



Disconnected Welfare Leavers Face Serious Risks

by Pamela Loprest

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About one in seven adults who left welfare recently is disconnected from both the labor market and the welfare system—that is, not working, without a working spouse, and not receiving welfare or disability benefits. The percentage was somewhat lower among those who left welfare earlier, in the years right after reform. The proportion of disconnected adults indicates the extent to which former recipients are not making successful transitions off welfare. The disconnected face significantly higher barriers to work and greater hardships than welfare leavers who work.

Disconnected adults have few ways to support their children and are at great risk of economic hardship.¹ New data from the National Survey of America's Families reveal the extent of the problem among those who left welfare recently (between 2000 and 2002), as well as the barriers and material hardships that disconnected leavers face.

Disconnected leavers include adults who at the time of the interview were not working, did not have a working spouse, and were not receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a cash assistance program for low-income adults with disabilities. In addition, they had not worked within the past year and thus were unlikely to be temporarily between jobs. Some of them might be on the verge of returning to TANF. Such returns have been high among recent leavers, with 25.5 percent back on TANF when they were interviewed in 2002 (Loprest 2003).

The share of all leavers who are disconnected rose between 1999 and 2002, from 9.8 percent to 13.8 percent. However, the number was slightly lower in 2002 because fewer families left welfare after 1999.

Former recipients who are disconnected are more likely to face barriers to work than leavers who are working and have not returned to TANF (figure 1). The disconnected are significantly more likely to be in poor health (41.3 percent compared with 25.0 percent) and less likely to have completed high school or a GED (54.7 percent compared with 22.3 percent). In addition, 44.2 percent of disconnected former recipients have not worked in the past three years.

More than half (57.3 percent) face more than one of these barriers, compared with 17.0 percent of working welfare leavers.

Economic Hardship

Disconnected former welfare recipients have limited sources of income and may be at risk of serious economic hardships. By definition, families in this group do not currently have income from earnings, TANF, or SSI. Some families do receive child support, food stamps, housing subsidies, or other assistance. One study of families with children who were living without earnings or government cash assistance found that the families received income from

occasional side jobs, family, friends, and charities, but that they faced serious economic hardship (Zedlewski et al. 2003).

The disconnected also experience more food hardship than working former TANF recipients (figure 2). They are more likely to have cut the size of meals or to have skipped meals in the past year (47.9 percent compared with 30.1 percent). Moreover, they are more likely to have worried during the past year that food would run out (68.8 percent compared with 51.2 percent) or to have had food run out with no money to buy more (62.9 percent compared with 43.4 percent). Housing-related hardship is similar among disconnected and working former recipients.

DATA AT A GLANCE

57 PERCENT OF DISCONNECTED WELFARE LEAVERS FACE MORE THAN ONE BARRIER TO WORK COMPARED WITH 17 PERCENT OF WORKING WELFARE LEAVERS.

63 PERCENT OF DISCONNECTED WELFARE LEAVERS REPORT RUNNING OUT OF MONEY TO BUY FOOD COMPARED WITH 43 PERCENT OF WORKING FORMER RECIPIENTS.

Conclusion

Helping disconnected families poses a difficult challenge. Welfare offices may not even know who these families are, since offices do not necessarily follow up on those that leave welfare. Some families may have lost benefits because of mental or physical problems that render them unable to navigate the system. Misinformation and administrative hassles may have prevented other families from regaining benefits. While some families may not want to go back on welfare because they want to be independent from the welfare system, the serious personal barriers to work and the economic hardships that disconnected former welfare recipients—and their children—face suggest that attempts should be made to reconnect them with TANF for the short term and to address barriers to work for the long term.



References

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Endnote

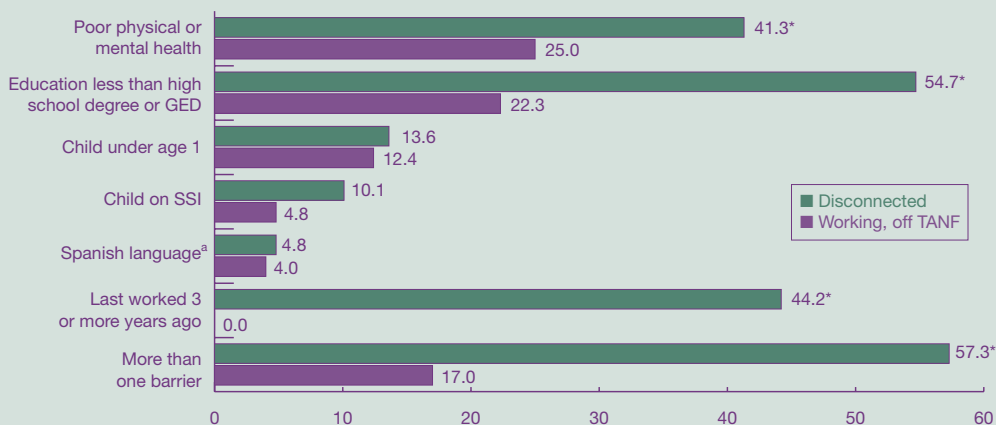
¹ See Loprest (2002) for a discussion of the barriers and economic hardships facing disconnected leavers in 1999.

Pamela Loprest is a senior research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center of the Urban Institute. Dr. Loprest's research focuses on policies that can support work among low-income families and persons with disabilities.

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Figure 1. Potential Barriers to Work among Recipients Who Left TANF between 2000 and 2002



Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families

Note: Disconnected recipients are not working, without a working spouse, and not receiving welfare or disability benefits.

SSI = Supplemental Security Income

^a Interview conducted in Spanish.

* Estimate for disconnected group is significantly different from estimate for working, off TANF group at the 0.10 level.

Figure 2. Indicators of Economic Hardship in the Previous Year among Recipients Who Left TANF between 2000 and 2002



Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families

Notes: Disconnected recipients are not working, without a working spouse, and not receiving welfare or disability benefits. Approximately 6 percent of respondents were not asked questions about food problems.

^a Only asked of those who were unable to pay bills at some time.

* Estimate for disconnected group is significantly different from estimate for working, off TANF group at the 0.10 level.

