

Profile of Disability Among Families on AFDC

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After a year and a half of contentious debate and two presidential vetoes, President Clinton and the 104th Congress reached an uneasy agreement on welfare reform.

The legislation enacted by Congress and signed by the president eliminates Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the largest cash assistance program in the nation's social safety net, and replaces it with block grants to the states.

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Under the new system, adults in poor families with children will face increased work requirements and a five-year time limit on benefits over their lifetimes. However, the legislation allows states to exempt from the time limit 20 percent of those qualifying for assistance. This exemption is in part to help states cope with hard-to-place individuals, including the disabled.

Currently, some disabled persons receive cash assistance under the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, a program specifically designed to help the disabled and the elderly. But many disabled persons do not qualify for SSI benefits. Traditionally, poor families with children who do not qualify have been able to receive AFDC benefits. Unfortunately, little is known about the number and characteristics of such families.

In addition, many women with less severe disabilities will need certain accommodations to be able to work or may have limited ability to work in the jobs available to them. The presence of children with disabilities in families on welfare, particularly single-parent families, can also inhibit work because of special child care needs. While the goal of the new welfare law may be for all AFDC recipients to work, access to necessary resources, ranging from special equipment or training to appropriate child care, varies substantially across states and localities.

Thus, it is unclear whether the new policy will adequately protect women who cannot reasonably be expected to work or who will require significant assistance to find and maintain employment.

To fill this knowledge gap, Urban Institute researchers Pamela Loprest and Gregory Acs recently assessed the extent to which women and families currently receiving AFDC have a limited ability to work due to their own disabilities or those of their children. The resulting disability profile of AFDC recipients raises questions about whether the 20 percent exemption allowed for states is high enough to accommodate the number of recipients who are hard to place in jobs.

The researchers employed a functional definition of disability to construct their profile. Under this definition, the interaction among impairments (such as blindness), chronic health conditions (such as arthritis), and social expectations about work is reviewed to determine its effect on the ability of an individual to perform expected work-related tasks — or, in the case of children, age-appropriate functions, such as attending school.

To create as complete a profile as possible, the researchers drew data from three sources: the 1990 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), the 1990 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), and 1992 data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). Their analysis reveals that between 27.4 and 29.5 percent of families receiving AFDC have either a mother or child with some level of functional limitation. Despite the differences in sample size and wording of survey questions among the three data sources used, this range is relatively narrow. In addition, since the data do not fully capture limitations due to mental or emotional disorders or substance abuse, these findings probably understate the true level of disability among the AFDC population.

Disability Among Women Receiving AFDC

The researchers relied on several different measures to determine the extent of disability that would limit or preclude gainful employment among women using AFDC. Each measure provides an important — but limited — perspective on the prevalence of disability among these women. When analyzed together, a more complete picture emerges. The measures included disability status, specific limitations to work, and use of health services.

Work limited by disability status. This measure involves simply asking survey respondents the question: "Do you have a physical, mental, or other health problem that limits the kind or amount of work you can do?" The

percentage of all women on AFDC reporting a work limitation due to such health conditions ranges from 16.6 to 19.2 percent across the three data sources the researchers used.

Specific limitations to work. An additional measure of disability is the self-reported ability of these women to perform specific, job-related functions. Asking about specific functional limitations allowed the researchers to gauge the severity of disability among AFDC recipients based on less subjective answers. Of women receiving AFDC, 20.1 percent reported having at least one functional limitation.

The severity of these functional limitations can be judged by separating them by type. The researchers studied difficulties associated with meeting basic needs, referred to as Activities of Daily Living (ADLs), such as dressing, eating, and bathing; and those associated with meeting routine needs, referred to as Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADLs), such as lifting ten pounds, using stairs, and preparing meals.

Of women receiving AFDC, 10.6 percent report some difficulty with at least one ADL. Of these, a third (3.3 percent) report difficulty with more than one ADL, an indication of substantial limitation. In addition, 9.4 percent of women receiving AFDC have difficulty with an IADL.

Health service use. The researchers also considered the number of days a respondent reported staying in bed for at least a half-day due to illness and the number of days spent in a hospital (not counting childbirth and outpatient visits). About 7 percent of women on AFDC reported they were confined to bed because of health reasons for more than 30 days in the past year, and almost 4 percent of women were in the hospital for more than five days. Even if these health problems are not chronic, they can be impediments to work for this group of women.

Using all of these measures, the researchers were able to construct a broad assessment of disability among female AFDC recipients. As shown in the accompanying [table](#), women reporting a limitation of some kind ranged from 16.6 to 20.1 percent across the three data sources used. The researchers also determined that 8.4 to 10.6 percent of women had a serious disability, meaning a reported inability to perform at least one job-related function, or were unable to work at all.

Disability Among Children on AFDC

The same criterion of functional limitation used with adults was used again by the researchers to assess disabilities among children receiving AFDC benefits. The researchers focused on disabilities that prevent a child from performing a major activity considered appropriate for that child's age group. A major activity for a child under age 6, for example, involves regular play, while for children ages 6 to 17 the major activity is attending school.

Specific limitations to play and education. The researchers found that in 11.1 to 15.9 percent of the families receiving AFDC, the children (of all ages) are limited in the kind or amount of their activity, and in almost 2 percent of such families a child is unable to perform a major activity ([see table](#)).

Only 1.7 percent of families on AFDC have young children (ages less than six) who are limited in age-appropriate activities. This is partly due to the difficulty in diagnosing some disabilities, such as learning disabilities, in young children. In addition, 2.4 percent of families receiving AFDC have children between the ages of three and 14 with a "long-lasting" condition that limits their ability to walk, run, or use stairs.

Health service use. A child's use of, or need for, certain health care services can also reflect disability. The researchers point out, however, that distinguishing between disability and severe-but-temporary acute conditions can be difficult. Interpreting data on hospital use is an example of this difficulty. About 4 percent of families receiving AFDC have a child that has spent more than five days in the hospital in the last year, and 6.3 percent of families have a child that has paid more than 15 visits to the hospital. Nevertheless, these statistics exclude children with serious disabilities who may not have visited the hospital recently.

The researchers also examined more targeted measures, such as special equipment usage or reported health condition. Almost 5 percent of families require special equipment, from wheelchairs to special clothing, reflecting a range of disabilities. One or more severe or chronic conditions — such as a crippling orthopedic condition, blood disorder, or epilepsy — affects a child in 3.8 percent of families receiving AFDC.

Outlook for Disabled Welfare Recipients

The high incidence of disabilities among families receiving AFDC may have significant implications for successfully reshaping the welfare system. The researchers argue that policies placing time limits on receipt of benefits and introducing stricter requirements for work must take into consideration the recipients' ability to work. Under some current reforms being implemented by states, the long-term goal is for all recipients to be working. Yet, in light of the researchers' disability profile, the 20 percent threshold for states to exempt AFDC recipients from the five-year time limit may not be high enough.

The researchers point out that a woman's ability to work depends, in part, on whether she or her child has a disability, the nature and severity of that disability, and the requirements of the jobs available to her. Caring for children with disabilities can be extremely time-consuming, may require specialized day care, and can entail additional expense. For women with severe disabilities, policymakers may want to consider exemptions from work requirements altogether. For women with less severe disabilities, accommodations in workplaces, alternative work arrangements, and specialized child care may make work more feasible. Better enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities, may lead to more employers making such workplace accommodations.

DISABILITY AMONG FAMILIES RECEIVING AFDC

<i>Women with</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Any work-related limitation	16.6–20.1
A serious disability preventing one or all work-related functions	8.4–10.6
<i>Children (ages 21 and younger) with</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Some limitation in age-appropriate activity	11.1–15.9
A serious disability preventing age-appropriate activity or due to one or more chronic conditions	1.8–3.8

Source: Urban Institute 1996 tabulations from 1990 Survey of Income and Program Participation, 1990 National Health Interview Survey, and 1992 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

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