Welfare Recipients’ Attitudes toward Welfare, Nonmarital Childbearing, and Work: Implications for Reform?

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In the federal welfare reform act, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), Congress very explicitly stated its attitudes toward the existing welfare system, nonmarital childbearing, and work. It made the following assertions:

- “Marriage is an essential institution that promotes the interests of children;”
- “Promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children; . . . [and]
- “Prevention of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and reduction in out-of-wedlock birth are very important Government interests . . . .”

Based on these findings, Congress authorized the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, whose purposes were to

- “End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;”
- “Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies; . . . and
- “Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.”

This brief explores how attitudes toward welfare, nonmarital childbearing, and work differ between mothers who have recently received welfare payments and mothers who have not recently received welfare.

Differences in attitudes may be important to public policy because attitudes may influence behavior. For example, a mother with a young child who believes that mothers should not work outside the home when children are young might find a welfare-to-work transition more difficult than would a mother who does not share that belief. At the end of the brief, we consider whether any of the differences we find have implications for federal welfare policy and practice.

Data are from the 1997 National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF), collected shortly after the passage of PRWORA. The NSAF surveyed respondents’ socioeconomic and demographic characteristics as well as their opinions regarding welfare, nonmarital childbearing, and work.

Attitudes toward Welfare

Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed with the following three statements:

- Welfare encourages young women to have babies before marriage;
- Welfare makes people work less than they would if there were not a welfare system; and
- Welfare helps people get on their feet when facing difficult situations such as
A large percentage of recipients and nonrecipients agreed with the second statement, “Welfare makes people work less than they would if there weren’t a welfare system.” However, mothers who had not received welfare in the past 12 months were more likely to agree with this statement than were mothers who received welfare in the past year (80 percent versus 62 percent).³

Both groups were equally likely to agree with the final statement that welfare helps people get on their feet. Eighty-one percent of the women who had received welfare within the past year agreed with this statement, and 82 percent who had not received welfare in the past year agreed with it.

Attitudes about these statements were also examined according to the mother’s socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics. Women with fewer than 12 years of education, African-American mothers, and single mothers were more likely to have positive attitudes toward the welfare system than other women were. Even after controlling for educational attainment, race/ethnicity, and marital status, welfare recipients were less likely to agree with the statements regarding welfare’s negative influences and just as likely to think that it helps recipients get on their feet.

**Attitudes toward Nonmarital Childbearing**

Two statements were used to gauge a mother’s attitude toward nonmarital childbirth. Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed with the following:

- People who want children ought to get married; and
- A single mother can bring up a child as well as a married couple can.

Mothers who did not receive welfare within the past year were significantly more likely to support the idea that people who want children ought to get married (74 percent) than were mothers who did receive welfare within the past year (61 percent) (figure 2). Furthermore, mothers who did not receive welfare within the past year were significantly less likely to agree that a single mother can bring up a child as well as a married couple can (65 percent) than were mothers who did receive welfare (80 percent). Still, a solid majority of both groups expressed a preference for childbearing within marriage.

There were significant associations between a mother’s education, race/ethnicity, marital status, poverty status, and age and her attitudes toward nonmarital childbearing. Better-educated mothers were significantly more likely to hold negative attitudes toward nonmarital childbearing than were those with limited schooling, and white and Hispanic mothers were less supportive of nonmarital childbearing than were African Americans (table 1).

Nevertheless, mothers who had been on welfare were more accepting of single parenthood, even when critical social and economic differences were taken into account. When we controlled for education, race/ethnicity, and marital status, the relationship between welfare receipt and attitudes toward nonmarital childbearing remained similar to those presented in figure 2.

**Attitudes toward Work**

Two statements on the survey explored a mother’s beliefs about maternal employment. Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed with the following:

- When children are young, mothers should not work outside the home; and
A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work. Regardless of whether they received welfare within the past 12 months, mothers had similar views about employment when children are young. Forty-nine percent of women in both categories agreed with the statement “When children are young, mothers should not work outside the home” (figure 3). However, after the results were adjusted for education, race/ethnicity, and marital status, a slightly larger percentage of mothers who had received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) within the past 12 months agreed with the statement (50 percent compared with 48 percent).

Recipients and nonrecipients also felt similarly about the second notion, “A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.” A large majority of the mothers from both groups agreed with this statement (81 percent from each category). However, after the results were adjusted for education, race/ethnicity, and marital status, a larger percentage of mothers who had not received welfare within the past year agreed with the statement (28 percent compared with 23 percent).

Agreement with the work-related statements varied by socioeconomic and demographic characteristics (table 1). For example, 55 percent of women who did not graduate from high school believed women should not work outside the home when children are young, whereas 49 percent of mothers with 12 to 15 years of education and 43 percent of those with at least a college degree believed this. Similarly, attitudes toward maternal employment varied greatly by race and ethnicity. Sixty percent of Hispanic mothers believed that

### TABLE 1. Percentages of Mothers Agreeing with Statements Reflecting Attitudes toward Welfare, Nonmarital Childbearing, and Work, by Education, Race/Ethnicity, Age, and Marital, Immigrant, Poverty, and Employment Status

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<tr>
<td>Less than 12 years</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<td>12–15 years</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>82%</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 or more years</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>85%</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>82%</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>87%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>71%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Younger than 25</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<td>25–44 years</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>72%</td>
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<td>Older than 44</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>85%</td>
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<td>65%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>81%</td>
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<td>Marital Status</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>85%</td>
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<td>Native born</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>82%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreign born</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<td>Poverty Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not poor</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>75%</td>
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<td>48%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>78%</td>
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<td>Employment Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not working</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working full-time</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>88%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working part-time</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>80%</td>
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</table>

*An asterisk denotes percentages that are statistically significantly different at the 0.05 level from the first category listed within each of the socioeconomic and demographic variables (e.g., for the statement that “Welfare encourages nonmarital childbearing,” a statistically significant difference exists between those with 12–15 years of education and those with fewer than 12 years of education).
mothers with small children should not work. In contrast, only 50 percent of white mothers and 35 percent of African Americans felt this way.

Attitudes toward work by mothers varied slightly by marital status. Fifty-one percent of married women believed that mothers with small children should not work, compared with 41 percent of unmarried women. On the other hand, 85 percent of unmarried women believed a working mother can establish a secure relationship with her child, compared with 80 percent of married women.

Some Modest Differences May Require Sensitivity

The attitudes of mothers who recently received welfare, as a group, differ from those of other mothers in several respects, which may have relevance for welfare reform. For some recipients, such attitudes may be a barrier to getting off and staying off welfare.

- Mothers on welfare are less likely than other mothers to believe that marriage is essential for raising children. Thus, they may be more likely than other mothers to have another child (which would be an extra obstacle to working) and less likely to get married.

- Mothers on welfare are also somewhat less likely than other mothers (after controlling for demographic differences) to believe that a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work. They are also slightly more likely than other mothers to believe that mothers should not work outside the home when children are young. Thus, resistance to taking steps toward work may be somewhat more prevalent among mothers on welfare than those in the general population.

Except for attitudes linking welfare to nonmarital childbearing, however, these differences were relatively modest, with little attitudinal difference between welfare and nonwelfare recipients. For caseworkers and providers of social services, these findings should be largely reassuring, in that attitudes do not appear to be a barrier to the transition to work for most welfare recipients, or at least no more of a barrier than for nonrecipients.

These analyses also found that many women have misgivings about mothers of small children working outside the home. Sensitivity to this issue on the part of state welfare programs and their frontline workers may pay dividends in helping all

FIGURE 2. Percentage of Mothers* Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing with Two Statements of Attitude toward Nonmarital Childbearing, by AFDC Status, 1997

Source: National Survey of America’s Families.
AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children.
* The female adult in the household most knowledgeable about the child.
** Differences in percentages significant at the 0.01 level.

FIGURE 3. Percentage of Mothers* Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing with Two Statements of Attitude toward Work, by AFDC Status, 1997

Source: National Survey of America’s Families.
AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children.
* The female adult in the household most knowledgeable about the child.
welfare recipients make successful transitions into work.

Endnotes


2. It is clear from the language of PRWORA that Congress believes that receiving welfare is undesirable. For example, it cites “being on welfare” as one of six negative consequences of nonmarital childbirth. However, PRWORA does not explicitly assert that welfare encourages nonmarital childbirth and reduced work effort.

3. PRWORA, Sec. 401, p. 9.

4. For this brief, attitudes were coded bivariately, with the strongly agree and agree responses grouped in one category, and the strongly disagree and disagree responses in a second category.

5. Statistical significance was calculated at the 0.05 level.

6. This holds true even after controlling for marital status.

About the Authors

Richard Wertheimer is an economist and senior research associate at Child Trends. He cowrote one of the first estimates of the cost of adolescent childbirth.

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This series presents findings from the 1997 and 1999 rounds of the National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered in each round from more than 42,000 households with and without telephones that are representative of the nation as a whole and of 13 selected states (Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin). As in all surveys, the data are subject to sampling variability and other sources of error. Additional information on the NSAF can be obtained at http://newfederalism.urban.org.

The NSAF is part of Assessing the New Federalism, a multiyear project to monitor and assess the devolution of social programs from the federal to the state and local levels. Alan Weil is the project director. The project analyzes changes in income support, social services, and health programs. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies child and family well-being.


This policy brief was prepared for the Assessing the New Federalism project. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Urban Institute, its board, its sponsors, or other authors in the series.