, and decision making of low-income women that run counter to the reality of women's values and priorities.

Securing Quality Child Care: Another Obstacle to Work Outside the Home. Feminist critiques of work requirements extend beyond disagreement with TANF's philosophical underpinnings to the structural shortcomings of "reform" that make program compliance difficult if not impossible. Support for child care and early education comes from multiple programs (e.g., Head Start, Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), Social Services Block Grant), and through increased

state flexibility to use TANF funds to provide child care for current recipients, recent program leavers, and other low-income families.

Child care is not an entitlement and remains in short supply, particularly for infants and toddlers, children with special needs, and families requiring care during nonstandard hours such as evenings and weekends (GAO, 1999c). Bureaucratic regulations and cumbersome parental requirements also block access to childcare benefits (Holcomb et al., 2006). This is particularly true for parents transitioning off of welfare who may need to reapply for care or schedule in-person visits or follow-up meetings (Holcomb et al., 2006). During any given month of 2008, it is estimated that only one in six children eligible for childcare assistance from the Child Care and Development Fund received it (Children's Defense Fund (CDF), 2011). Limited funding means that only 3% of eligible infants and toddlers are able to participate in Early Head Start (CDF, 2012).

States vary in terms of the accessibility of child care but in at least one-third of states shortages mean that eligible families are put on waiting lists or sent away (CDF, 2005). In California alone, 187,516 children were on the childcare waiting list in April 2011 (CDF, 2012). Many states set cut-off rates so low as to exclude many needy families. For example, in 18 states, eligibility for childcare subsidies is restricted to families with incomes below 175% of the poverty level (\$32,043 for a family of three; CDF, 2011). Reflecting the devaluation of caregiving work, childcare providers themselves frequently earn poverty level wages. In 2009, in California, a state known for its high cost of living, Head Start teachers earned a mean salary of \$31,794 and childcare workers a median salary of \$23,730 (CDF, 2011).

Quality, in addition to access, remains a pressing concern. Many states set low payment rates for providers which, in turn, contributes to inadequate wages, untrained and undertrained staff, and limited incentives for the expansion or improvement of services (Pearlmutter & Bartle, 2003). Less than 1% of family childcare homes and less than 10% of all childcare centers were accredited in 2008 (CDF, 2010).

The strain associated with low quality childcare and poor accessibility is evident in Dodson's (2007) findings from interviews and focus groups with approximately 300 low-income women. Protecting children emerged as a major concern, with almost half of respondents discussing current or previous experiences with substandard care caused by overcrowding, lax caregivers, or lack of control over their children's care needs (Dodson, 2007). In some of the most troubling situations, children's lives were potentially endangered. Discussing her son's allergies and difficulty finding appropriate care, one mother explained,

He has severe allergies to all milk and dairy and everything, and so that's part of the reason why I work these night shifts, because I don't want anybody else . . . (inaudible). I mean, his throat closes up and everything. And so now when I ask for help (from state children's agencies) finding special needs daycare, they send

me three numbers and two of them is already disconnected. . . . I need to know that my son is going to make it through the day. (Dodson, 2007, p. 264)

Most childcare facilities, particularly those serving low-income families, are ill-prepared to care for with children with special needs and medical conditions, even those as straightforward as allergies, leaving the burden on securing safe appropriate care on already strapped mothers. Although Dodson's (2007) study did not specifically examine the psychological impact of these experiences, she found that "many mothers spontaneously referred to being depressed and angry at their care dilemmas" (p. 265).

These same sentiments are also evident in Pearlmutter and Bartle's (2003) focus group study of mothers' perceptions of childcare subsidy programs in California and Ohio. Difficulties accessing care were common and subsidies often arrived late. Delayed payments have led many caregivers to refuse this form of compensation, further complicating recipients' ability to find child care and putting their employment in jeopardy. Care providers who accept subsidies may risk sinking into poverty themselves. Describing the dilemma facing her child's care provider, a California mother explained,

. . . because they haven't paid her for these three children that she's been keeping for months. She said, 'I'm going to have to stop keeping them because they haven't paid me yet, and no one in the world can keep these kids for free.' She said, [they owe me] . . . nine hundred dollars. She was sitting there crying. . . . I was trying to find a place to get some food from. And, she was asking me where was I going and because she needed some too. . . . (Pearlmutter & Bartle, 2003, p. 167)

Stories such as these underscore the poverty that plagues both mothers and those who care for low-income children, as well as ways in which the subsidy system fails those who rely on it. Although welfare reform has brought increased attention to the need for accessible, quality child care, without further investment, lack of child care will continue to be a major threat to family financial stability and health.

Workplace Discrimination: An Underacknowledged Barrier to Work. Although racism and sexism are well-documented barriers to hiring and workplace advancement (Browne, 1999), employer bias is neglected in evaluation research examining transitions from welfare to the paid labor market and barriers to work. It is also noticeably absent in the political discourse of welfare reform. A field experiment by Pager, Western, and Bonikowski's (2009) dramatically illustrates the extent to which racism skews the employment "playing field." To test for racial discrimination, white, Black, and Latino men posed as job applicants and applied for 340 advertised entry-level jobs in New York City. Fictitious resumes were used to match the educational attainment and work histories of the ethnically diverse "applicants," with each described as steadily employed high school

graduates. The magnitude of racial bias was further tested by pitting “clean” Black and Latino applicants against a white applicant who had served 18 months for a drug felony for possession of cocaine with intent to distribute (Pager et al., 2009). Compared with similarly qualified whites, African Americans were only half as likely to receive a follow-up call or job offer, and Black and Latino applicants without criminal records fared no better with employers than a white applicant who had just been released from prison (Pager et al., 2009). These findings provide vivid documentation of “a racial hierarchy” in which young white men are positioned at the “top,” followed by Latinos and African Americans at the “bottom” (Pager et al., 2009, p. 793).

The stigma of a criminal record may not tarnish the employment prospects of most welfare recipients; however, intersections of racism, sexism, and classism are equally salient determinants of the employability of welfare recipients. The impact of these intersections on women’s employability is illustrated in Kennelly’s (1999) study of white employers’ stereotypes about Black female workers. Seventy-eight white employers in the Atlanta metropolitan area participated in face-to-face interviews. Supervisors stereotyped Black women workers as single mothers regardless of whether this was accurate, and in turn, associated single parenthood with absenteeism, tardiness, and poor work skills (Kennelly, 1999). Racism, classism, and sexism were also evident in employers’ equation of Black single mothers with poor mothering skills.

Welfare receipt itself carries its own negative associations of poor work ethic. In Alfred’s (2007) focus group and interview study of 15 employed African American TANF recipients and their employers, both sets of respondents described discrimination against welfare recipients as widespread. As one low-income respondent put it, “. . . I think being on welfare make employers not want to hire you because they think you don’t want to work” (Alfred, 2007, p. 302). Jacob’s (2005) experimental investigation of hypothetical hiring decisions made by 81 employees of temporary employment agencies brings these sources of bias into sharper focus. Participants reviewed fictitious resumes of job applicants who were described as TANF or non-TANF recipients and as African American or white. Applicants were portrayed as applying for a position as a fast food restaurant cashier or an administrative assistant. Hiring decisions were mediated by job type, with TANF recipients and African Americans less likely to be recommended for an administrative assistant position than as a fast food cashier (Jacob, 2005). These findings suggest that bias against hiring welfare recipients and women of color may be particularly strong in decisions involving higher status positions (Jacob, 2005). Of course, higher status positions also tend to pay higher wages.

Research investigating labor force dynamics and employer demand for different types of workers lends further insight into discrimination and other structural barriers. For example, in a telephone survey of 750 firms in Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Los Angeles, Holzer and Stoll (2003) found that demand for Black and Hispanic welfare recipients lagged behind their representation in the population of poor, female-headed households. Hiring decisions, especially those

involving African Americans, appeared to be less related to overall demand and desired skill sets and more closely connected with location (e.g., central cities) and discriminatory preferences among employers. Workplace retention rates of employed welfare recipients are also suggestive of discriminatory bias. In Holzer, Stoll, and Wissoker's (2004) multicity study, Black workers had higher discharge rates and more negative employer evaluations than Hispanic workers. It may be the case that anti-Black attitudes contribute to the greater perceived salience of problematic work behaviors (e.g., "bad attitudes" and absenteeism) among employers.

Collectively, these findings underscore the realities of workplace discrimination, a reality that is largely neglected by policymakers who support time limits and work requirements without acknowledging how discrimination restricts opportunities, and researchers who largely situate "barriers to work" within the individual rather than broader societal factors. Failing to conceptualize job discrimination as a "barrier to work" in research evaluating welfare reform, negates poor women's multifaceted and intersecting experiences of discrimination and leaves larger power hierarchies unquestioned and undisturbed.

Sanctions: Penalizing Low-Income Women and their Families. Many TANF exits are involuntarily, with families leaving the welfare system due to sanctions. Financial sanctions were also part of the previous AFDC system, but under PRWORA, states have greater latitude to define the scope of penalties (e.g., sanctioning the entire family versus adults only and the duration of sanctions) and types of punishable behaviors. In 2008, 219,000 cases were closed due to full family sanctions (12.8% of all closed cases), and each month, approximately 85,000 families or 5.2% of the average monthly caseload were subject to partial family sanctions (Legal Momentum, 2010b). These figures likely underestimate true sanction rates (Legal Momentum, 2010b). Although time limits have received more public attention than sanctions, four times as many families may be affected by sanctions than time limits (Bloom & Winstead, 2002).

The most economically vulnerable recipients appear to be the most likely to be sanctioned. Compared with other welfare recipients, sanctioned families have lower levels of educational attainment, lower earnings, and higher rates of physical and mental health issues (Bloom & Winstead, 2002; GAO, 2000; Kalil, Seefeldt, & Wang, 2002; Lens, 2006). They also tend to have greater difficulty accessing reliable transportation and child care and report higher rates of domestic violence (Goldberg & Schott, 2001). These characteristics increase the difficulty of complying with welfare regulations, especially work requirements; they are also associated with longer-term welfare receipt, thereby increasing potential opportunities to be sanctioned.

Reviews of sanctioned cases vividly illustrate how common "barriers" heighten the likelihood of being sanctioned; they also reveal the tough standards to which poor women must adhere to keep their benefits (Lens, 2006, 2008, 2009). Health and transportation difficulties are highlighted in the description of the

appeal hearing of a 43-year old African American woman who was sanctioned for missing an appointment. The woman, who lived in an emergency shelter and suffered from both shingles and AIDS, tried to make her appointment despite feeling sick. When the bus was slower than anticipated, she called to report that she would be 20 minutes late and learned she was being sanctioned (Lens cited in Legal Momentum, 2010b). Difficulties securing child care are evident in the case of a Texas woman who was sanctioned for missing an orientation and job search class (Lens, 2006). She was told to bring her children with her but that they would not be allowed into the job search room with the computers (Lens, 2006). Unsure who would care for her children in the waiting room, she was sanctioned for not attending the meeting. Ironically, sanctions may be administered even if “noncompliance” is work related. Salma, a California mother of four, was sanctioned for missing a required orientation because she was attending school and working (Moreno et al., 2006). After obtaining a full-time job in a dental office, she still struggled financially but was unable to come into program compliance because of her busy work schedule, and as a result, continued to receive reduced benefits. These impossible competing demands deny poor women their autonomy, forcing them into “no win” situations.

It is not simply a matter of some groups being more “vulnerable” to sanctions than others; sanctions involve layers of state and local choices and decision making, and race and racism figure prominently into the adoption and implementation of sanctions. Numerous studies find that recipients of color are sanctioned at higher rates than their white counterparts (Legal Momentum, 2010b) and racial bias appears at multiple levels of the system (Gooden, 2003). Soss, Schram, Vartanian, and O’Brien (2001) found that states with higher percentages of people of color have adopted stricter sanction, time limits, and “family cap” policies than states with smaller percentages of people of color. Local context also matters, with larger racial disparities in sanctioning occurring in more conservative regions and in states in which local stakeholders are granted discretion over decision making (Fording, Soss, & Schram, 2011).

Racial bias can also be manifested in frontline treatment of recipients. In Gooden’s (1998) post-reform interviews with welfare recipients in Virginia, Black respondents reported receiving less transportation assistance and less caseworker support related to education than white respondents. Such patterns echo racist practices earlier in welfare’s history, such as Washington, DC caseworkers’ use of a more generous standard budget for white than Black recipients (Gordon, 1994). The discretionary nature of sanction and appeal decisions make these prime areas for bias to influence the decision making process. As Lens (2009) observes,

Sanctions, an inherently discretionary tool, can be applied in different ways. Because all states permit clients to avoid sanctions if they have ‘good cause’ for not complying

with work rules, sanctions often require individualized, and hence discretionary, determinations. . . . Workers must scrutinize clients' reasons for not complying for sufficiency and truth. (p. 288)

Further examination of how racism is manifested both through the preferential treatment of white families and subtle and overt discrimination against families of color is crucial. Careful investigation of interpersonal and intergroup dynamics is particularly important.

Sanctions are intended to increase participants' compliance with work and other program requirements; however, there is little evidence that they effectively do so (Wu, 2008). They do succeed in increasing family hardship (for a review, see Lens, 2006). In 2008, partially sanctioned families faced an average monthly reduction of \$146 or about 38% of a \$383 monthly TANF grant (Legal Momentum, 2010b), and not surprisingly, sanctioned families experience more material hardship than nonsanctioned families (e.g., difficulty paying household and medical bills, not having enough food, housing insecurity, and having a utility turned off) and often remain unemployed (Lens, 2006; Parrott & Sherman, 2006). The duration and timing of sanctions is also related to hardship. Wu (2008) found that recipients who received full family sanctions and those who were sanctioned for longer periods of time were more likely to exit the system without a job than to leave with a low-paying job. Sanctions may be particularly damaging to children. Lohman, Pittman, Coley, and Chase-Lansdale's (2004) analysis of a representative sample of low-income urban preschoolers and adolescents in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio found that preschoolers of sanctioned mothers experienced rates of serious behavioral problems triple that of national norms. The causality of these relationships are difficult to determine and sanctioned families may be more vulnerable than other low-income families to begin with; however, it is also likely that the stress and material hardship of leaving welfare due to sanctions negatively affects children's development.

Sanctions clearly "succeed" in reducing state caseloads (Legal Momentum, 2010b). Sanctions are a primary contributor to reduced caseloads in many states (GAO, 2000; Goldberg & Schott, 2001), particularly full family sanctions (Legal Momentum, 2010b). Goldberg and Schott (2001) estimate that between 1997 and 1999 approximately 540,000 families lost their TANF benefits following a full family sanction. Advocates worry that DRA changes to work participation rates will encourage reliance on sanctions to lower state caseloads.

Critical scholars identify broader economic and social functions served by sanctions. By narrowing poor women's options, sanctions help ensure the availability of a low wage labor pool. Within the welfare system, women must comply with work participation requirements or lose all or a portion of their benefits. Among those outside of the system, the close behavioral oversight associated with sanctions may deter eligible families from seeking assistance. Sanctions serve corporate interests by weakening the safety net and providing a pool of laborers

who must accept a job regardless of the nature or conditions of the work (Piven & Cloward, 1993). Sanctions also serve important hierarchy-enhancing functions. Sanctions both gain their legitimacy from and reinforce stereotypes of welfare recipients as unmotivated workers and irresponsible parents who must be coerced to behave appropriately. In doing so, sanctions provide the nonpoor with yet another opportunity to assert their superiority (e.g., “without these rules, welfare recipients would take advantage of the system”; “poor women must be forced to send their children to school”) and distance themselves from poverty and the poor. As Fording et al. (2011) assert, “Negative images of target groups guide policy design and implementation, and policy designs are then implemented in ways that reinforce negative group outcomes and reputations” (p. 1652). Lens’ (2009) content analysis of a random sample of 255 sanction hearings in Texas lends insight into how perceived deservingness and judgments of morality are manifested in sanction decisions. Rules were often applied narrowly with little consideration of contextual factors or structural barriers to compliance (e.g., being 15 minutes late to a meeting due to child care or transportation difficulties), clearly showing that poor women are rarely given the benefit of the doubt.

Whose Family Values? TANF and Family Formation

TANF’s final two goals, the prevention and reduction of “out-of-wedlock” pregnancies and the promotion of two-parent heterosexual families, are among welfare reform’s most controversial provisions. To advance these goals, PRWORA created new rules for teenage mothers (i.e., making TANF eligibility for mothers under the age of 18 contingent on living with a responsible adult, usually a parent, and participation in school or training), permitted states to adopt disincentives to having additional children while receiving TANF (e.g., “family cap”), introduced incentives for reducing “out-of-wedlock” births (i.e., state bonuses for reducing births to single parents without accompanying increases in abortion rates), supported abstinence and marriage promotion education, and required mothers to identify biological fathers and cooperate with child support enforcement (GAO, 2001). TANF reauthorization via the DRA sought to further strengthen marriage and responsible fatherhood efforts through the allocation of \$150 million annually from 2006 to 2010 to support these efforts (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007). States can also use their TANF block grants and their own funds to support marriage and fatherhood activities (Mink, 2010).

High poverty rates among single mothers (US Census Bureau, 2012a) are commonly cited as the rationale for these changes. According to this logic, encouraging marriage and the formation of two-parent families will help to reduce poverty by having two rather than one potential wage earner in the home. However, the cited benefits of two “breadwinners,” and two-parent families, more generally, only partially explain the adoption of these initiatives. Classist, racist, and sexist stereotypes about single motherhood, sexuality, and parenting skills are integral to these and other “reform” initiatives.

Welfare scholars are quick to point to a long history of attempts to regulate poor women's sexual behavior and marital status. Mothers' pension or aid programs, the first US "welfare" programs for poor women and their children, limited eligibility to only the most "deserving" women (Katz, 1986). Widowed mothers were eligible for benefits, whereas divorced mothers were not. "Suitable home" rules further whittled down eligibility by making "immoral" behaviors, such as "out-of-wedlock" births, drinking alcohol, housing boarders, or "foreign" forms of childcare or housekeeping, used as grounds for ineligibility (Gordon, 1994). Poor immigrants were often the intended targets of "suitable home" rules (Gordon, 2004).

These practices continued and evolved under Aid to Dependent Children (ADC; later renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children, AFDC). Although not legally restricted to widows, ADC, particularly in its early years, was primarily viewed as a program for families who had lost an earner, with "suitable home" violations (e.g., "out-of-wedlock" children, the presence of a man in the house) providing cause for termination (Gordon, 1994). During the 1940s and 1950s, "morality" was enforced through the intense surveillance of ADC recipients:

Across the country three levels of surveillance emerged: 1) a home was watched during the day or night or both; 2) two investigators made a surprise visit with one at the front door, the other at the back door, in the hope of apprehending an errant man; or 3) the investigators demanded entry and searched the premises for a man or evidence that a man might be included in the family unit . . . the 'surprise element' of the actual visit was considered to be one of its chief merits. (Bell cited in Gordon, 1994, p. 298)

This process was intended not only to humiliate targeted families, but also deter potential applicants.

Southern states were particularly brutal in their enforcement of "suitable home" rules, with Black women disproportionately judged as violating these standards (Lindhorst & Leighninger, 2003). In Louisiana, comments by public officials lay bare perceived connections between "illegitimacy," welfare use, and race. For example, during a discussion of single mothers, a member of Louisiana Board of Public Welfare claimed, "Negroes in the South don't look upon illegitimacy as anything wrong," with the Governor, a segregationist, expressing his perception of "charity hospitals as baby hatcheries for unmarried women" (Lindhorst & Leighninger, 2003, p. 569). Strict enforcement of "unsuitable home" rules resulted in the termination of 22,501 Louisiana children or 28% of the state's caseload in July 1960 (Lindhorst & Leighninger, 2003). Ninety-five percent of terminated children were Black, with most families living in urban areas. In most instances, "guilty" mothers were allowed to continue caring for their children, but the loss of cash assistance resulted in considerable hardship (Lindhorst & Leighninger, 2003; Piven & Cloward, 1993).

It was not until the 1960s that a series of rulings undermined “suitable home” policies. The Supreme Court’s 1968 ruling in *King v. Smith* sent one of the strongest messages against “immorality” as grounds to terminate benefits. The plaintiff, an African American mother of four who earned \$16.00 a week as a waitress, was denied AFDC benefits after the state of Alabama claimed that she had a male partner who could provide parental support (Gooden, 2003). This allegation was based on Alabama’s practice of considering an ongoing sexual partner as a “substitute father” regardless of actual financial obligation (Gooden, 2003). The Supreme Court struck down the regulation citing that Alabama lacked the authority to modify “the federal statutory definition of parent to include a ‘substitute father’” (Gooden, 2003, p. 262). Claims that the regulation was essential for combating “immorality” were rejected on the basis that such practices were inconsistent with AFDC’s goal of child protection (Gooden, 2003).

The legacy of “suitable home” rules and other aspects of earlier welfare programs – discouraging single motherhood, regulating sexual behavior, and excluding women of color – are alive and well in contemporary family formation initiatives. Commenting on how these older practices ground current policy, Gordon (1994) explains:

Not only did mothers’ aid shape the welfare state, but the debate about it introduced the themes and questions that still dominate welfare policy discussions today. These include concerns about how to help single mothers without encouraging single motherhood and the proper role of women, as well as the most fundamental questions about what entitles a person to help. Who is deserving? . . . Does the state have an obligation to police the behavior of those who receive public funds? (p. 37)

The years leading up to PRWORA’s adoption were dominated by alarm about rising nonmarital births and single motherhood, particularly among teenagers and low-income women of color. TANF’s “family formation” goals were among the most hotly contested, with political and religious conservatives claiming that the welfare system itself was responsible for the dissolution of the traditional nuclear family by serving as a “surrogate husband” that enables poor women to raise children on their own (Harris & Parisi, 2005). This perspective is illustrated in former Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson’s characterization of the welfare system as “a self-perpetuating monster that sustains the most distressing ills of our society – illegitimacy, the disintegration of the family, weakening of the work ethic and crippling dependency” (Hutchinson, cited in Onwuachi-Willig, 2005, pp. 1671–1672). Although conservative support for “reform” policies encouraging the formation of two-parent families was strong, pregnancy prevention goals, unless grounded in abstinence education, were met with ambivalence due to their association with sex education (Orth & Goggin, 2003).

Mainstream news depictions of welfare recipients, particularly African American women, as sexually available and as bad mothers, reinforced dominant

stereotypes about single motherhood and irresponsible parenting (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001; Kelly, 2010; Schram & Soss, 2001) and lent credibility to conservative claims. Kelly's (2010) analysis of television news coverage of US welfare reform from 1992 to 2007 documents the prevalence of these images in mainstream news outlets. Consistent with other analyses (Bullock et al., 2001; Gilens, 1999), African Americans were overrepresented in news stories about "reform," and stereotypical depictions were common, including representations of welfare mothers as childlike (e.g., too unintelligent or naïve to leave welfare), hyperfertile (e.g., having larger families than is typical of nonwelfare families, bearing children "out-of-wedlock," and starting families during adolescence), lazy (e.g., unmotivated to pursue school or job training), and weak role models (e.g., rejecting mainstream "American" values and engaging in unhealthy behaviors). By reflecting and reinforcing classist, racist, and sexist stereotypes, these images set the stage for conservative reform.

Feminists and other critics counter that the conditions of single motherhood – low wages, lack of family supports, discrimination – are the root problems, not single mothers or single motherhood, per se (see Mink, 1998a, 1998b, 2001, 2010). Accordingly, resources should be directed to training and education that prepare TANF recipients for higher paying jobs rather than marriage promotion programs and other family formation initiatives. It is further argued that TANF's emphasis on heterosexual marriage institutionalizes its normative status and negates the legitimacy of gay and lesbian families (Lind, 2004). And, in promoting heterosexual two-parent families over female-headed households, welfare reform simply replaces reliance on cash aid with dependence on male partners (Harris & Parisi, 2005). Initiatives to make welfare receipt contingent on establishing paternity and implementing child support are criticized for their potential to incite hostility and violence from male partners, deepening the risk of abuse (Catlett & Artis, 2004). Family caps are rebuked for overtly seeking to regulate the childbearing decisions of poor women and for endangering family well-being through the reduction of benefits. Collectively, these policies are condemned as overt attempts to regulate the marital and childbearing behaviors of poor women (see Mink, 2010; Onwuachi-Willig, 2005; Roberts, 1995), with some critics calling such policies a modern incarnation of the eugenics movement (Pierson-Balik, 2003). More general reservations about the role of government in matters as personal as marriage and family formation are also central concerns.

Marriage as a Solution to Poverty? Early welfare reform efforts focused more heavily on "welfare to work" efforts than family formation, with state variability in the implementation of policies and/or activities to promote marriage, strengthen two-parent heterosexual families, and discourage divorce (Harris & Parisi, 2005; Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke, 2004; Orth & Goggin, 2003). Many states revised their TANF eligibility rules to treat single and two-parent households similarly, making it easier to provide benefits to married families (Ooms et al., 2004).

Orth and Goggin's (2003) 18-state review identified four main categories of marriage promotion initiatives: (1) campaigns to reduce "out-of-wedlock" births and supportive statements by policymakers or leaders; (2) the formation of coalitions and/or advisory groups to oversee marriage promotion efforts and the prevention of nonmarital births; (3) the launching of educational initiatives centered on relationship skills; and (4) financial incentives (e.g., cash bonuses for married TANF recipients, income disregards for a spouse who marries a TANF recipient, and elimination of financial penalties for two-parent families).

Although married households tend to have higher incomes than single female-headed households (Thomas & Sawhill, 2005), marriage is not a guarantee of upward mobility and two-parent married couples can remain poor (Onwuachi-Willig, 2005). Evaluation studies find little effect of family formation initiatives on marriage rates among recipients (Blank, 2007b; Donley & Wright, 2008; Kissane & Krebs, 2007). In Graefe and Lichter's (2008) comparison of pre- and post-PRWORA data, for example, welfare reform was not strongly associated with changes in marital status among single mothers. Another study found increased rates of cohabitation, an outcome that is ironically at odds with PRWORA's goals, but the likely consequence of an increased need to share resources (Cherlin & Fomby cited in Blank, 2007b).

As with all social behaviors, the decision to marry, live together, or remain single is motivated by complex, multifaceted intentions and circumstances. In welfare reform's wake, researchers have sought to understand the reasons underlying lower marriage rates among poor women and women of color. One line of research examines marital attitudes and expectations among so-called fragile families, and in doing so both debunks stereotypes about the devaluation of marriage in poor communities and offers insight into reasons for delaying marriage (e.g., Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004; Edin & Reed, 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). In Gibson-Davis et al.'s (2005) interviews with 47 unmarried, romantically involved couples with children, financial concerns, relationship quality, and fear of divorce emerged as the most frequently cited reasons for waiting to marry, with many respondents identifying more than one of these factors as influencing their relationship decisions. Although the majority of couples (77%) lived together at the time of the interviews and ostensibly had established households together, perceived financial obstacles still loomed large. Participants saw economic hardship as undermining marriages and wanted to build their assets and achieve greater financial stability before marrying. And, echoing dominant cultural representations of marriage, respondents hoped to have the means to plan a "nice" wedding and reception (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005, p. 1308). The desire to enter marriage on firm economic grounding and in a relationship they trusted as strong is indicative of the high value placed on marriage.

These findings coupled with the results of evaluation studies raise deep questions about the effectiveness of marriage promotion efforts, particularly those

geared toward “teaching” respect for marriage as an institution, many of which are geared toward white, middle-class groups (Orth & Goggin, 2003). Critiquing both the practical consequences and philosophical underpinnings of these initiatives, the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund (n.d.) asserts,

Federal marriage promotion diverts welfare funds from basic economic supports, lacks public support, coercively intrudes on fundamentally private decisions, places domestic violence victims at increased risk, wastes public funds on ineffective policies, and inappropriately limits state flexibility. It sends the message that the way out of poverty for women is dependence on someone else to act as a breadwinner rather than economic self-sufficiency. (para. 2)

Continued funding for marriage promotion initiatives and demonstration projects in the face of mounting evidence against their effectiveness is indicative of the degree to which poverty is seen as a moral failing.

Whether marriage promotion efforts are deemed “successful” seems largely contingent on the criteria upon which judgments are based. If the “true” goals of marriage promotion are primarily symbolic – to culturally affirm heterosexual marriage and stigmatize single motherhood – than failure to significantly increase marriage rates, while important, particularly to conservatives, may be secondary to ideological gains. For progressives and critical scholars, marriage promotion efforts are yet another diversion from addressing the structural roots of inequality and women’s poverty. Findings from Pandey and Kim’s (2008) analysis of national survey data offer insight for moving beyond this stalemate. They found that postsecondary education significantly improved the financial security of mothers regardless of their marital status, and that educated mothers were more likely to be married. Increasing opportunities for postsecondary education under TANF rather than investing in unproven marriage promotion programs may be among the surest routes to achieving goals important to both progressives and conservatives. Unfortunately, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (2006) moved in the opposite direction by tightening how work activities are defined and allocating funds for healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood initiatives.

Births to Single Mothers. During PRWORA’s first several years, \$100 million was awarded annually to states that achieved the largest reductions in “out-of-wedlock” births providing that abortion rates did not rise. Although discontinued, “out-of-wedlock” birth reduction bonuses, or “illegitimacy bonuses,” remain one of the starkest initiatives to reduce births to single mothers. Between 1999 and 2003, 23 “illegitimacy bonuses” of approximately \$20–\$25 million were granted, with Alabama, Michigan, and Washington, DC receiving 13 of the 23 awards and nearly 60% of the funds (Korenman, Joyce, Kaestner, & Walper, 2006). Korenman et al.’s (2006) analysis of these three bonus recipients reveals

that “changes in the racial composition of births accounted for between one-third and 100% of the decline in the nonmarital birth ratio” (abstract). In Washington, DC, reductions in nonmarital birth ratios (nonmarital births/total births) can be explained by declining African American birth rates and a decline in the Black population at peak childbearing age; nonmarital birth ratios rose among Hispanics and whites (Korenman et al., 2006). Such findings raise serious questions about the effectiveness or value of such incentives other than to reinforce the symbolic importance of childbirth within marriage.

“Family caps” are perhaps among the most controversial family formation initiatives (Camasso & Jagannathan, 2009). State policies range from “full child exclusion” (i.e., a new child is excluded from benefits) to “partial child exclusion” (i.e., families with a new child receive a reduced increase in benefits) to “flat grant” practices (i.e., regardless of size, all families receive the same benefits; Smith, 2006, p. 152). Bluntly describing the goals of family cap policies, Vobejda and Havemann (1997) explain:

It seeks to send a message to poor women that having more children will only increase hardship and deprivation – not bring extra cash. That message is intended to be so clear and harsh that it will reach into the most private sexual relationships, persuading women to stop having children they cannot support. (p. A01)

Although poor mothers are the intended targets of family cap policies, the burden of having less money inevitably deepens hardship for the entire family.

The meaning of these policies for families is powerfully illustrated by reviewing “real” dollar reductions in benefits. For example, in New Jersey, if a second child is born while a family is receiving TANF, the family is denied \$102 per month, and a third child (or further children) results in a loss of \$64 per month per child (Camasso & Jagannathan, 2009). Based on a GAO (2001) analysis of data from 20 states, family caps were estimated to result in a 20% reduction in cash benefits, or an average of \$100 less per month, for a two-person family with one “additional” child (GAO, 2001). Equally unsettling are estimates of the number of families affected. In these same 20 states, 108,000 families (9% of their TANF caseload) were subject to family caps during an average month in 2000 (GAO, 2001).

The financial repercussions of family caps on mothers and their children have not been the focus of extensive systematic evaluation, perhaps in part due to difficulty distinguishing the effects of various benefits (e.g., child support, earnings, and TANF; Smith, 2006). The misperception that these reductions are too small to be consequential may also contribute to a lack of research attention. Also untested is the assumption that family caps save states money (Smith, 2006). Although family caps may reduce state expenditures in the short run, the deeper deprivation caused by reduced benefits is likely to result in greater long-term social and financial costs.

Evaluations of family cap policy on rates of nonmarital childbearing fail to show consistent effects. Some studies document declining nonmarital birth rates, while others show no correlation (see Camasso & Jagannathan, 2009; Dyer & Fairlie, 2003; Kissane & Krebs, 2007; Romero & Agénor, 2009; Smith, 2006). A smaller strand of research examines the impact of family cap policies on abortions. Among the most widely cited finding is Camasso's (2004) study, in which New Jersey's family cap policy resulted in fewer births and increased abortions and contraception use among short-term welfare recipients.

These findings fuel claims that welfare "reform" and its advocates are more interested in limiting the growth of poor families than protecting the "family values" so often evoked in public discourse. Noting this hypocrisy, Mink (1998b) observes:

The welfare debate revealed that except among the purest of abortion foes, the fact of illegitimacy is more morally freighted than the act of abortion; the need to teach 'those people' not to reproduce unless they can afford it is more urgent than the call to protect the unborn; and the demand to reform welfare is more righteous than the struggle to preserve life. (pp. 100–101)

The selectivity with which supposed "violations" of "family values" are decried (e.g., nonmarital births) or conveniently ignored (e.g., the potential of restrictive policies to increase abortion rates) speaks to both the regressive and conflicted beliefs surrounding welfare "reform." Since PRWORA's passage, federal legislation prohibiting family caps has been introduced but not moved forward; however, some states have phased out or eliminated family caps. Family caps were not a focus of TANF reauthorization, and TANF policy remains silent on the issue leaving these policies at the discretion of the states (Smith, 2006).

Mothers and children pay the price for these coercive (and ineffective) policies. Yet a full-scale overhaul of family formation initiatives in their many forms – marriage promotion, family caps, abstinence-only education, paternity establishment, and responsible fatherhood initiatives – seems unlikely without also challenging the classist, sexist, and racist stereotypes that give them their legitimacy (see McClelland & Fine, 2008). Empirical evidence repeatedly discredits well-worn myths about poor women's sexual and reproductive behavior: poor women value marriage; welfare benefits are not an incentive to have "additional" children; welfare recipients do not have larger families than nonrecipients; and regardless of family caps, the likelihood of having another child declines with length of time on welfare (Smith, 2006). Yet the focus remains on behavior modification and "creating a culture of marriage" (Harris & Parisi, 2005, p. 855), rather than fostering the positive economic conditions associated with personal well-being and healthy long-term relationships. Scott, London, and Gross' (2007) findings from interviews with 38 welfare recipients about their views on "self sufficiency," work, and marriage reinforce the need for a radically different approach to

supporting low-income families, one that prioritizes the perspectives and needs of poor women, and puts economic stability and well-being ahead of the advancement of marriage, *per se*. They summarize:

If we were to listen to the women, they might tell us that the more likely path to self-sufficiency involves increased education and training and access to higher paying jobs with benefits. They might also tell us that if the men had more options, and were financially stable and well employed, they would consider marriage to the men in their communities. They certainly would say they do not need to attend programs on marriage education and skills training – they are all for marriage, under the right circumstances. (Scott et al., 2007, p. 622)

Fostering the “right” circumstances – self-sufficiency wages that make it possible for low-income women and men to support themselves and their families, healthcare benefits, and access to quality, affordable child care – would turn current “family formation” policies on their head, and yet ironically might be more effective at achieving PRWORA’s articulated goals.

Breaking the Cycle of Women and Children Last

A comparative study of pre- and post-reform public opinion by Hetling, McDermott, and Mapps (2008) offers unique insight into popular understandings and perceptions of welfare reform. Respondents who were aware of welfare reform expressed more positive attitudes toward welfare recipients post- than pre-reform. Interestingly, this attitudinal change was unrelated to the perceived effectiveness of welfare reform; instead, this greater positivity appeared to be largely attributable to the simple fact that “reform” had occurred (Hetling et al., 2008). These findings speak to the symbolic nature of welfare reform, and the extent to which the drive for “reform,” in and of itself, can trump the real outcomes of “reform” for low-income women and their children, at least in the public mind. If stereotypes of “out of control” welfare recipients in need of discipline were not so widespread, the harmful consequences of welfare reform on low-income families might gain greater traction in shaping public opinion and discourse.

Much of the research literature evaluating welfare reform clings to the same narrow conceptualizations and in doing so fails to ask the truly important questions: “Are families better off with TANF? . . . Are children better off with TANF? . . . To what extent is the over 50% drop in the welfare rolls due to sanctions? . . . Is TANF really a viable path out of poverty for families? . . . Are welfare applicants and recipients being treated fairly?” (Applied Research Center, 2006, pp. 1–3). A justice-focused research agenda requires taking on these and other questions capable of challenging “mainstream understandings of women’s ‘success’ post-welfare” (Gatta & Deprez, 2008, p. 21) and “shift the focus of research, away from the characteristics of failings of poor people and

toward those of a mainstream political economy and culture that relegates so many people to economic insecurity and social marginality” (O’Connor, 2000, p. 557).

Our attention must turn to fostering economic security and asset building (e.g., How can policies be structured to help low-income women and families build assets? What does economic security mean to low-income women?), fully interrogating underlying philosophies and assumptions (e.g., What would welfare policy look like if it were guided by a strength rather than deficit approach? How do individualistic beliefs blind us to structural inequality?), and treating race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and disability as more than demographic characteristics (e.g., How does welfare policy recreate inequality and privilege? How do power inequities pervade the design, implementation, and delivery of public assistance? How can these dynamics be interrupted?). It also requires ending our overreliance on decontextualized analyses of welfare reform and instead examine women’s lived experiences and their recommendations for change (Gatta & Deprez, 2008).

TANF’s next reauthorization offers a crucial opportunity to revisit current policies and make changes that will strengthen the safety net and promote economic security. Debates about obligation, morality, and deservingness are steeped in a long history of racism, classism, heterosexism, sexism, and ableism and are unlikely to be resolved, but progress is still possible. Fifteen years post-reform, some facts are irrefutable. Poverty remains a significant and growing problem, and TANF serves fewer eligible families than its predecessor did. Work-first policies, by and large, have not increased women’s economic security, and marriage promotion efforts have not yielded significant increases in two-parent families. Welfare reform’s only consistent success appears to be reducing the caseloads.

Alleviating poverty, not simply reducing welfare caseloads, requires that a “human welfare first” approach replace the current “work first” philosophy (Bullock & Limbert, 2008). Access to higher education, safe jobs with self-sufficiency wages, reliable health care, high-quality child care, affordable housing, benefits that make it possible for recipients to care for themselves, and programs that treat *all* recipients with dignity and respect are key elements of creating a real safety net (see Chapter 6 for a further discussion of policy recommendations). Without comprehensive changes to TANF and significant investment in other support programs, the burden of poverty will continue to fall on women and children.