



Work Activities of Current Welfare Recipients

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No. 4

About six out of 10 adults receiving welfare in 2002 reported that during the previous 12 months they had either worked or engaged in activities to prepare for work. Many held paid jobs; some took job training or job preparation classes; others took high school or postsecondary classes; and some participated in more than one of these activities. This level of activity demonstrates one important aspect of the success of states' Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs and individuals' responses to new program rules that encourage work.

Federal TANF rules mandate work requirements for welfare recipients and minimum annual work participation standards for states.

While current rules require states to engage 50 percent of all families in work activities, a "caseload reduction credit" reduces these requirements considerably. States can count paid or unpaid work, up to 12 months of education and training, and up to three months of job search activities as participation. In FY 2001, the national average monthly participation rate for all families on TANF was 34 percent (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2003).

In all three rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), conducted in 1997, 1999, and 2002, interviewers asked low-income adults whether they worked in a paid or unpaid job, took high school or college courses, engaged in job training courses, and took classes or workshops to help them look for work during the past 12 months. This Snapshot reports work activities among adults receiving welfare who are the primary caretakers of the children in the family (usually the mothers). Results differ from administrative data on work activities because the findings reported here rely on individuals' reports of activity, include only the mother's activities, and include all work activity during the past year even if it occurred while the mother was not receiving welfare. The 12-month activity measure also will be higher than the official participation rate because the 12-month rate includes all activity during the year and many adults participate in work activity for part of the year, whereas the official rate measures participation at one point in time.

Most Recipients Engaged in Some Work Activity

Six out of 10 adults receiving welfare in 2002 had engaged in some work activity during the past 12 months (figure 1). Total work activity in 1999 and 2002 was significantly higher than in 1997, when federal reforms were just rolling out in the states, mostly because paid work increased. The proportion of recipients working either currently or in the past year rose from 31.1 percent in 1997 to 43.8 percent in 1999 and then fell to 39.2 percent in 2002.¹

Almost half of the caseload reported other types of work preparation activities in all three years, although the type of activity changed somewhat across time. Significantly fewer took high school or college

classes in 1999 and 2002 than in 1997, perhaps reflecting restrictions on the amount of education that states can count as work activity. In all three years, about one in 10 mothers on welfare reported taking a job training course.

The proportion of recipients engaged in job search workshops did not change significantly during this period.

Targeting Work Activity Requirements

Patterns of work activity differ somewhat depending on the education level of welfare recipients (figure 2). One in five high school dropouts were working on their GEDs in 2002, and one in 10 were training for a specific job or vocation. Only about one in 10

mothers on welfare who had completed high school were enrolled in postsecondary education classes. The majority of mothers were engaged in work activities during the past 12 months regardless of their education status.

Conclusion

A large share of adults on welfare engage in work activities during the course of the year. The level of activity indicates that most recipients are trying to move into employment, and that states' welfare policies are facilitating work activity. Work activity, especially paid work, increased significantly at the beginning of welfare reform and remained high in 2002 despite the weakened economy.

DATA AT A GLANCE

ABOUT SIX OUT OF 10 ADULTS RECEIVING WELFARE IN 2002 REPORTED THAT THEY HAD EITHER WORKED OR ENGAGED IN ACTIVITIES TO PREPARE FOR WORK DURING THE PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS.

THE SHARE OF WELFARE RECIPIENTS WORKING DURING THE PRECEDING 12 MONTHS ROSE FROM 31 PERCENT IN 1997 TO 44 PERCENT IN 1999 BEFORE FALLING TO 39 PERCENT IN 2002.



Reauthorization proposals that require states to increase work activity among welfare recipients should recognize the prevalence of part-year work activities. All work activity helps to move families off welfare and should be considered in the assessment of states' work participation policies.

References

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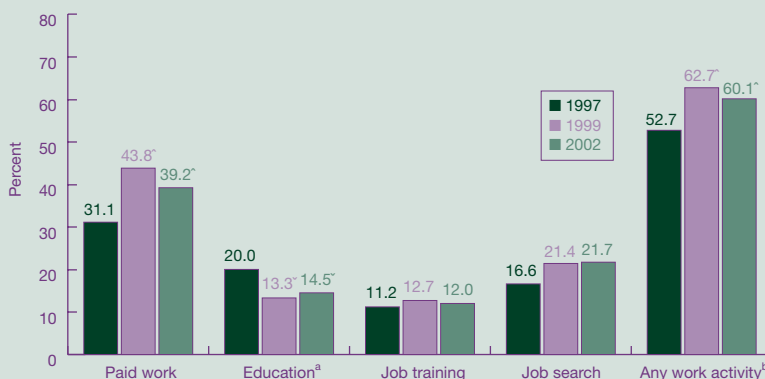
Endnote

¹ See Zedlewski (2003) for analysis of the change in work and barriers to work between 1999 and 2002.

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Figure 1. Work Activity among the TANF Caseload, 1997-2002



Sources: 1997, 1999, and 2002 National Survey of America's Families

^a Does not include individuals who worked on and completed a high school diploma or GED in the year before the interview. In 2002, an additional 2 percent reported taking classes toward and completing their diplomas or GEDs during the previous year. Comparable data are not available for 1997 and 1999.

^b Percentage engaged in at least one activity.

^{*} Increase from 1997 is significant at the 0.10 level.

[^] Decrease from 1997 is significant at the 0.10 level.

Figure 2. Participation in Work Activity, 2002



Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families

^a Percentage engaged in at least one activity.

^{*} Estimate for those with less than high school education is significantly different from estimate for those with high school degree or more at the 0.10 level.

SNAPSHOTS³
of America's Families



Snapshots III presents findings from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families

(NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered from approximately 40,000 representative households in each round. The NSAF is part of the *Assessing the New Federalism* project (ANF). Information on ANF and the NSAF can be obtained at <http://www.urban.org/anf>.

This Snapshot was funded by The David and Lucile Packard Foundation. The *Assessing the New Federalism* project is also currently supported by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and The Ford Foundation.

Alan Weil is the director of *Assessing the New Federalism*. Kenneth Finegold is the editor of *Snapshots III*. Design is by Bremmer & Goris Communications.



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