WorkFirst? Women and Children Last?
The Poverty of Economics in Explaining the Poverty of Women and Children

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The decline in welfare rolls across the country is heralded by many as a great success. The falling caseloads are often attributed to the welfare reform passed by Congress and signed into law by President Clinton in 1996. In his recent State of the Union address, Clinton stated that welfare rolls had been cut in half, to their lowest level in 30 years. The chamber erupted into applause over his statement that “we ended welfare as we know it.” The exuberance for welfare reform is perhaps understandable: the public views public assistance as, at best, a necessary evil. Interestingly, so do many of the recipients. Nonetheless, the fact that we have “ended welfare” with little understanding of or compassion for those who relied on it in order to meet their family’s basic material needs while also cheering its demise is troubling. The desire to end welfare as we know it comes at the cost of neglecting the war on poverty and relegating poor women and children to even greater economic and social marginalization. Much of the recent

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1 National AFDC caseloads peaked in 1994 and thus began declining prior to the passage of the 1996 legislation. “Welfare reform” here, as is the current, standard practice, refers to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of August 1996. The legislation abolished the guarantee of federal aid for poor children and their parents. Instead, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the main federal cash welfare program, and smaller programs are folded into an annual block grant to states to run their own programs. The new program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), also imposes a five-year lifetime limit on receiving welfare and requires recipients to work or be in employment-related activities.
welfare research provides ample evidence that many of the underlying assumptions guiding recent reform efforts are misguided and, particularly once the economy falters, poor women and children are at severe economic risk.

The focus of the current reform is first and foremost for recipients to get a job – any job – and get off welfare; much less attention is paid to the obstacles to paid employment that women on welfare face, and how getting a job and getting off welfare affects the families’ overall well-being. In this paper, I am presenting an embryonic project aimed at gaining a fuller understanding of the impact of welfare reform on poor women and their families. As will be explained in greater detail below, I have chosen an ethnographic approach for this project. I am particularly interested in allowing the voices of women on welfare to be given an opportunity to be represented in the current dialogue on the success of welfare reform.

**The “Success” of Welfare Reform**

National studies indicate that the majority of welfare leavers are working, and that their employment rates are higher than those currently receiving welfare benefits. Brauner and Loprest found employment rates of over 50 percent as contrasted to only 28 percent of TANF recipients (1999). Data such as these are understandably trumpeted as good news and evidence for the success of welfare reform. Given that simply finding a job is the hallmark of success, under this limited, potentially-dubious definition, welfare reform is successful.
If, however, our interest is in these families’ well-being, we should be disturbed: “the average lever’s earnings are below the poverty level” (Brauner and Loprest 9). The median wage of employed former recipients, is only $6.61, while “25% make more than $8.00 an hour, … another 25 percent are making less than $5.29 an hour” (Loprest 12). According to Joel Handler, 40 percent of those who exit welfare as a result of work – and thus those we would expect to be most successful in the labor market – remain poor (9).

A closer examination of the success of welfare reform reveals several other weak links. One is the lack of health insurance available for low-wage workers. Given Medicaid is extended for only one year after leaving welfare, the research suggests that most former recipients will be without health insurance once that year is up: “only 23 percent of employed former recipients report having health insurance through their employer” (Loprest 12). The same study found other indications that former welfare recipients and their families face significant economic risk: a third of former recipients have had to cut the size of or skip meals in the last year because there wasn’t enough money for food and “(t)hirty-nine percent reported there was a time in the last year when they were unable to pay rent, mortgage, or utility bills (20). Additionally, 25 percent of former recipients were found to have no work income nor an employed partner or spouse (9). Furthermore, a comparison between current and former recipients along a variety of indicators measuring economic struggles found no statistically significant differences (Loprest and Zedlewski 1999). One interpretation of that finding is that going off welfare did not decrease a family’s economic insecurities. Of course, interpretations will differ on the validity of the
measures used and emphasized for assessing welfare reform. Despite these differing perspectives, most agree on at least one unambiguous detrimental outcome of the last few years: the number of poor children benefiting from food stamps fell from 88 percent in 1995 to 70 percent in 1998, even though they remain eligible and presumably in need (New York Times). Findings such as these probably tempt many of us to question whether welfare reform should be hailed as an unqualified success.

**Welfare Reform in Washington State**

Prior to PROWA, Washington state’s welfare program was identified as “among the most generous in the United States,” spending $1,427 per poor person compared to the national average of $984 in 1995 (Long et al. 1998). Additionally, in Washington the maximum combined AFDC and Food Stamp benefits for a family of three was $835 per month, compared to $699 per month in the median state, such that Washington’s combined grant was 77 percent of the poverty threshold, compared to 65 percent for the median state.

WorkFirst, signed by Governor Gary Locke in April 1997, is Washington’s response to PROWA. Many of its major features stem from the federal mandate: five-year lifetime limits and mandatory work requirements (unless the client has a child less than three months of age) with refusal subject to loss of benefits. Further work incentives were incorporated by allowing a 50 percent income disregard when calculating benefits (as contrasted to AFDC, where participants were allowed a 33 percent disregard). Clients can own a vehicle worth up to $5,000 and have

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2 These data include only those families with children.
$4,000 in savings and other resources. WorkFirst also subsidizes child care and public transportation costs. Under AFDC-JOBS in Washington State, education and training were emphasized; the focus has shifted to more immediate job placement under WorkFirst. For example, a participant enrolled in a computer training class at a community college is now also required to be engaged in an approved work activity of at least twenty hours a week. Medical assistance is available for one year after cash assistance ends.

By the current standard measures, welfare reform in Washington state, as across the country, is largely successful: welfare rolls are dropping and recipients are working more. In 1994, 105,000 families received cash assistance; today the number has dropped to 58,600 (Callaghan). About 4,500 new families enter WorkFirst every month, while about 5,500 leave (Silver). Furthermore, according to a recent study, WorkFirst has resulted in a 56 percent increased likelihood in employment among welfare recipients, a 48 percent increase in earnings, and a 21 percent reduction in welfare use (Washington State Institute 1999).

Yet, the concerns noted above regarding nationwide outcomes apply equally to Washington State. The Washington Welfare Reform Coalition found that among those exiting welfare with the highest-paying jobs (about $7.70 an hour), “18 percent had their heat or electricity cut off in the past six months, 30 percent had their phones cut off, 16 percent used a homeless shelter, 35 percent (had) no health care and 36 percent no child care” (Silver). Their survey found the situation for welfare recipients, despite our strong economy, getting worse. Forty-three percent of their respondents reported going without food for a day or more (as contrasted to 27 percent
six months earlier); similarly those without health insurance jumped from 30 to 45 percent (Silver). For a substantial number of women and children, leaving welfare appears to leave them worse off. For this project, I have chosen to try to understand the outcomes of those families a little more closely. In my case, “more closely” means an ethnographic approach, to enable me to listen to what these women (and their service providers) are saying about welfare reform. 

**The Need for a Closer Look: An Ethnographic Approach**

It is perhaps yet another sign of the widening income inequality in this country: “those who have” are so far removed those “those who do not” that they have no idea what it means to need welfare (and food banks, and housing assistance, and bus passes) in order to survive. I am hardly in the position to wag my finger at those who are far removed from poverty and welfare. Until last year, my understanding of poverty and welfare in the United States was strictly academic. As an economist at a small liberal arts college, my exposure had been limited to teaching a class on the subject and undertaking empirical research on child support (a topic with some overlap with the poverty and welfare).

I had never actually worked with the poor nor, for that matter, had any contact with them. I decided the isolation from my subject matter no longer suited me and that my understanding was very limited given it was always filtered through other academics who themselves (apparently) had no contact with the poor. For my sabbatical, I began reading the literature on ethnography
and thinking about how I might better inform my understanding by undertaking a project that was more directly involved with the poor. The more I read about field research methods, the more I became convinced that such qualitative studies are a necessary (although perhaps not sufficient) means for understanding welfare and poverty, and that traditional quantitative methods and economic theory are missing or ignoring some of the important realities for women on welfare. As Seiz states "Analyzing phenomena fraught with connection to others….tradition….and relations of domination…with only the language of individual agency, markets, and choice is very likely to create a feeling of distortion, a feeling that what is most important has been left out" (300).

The scientism of mainstream economics leaves little scope for the use of qualitative methods, which are more likely to explicitly acknowledge their intersubjectivity. Mainstream economics and its practitioners seem convinced that a positivist construct of the world makes sense: that a value-free investigation is possible and results in value-free truth. The quantitative methods of economics suggest a detached, impersonal, objective researcher. In contrast, an ethnographic approach acknowledges that

they/we are equally positioned, interconnected, and involved in the social and cultural relations under study…So rather than claiming some sort of separate Archimedean point from which the world can be critiqued, the researcher’s viewpoint is largely a product of social relations [of power/knowledge] within the academy and between it and the world at large…Therefore, whether it is acknowledged or not, it is important to understand that research on social relations inevitably arises out of social relations between the field, the academy, and beyond (Cook and Crang 4).

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3 For many researchers, this methodology would not be a deviation from the norm; I was trained as an economist, so for me, ethnographic research represents a new method. At this stage, I am undertaking my “field work.”
The real world of material provisioning seems much messier and the people within it much more complicated (and interesting), than traditional economics seems to allow. Some of the literature in feminist methodologies speaks directly to these issues. "Many feminists find such an ahistorical, disembodied account...bizarre. In the extreme it suggests that the ideals and definition of economics have been given to humankind through divine intervention, or perhaps dropped from a Friedmanesque helicopter" (Ferber and Nelson 1).

Prior to beginning this study, I had been an empirical researcher in the traditional economic method. Regarding the data used in economic studies, economists seldom collect it themselves. This would not necessarily be problematic if we were aware of and acknowledged the qualitative nature of the construction of the data, and the limitations that construction poses for the information we obtain. Second to theory, economists also allow their data to direct their inquiry. They may start with an interesting question, but then encounter "data limitations." Typically, they do not turn to an alternative, perhaps qualitative, method to answer the question; instead, they (like utility-maximizing agents) do the best they can with what they’ve got, even if that means relegating even their own interesting questions and concerns to the waste bin.

Although economic theory and testing are perceived as separate entities; they become invariably bound together. The theoretical edifice not only defines the questions to be tested, but instills in the researcher certain concepts and notions with which to view the world, such that results are filtered through neoclassical lenses. Thus, theoretical constructs, concepts, and distinctions can
“seem to represent something preexisting and real [and, thus] they generate what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, referred to as the ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness.’ Most simply put, we come to take as real that which is not” (Babbie 79).

These concerns about economic theory and testing are particularly germane when we turn our attention to the lives of poor women. Economists view society as comprised of optimizing agents, who rationally weigh their choices within the confines of whatever constraints they face. Undoubtedly, that proposition yields much insight. However, in practice, economists focus on the choices rather than the constraints. I think this is a mistake when it comes to understanding the lives of poor women, whose lives appear to be much more influenced by the obstacles they face, their constraints, than the choices they can make. Indeed, for me one of the most troubling aspects of the virtually unmasked delight over the “end of welfare” is the presumption that many of the recipients of welfare simply chose the easy life of welfare over the hard work of the real world. Such a notion ignores what Earl Shorris refers to as the “surround of force”(50). In the academic literature, one can find mention of these factors, but they are frequently presented as nonbinding, nonimpinging descriptors rather than forces which can at times become, at best, temporarily overwhelming and, at worst, paralyzingly insurmountable. The factors I refer to – drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, criminal records, depression, and poor physical health – are also faced by middle-class families. Poor women, however, battle these forces alone and with very little income.4

4 I thank Nancy Read, a former maternity case manager, for pointing this out.
Thus, I have turned to an alternative method to try to better understand the very constraints that impede the choices of poor women. Rather than capture the statistical mean, I wish to understand processes as well as outcomes and capture nuances and variations among individuals. As Cook and Crang argue "It is the way in which people make sense of the events around them, render these ‘true’ in their own terms, that is most revealing about how their/our lives are embroiled [in] larger social, cultural, economic and political processes. Therefore, stories told in the research encounter are not simply to be regarded as a means of reflecting the world, but as the means through which it is constructed, understood and acted upon" (8).

This shift (for me) in methodology is, of course, fraught with professional risks. I am fortunate that my academic home is within an institution that defines scholarship sufficiently broadly and flexibly that work such as this “counts.” But of greater significance than the potential risks are the possible benefits: this work embodies why I became an economist in the first place. As an undergraduate, I saw economics as a study that could affect social change. I am hopeful that this nascent project is consistent with a methodology that “aims to improve the lives of women who are the subjects of the research…(and) is based on validating personal experience in the research process, using interdisciplinary approaches and combining activism with academic goals” (Esim 137).

While I became convinced that an ethnographic approach was right for me and this subject matter, at first I was uncertain how to actually enter the field. Serendipitously, a letter to the editor appeared in the local paper, written by the director of a community-based organization
looking for mentors for women on welfare trying to become self-sufficient. I called immediately. That call was approximately six months ago and it opened the doors of “the field” for me. As a volunteer in the program Project Interdependence, I have met and talked with innumerable service providers and several women in various stages of transition off welfare.

Recently a former service provider said to me, “You don’t know anything unless you’ve been out in the field.” I agree with her. None of the traditional academic literature captures the realities of these families’ lives. It is one thing to read about the shortage of low-income housing; it is quite another to search for affordable housing for a woman and her daughter who encounter prostitutes in the hallway with clients and who are kept up all night by the meth lab activities in the apartment above them. Theoretically, this family is protected by a variety of tenants’ rights from these activities and the backed up sewer and the overflowing toilet; in reality, the mother knows from experience, it takes months before a case is acted upon. Meanwhile, we drive through boarded up neighborhoods for three months looking for a new place, only to be told again and again that the wait list is so long (up to six years) that they will not even accept any more names, or that her previous evictions or low income prevent her from passing the screening test. One place will take her and her daughter – if she agrees to random urine testing, attending weekly meetings, and foregoing her right to an eviction notice. Although she’s been clean and sober for two years, she’s willing to agree to these terms in order to live in decent housing.

In the short time I have been in the field, I have become aware of other instances where the quantitative studies note a factor affecting welfare exit almost as a sidebar, where in reality it
takes on a dizzying scope of potentially overwhelming magnitude. For example, Loprest and Zedlewski find that 32 percent of current recipients and 26 percent of former welfare recipients report very poor mental or physical health, where “very poor mental health” means falling in the bottom 10\textsuperscript{th} percentile of all adults (1999).

Not surprisingly then, many of the women on welfare I have met struggle with serious mental health issues, such as depression, and physical problems such as asthma. The degree to which these problems can affect the ability to find and hold a job are simply glossed over in the academic literature, but for these women such problems literally define their day-to-day lives. Similarly, the literature notes that some welfare recipients have drug and alcohol histories but fail to capture how these activities are influenced by their mental and health problems, by substance abuse in their families while growing up, or the sexual or other abuse they endured as children.

How poverty interacts with the ability to escape poverty is difficult to capture in regression analysis. For example, you could not easily capture the following (true) scenario: driving an old car with a burnt out turn signal results in a ticket for not wearing a (broken) seat belt; the cost of the ticket is beyond the means of the family to pay; they fail to appear in court to try to reduce it because by the time of their courtdate they are homeless and do not receive their hearing notice; the “failure to appear” adds further costs to the original ticket; the family slowly begins to make payment on the ticket, but three consecutive payments (in the form of costly money orders, which the poor often rely on because they do not have the required identification for a checking
account) are stolen out of the mailbox; the court turns the ticket over to collections, where an initial ticket of $60 has grown to several hundred. Such stories may strike us as an unbelievable series of events, but they are the realities of these women’s lives, and our standard studies are ill-equipped to capture such complicated, but defining, events.

Given such complexities, at this stage in the research process, I am simply immersing myself in the field and becoming familiar with the terrain. I am attempting to juxtapose what I observe in the field with the quantitative studies. As I fill my notebook with stories and statements, I am trying to sift through the important material and questions. It is premature to speculate on the final shape and form this project will take. Given my experience with the program, I envision Project Interdependence and its participants acting as the centerpiece to a case study of welfare reform with its attendant successes and failures. I would hope such a study would accomplish several goals: (1) to provide information that would guide and aid Project Interdependence; (2) to disseminate the findings to other community-based organizations interested in starting similar programs or already undertaking them; (3) to identify colleagues who can use the information we have gained to develop the appropriate questions for quantitative studies intending to assess the impact of welfare reform-related programs; (4) to inform the public and local policy-makers of some of the more complicated issues surrounding welfare reform; and (5) perhaps most importantly, to give an opportunity for some of these families to articulate in their own voice their successes and concerns regarding welfare reform.

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5 There has been a veritable explosion in the number of such organizations and other services in the wake of welfare reform. Many hold contracts with Washington State’s Department of Social and Human Services (DSHS) as part of the “partnership” nature of welfare reform.
Given the embryonic stage of this project, it is probably premature on my part to draw any conclusions regarding welfare reform. Recognizing their initial nature, however, in the next section I would like to offer some concluding thoughts on the welfare reform process.

**Welfare Reform: Some Initial Observations**

Virtually everyone I have spoken to, in line with much of what has been written, agrees that welfare needed to be changed from one where the expectation was that cash assistance could be available indefinitely (as long as one had children under the age of 18) to one where the expectation is that it is available for a limited amount of time. The current welfare reform, however, imposed five-year lifetime limits, and allowed states to impose even shorter stays, simultaneously with the shift from the training and education emphasis of the Family Support Act of 1988. This shift from encouraging welfare recipients to think long-term in terms of human capital investment to requiring to take virtually any job offered coupled with five-year lifetime limits seems to impose a severe economic burden on these families. Any job offered, given their low-skill levels, is one that will be low-paying with few benefits, little opportunity for advancement, and subject to job insecurity. It might have made sense to require participants to take such jobs if we had maintained a safety net they could turn to when those jobs were lost, or wages insufficient to make ends meet, or benefits inadequate to ensure health care. On the other hand, if lifetime limits were to be imposed, it would have seemed to make sense, to maintain the training and education emphasis such that families could prepare themselves for the future by increasing the skills they have to offer in a labor market
that only rewards those with a level of skills. But we chose to both impose lifetime limits and require recipients to work at whatever job they could find, and in doing so, we imposed further constraints on these women while at the same time reducing their choices.

WorkFirst’s motto is “a job, a better job, a better life.” I am unconvinced of the clear and direct path from “a job” to a “better life.” However, I am somewhat encouraged by the fact that the Washington State legislature is currently debating a bill that would allow participants to enroll in college and still be in compliance with WorkFirst requirements.

My reading of the national studies is that for most recipients, welfare is used exactly as it was intended – a safety net when, for a variety of reasons, poor women are unable to make ends meet on their own. I interpret the findings that many cycle on and off welfare (what is referred to as “recidivism”) as evidence that these women are not simply choosing welfare over work. The fact that “sanctioned” leavers from welfare have higher unemployment rates than those who left welfare voluntarily provides me with further evidence. If welfare was simply an easy alternative to work, then once recipients were kicked off it, they would have found jobs and gone to work. That they are unemployed, particularly in this period of unparalleled economic growth, implies to me, that perhaps few could. Therein lies the heart of my disagreement with welfare reform, the underlying assumption of welfare reform is that these women simply need to go to work, they can and they should. It’s not that simple. My short time in the field has taught me that.
References


