

9-21-2004

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Recommended Citation

Albelda, Randy (2004) "Moving Target: The Dilemma of Serving Massachusetts Poor Families," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol20/iss1/12>

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Moving Target

The Dilemma of Serving Massachusetts Poor Families

Randy Albelda

While Community Action Agencies' original mission of serving the poor has changed little over the last three decades, government commitments to the poor, the population of poor individuals and families, and women's economic expectations have changed considerably. This article documents the trends in family structure, women's employment patterns, and poverty policies in Massachusetts between 1970 and 2000. The increase in poor, single-mother families and poverty policies that emphasize employment present dynamic challenges for Community Action Agencies (and others who serve the poor), but also create some new organizing opportunities.

In the mid 1960s, one weapon in the War on Poverty arsenal was Community Action Agencies (CAAs). Their mission, spelled out in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, was to find ways to best use a range of public and private resources to help low-income families and individuals attain the tools to become self-sufficient. While the enabling legislation was replaced by the Community Services Block Grant Act of 1981, the main goal of CAAs remains the same, serving the poor — and the communities in which they live — through a range of programs and community planning.

This task has become increasingly difficult in a period of increasing income inequality and in light of diminished public resources dedicated to poor families and individuals. This mutually reinforcing set of forces works to create antipathy toward the poor and justifies the growing gap between poor and rich as well as spending cuts to poor people's programs. What has also made the task of CAAs challenging is a set of changes and circumstances that have affected not only who is poor but the overall understanding of why people are poor. Families with a single primary female adult have always been poor, but their numbers have grown over the last four decades. Similarly, female labor force participation has increased and with it the expectation that employment makes families "self-sufficient." Still, the labor market for low-income mothers and the responsibility for providing care for young children

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have hardly changed since the 1960s. Together, these help explain changes in the composition of the poor and policy prescriptions toward them. They also have profound effects for CAAs and others whose primary goal is poverty reduction. “Serving the poor” has become a much more dynamic task, creating both challenges and new opportunities.

Changing Families, Changing Poverty

By definition, to be poor means to have limited income resources. Historically, those with limited income included the old, single parent families, and the unemployed. Each of these categories carried gender connotations: the old and single parents were mostly women while the unemployed were largely men. There was also a racial profile to poverty. Racial and ethnic discrimination limits access to jobs, making these groups much more likely to be poor than those who are white and native-born.

Table 1 shows the Massachusetts poverty profile in 1970, when black and Latino families were almost four times as likely to be poor as white families, while lone mother families were seven times more likely to be poor as all

Table 1
Percent of Total Population, Poverty Rates, and Percent of Poor Families and Individuals in Massachusetts, 1970 and 2000

	1970			2000		
	Percent of all families or individuals	Poverty rates	Percent of all poor families or individuals	Percent of all families or individuals	Poverty rates	Percent of all poor families or individuals
all families	100.0	6.2	100.0	100.0	6.7	100.0
white	96.8	5.7	89.0	86.3	4.6	59.5
black	2.8	22.4	9.9	4.9	18.3	13.4
Latino	1.0	20.1	3.2	5.8	28.5	25.0
single mother	5.6	41.0	36.7	10.3	34.0	52.7
all persons	100.0	8.6	100.0	100.0	9.0	100.0
under 65	88.5	7.4	76.5	86.5	9.1	87.5
65 and over	11.5	17.5	23.5	13.5	8.3	12.5

Note: Latino families may be of any race. 2000 data include those who identified as black only (families could report more than one race in 2000).

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

families. Similarly, those 65 and older were almost two and one-half times more likely to be poor than those under 65. Single-mother families comprised only 5.6 percent of all families, yet they were just over one-third of all poor families in 1970. Similarly, elders were just over 10 percent of the population, but constituted about one-fourth of all poor people. While black and Latino families were much more likely to be poor than white families, in terms of their absolute representation among the poor, it is relatively small, because of their small number.

From 1970 to 2000, poverty rates among families and persons rose only slightly, but the composition of families and the poor changed considerably.² The representation of single-mother families among all families doubled and increased to over half of all poor families. Black and Latino families have increased their representation both in the total population and in the poor population. Latino families are just under 6 percent of all families but comprise one out of every four poor families. While elders are a slightly larger portion of the population in 2000, they now are underrepresented among the poor population, with poverty rates below that of those under 65 years of age.

Serving the poor has changed from tending to the elderly and a largely white population to focusing more on families (as opposed to individuals) — especially single-mother families — and those of varied ethnic and racial backgrounds. The percentage of all families with children (not shown in Table 1) that are single-mother families has more than doubled, growing from 10 percent in 1970 to 22 percent in 2000. While poverty rates have fallen for this group, lone-mother families as a percent of all poor families has grown.

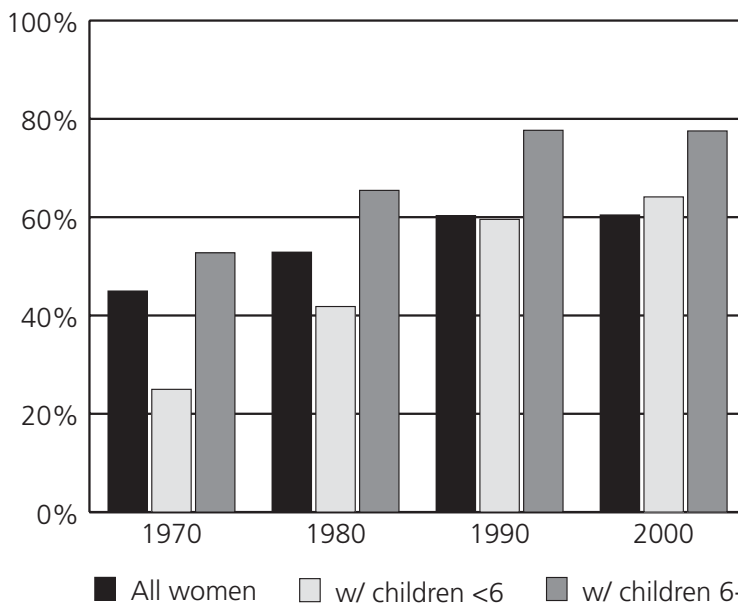
No Time for Mother

As the composition of families has changed since the mid 1960s, so has the economic activity of women. Decennial census data indicate the labor force participation rate (the percentage of all women age 16 and older who are either employed or actively seeking employment) of women in Massachusetts has risen from 45 percent in 1970 to 60 percent in 2000. The change for women with children is more dramatic. Figure 1 uses data from the last four decennial censuses to depict the labor force participation rates for all women in Massachusetts (16 years and older), for those with children under 6 years old, and for those whose youngest child is between 6 and 17 years of age.

By 1990, over half of all women with children under 18 years old were in the labor force. Over the 1990s, labor force participation rate for women with children ages 6 to 17 has leveled off, but rates for women with younger children continue to grow. And while decennial data do not allow for a look at labor force participation rates by presence of children and marital rates in Massachusetts, national data indicate that by the late 1990s, single mothers have higher labor force participation rates than married mothers. In 2002, 71 percent of single mothers with children under 6 were in the labor force

Figure 1

Labor Force Participation Rate of Women 16 Years and Older in Massachusetts, by Presence of Children, 1970-2000³



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

compared to 61 percent of married mothers. For mothers whose youngest child is 6 to 17 years old, 82 percent of single mothers compared to 77 percent of married mothers are in the labor force.⁴

The increased employment of mothers has generated increased pressure on employers and parents to balance the demands of work and family. This “work/family” dilemma always has been especially sharp for single mothers as there is only one parent primarily responsible for caregiving and garnering enough income to support her family. For poor families, this work/family dilemma is exacerbated by lack of economic resources to remedy the time squeeze that employment creates.

Shifting Poverty Policies

Despite tremendous economic growth in Massachusetts since the 1970s, poverty rates in Massachusetts have changed little. Still, the composition of the poor and the expectations of how the poor should become self-sufficient have shifted. In the 1960s, particularly with the War on Poverty, there was a new policy focus on poverty reduction and ways to apply public resources. Programs largely attempted to address structural problems in the economy such as discrimination, neglect, and dislocation, but they differed for the three main categories of poor (elders, lone mothers, and the unemployed).

Cash and in-kind assistance programs were mostly seen as important mechanisms for reducing poverty among the elders and lone mothers; these groups were not expected to earn their way out of poverty. In particular, mothers of young and school-age children were to care for their children. But for the unemployed (including those in rural areas, inner-city youth, displaced workers and homemakers, and long-term unemployed adults), employment and training programs coupled with community economic development in high-poverty areas were seen as key ways to reduce poverty.

Federal programs like Medicare (passed in 1965), Food Stamps (a national act passed in 1964), and public housing for the elderly are among the programs that have targeted those over 65. But it is Social Security (indexed to inflation in 1975) that has proved particularly effective in reducing poverty for those 65 and older. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the main cash assistance program for single mother families, is not indexed to inflation and, since the mid 1970s, benefit levels have lost considerable ground. The maximum monthly benefit for a family of three in 1975 in Massachusetts was \$829 in 2001 dollars.⁵ In 2001, the maximum TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families — the program that replaced AFDC in 1996), in Massachusetts was \$633.⁶ While Medicaid (1965), Food Stamps, Nutritional Programs for Women, Infants and Children (1972), and Head Start (1965) have all played important roles in helping poor families, none has been able to overcome the lack of income in single mother families.

A host of urban development as well as employment and training programs have had only marginal success, overshadowed by dramatic employment shifts that have included a decline in manufacturing sector jobs and the rapid growth of jobs in the low-wage sectors of services and sales industries. So while unemployment rates have fallen, poverty rates have not.

As women's labor force participation rates increased, so did the pressure to see employment as the key to poverty reduction among the non-elder, "able-bodied" poor. This pressure was strongly reinforced by growing inequality and shrinking public funds. Through the 1980s, several governors used AFDC's waiver process to pursue employment and training efforts for single mothers, including Massachusetts's ET Choices — an employment and training program aimed at lone mothers whose youngest child was school-age or older. These efforts helped shape the 1988 Family Support Act, which required states to impose employment and/or training requirements on adults receiving AFDC, although states were given considerable leeway.

The full-fledged push toward seeing employment as the solution to single mother poverty came in the 1990s. Massachusetts enacted sweeping changes to its welfare policies in 1995, and federal legislation abolishing AFDC and establishing TANF followed in 1996. Immediate employment and time limits have become the cornerstones of welfare changes, ensuring that poor families not receive public cash assistance for any length of time. Education and

training opportunities have become limited. Instead, women are expected to take a job, any job, and work up the ladder and out of poverty. And while rapid job growth in the 1990s accommodated this policy, in Massachusetts poverty rates among single mother families did not fall during the boom, and child poverty rates actually rose in the late 1990s — the height of the Massachusetts expansion.⁸

Ending Welfare but not Family Poverty

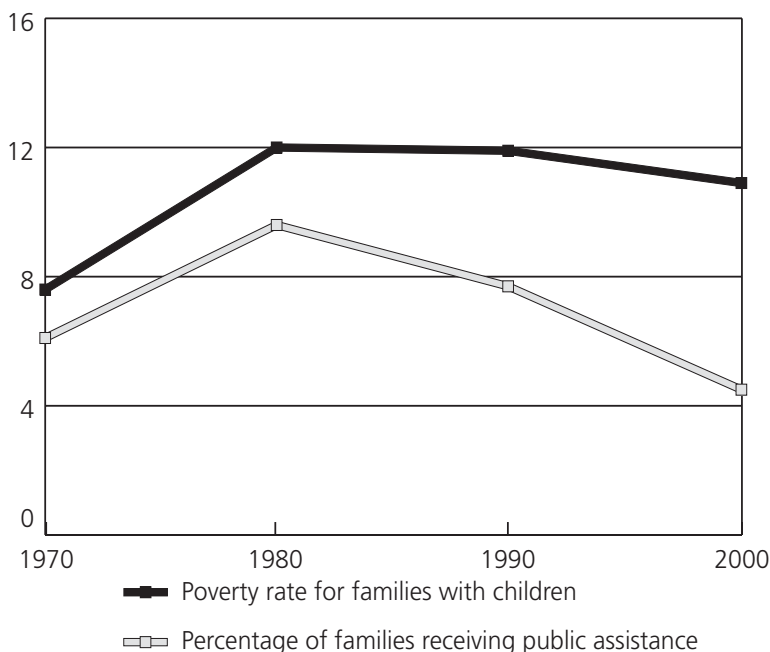
In the 1970s, the poverty rate for families with children rose sharply, leveled off in the 1980s and fell slightly in the 1990s. It remains considerably higher in 2000 than in 1970 despite the Massachusetts Miracle of the 1980s and the High Tech/ New Economy expansion of the 1990s. Yet, as Figure 2 depicts, the percentage of families receiving cash assistance has dropped to below the 1970 level.

Are “Work First” employment policies the solution? Not as they have been implemented. Single mothers are now expected to be primary wage earners as well as primary caregivers. Yet, caregiving takes time and resources that limit employment opportunities. Full-time work is nearly impossible under these circumstances without flexible and reliable child care. But, market rates for child care are very expensive and quality care is often hard to find. While women with college degrees have seen enormous increases in their earnings since the 1970s, women without college degrees have not. Sales and low-end service work — the types of jobs the majority of single mothers found in the 1970s and today — are not jobs that assure self-sufficiency. Juggling care and low-wage work (which is often inflexible in terms of hours) is incredibly difficult, leading many women to move in and out of employment. Job “churning” reduces the chances of seeing wage improvements over time and also wreaks havoc with income levels, making receipt of Medicaid, Food Stamps, WIC, and TANF more unstable.

The employment solution to ending poverty has always presented enormous challenges to poor families and the agencies that serve them, but the work/family tensions of single mother families make the task harder and different today than it was when CAAs came on the scene. Low-wage employment leaves many families with less time and increased difficulties providing for their families. Education and training programs are limited, even though most people know that such programs offer the best route to a better job. While federal and state expenditures on child care have increased over the last two decades, the need far outstrips the supply of subsidies. For many, low-wage employment is a new poverty trap — you work longer hours, but often end up with the same or fewer resources (assistance falls as earnings rise) and higher costs. The employment solution has also become a problem for the agencies that serve the poor. The demands of employment leave poor families

Figure 2

Poverty and Public Assistance in Massachusetts, 1970-2000⁷



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

with little or no time to access programs that might assist them or to join organizations that might help them mobilize their resources more effectively.

The term “working poor” has re-entered the poverty dialogue, but it means something different now than it did forty years ago. Today, the key issue is figuring out how an adult can be both a caregiver and an earner. This new situation presents new opportunities. Recognizing that the work/family dilemmas that poor families face are similar to those of other families creates the potential for new coalitions and new solutions.

CAAs and others that serve the poor still need to push for economic development in poor neighborhoods, and for education and job training, and they need to promote more affordable housing. But the economic problems facing many poor families — especially those headed by single parents — also include care giving and employment policies. As more parents fill the role of both primary caregiver and provider, we need to find ways to ease the work/family tensions, especially among low-income families. Policies that are needed include the expansion of affordable, quality child care; the establishment of paid family and medical leave; part-time employment with pro-rated benefits; health insurance for all; and decent pay and flexible work arrangements for a large range of workers. ❁

Notes

1. U.S. Census Bureau, *1970 Census of Population, General Social and Economic Characteristics Massachusetts*, PC(1)-C23. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972); U.S. Census Bureau, *Census 2000, Summary File 3, Massachusetts* (2002), downloaded from <http://www.miser.umass.edu/datacenter/Census2000/SF3/Massachusetts.pdf>; and U.S. Census Bureau, *2000 Census of Population and Housing, Massachusetts: 2000, Summary Social, Economic and Housing Characteristics*, PHC-2-23 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2003).
2. Using the same census data, unemployment rates were 3.8 percent in 1970 and 4.5 percent in 2000.
3. U.S. Census Bureau, *1970 Census of Population, General Social and Economic Characteristics of Massachusetts*, PC(1)-C23 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972); U.S. Census Bureau, *1980 Census of Population, General Social and Economic Characteristics of Massachusetts*, Part 23 Massachusetts PC80-1-C-23 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1983); U.S. Census Bureau, *1990 Census of Population and Housing, Summary Tape File 4b, Subfile A Massachusetts*, downloaded from <http://www1.miser.umass.edu/datacenter/profiles/profstf4.pdf>; *1970 Census of Population, General Social and Economic Characteristics of Massachusetts*, CP-2-23 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1993); U.S. Census Bureau, *1990 Census of Population and Housing, Summary Tape File 4b, Subfile A Massachusetts*, downloaded from <http://www1.miser.umass.edu/datacenter/profiles/profstf4.pdf>; U.S. Census Bureau, *1990 Census of Population, General Social and Economic Characteristics of Massachusetts*, CP-2-23 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1993); U.S. Census Bureau, *Census 2000, Summary File 3, Massachusetts 2002*, downloaded from <http://www1.miser.umass.edu/datacenter/Census2000/SF3/Massachusetts.pdf>; and U. S. Census Bureau, *2000 Census of Population and Housing, Massachusetts, Summary Social, Economic and Housing Characteristics PHC-2-23*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2003). (1972, 1983, 1993, 2002, 2003a).
4. U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, Washington D.C., 2003b, 392 at <<http://census.gov/statab/www>>.
5. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 1996 Green Book, Table 8-15 <<http://aspe.hhs.gov/96gb/08anf.txt>>.
6. Department of Health and Human Services, *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program, Fourth Annual Report to Congress 2002*, table 13-18.
7. U.S. Census Bureau, *1970 Census of Population, General Social and Economic Characteristics Massachusetts*, PC(1) C23 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972); U.S. Census Bureau, *1980 Census of the Population*, Vol.1 General Social and Economic Characteristics Part 23 Massachusetts PC80-1-C-23 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1983); U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of the Population and Housing, Summary Tape File 4b, Subfile A Massachusetts*, downloaded from <http://www1.miser.umass.edu/datacenter/profiles/profstf4.pdf>; U.S. Census Bureau, *1990 Census of the Population Social and Economic Characteristics Massachusetts* CP-2-23 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1993); U.S. Census Bureau, *Census 2000, Summary File 3, Massachusetts* (2002) downloaded from www1.miser.umass.edu/datacenter/census2000/SF3/Massachusetts.pdf; U.S. Census Bureau, *2000 Census of Population and Housing, Massachusetts: 2000, Summary Social, Economic, and Housing Characteristics PHC-2-23*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2003). (1972, 1983, 1993, 2002, 2003a).
8. Randy Albeda, Donna Haig Friedman, Elaine Werby, and Michelle Kahan, "After Welfare: Poverty and Emergency Services Use in Massachusetts," Center for Social Policy, McCormack Institute, University of Massachusetts Boston, June 2001.