

The Next Welfare Reform Counter Boomerang Effect

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Document date: September 20, 2002

Released online: September 20, 2002

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WASHINGTON — The number of people receiving public assistance has dropped dramatically since the welfare revolution in 1996. But more than a fifth of the thousands of families that have left welfare have boomeranged back, and rolls started climbing again last year in 30 states.

As Congress debates the next stage of welfare reform this month, new research on who leaves and who returns suggests that moving from welfare to economic self-sufficiency should be more like learning to fly a plane than like parachuting out its hatch into the blue.

More than half of those who return to welfare — the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program — originally left with a job. They soon either got laid off, lost their jobs for other reasons, or found they could not earn enough to stay afloat. Many couldn't find child care and the other backstops that working parents need.

The Urban Institute's National Survey of America's Families also shows other influences on boomeranging. People with some postsecondary education stay off welfare longer after leaving it than those with no high school diploma. Over a third of former recipients who have a child after leaving rejoin the rolls. Those in poor mental or physical health are more likely than others to return. And married people are only a third as likely as never-marrieds to get back on the welfare rolls.

Clearly, families cutting loose from the welfare system need help making a lasting go of work.

Evidence from the national survey and from state studies tells the same story: Families who get child care, public health insurance, food stamps, housing assistance, or emergency assistance are much less likely to return to welfare than those who don't. Yet, many former recipients who qualify for these work-support benefits that have proven effective don't get them.

Fewer than a third of adults who had left welfare in the past two years — whether for a job or not — reported they were receiving food stamps. A third of former adult recipients and a fifth of children had no health insurance.

Many of these families qualify for public benefits, but either don't know they do or find negotiating the application maze while working is too difficult — small wonder when waiting in line or scraping documentation together can sometimes take all day. Simplifying application and recertification procedures and making the whole process more "worker friendly" could help.

Besides simplifying paperwork, state welfare agencies need to hold on to the flexibility and resources given them in 1996 so they can expand job-retention services for those who leave welfare to work. For instance, states can fund job mentors for first-time workers, or such emergency supports as temporary child care or car repairs so families can weather the short-term crises that can trigger job loss.

In short, welfare offices need to treat those fresh-off-the-rolls as "halfway" clients until they can make it on their own.

That means putting together the benefits and services other than cash that parents need to keep working. It also means judiciously dividing up resources so that both working parents and those still on the rolls get the basics they need.

Over the longer run, low-income families also need alternative sources of temporary support to cover a job layoff or pregnancy.

Options include expanding unemployment insurance or access to paid family leave.

As Congress grapples in a sputtering economy with welfare's next stage and the prospect of rising caseloads, one priority should be helping those who have left cash assistance behind get firmly anchored in the workplace so they can stay off TANF.

Some former welfare families have so many problems — including little or no previous work experience — that they may need several tries just to get off the rolls even with a complete package of transitional benefits.

Even so, the more than half of all former recipients who have already gone to work deserve the support needed to stay on the job and keep the welfare revolution rolling.

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