

**Mothers' Work and  
Children's Lives**

**Low-Income Families after  
Welfare Reform**

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## The Road to Welfare Reform

In December 1994, as the welfare reform bill was working its way through Congress, Jason DeParle, author of *American Dream* (2004) and longtime *New York Times* poverty reporter, wrote an article for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* about a single mother of four juggling a low-wage job, poverty, and the daily strain of life on the margins (DeParle 1994). It was a prescient profile in many ways.

Mary Ann Moore, at age 33, was proud of herself. Although she'd had her first child as a teenager and spent the next 14 years on and off welfare, she was now on the right road. Every day, hours before the sun rose, she would drag herself off the couch that served as her bed, roust her kids, feed and dress them, and pile them into their beater of a car to drive the 11 miles to her mother's home. The children grew accustomed to the routine. After kissing them goodbye at her mother's apartment, Moore would head to her job in the kitchen at a homeless shelter, clocking in at 6:00 a.m. There she worked hard, putting in 52 hours a week, feeding 100 homeless people each day, and sometimes clocking two 13-hour shifts per week. Her toil barely paid the bills, but she felt better working than receiving welfare.

The story of Moore's life was, to many, a tale of the American way: work hard, take responsibility for yourself, be a role model for your children. Moore was doing that in spades.

Moore was also the vision policymakers in Washington in the early 1990s had for all women relying on welfare. As Bill Clinton himself said in the run-up to reform, "Work organizes life. It gives structure and discipline to life . . . It gives a role model to children." He was thinking then of Lillie Harden, a former welfare recipient in Arkansas who, when asked what she liked best about being off welfare, had said, "When my boy goes to school and they say, 'What does your mama do for a living?' he can give them an answer" (Safire 1997; U.S. Government Printing Office 1997).

When DeParle's story went to print in 1994, the rumbles of welfare reform were picking up steam. Although a number of important

changes would be put into place in 1996, a set of gradual changes to the welfare program had in fact begun with the Family Support Act of 1988, which included, among other things, fewer work exemptions to mothers with ever younger children (see Haskins [2006] for a thorough account of welfare reform).<sup>1</sup> In 1992, then-candidate Clinton had campaigned on “ending welfare as we know it,” and his advisers had been struggling since his inauguration to craft a welfare reform plan to which everyone could agree. The reform they were proposing centered on jobs and making work pay more than welfare by expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), ensuring universal health coverage, and subsidizing child care costs. It also sought to transform the welfare system from a check-writing institution to one that sent a clear message: “Two years and you work.”<sup>2</sup> The centerpiece was a mandate that recipients spend two years maximum on education and training followed by a job, either in the private sector, or if no private-sector job were available, in a meaningful public-sector job (Ellwood and Piven 1996).<sup>3</sup> The early version of the bill said nothing of lifetime limits, block grants, or the other mandates that eventually made their way into the reform bill.

Even though polls were showing that the country was solidly behind welfare reform, several aspects of the proposed reform were a difficult sell, mostly to fellow Democrats. The two-year requirement was alarming to many, and others thought the bill was simply too punitive. Politics and the timing of the bill also came into play. More important, money was tight, and preparing welfare recipients for jobs was much more expensive than just sending them a check every month. The country was running a significant budget deficit at the time, and no one could muster the votes to raise taxes in support of welfare and the poor. As the summer of 1994 drew to a close, a solid direction for welfare reform had still not materialized.

Of course, few could have predicted the events of that fall. With Newt Gingrich leading the charge, Republicans swept both houses of Congress, taking firm control of the reins. With that, Republicans were now poised to push through their own welfare reform proposals.

## THE IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDE ON HELPING THE POOR

Those proposals, in fact, had been simmering for nearly a decade. Back in the mid-1980s, Ronald Reagan created potent images of “welfare queens” driving Cadillacs. The conservative base of the party, in fact, argued that welfare *caused* poverty by dulling poor women’s motivation to work hard and lift themselves up. At about the same time, Charles Murray was publishing his “thought experiment” in *Losing Ground* (1984), the controversial book that would become the foundation of the Republican proposals for reforming welfare.<sup>4</sup> In that book, Murray laid out the perverse incentives built into welfare as he saw it with a fictional couple, Phyllis and Harold. Prior to the current welfare policies, Phyllis and Harold would have married after discovering Phyllis was pregnant, and Harold would have gone to work. However, with welfare in place, Phyllis and Harold shun both marriage and work and instead live off the welfare check that Phyllis now gets. They were, he said, acting rationally given the government assurance of cash assistance.

Following the same line of argument, other conservatives claimed that women were having more children so they could receive bigger welfare checks. Still others argued that welfare reform was the cause of teen pregnancy. If a young woman sees a safety net under her, they argued, there is no reason not to jump. Welfare, said Jason Turner, a key state-level player in reform, creates “enforced idleness that is responsible for much (though not all) of the decay in the social and family fabric” (Danziger 1997).<sup>5</sup> Mickey Kaus, the author of another influential book at the time, *The End of Equality* (1992) called welfare the “underclass culture’s life support system.”

Murray and his fellow conservatives were tapping into a sentiment in the American public that women on welfare were lazy, cheating the system, and in many respects were “to blame for so much that was wrong with America” (Piven, Hallock and Morgen 2002). The problem with the current policies, as Murray and others saw it, could be traced directly to a long line of liberal thinking about social problems. As Murray (1984) put it: “What emerged in the mid-1960s was an almost unbroken intellectual consensus that the individualist explanation of poverty was altogether outmoded and reactionary. Poverty was not a

consequence of indolence or vice. It was not the just desserts of people who didn't try hard enough. It was produced by conditions that had nothing to do with individual virtue or effort. Poverty was not the fault of the individual but of the system" (p. 29).

Liberal scholars and others had long argued that families struggled in poverty not because of personal behavior, but because of larger, "structural" conditions that created an uneven playing field. The economy, for example, demanded higher skills, yet urban schools were failing to educate children. Wages had been stagnant for low-skilled workers since the late 1970s, and males, particularly African American males, had been hard hit by the slump. As investment and businesses left the inner city, jobs left with them, and inner-city unemployment rose to high levels. Many men became discouraged and dropped out of the job market, living with their girlfriends or mothers for support. Others turned to underground, sometimes illegal, markets to earn a living. Increasingly they were imprisoned.

These trends depleted the marriage pool of men, which scholars argue has contributed to the declining marriage rate in the urban African American community. Men with few prospects for employment, either because of a prison record or other reasons, are not attractive marriage partners in many women's eyes, as William Julius Wilson chronicled in *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987). Yet, although marriage rates were on the decline, childbearing was not. Some might ask why women would not postpone childbearing knowing the toll that poverty imposes on children. The reason, as Edin and Kefalas (2005) find, lies in the response commonly offered by low-income urban women: "Wait for what?" Kefalas (2007) notes, "For a woman with a high school diploma, the \$7-an-hour job she can land at [age] 18 is the same \$7-an-hour job she'll be holding at 28."

Remedying these structural contributors to poverty, liberals argued, called for investing in job development, economic development, education and job training, and neighborhoods, while leaving a strong safety net in place. But Robert Rector of the conservative Heritage Foundation summed it up for many conservatives when he said in an online debate in 1997 that those ideas "sound an awful lot like spending more on things that have failed in the past . . . Our nation has since invested more than \$6 trillion in fighting the war on poverty—and virtually every social problem has gotten worse, not better" (Rector 1997).

## THE NEW WELFARE BILL

The result of this wrangling was a bill that passed in the Republican House only to be softened somewhat by the Senate in September 1995, but with some additional restrictions on immigrant eligibility. Clinton ultimately vetoed that bill and sent it back for compromise. The result was the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Its most striking feature was the abolishment of the guarantee for the poor of a welfare safety net. No longer was cash assistance an entitlement. Equally important were the work requirements in exchange for welfare (the “two years and you work” requirement) and five-year lifetime time limits on receipt of the newly named cash assistance program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Under the new law, a woman could only receive welfare for a cumulative total of 60 months, after which she was barred from returning to welfare. The law required states to have 50 percent of their TANF caseload in the workforce, and it required them to have 90 percent of two-parent families in the workforce. Going forward, states would receive a credit for further caseload declines. Specifically, the credit reduced the work participation rate by the percentage that the state reduced its overall caseload in the prior fiscal year compared with its caseload in 1995. Originally, states were not required to include families who were funded by separate state funds in these calculations.

Work requirements also specified that single parents were required to work at least 20 hours a week in 1997, rising to 30 hours a week by 2000. A key impetus for these work requirements, in addition to ending what many saw as long-term dependency, was the belief that work, through the order, routine, and income that it injected into family life, would ultimately benefit children. Mothers who did not work and relied instead on welfare, many argued, were not good role models for their children. Or as Rector (1997) put it, “Welfare costs a lot and generates dependence and illegitimacy, both of which are harmful to children’s development.”

Finally, to signal that it meant business, the federal program stipulated that those who failed to abide by the new rules were to be sanctioned by reducing the amount of their welfare check for each infrac-

tion. The carrot to this stick was the ability of states to “disregard” a larger share of earnings before reducing an individual’s welfare check.

Under the new law, states were also allowed much more flexibility to manage their own cash assistance program, with some added risk. Rather than a federal stream of funding that rose or fell depending on caseloads, the new funding was a lump sum (block grants) based on a state’s welfare spending between 1992 and 1996. If caseloads declined, the leftover money was theirs to use as needed for child care programs or even to plug other holes in state budgets. However, if caseloads rose, they had to make do with the set amount of funding.<sup>6</sup>

The new rules were flexible in other ways as well. Under the law, states must abide by the general requirements outlined in PRWORA, but they could be more or less strict on their own dime. For example, 24 states have imposed a time limit that results in complete termination of benefits at the end of 60 months of welfare receipt; 19 states have time limits that are shorter than 60 months. But, 8 states have no time limits on the receipt of cash assistance or provide indefinite benefits for the child portion of the case (Zedlewski et al. 2007). Some states imposed strict sanctions for not following the welfare rules, whereas others created more generous incentives to make work pay more than welfare. Other states shortened their “two years and you work” time limit and encouraged women to enter the workforce quickly. This “work first” approach was based on the philosophy that women with few skills or education would be better off learning those skills on the job than in a classroom.

Ultimately, the new welfare bill gave states what they had been clamoring for—independence to design a welfare program that reflected the conditions in their state. The new law also allowed the federal government to send a clear message: welfare is no longer an entitlement but a temporary support on the road to work. Wiped clean was the original intent of the program in the 1930s—to support single mothers who had been abandoned by a breadwinning man. Women were required to take personal responsibility for their livelihoods and join the country’s ethos of work and self-sufficiency.

## THE RESPONSE: WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

The push-back on the proposed bill was staunch, and at times hyperbolic. Critics of the bill were especially alarmed for the 1.1 million children that the Department of Health and Human Services estimated would be pushed into poverty by the loss of a safety net. The debate on the Hill and in the media was heated. Another Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously claimed that children would be sleeping on the street grates and that there would be “scenes of social trauma such as we haven’t known since the cholera epidemics” (DeParle 1994). Senator Edward Kennedy, prior to passage of the 1995 Senate bill, described it as “legislative child abuse” (Toner 1995).

Writing in an *Atlantic Monthly* online forum in 1997, one year into reform, Peter Edelman, a Clinton Administration welfare reformer who resigned when passage of the 1996 legislation was inevitable, said: “What we’ve now got instead is . . . a totally untried, underfinanced, and most important, undefined forced march of poor children out onto the high wire without a safety net” (Edelman 1997). He also predicted more homelessness, more family violence, more child abuse, more crime, more malnutrition, more drug abuse, and increased infant mortality.

An initial supporter of reform, Mary Jo Bane, former assistant secretary for the Administration for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services, was also worried about the potential negative effects on children. Children, she said, would suffer from lack of supervision and appropriate discipline from parents who were away from home for long hours without the ability to provide good substitute care. “For some, abandonment or serious abuse or neglect will result. For others, the effects may show up in poor school performance and antisocial behavior” (Bane 1997, p. 49). Bane also saw the reformed child welfare system as ill equipped to handle the flood of children who would likely be in danger of abuse or neglect in the homes of struggling mothers who had lost their welfare benefits. She, too, resigned.

The prospect of a negative impact on children was not confined to Democrats. One of the earliest versions of the bill allowed states to use block grants to establish orphanages in stark recognition, as Mary Jo Bane pointed out in her essay on the foibles of the proposed reforms, “of the fact that some families would be denied assistance entirely and

that not all parents would successfully meet the challenges of the new requirements” (Bane 1997, p. 52).

Finally came the warning of a “race to the bottom.” With block grants to the states and few strings attached, some warned that states could do anything they wanted with their welfare programs, including nothing at all. Given that the remaining recipients were most likely those with the highest barriers to employment, including limited education, fragile mental health, and substance abuse or alcohol dependencies (Danziger et al. 2000), it would be less costly for states to push them off completely than to prepare them for jobs. The government spent approximately \$5,000 per family annually under the current system. Creating a job for a mother and supplying child care would more than double that expense (DeParle 2004). Perhaps Bane had these families in mind when she warned that the loss of AFDC may be felt most in housing, with increased eviction, more doubling up, more moves, more crowding, and more violence-prone relationships.

These warnings were not plucked from the sky. Researchers have long explored the potential effects of working among single-mother families. A key question has always been one of time. More work means less time with children. Mothers who work long hours may have less time to provide emotional support, monitor their children’s behavior, or foster the child’s involvement in activities in school or in the community. They may also be tired and stressed, which can strain parenting. However, some evidence suggests that working mothers simply partition their days differently, cutting back on sleep and other tasks while continuing to devote the same “quality time” with their children (Bianchi 2000). Mary Ann Moore, for example, referred to her few hours of sleep as “cat naps,” catching it where she could. Chase-Lansdale et al. (2003) have confirmed this idea by finding no reduction in time with children among low-income mothers leaving welfare for work.

There is also the issue of mothers’ mental health and positive parenting. Unstable work or fluctuating work hours in a menial job can be stressful for anyone, let alone single parents, who frequently live in isolated neighborhoods with a long commute, often on public transportation, and whose child care is often unreliable (McLoyd et al. 1994). This added strain could increase the probability of mental health problems such as depression, which can make it hard for mothers to parent

effectively (Kessler 1997). Similarly stressful is job loss or a string of jobs, which can be emotionally defeating. Some women faced with this uphill climb may turn to alcohol or drugs to relieve the stress (Catalano et al. 1993). Finally, job loss, nonstandard hours, and stressful, menial work can take a physical toll on mothers, which can impair the quality or quantity of time with children (Presser 2004).

As Bane argues, income instability (without the safety net of welfare) may cause some families to double up or send them on a nomadic journey from apartment to apartment (Bitler, Gelbach, and Hoynes 2006). If such doubling-up arrangements help families make ends meet financially, and if grandmothers help provide quality care for young children while mothers work, this could be a good thing. Indeed, some studies have shown positive impacts for low-income children when grandmothers live with them (DeLeire and Kalil 2002). On the other hand, if doubling up means forming households with other men, children could suffer, given that studies show children in cohabiting arrangements fare worse developmentally than their counterparts in other arrangements (Brown 2004). In part, this is because cohabiting unions among low-income families are often short-lived, and children are more likely to move more frequently (Bumpass and Lu 2000). This itinerant existence takes a toll on children's academic achievement (Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin 2004; Haveman and Wolfe 1995; Ingersoll, Scamman, and Eckerling 1989; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994) and can contribute to behavioral problems (Adam and Chase-Lansdale 2002). Moving frequently also disrupts children's social networks by severing ties with friends, schools, and community institutions (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

The ultimate gamble in all this was whether income gains would offset the other trade-offs that the poor must contend with daily. As DeParle asks in *American Dream*, which features the lives of three mothers and their 10 children in the postwelfare world, "How much will low-wage work alone change the trajectory of underclass life? What if the mothers' jobs leave them poor? What if they're still stuck in the ghetto? What if their kids still lack fathers?" (DeParle 2004, p. 113).

## **SURPRISING RESULTS: CASELOADS PLUMMET**

To the surprise of many, welfare caseloads fell quickly and dramatically in the years following the passage of PRWORA. Poverty among single mothers declined from 42 percent in 1996 to 33 percent in 2000 (Jencks 2005). Among their children, the poverty rate fell from 54 percent in 1993 to 43 percent in 2005 (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.). In most states, caseloads were cut in half and have continued to decline, although at a slower pace than in the early years. Between 1996 and 2003, for example, caseloads declined 53 percent in Michigan (the focus of our study here), 57 percent in Wisconsin (the “birthplace” of welfare reform), and 84 percent in Illinois (home to a large, urban city, Chicago) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2007).

The extent to which PRWORA itself was responsible for these caseload declines remains the subject of some debate in the research world. The Council of Economic Advisers (1999), among others, find that welfare reform and other social policy changes at the time contributed, at most, to about one-third of the decline in welfare caseloads. Instead, the economy, which between 1992 and 2000 pumped more than 20 million jobs into the pipeline, was a much bigger player. Another contributing factor was the EITC, which Clinton expanded greatly just prior to reform. The EITC, which provides up to \$4,000 in tax refunds to low-wage workers, has been called the single most important antipoverty policy in the decade (Blank 1998, p. 113). The program has been credited with lifting millions out of poverty—4.4 million in 2003 alone, more than one-half of them children. Without the EITC, the poverty rate among children would be 25 percent higher (Holt 2006). In addition, the country’s workforce had been shifting steadily away from manufacturing and toward services, with its lower demands for education. For women leaving welfare, many of whom lacked skills and education, the service sector was a place to gain a foothold.

In the aftermath of welfare reform, the race to the bottom never materialized, and many women are indeed working and earning slightly more, on average. The employment rate nationally of low-educated, single-mothers increased from 62 percent in 1996 to 73 percent in 2000 before falling to 69 percent by 2005 after a brief recession (Parrott and

Sherman 2006). In 2008, 71.4 percent of mothers in female-headed households were employed (U.S. Census Bureau 2009).

However, rising rates of employment among less-educated single mothers have not eradicated material hardships. Families experiencing such hardships in the postwelfare world are the most vulnerable, having lost an important source of income when they left welfare. Thus, they may be particularly at risk during periods of unemployment. In fact, it may be these most vulnerable women who have contributed to the rise in *severe* poverty (those with incomes less than 70 percent of the poverty threshold) between 1996 and 2003, even as overall poverty rates declined (Jencks, Winship, and Swingle 2006). That is, although many single mothers have more income today, the poorest among them do not. Jared Bernstein and Mark Greenberg, writing in *American Prospect* in 2001, reported that one-third of those who had left welfare (both working and nonworking mothers) had to cut the size of meals or skip them because there wasn't enough food, 39 percent reported being unable to pay rent in the last year, and 7 percent were forced to move in with others.

## THE LOW-WAGE JOB MARKET

It is perhaps not surprising that in the first years following welfare reform, women still struggled to make ends meet. Nationally, wages among those who had left welfare were between \$7 and \$8 per hour (Acs and Loprest 2004). For a full-time job, these wages translate into roughly \$18,000 a year. “Good jobs” are often elusive for former welfare recipients.

The types of jobs these single mothers were finding, in addition to being low-pay, were often unstable, with hours that could change in a minute's notice. Presser and Cox (1997) find that more than 40 percent of all working mothers aged 18–43 who lack postsecondary education—a category into which many welfare recipients fall—work nonstandard schedules (see also Henley and Lambert [2005]). As a 2007 policy paper by the Center for Law and Social Policy outlines, less-educated workers, younger workers, and African Americans are disproportionately working night or evening hours. Only 39 percent of

low-wage workers received paid time off, and their “flexible” hours are often flexible only to the employer. Low-wage workers are less likely to be allowed to alter their hours or work from home, and their schedules are often less predictable than workers in higher-paying jobs (Lower-Basch 2007).

Despite these generally low wages and variable work, many argued that welfare reform was a success. Families were working instead of relying on welfare, and because caseloads had declined so precipitously, many states were able to use their block grants to bolster child care subsidies and other work-related supports. But given the generally low wages, unpredictable schedules, and the frequent lack of a spouse or partner to pitch in at home, the question remained, how were these women balancing their work and family responsibilities? Were they, as predicted, sacrificing time with children, both at home and in school? Were they stressed, and was their parenting suffering as a result? Was their mental health on edge? Were their precarious financial situations forcing them to move frequently or double up with other family members or friends? In short, how was the “second shift” in their lives holding up?

## **MOTHERS’ WORK AND CHILDREN’S DEVELOPMENT**

As noted above, many scholars and policymakers were particularly concerned about children in families without a safety net and growing work demands on single parents. Poverty is hard on kids, but so too is being stuck in a bad neighborhood with overtaxed schools and overtaxed parents. Yet, evidence from experimental evaluations, in which one group of working families is compared with a control group that is not working and still receiving welfare—considered the gold standard of research—was showing hopeful results for working mothers and their children.

One such evaluation was conducted on the state welfare program in Minnesota, the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). A distinguishing feature of this program was its added financial incentive to work. A working welfare recipient in Minnesota received a 20 percent boost in her welfare grant to cover work-related expenses, and roughly

40 percent of her earnings were disregarded in calculating the family's grant level. In 1994, a single parent with two children working part time at \$6 per hour received \$237 more under MFIP than under the old welfare system (Gennetian and Miller 2002). Results from the evaluation show that the MFIP program improved the school performance and reduced behavior problems of young children whose parent was single and a long-term welfare recipient. The gains were significantly greater than those in the control group, whose mothers were not working but still receiving welfare. The key to these positive results was the income supplement the families received in addition to their wages (Gennetian and Miller 2002).

Two other evaluations show more mixed results for children. The Connecticut Jobs First Program was very strict in that a family's entire welfare grant was terminated if the mother reached a 21-month time limit on welfare, but it also allowed working recipients to keep all their earnings up to the federal poverty level as well as their cash assistance for the remainder of the 21 months (Bloom et al. 2002). Jobs First boosted employment and earnings, and it led to small improvements in the behavior of participants' young children. It had mixed effects, however, on the development of adolescent children.

Florida's Family Transition Program limited women to 24 months of welfare in any 60-month period (but with no lifetime limit on welfare use and a wide array of services and incentives to help welfare recipients find work) (Bloom et al. 2000). This program had few impacts, positive or negative, on the well-being of elementary-school-aged children. Among adolescents, however, children whose mothers were working performed somewhat worse than their counterparts in the old AFDC program on a few measures of school performance.

It is not unreasonable to conclude from these evaluations that, on one hand, time limits can be implemented without having widespread severe consequences for families and, on the other, that income supplements in addition to wages of mothers who left welfare may help improve children's development. An important caveat to these findings, however, is that all of the studies were conducted in an unusually strong economic period (1994–2000).

Another notable experiment, New Hope, was conducted in Milwaukee between 1994 and 1998. This program focused on a much broader group than the welfare population, but was also designed to boost

income and provide work supports to low-income families. The program is instructive in thinking about what kinds of programs can work for those women who left welfare and joined the ranks of the working poor. New Hope offered low-income workers a wage supplement that averaged \$125 per month, health insurance, and a child care subsidy averaging \$700 per month, among other supports. As in MFIP, New Hope led to school and behavior improvements among young children five years later. Eight years later, these performance differences would fade while new effects emerged. New Hope children were more engaged in school, and their parents were less likely than control group parents to report that their children had repeated a grade, received poor grades, or been placed in special education. The early results were also stronger for boys. School results such as these are important because doing better in school can increase the likelihood that children will remain engaged and not drop out or seriously falter. For boys in inner-city schools in particular, dropping out is a too-frequent temptation, with the lure of gangs and other trouble right around the corner (Duncan, Huston, and Weisner 2007; Miller et al. 2008).

One caveat to the generally positive findings, however, is outcomes for teens. Whereas a mother's employment improved school performance and behavior for young children, it often had the opposite effect on teenagers. The MFIP evaluation, for example, finds that when parents increase employment, adolescents are at increased risk for school difficulties (Gennetian and Miller 2002). One explanation for the adverse impacts on teenage children is that they are shouldering the burden of caring for younger siblings while their mothers are at work.

Other research (albeit not random assignment experimental studies) lends support to these findings. In these studies, the type of job mattered. In particular, a mother's unstable employment was often associated with greater risk of dropping out of school among teens and increased behavior and mental health issues (Chase-Lansdale et al. 2003; Gennetian, Lopoo, and London 2008; and Kalil and Ziolo-Guest 2005). Likewise, work intensity can take a toll on children. Studies also show that full-time work, compared with part-time, increases the likelihood that teens will skip school or act out in class and see their grades decline (Gennetian, Lopoo, and London 2008). Although few have studied the effects on children of parents who work nonstandard hours (night shift or weekends, for example), one can easily imagine that such

work schedules can stress parent-child relationships. One study shows that the increased stress posed by nonstandard work hours can increase children's behavior problems and harm school performance (Joshi and Bogen 2007).

The culprit in these poorer outcomes, some have surmised, may be a lack of oversight after school and in the evenings. Consider Debra, whom Katherine Newman and Margaret Chin (2002) profile in an *American Prospect* article. Working the afternoon shift, Debra had to rely on her 10-year-old to care for her younger children, time that should have been reserved for school work and playing with her own friends. Her daughter had already been held back in school once and was still struggling academically. Being called on to care for her young siblings was likely an added responsibility that was detrimental to her academic life. Indeed, in interviews with low-income mothers, a frequent fear was that without proper supervision and monitoring, their children would let homework slide and fall victim to the lure of the neighborhood. As Toni, whom Kristin Seefeldt interviewed in an in-depth qualitative study of participants in the Michigan Women's Employment Study (Seefeldt 2008), said, "My kids are teenagers, and [with] teenagers, I think a parent needs to be at home when they're home because they get carried away . . . I experienced that already with my oldest son, so I don't want to make that same mistake with these two." Other women feared that their teenage daughters would become pregnant if they were not home to keep an eye on them.

In *The Missing Class*, Katherine Newman and Victor Tan Chen (2007) chronicle the lives of several families who are teetering on the brink between working class and poverty. Many of the mothers had used welfare in the past, and were now working hard to escape the clutch of poverty. One mother, Tamar Guerra, was doing everything right, according to welfare reformers. She was working, she was married, and she was earning an above-poverty wage. However, her son Omar was feeling this success differently.

Tamar's job far across town demanded that she leave early in the morning, returning home after 6:00 p.m., when she made dinner and then "passed out in an armchair" from exhaustion. Her absence after school and her exhaustion after dinner left Omar on his own, when before Tamar had been vigilant about making him study. Not surprisingly, Omar's homework was not getting done, and teachers were call-

ing frequently. Tamar's youngest son's grades had also begun to slide. Gradually Omar disengaged from school, cutting classes to do odd jobs in the neighborhood, until at age 15, he embarked on a new, seriously destructive path. He and two other boys were accused of sexually assaulting a young woman, and Omar was sent to a juvenile detention facility in upstate New York for 18 months.

Tamar was fortunate enough to have regular hours. Olivia, an African American mother of three whom Seefeldt (2008) interviewed, worked various shifts at a call center, sometimes a normal 8–5 shift, sometimes 12–9 p.m. The job was stressful—200 workers confined to cubicles fielding calls from often irritated customers under a stop clock. To add to the stress, not being able to depend on a regular schedule disrupted Olivia's sleep, but more important, it did not allow her to spend time with her children. She often worked through dinner and lamented the fact that her children ate hot dogs on those nights. Most recently, her son had been in a fight at school, and the principal had called Olivia to come and get him. Her supervisor refused to let her go, telling her to find someone else to pick up her son.

The uncertain hours, low wages, and often monotonous or highly structured work environments leave women tired and frazzled at the end of a day. Anita, another woman whom Seefeldt (2008) interviewed, talked about how work was interfering with what she saw as a woman's primary job: being a mother. Once, she said, the job of a mother was to take care of the household. Today, Anita's friend with two children has to "do it all," and be the breadwinner too. "She's doing it . . . but it's hurting the kids. One of them, which is my godchild, she can barely read. And it's like, when her mama get home, she's tired. It's hard for her to spend the time, to take the time out." Denise, a 32-year-old woman in Seefeldt's study who managed a trucking company, summed it up for many women working what Arlie Hochschild (1989) has called the "second shift": "It gets stressful, taking care of everything, being both mom and dad and then having to work." Perhaps the most poignant of the comments is from Caroline, who also appears in Seefeldt's book: "There are days," she says, "where you just want to put your head down and you just feel like crying."

## THE FOCUS OF THE BOOK

The federal and state policy emphasis on mandated work in exchange for receipt of cash assistance is unlikely to change. Most recently, Congress passed, and President Bush signed into law, legislation that reauthorized the TANF program of 1996. The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 requires states to engage more TANF cases in productive work activities leading to self-sufficiency (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services n.d.). Single parents are required to participate in work activities for at least 30 hours per week. Two-parent families must participate in work activities between 35 and 55 hours a week, depending on circumstances.

These policies have focused on pushing low-income women into work, in part because policymakers think doing so will benefit children. It is not clear, however, that this will be true when many of the women leaving welfare for work are likely to land jobs that make it difficult to balance work and family.

It is this balance—or lack thereof—and its effects on children that we focus on in this monograph. We pay particular attention to the nature of work. We explore the effects of work that are stable or unstable, the number of hours worked in a week, the regularity of the schedule, and its flexibility, among other things. If we can draw any lessons now from welfare reform, it is that work per se is not a bad thing for single-mother families. In fact, work can bring stability, routine, and a sense of pride to a woman and her family, just as Clinton said. However, peeling back the curtain shows that the type of work, the number of hours worked, and the flexibility of the job—in other words, the nature of the work—is key.

The next chapter provides a description of Michigan's welfare policies followed by a description of the Women's Employment Study. We then present the structure of our analysis—the data, measures, and methods we use to analyze the outcomes—and describe the findings. We conclude with some thoughts on what these findings might mean for future policies in a postwelfare world.

## Notes

1. Public Law 100-485. Family Support Act of 1988. October 13, 1988.
2. Clinton had originally campaigned on the bumper-sticker slogan, “Two years and you’re off,” but reformers softened the message.
3. Many of these ideas were outlined in David Ellwood’s book, *Poor Support* (1988). Ellwood’s policy prescriptions for reforming welfare and ending poverty included providing universal medical protection, bolstering the earnings of low-wage workers, strengthening the child support system, retaining a welfare safety net for families suffering temporary setbacks, and offering government jobs of last resort.
4. Evidence of just how radically thinking had shifted in a decade, the book was labeled a “thought experiment” in 1984 because no mainstream politician would then touch it.
5. Turner was a member of the Wisconsin group, led by Governor Tommy Thompson, who used Clinton’s offer of state control of welfare programs to usher in much stricter requirements, including firm time limits, of welfare recipients than Clinton’s plan proposed. Indeed, Wisconsin’s model would be a major influence on the final welfare reform bill. Danziger (1997).
6. In a robust economy, more people are able to find work, and caseloads will typically decline. This was evident in the years immediately following passage of PWROWA, when the country was in the midst of a very robust economy. After 2001, however, most states saw increases in their TANF caseloads, in part due to worsening economic conditions.