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Welfare Reform Sanctions and Financial Strain in a Food-Pantry Sample

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Survey and interview data about life after welfare reform were collected from food pantry clients in upstate New York in 1997 and 1999. By 1999, respondents were increasingly likely to have no work or benefits. Having no work or benefits was also associated with having been penalized (sanctioned) for not working or for noncompliance with welfare rules. Sanctions for not working averaged 89 days. Clients sanctioned for job loss tended to report problems with health (including children's health). Sanctioned individuals reported relatively high levels of financial strain, unstable housing, children's changing schools, and lack of a phone. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

Since national implementation of welfare reform through passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, many states have reported substantial decreases in welfare caseloads (USDHHS, 1998a). Generally it is assumed that welfare caseloads are decreasing as clients enter the work force. Yet one post-welfare-reform study conducted at social service agencies and charities in 10 states (NETWORK, 1999) found a sharp rise in the number of people who had neither welfare nor work. Food pantry and soup kitchen users were most likely to report unmet health and utility needs, and going without food. The present study asks to what extent food pantry clients' reports of receiving wages or benefits changed from 1997 to 1999. Using quantitative and qualitative data, the study also asks if welfare penalties (sanctions) involving cuts

or reductions in benefits were associated with clients' reporting life strain or financial strain, and asks about reasons for sanctions.

Welfare Reform, the Work-Participation Formula, and Sanctions

Once a federal entitlement for the poor—Aid to Families with Dependent Children—welfare has been restructured as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) run by states [Eitzen & Zinn, 2000; National Governors' Association, National Conference of State Legislatures, & American Public Welfare Association (NGA et al.), n.d.]. TANF rules are meant to move individuals from welfare to work. In exchange for welfare, TANF recipients are asked to take part in job search activities or to perform community service work (workfare), and to find paid work within 24 months of first receiving benefits. Those who do not find paid work within two years must take workfare. There is a 5-year lifetime cap on receipt of TANF benefits.

TANF rules also push states to move people from welfare to work. States only get full TANF block grants from the U.S. government if they raise welfare recipients' participation in work to acceptable levels, which rise over a 5-year period. To count as workers in state totals, individuals must work at least 20 hours a week, two-parent families a combined 30 hours a week (family caretakers with children under three are exempted). Work may include community service or vocational training but not college, unless states make exceptions. State access to TANF funds is calculated using a work-participation formula: states must show a sufficiently high ratio of TANF workers relative to all TANF recipients. If the number of TANF recipients in the formula denominator is reduced, states look more successful in putting welfare recipients to work. As one way to subtract non-workers from the denominator, states may subtract people who have "refused to work" within the past month and been penalized (sanctioned) for no more than three months in the past year with cuts or reductions in welfare and food stamps. Where sanctions take people off the welfare rolls for the short or long term, they can also make state welfare reform look more successful (Rogers-Dillon & Skrentny, 1999; Tyson, 1998).

*Leaving the Welfare Rolls but not Getting Work:
Job Loss and Sanctions*

Although TANF pushes welfare recipients to work, some may have trouble with employment. Those individuals could start work, go off welfare, and then lose work; thus, although people might leave the welfare rolls, they would not necessarily be getting work. Those who might have trouble getting or keeping work include those who have little education, low self-esteem, or medical, mental health or substance use problems (Danziger, Corcoran, Danziger, Heflin, Kald, et al., 2000; Olson & Pavetti, 1996). In 1996, not only was welfare reform implemented but Supplemental Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits for substance use were cut and renewed for only about 35% of those who reapplied (Lewin & Westat, 1998). Those who turned to TANF might have had trouble meeting its work rules due to substance use or other barriers; in general, substance users have relatively high rates of unemployment (see Metsch, McCoy, Miller, McAnany, & Pereyra, 2000).

In 1996 criteria for granting Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) benefits to children with disabilities were also tightened (Eitzen & Zinn, 2000). Mothers who have been on welfare are especially likely to have children who are chronically ill, and may find it difficult both to take care of children and work at jobs with inflexible schedules and few sick days (Heymann & Earle, 1999); 79% of the welfare mothers in Punttenney's (1998) sample were caring for a family member or network member with a serious health problem. Childcare and transportation are other great needs of poor working families (Edin & Lein, 1997), yet some states provide little assistance for those needs (Tufts Center on Hunger and Poverty, 1998). Such problems—and especially health issues—help explain 25% to 40% rates of job loss among workers just off welfare (Hershey & Pavetti, 1997; USDHHS, 1998b).

When other work is not available, welfare recipients may take community service workfare in exchange for benefits; however, the U.S. Conference of Mayors (1997) found that 92% of cities surveyed did not have enough low-skill jobs to put welfare recipients to work (see Jensen & Chitose, 1997). Katz (1989) described

workfare as work for relatively short periods in jobs that offer no training or remedial education, and tend not to boost wages enough to lift people out of poverty. Some may not wish to take or keep such work, leading to noncompliance with workfare and sanctions. In general, sanctions have been applied more often and for longer periods than in the past, but do not improve compliance with work programs (USDHHS, 1997).

The extent to which states or caseworkers cut welfare benefits for noncompliance with welfare rules varies widely (Associated Press, 1999; Froomkin, 1998). Even when unemployed individuals want to work, some states may construe "refusal to work" broadly and may impose sanctions. Writing about a Florida state welfare reform program (implemented prior to national reform), Rogers-Dillon and Skrentny (1999) noted that it received national media attention and intense pressure to succeed from the start. Because supervisors thought "having an unemployed compliant participant would reflect a failure within the program" (p. 19), they defined noncompliance as not having gotten work within the welfare reform time limit, and structured review of cases and penalties accordingly. Thus, even for compliant welfare recipients, not working could be associated with a greater likelihood of being penalized with cuts in benefits.

Financial Strain. Upon losing welfare, people may in turn lose resources useful for getting or keeping work—for example, cash for rent and other needs. Tightened welfare reform restrictions on eligibility for food stamps may also increase strain. Little is known about how sanctions or welfare cuts affect welfare recipients. One study (cited in Tweedie, 1998) found that 53% of sanctioned workers planned to get jobs, but only 30% could; 47% then depended on relatives, although only 23% had planned to; 38% reapplied for benefits. In a study of state welfare reform, sanctions saved programs money but did not lead to higher worker earnings (Riccio & Orenstein, 1996). Given a shortage of available jobs, sanctioned individuals may not be able to get work to make up for lost benefits and may experience serious financial strain.

Work and Welfare in the Area Studied Here

In the upstate New York city studied here, the economy has stagnated since the decline of three major manufacturing in-

dustries, including I.B.M.; nor does the nearby rural area offer much work (Fitchen, 1995). Applicants for work include better-educated displaced workers, students, and retirees, as well as people moving from New York City, which has a 9% unemployment rate that has helped raise the state rate to 5.5% (Children's Defense Fund, 1998). In December of 1996 Broome County began implementing welfare reform legislation; 20–25% of county welfare recipients have gotten work in each year since. Work sites vary in whether they provide mentorship and training; some assume workers come ready to work. In 1997, 5% of county welfare-to-work participants were sanctioned, with numbers dropping to 4% since—a change attributed to growing acceptance of workfare. Tufts' Center on Hunger and Poverty (1998) ranked New York in the middle of states for welfare reform incentives and penalties.

Hypotheses: This study asked to what extent receipt of benefits and wages changed for two independent samples from 1997 to 1999. NETWORK (1999) found that over time, social service clients were increasingly likely to have neither welfare nor work, with food pantry clients being especially likely to lack resources. This study hypothesized that (1) compared to food pantry clients in 1997, by 1999 clients would be less likely to receive welfare and other benefits (e.g., SSI or food stamps) but would not be more likely to work. Further, because sanctioned individuals might be especially likely to have had benefits cut as a result of not working, (2) they might be especially likely to have neither work nor benefits, and (3) might report more financial and life strain than others did. (4) Those sanctioned for not working might tend to report problems with health, substance use, childcare, and workfare. Qualitative data from interviews will also be cited to illustrate perceptions of reasons for and the impact of sanctions.

Method

Procedure and Sample

The agency conducting the study was located downtown, near poor neighborhoods, in a small city in upstate New York. Surveys about welfare reform were conducted in July and August of 1997, and again with a new group of clients in March and April of 1999. The agency's food pantry supplied a free bag of groceries

per family once a month. Clients were asked to volunteer to take the confidential 20-minute survey as they waited for food, clothing, or services. About 60% of clients asked to participate did so. Trained volunteers orally administered surveys in a quiet room near the waiting room, and took notes as respondents spoke of life after welfare reform in unrecorded interviews. The notes were used as the basis for coding narrative themes.

Demographic characteristics of the 1997 ($N = 131$) and 1999 ($N = 160$) samples did not differ significantly and thus are presented together. Because this study pertains to people eligible for welfare, data from 11 people aged 65 or older were omitted; only one person in that group (a caretaker grandparent) received welfare. To conduct analyses on independent samples for 1997 and 1999, 4 people surveyed in both years were omitted. Demographic characteristics of the remaining group ($N = 270$) are given in Table 1. The sample was 60% female and 73% non-Hispanic White, of average age 37.2 ($SD = 10.1$); 1999 data showed that clients had about 11.4 years of education ($SD = 2.2$), and 44% less than a high school degree. Half of clients (51%) had children. Agency data showed that most clients made less than \$10,000/year. People getting substance use treatment were less likely than others to report working, $X^2(1) = 3.84, p < .05$.

Measures and Data Analysis

A somewhat more extensive set of measures was collected in 1997 than in 1999. In 1997 respondents completed survey items about life strain or financial strain in the past six months—whether they had moved due to lack of rent, or had a child change schools; and whether it was easier, about the same, or harder to pay for adult health care, rent, food, or bills (e.g., for utilities or the phone) than it had been six months before. The latter items were recoded to indicate increased financial difficulty or not. Respondents also noted whether they had gone without food for a day in the past month, and in both years noted whether they had a phone. In both years, respondents reported whether they had received wages, unemployment benefits, substance use treatment, welfare, SSI/SSDI, housing benefits, food stamps, government child care, or government medical benefits in the past six months. Welfare recipients could have received TANF or General

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

<i>Demographic item</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent or Mean</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
Gender			
Women	161	60%	
Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic White	197	73%	
African-American	47	17%	
Latino	14	5%	
Other ethnicities	12	5%	
Recoded age			
18–34	124	46%	
35–49	111	41%	
50–64	35	13%	
Number of adults in household			
(mean)	270	1.6	(0.8)
One	146	54%	
Two	101	37%	
Three or more	23	9%	
Number of children in household			
(mean)	270	1.3	(1.8)
None	132	49%	
One	43	16%	
Two	35	13%	
Three or more	60	22%	
Number of children			
(Parents only)	138	2.6	(1.7)
Age of children			
(mean in years)	138	7.5	(4.5)

Assistance. A No work/No benefits item was coded for whether people received wages or any of the benefits above (except substance use treatment or child care), or had no such resources. Respondents also noted if they had been sanctioned and how many times; in 1997 lengths of sanctions were noted. Reasons for sanctions were coded from narratives into three categories: (a) Not working—losing work or being fired, not taking workfare, or quitting work; (b) Noncompliance—such as unreported

income, not complying with job search rules, or breaking rules (e.g., selling food stamps); and (c) Minor infractions—missing job appointments or interviews, or leaving drug treatment early. The first author coded all narratives; a second rater 20% of them; inter-rater reliability exceeded .90.

To compare 1997 and 1999 data on receipt of wages and benefits, a first set of logistic regressions was estimated in which dependent variables were receipt of earnings or each of the benefits (coded 1 if received, 0 if not) and independent variables were year (1997, 1999), sanction status (sanctioned or not), and demographic controls—gender, age, minority status (White, Non-White), number of children in the household, and number of adults in the household. Analyses were not estimated for unemployment benefits or government childcare, which only 3% and 4% of the sample received. An interaction term for Sanctioned status \times Year was tested in regressions and retained as a predictor if significant. Also, a logistic regression was estimated to predict the likelihood of being sanctioned; independent variables were year and demographic controls. Next, to examine correlates of increased financial strain and life strain in 1997, a second set of logistic regressions was estimated with sanction status and demographic controls as predictors. To see if the prevalence of reasons for sanctions differed in 1997 and 1999, cross-tabulations with chi-squares were conducted. For 1997 data, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to see if sanction lengths differed by the reason for the sanction.

Results

Receipt of Earnings and Benefits in 1997 and 1999, and Financial Strain in 1997

Table 2 shows results of logistic regressions that asked if reported receipt of wages or benefits differed by year (1997 or 1999) or for those who had been sanctioned compared to those who had not. Confirming Hypothesis 1, compared to respondents in 1997, those surveyed in 1999 were more likely to report having neither work nor benefits. They were less likely to report getting welfare but not more likely to report working. They were also less likely to report receiving SSI/SSDI, housing benefits, food

Table 2

Receipt of Earnings and Benefits: Percentages and Correlates, by Year and Sanction Status

Earnings or Benefits		All (n = 265)	Sanctioned (n = 40)	Not Sanctioned (n = 225)		r
No work/ No benefits	1997	7%	25%	3%	Sanction status	.17**
	1999	23%	38%	21%	Year	.21***
Welfare	1997	47%	46%	50%	Sanction status	.00
	1999	26%	31%	25%	Year	-.18***
Earnings	1997	21%	13%	22%	Sanction status	-.08*
	1999	26%	6%	28%	Year	.00
SSI/SSDI	1997	38%	21%	41%	Sanction status	-.06
	1999	28%	19%	29%	Year	-.10*
Housing benefits	1997	31%	46%	29%	Sanction status	.00
	1999	17%	19%	17%	Year	-.12*
Food stamps	1997	67%	50%	71%	Sanction status	-.10*
	1999	44%	50%	44%	Year	-.20****
					SS × Year	.08*
Medical benefits	1997	78%	58%	84%	Sanction status	-.14**
	1999	54%	56%	53%	Year	-.24****
					SS × Year	.12**
Substance use treatment	1997	10%	21%	7%	Sanction status	.19**
	1999	5%	19%	3%	Year	.00

Note: Correlation coefficients (*r*) for receipt of earnings or benefits from logistic regressions with Year of receipt (1 = 1997, 2 = 1999) and Sanction status (0 = No, 1 = Yes) as predictors.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ **** $p < .0001$

stamps or medical benefits. Confirming Hypothesis 2, those who had been sanctioned were also especially likely to report having neither work nor benefits. They were less likely than others to report receiving wages and more likely to report receiving substance use treatment. There were two significant interactions of Sanctioned status × Year. In 1997 (but not 1999), people who had

been sanctioned were less likely than others to report receiving food stamps [$F(1, 116) = 3.98, p < .05$; 1999, $F(1, 145) = .24, ns$] or government medical benefits [$F(1, 116) = 7.95, p = .006$; 1999, $F(1, 145) = .05, ns$]. Early in welfare reform in 1997, people may not have realized that even if their welfare had been cut due to sanctions, they might still be eligible for food stamps or medical benefits. A greater proportion of clients (20%) was sanctioned in 1997 than in 1999 (11%), $r = -.09, p < .05$; in 1999, relatively fewer people received welfare or food stamps and could be sanctioned. Demographic items did not predict sanction prevalence

Among demographic correlates of benefits receipt, those with more children were more likely to report getting welfare ($r = .17, p < .0007$), food stamps ($r = .13, p < .005$), and government medical benefits ($r = .16, p < .001$). Those with more adults at home were less likely to report getting welfare ($r = -.11, p < .02$) or food stamps ($r = -.11, p < .01$). Minorities were more likely than Whites to report getting welfare ($r = .15, p < .002$), food stamps ($r = .15, p < .002$), medical benefits ($r = .12, p < .008$), housing benefits ($r = .15, p < .003$) and substance use treatment ($r = .25, p < .001$), with no difference between Blacks, Latinos, or others on the items. Men were especially likely to report getting substance use treatment ($r = .11, p < .03$), older people to report getting SSI/SSDI ($r = .12, p < .009$). Not having work or benefits was less likely among people with more children ($r = -.15, p < .007$) and minorities ($r = -.11, p < .03$).

Hypothesis 3 had predicted that sanctioned individuals would be especially likely to report financial and life strain. In general, those in the 1997 sample reported increased financial strain in the first six months after implementation of welfare reform (Table 3). Yet people who had been sanctioned were especially likely to report that it was harder to pay for bills, rent, and adult health care; were marginally more likely to report that it was harder to pay for food; and were more likely to say that they had moved due to lack of rent, or that their children had changed schools. The groups did not differ in reports of having gone without food for a day in the past month, which more than half of each group reported. In both years, those who had been sanctioned were less likely to report having a phone. Interviewer notes also revealed client financial strain. Of one person sanc-

Table 3

Relation Between Having Been Sanctioned and Financial or Life Strain in 1997: Correlation Coefficients from Logistic Regressions

<i>Financial or life quality items</i>	<i>All (n = 118)</i>	<i>Sanctioned (n = 24)</i>	<i>Not Sanctioned (n = 94)</i>	<i>r for Sanction Status</i>
In past 6 months, harder to pay for . . .				
Food	80%	96%	76%	.12+
Bills	63%	83%	60%	.13*
Rent	49%	67%	46%	.10*
Adult health care	36%	67%	28%	.23**
Lacked food in past month	53%	54%	52%	.00
Moved due to lack of rent	17%	33%	14%	.07*
Child changed schools ^a	27%	54%	22%	.17*
No phone (1997 and 1999) ^b	44%	60%	41%	.07*

Note: Correlation coefficients (*r*) for financial or life strain items from logistic regressions with Sanction status (0 = No, 1 = Yes) as a predictor along with demographic controls.

^a Parents in 1997 only, *n* = 74

^b *n* = 270 + *p* < .10 * *p* < .05 ** *p* < .01.

tioned six months, an interviewer wrote, "The family had to move, the children had to change schools. It's harder to get food. The partner needs an operation." Of another person sanctioned 75 days, the interviewer wrote, "They cannot pay the rent, they are afraid of eviction, the children are sent to other homes for food."

Reasons for Sanctions and Length of Sanctions

Asked why they had been sanctioned (Table 4), respondents mentioned not working (43%), especially losing a job; minor infractions, such as missing job appointments or leaving substance use treatment early (18%); and noncompliance with rules, including not reporting income or not complying with job search rules (39%). Reasons for sanctions did not differ by year [Fisher's exact *t* (two-tailed) = .65, *ns*]. For 1997 data, sanction lengths differed according to reasons for sanctions [$F(2, 23) = 46.93, p < .0001$]. Sanctions for noncompliance were longest (about 5–6 months), followed by those for not working (3 months), which in

turn differed from those for minor infractions (about 1.5 months). Sanctions averaged 106 days, or over three months ($SD = 52$; Range, 3–180 days); 5 people's second sanctions averaged 67 days ($SD = 29$).

Not working: Health, childcare and transportation. Of 19 people sanctioned for losing work or not working, six did not explain; two had missed work and then lost a job due to lack of childcare or transportation, and 11 (58%) had lost work (for one, a temp job) or not taken work due to being ill or caring for a relative who was ill. For example, a man who took his fiancée to the emergency room for pneumonia was fired for coming to work

Table 4

Percentage of Reasons for Sanctions, and Mean Length of Sanctions

Reason for Sanction	1997 and 1999		1997 Sanction Length	
	Category n	Within Category n %	Within Category n	M (SD)
<i>Not working</i>	19		11	88.6 (4.5) ^a
Lost job/Fired		12 (63%)	7	87.9 (5.7)
Didn't take workfare		4 (21%)	3	90.0 (0.0)
Quit job		3 (16%)	1	90.0 (0.0)
<i>Minor infraction</i>	8		7	49.3 (23.4) ^a
Missed appointment/ interview		6 (75%)	5	48.0 (26.8)
Left substance use treatment early		2 (25%)	2	52.5 (10.6)
<i>Noncompliance</i>	17		8	161.3 (35.6) ^a
Unreported income		5 (29%)	2	180.0 (0.0)
Broke rules		5 (29%)	3	180.0 (0.0)
Did not fulfill job search rules		3 (18%)	2	150.0 (42.43)
Alleges social service error		2 (12%)	1	90.0 (0.0)
Don't know		2 (12%)	—	—

^a Significant difference in sanction length in Scheffe post-hoc contrasts: Sanctions for noncompliance longer than sanctions for not working, which are longer than sanctions for infractions, $p < .05$.

late and was sanctioned. A mother who stayed home to take care of a sick daughter also lost work and was sanctioned. One woman who had a doctor's note saying she was too ill to work was still sanctioned six months for not reporting for workfare. Another respondent who had been in an accident could not get a note from a doctor who refused to deal with social services and was sanctioned for not working.

People with substance use problems were also sanctioned, including a man who quit his job because he was addicted to cocaine. A substance-using woman subject to panic attacks quit a workfare job after an upsetting incident at a men's shelter; nor could she deal with the on-the-spot decision making at the security job she got next.

It was frustrating to her that her workfare assignments didn't take into account what she can or can't handle. There is no choice, just an assignment to show up somewhere. She said, "Put me in a women's shelter or let me work with old people." She seemed willing to work but frustrated that her circumstances weren't given any credence.

Another woman spoke of a friend with HIV who risked sanctions if she did not attend workfare even if she might feel very sick on a particular day. "Anyone that sick should be given SSI," the friend said. "Her health may be compromised just to return the little benefits she does get."

Lack of childcare raised problems also. One woman missed work and lost her job when the child's father did not come to take the child to the babysitter; nor did she have other resources for childcare. "The interview was difficult to conduct," the interviewer wrote, "because the child was very active and trying to ransack the office." With no money for bus fare, another woman walked miles to work daily. One rainy day she did not want to walk to work, lost her job, and was subsequently sanctioned.

Workfare. Five people (including three noted above) were specifically sanctioned for not taking or continuing with social services workfare; it is also possible that some among the six who did not give reasons for not working were included in this group. Workfare jobs—described as offering little advancement—included crossing guard, security guard, work at a men's shelter, maintenance, and other unskilled work. Assigned to move boxes

all day, a woman asked why she could not get job training. Her interviewer wrote, "She would love some skills to help her get a job she would enjoy. She would like to work with children." "At workfare they change your job so often there isn't enough training to learn," another person said. "They feel workfare just puts them to work to pay for a living, but they can't keep the job after, so they feel no better off," an interviewer wrote. One man felt "upset about working through social services workfare and not recognized as a real worker. He wants to be hired and get off welfare."

One woman was told that social services would pay for day care as she attended workfare classes and job interviews: "She never got the money, and with what she received a month, the child care bill made things worse." Applying for government childcare, she learned that she would need to work 30 hours a week. Her interviewer noted, "She does not want to be away from her son that long each week. She feels he still needs the love and care only a mother can give her own child. She does not want a stranger raising her son. She felt it is why children are so violent." When the woman refused workfare, she was sanctioned.

Noncompliance with welfare rules. Sanctions were also imposed for not complying with welfare rules—including not reporting income or not performing job search requirements—e.g., missing a job seminar. Some sanctioned for unreported income may not have known that they had to report workfare earnings to DSS; receiving benefits contingent on participating in workfare, some may have thought of workfare pay as benefits, not income. In 1999, a woman who did not report \$151 in income was sanctioned 12 months. Another person sanctioned three months for job loss was sanctioned an additional six months for unreported income. Others who were sanctioned included a respondent whose family member did not have a birth certificate and a woman who had not reported a niece living with her. People in substance use treatment were 50% of the group of 8 who were sanctioned for leaving treatment early or missing appointments.

Other issues in implementing TANF. Welfare rules could also be problematic in other ways. Work requirements could come at the cost of completing college. One man left college just short of getting a B.A. to work for benefits to support his family. A

woman returning to school was also pressed to take workfare. Her interviewer wrote,

She has been manic-depressive since age 11. She is having difficulty finding the right medication. With all her depression, her husband was able to obtain full custody of the children. She has started college this summer taking computer science and is very excited. She is a full-time student who has ten hours-a-week work-study. DSS wants her to work an additional 20 hours-a-week to work off her grant.

It was not clear if the woman would be sanctioned for not working the 20 hours a week.

People whose benefits were cut when they got work also spoke of rapid cuts that sometimes did not give them enough time to get back on their feet financially, and may have contributed to some people's then losing work. An interviewer wrote of one man,

Shortly after starting work, Social Services took away benefits. . . . He could not pay next month's rent. He, his pregnant wife and a two-year-old daughter had nowhere to live. They moved from family to family. They could not afford the \$24/night that Salvation Army charged. They are now back to any empty apartment, but at least it's shelter.

Discussion

Decreased Resources Over Time and for Sanctioned Individuals

Despite reports that welfare-to-work is a success (Hobbs, 1996; USDHHS, 1997, 1998b), states have not been required to track those who leave welfare (McClintock & Colosi, 1998), and little is known about the effects of sanctions or benefits cuts. In this study, the proportion of food pantry clients who said they had no work or benefits rose from 1997 to 1999 (see NETWORK, 1999). By 1999 clients were less likely to report getting welfare, SSI, food stamps, medical benefits, and housing benefits. Since 1996, policy changes have made it harder to get welfare, SSI, and food stamps—reducing the number of people getting these benefits nationally (see Lawton, Lester, Todd & Smith, 1999). People who lost work and reapplied for TANF may also not

have been granted it. Further, at welfare offices people may not have been told they were eligible for TANF, Medicaid, or food stamps—also helping to explain national declines in receipt of these benefits since welfare reform (Keigher & Fendt, 1998; Lawton et al., 1999).

Because the object of welfare reform is to move people from welfare to work, one might expect decreases in receipt of welfare to be matched by increases in the percentage of people who work. Yet study participants were not more likely to work in 1999 than in 1997. In a non-metropolitan area where available jobs tend to be low-wage or part-time—and where many people compete for work—people may have had trouble getting or keeping jobs (Jensen & Chitose, 1997). Working poor are also susceptible to losing work due to layoffs or jobs ending, including temporary or seasonal work ending (Riccio, Friedlander, & Freedman, 1994). Lack of a high school degree—noted by 40% of the group—may have hindered getting work too (Metsch et al., 2000). Further, people in this poor food pantry sample may have needed more intensive help with childcare, transportation, health care, counseling, or job training to get and keep jobs.

Sanctioned individuals were especially likely to have neither work nor benefits. People sanctioned for job loss noted problems with health, caring for sick partners or children, and arranging childcare and transportation. After being sanctioned, respondents noted greater hardship paying for adult health care, bills and rent; a greater likelihood of moving due to lack of rent; and less likelihood of having a phone—conditions that could make it even harder to work.

Implications for Policy and Programs

If sanctions impose financial strain on vulnerable people, including those who are already trying to work, one can ask if there might be better ways to help people work. Tufts Center on Hunger and Poverty (1998) suggested two alternatives to sanctions: policies to help people work and to help develop income and assets. States might also benefit from new definitions for “worker” and “nonworker” as they calculate work-participation rates and apply for TANF funds.

Helping People Get and Keep Jobs

Providing time and resources for health care. Stereotypes hold that welfare recipients are too lazy to get off welfare and need to be pushed to work (Katz, 1989). Yet research suggests that many welfare recipients do want to work and that intensive and multi-faceted interventions help make that possible (see Strawn & Martinson, 2000, for a review.) In this study, respondents tended to report losing work or not taking work because employers or welfare offices had not been flexible when respondents encountered problems with individual or family health concerns. Findings suggest the importance of broad policy changes to give employees personal, medical, or vacation time off when necessary, since low-wage jobs tend to be inflexible about giving workers such time (Heymann & Earle, 1999). For example, people with chronic health problems (such as HIV) might better work if they could take time off to deal with illness as it arose.

Substance users may also need enough time to get back on their feet. In this study, people who had recently been in substance use treatment were over-represented among sanctioned individuals; perhaps they had trouble meeting welfare rules due to addiction and disorganized lives, or had trouble getting work. Metsch et al. (2000) found that substance-using women were more likely to make a successful transition from welfare to work when they received at least a year of treatment and aftercare. Programs that try to put substance users to work fast may be less successful than those permitting people to increase work gradually and get aftercare as they do.

Respondents also reported decreased receipt of medical benefits and food stamps over time; yet some might have been eligible for those benefits had they been informed. An application for AFDC used to automatically trigger an application for Medicaid. However, TANF and Medicaid have been unlinked so that separate applications are now needed for each (Ellwood & Ku, 1998). Some who thought they were ineligible for TANF may not have realized they could still get Medicaid or food stamps. Those who left welfare due to work or time limits may also not have realized they could get a year of transitional Medicaid. In

turn, adequate access to health care or food might have prevented health problems that interfered with work. Research suggests that welfare recipients are more likely to keep work when they know what transitional benefits (e.g., transitional medical benefits) are available, have help with paperwork (Rangarajan, 1998), and have stronger case management before and after starting work, so that they may better foresee and forestall problems (Hobbs, 1996; Iversen, 1998). Further, communities that provide more options for low-cost substance use treatment, health care, childcare, and transportation may help workers stay in jobs and develop job experience that promotes attachment to the community work force (USDHHS, 1997).

Making workfare more attractive. For people who could not get regular work, social services did offer community service workfare, with which recipients tended to express dissatisfaction. It was not clear to what extent such dissatisfaction led to clients' noncompliance with workfare—a topic for further research. Brock, Butler and Long (1993) noted that unpaid community service jobs do not generally lead to increased skills and wages, consistent employment, or reductions in welfare; the researchers called for investment of funding and staff commitment in service jobs to ensure adequate work opportunities and clear procedures for job placement. Caseworkers may also benefit from learning to assess individual needs and talents before placing people in jobs (see Iversen, 1998). However, those who have the least education and job experience or who are least able to adapt to work may be the most likely to take social services workfare. Slipping up in that system, they may be subject to sanctions and penalized further. Those individuals may come under greater pressure as states try to raise work participation levels after having placed "easier" cases. States and agencies may need to make greater investments in training, counseling, and substance use treatment to help those clients.

In imposing sanctions, welfare offices might also try to assess why clients are not meeting requirements, instead of simply punishing them if they do not (see Meyers, Glaser & MacDonald, 1998). Riccio and Orenstein (1996) found that caseworkers who spent more time with clients were less likely to sanction them, perhaps because staff knew clients' issues better. Agency use of

“integrated” case managers who simultaneously handle welfare eligibility, social services and work issues (USDHHS, 1998b) may also help prevent social service errors and client infractions, and better help clients keep their jobs.

Protecting Income and Assets

People who had been sanctioned were also especially likely to report financial strain; such strain and unhappiness associated with it could have made it harder to work. For example, people who moved due to lack of rent or who could not afford a phone may have been harder for employers or caseworkers to call, reducing opportunities to work. Greenberg and Savner (1999) have suggested revising requirements for unemployment insurance so that part-time workers are eligible for it, and so that “good cause” for losing work may include reasons associated with loss of child care, caring for sick children, or domestic violence. Strawn and Martinson (2000) have also noted that TANF maintenance-of-effort funds used outside of TANF cash assistance may be used as income support for people between jobs. In general, allowing individuals on welfare to keep a larger part of their earnings and more valuable assets—including more valuable cars, business equipment, and savings accounts—would help give welfare recipients a better chance to earn a living and stave off financial setbacks. Provision of health insurance after people leave welfare—possibly for periods longer than a year—would also help prevent health care costs from further draining poor people’s pocketbooks (Tufts Center on Hunger and Poverty, 1998).

Redefining “Worker” and “Nonworker”

In implementing welfare reform law, legislators might also consider ways to redefine “worker” and “nonworker” in counting workers for the TANF work participation formula. For example, a broader range of activities—such as educational activities, counseling, substance use treatment, or some combination of these and work—might count as work for the 20-hour-a-week requirement. In Illinois, completion of post-secondary education may be counted as work (see Strawn & Martinson, 2000). Legislators might also lower state work quotas or might calculate work

participation more flexibly. For example, for those on workfare who have chronic health problems, one might count a certain number of days of work per three months, rather than per one month, as work. In terms of defining nonworkers, the language of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 only calls for reducing benefits to people who refuse work, and need not include those who lose work. States might exempt some who lose work for good cause from nonworker totals, or might be allowed to modify work quotas in response to a wider set of conditions, including regional unemployment rates.

Limitations of the Study and Areas for Further Research

Finally, limitations of this study should be noted. Its somewhat imprecise, retrospective measures made it hard to assess the impact of sanctions on receipt of benefits. People could have said both that they had been sanctioned and had received welfare in the past six months, even if they also lost welfare within the 6-month window. (Sanctions could also have involved benefits reductions.) Future studies might prospectively measure the amount and kind of assistance lost to better assess changes in financial status and strain. Further, food pantry users may tend to report more money strain than other social service recipients do (NETWORK, 1999). Compared to the upstate New York county as a whole, which had 5% and 4% rates of sanctions in 1997 and 1999, people with sanctions were over-represented in this sample (20% in 1997, 11% in 1999). In a more typical welfare sample, it is likely that more people would have been working and might have felt less financial strain. The study also was not longitudinal; 90% of those who had been interviewed in 1997 could not be reached in 1998 for follow-up by phone—whether because they had moved or did not originally or later have a phone; a new sample had to be recruited in 1999. In NETWORK's (1999) study, many clients also had no phone. Yet this would indicate that food pantries may be a good place to study poor people who fall between the cracks.

Future studies should ask what happens to those without work or benefits over time. In this study in 1997 sanctioned individuals were especially likely to move due to lack of rent, to have children change schools, and to have greater difficulty paying for adult health care. By 1999, the sample was generally less likely

to get housing or medical benefits. Increased hardship meeting needs for housing, education, and health care may contribute to deeper poverty, and stress other parts of the service sector. It is crucial that states track what happens to people who leave welfare, as well as assessing the impact on agencies (such as food pantries) to which people turn. Researchers could also ask to what extent states are using sanctions to get fixed TANF block grant funds (see Tyson, 1988). Where state have low employment rates but still get full TANF grants, do the states tend to have higher sanction rates? Do they use a broader range of reasons for imposing sanctions? Administrative data linking employment rates, sanction rates, and receipt of TANF funds might address such questions in this under-researched area of the relation between policy initiatives and program implementation (McClintock and Colosi, 1998).

To conclude, this study found that food pantry clients were increasingly likely to have neither benefits nor work, with this being especially true of sanctioned clients too. These results may be specific to the economically depressed area in which the research was conducted, but may also be more geographically widespread, as one study (NETWORK, 1999) suggested. Clearly, much more has yet to be learned about the effects of welfare reform on people and communities (see McClintock & Colosi, 1998) to see if and for whom "welfare-to-work" works.

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