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Women, Welfare, and Work

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Oregon Study Focuses on Women in Welfare

Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), known commonly as "welfare," is the major income support program for poor people in the United States. In Oregon, welfare is available only to single parents with children.

Recently, a randomly selected sample of AFDC recipients was surveyed by the Portland State University School of Social Work. The results shatter several commonly held misconceptions about welfare recipients. It was determined that the typical AFDC client is a mother of two children who has lived in Oregon for most of her life. She has been on welfare for less than two years, prior to which she worked. She wants to work again, but is unable to find a job, lacks training, and feels a need to stay at home with her children. Compared with AFDC clients in 1979, current recipients appear to be in even more difficult life circumstances and encounter greater obstacles in the job market.

The study showed that the typical AFDC recipient in Oregon is a 29-year-old Caucasian. She is not a newcomer to Oregon, having lived here approximately 16 years. She has been previously married, but her husband is no longer in the home. Although she receives food stamps, she typically receives no housing subsidy and has no additional sources of income. She has not quite completed high school. During the last five years she has held at least two jobs. Although she wants to work, she is currently unemployed, primarily because she has been unable to find work or lacks job training. She is isolated; she has no nearby relatives from whom she can receive financial support. She belongs to no neighborhood, political, social, or educational organizations. She and her family are not using any public or private social services, nor have they done so in the past.

This report summarizes the results of the survey, conducted in late Fall, 1982. The study was based on a random sample of 1,100 AFDC recipients drawn by the Adult and Family Services Division (AFS) of the State of Oregon Department of Human Services. These potential participants were mailed questionnaires which covered personal demographics, income, employment, social service utilization, attitudes, and other characteristics necessary to develop a comprehensive profile of the average AFDC recipient. An actual return of 261 responses produced a participation rate of 24 percent, which allows generalization to all of Oregon's adult AFDC recipients. While this study focused on all AFDC

recipients in Oregon, it was, in effect, a study of women on welfare, since nearly 96 percent of all respondents were women.

Funding for this study was provided by the Research and Publications Committee of Portland State University. Detailed results are available in a summary report entitled: **WOMEN AND CHILDREN ON WELFARE IN 1982: AFTER THE CUTS**. This summary report can be obtained through Dr. Norman L. Wyers, School of Social Work, Portland State University, PO Box 751, Portland, OR 97207.

Shifts Occur in Welfare Conditions

A number of significant changes have occurred since AFS conducted a similar but less comprehensive study in 1979. For example, the average number of months spent on AFDC has declined. As shown in Figure 1, recipients averaged 27.3 months on AFDC in 1979, whereas in 1982 they averaged only 21.0 months.

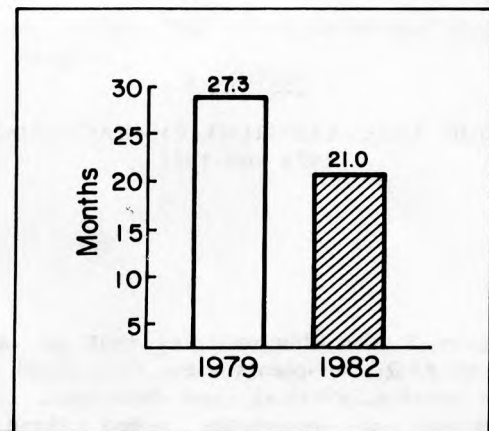


FIGURE 1

MEDIAN LENGTH OF AFDC ASSISTANCE:
1979 AND 1982

Separation, desertion, and other absences on the part of fathers have increased since 1979. While divorce continues to be the single most important factor contributing to family breakup, as Figure 2 demonstrates, these other paternal absences have increased from 20 to 26 percent. This shift may be related to the termination in 1979 of the program which provided AFDC coverage to low-income two-parent families in Oregon.

A smaller percentage of welfare recipients was employed in 1982 than 1979. As Figure 2 indicates, 20.5 percent of the 1979 recipients were employed full or part-time, compared with 14.2 percent in 1982. Furthermore, a significant shift from full-time to part-time employment occurred. These shifts are more likely a result of more restrictive federal and state policies than a loss of motivation on the part of recipients.

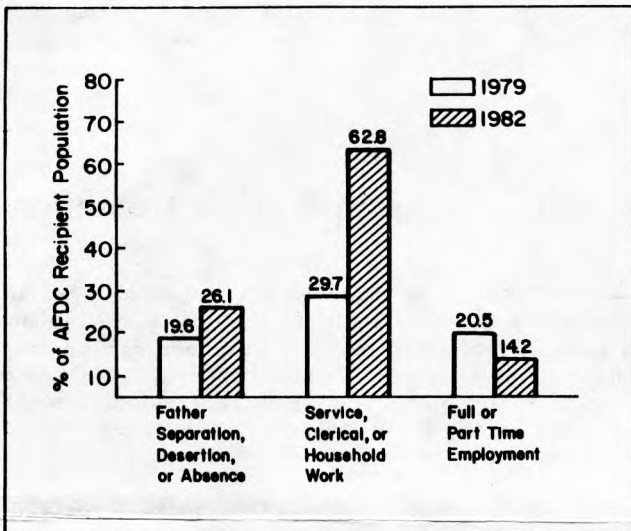


FIGURE 2

OREGON AFDC RECIPIENT CHARACTERISTICS:
1979 and 1982

Figure 2 also demonstrates that an increasing number of AFDC recipients view their usual kinds of work as service, clerical, and household. In 1979, 29.7 percent of recipients listed these fields, compared with 62.8 percent in 1982. This dramatic change may be associated with declining job opportunities for low-income women in Oregon, since it is unlikely that such a major shift in usual work performed would have occurred in only three years.

The 1982 AFDC population was less well off financially than was the 1979 population. During a time of rapid inflation and economic dislocation, the median public assistance benefit increased only three percent, from \$278.00 per month to \$286.41. While food stamp benefits increased by a median amount of approximately \$117.00 per month, these benefits could be applied only to the purchase of food, not to other expenditures. For the 23.8 percent who had additional sources of income, the median monthly amount of that income fell by \$53.00. Further, the median monthly income level for full or part-time employment in 1982 was \$300.00, as contrasted to a federal monthly median level of \$381.11 in 1979. Thus, on every indicator except food stamp benefits, the 1982 AFDC population fell behind, when inflation is considered.

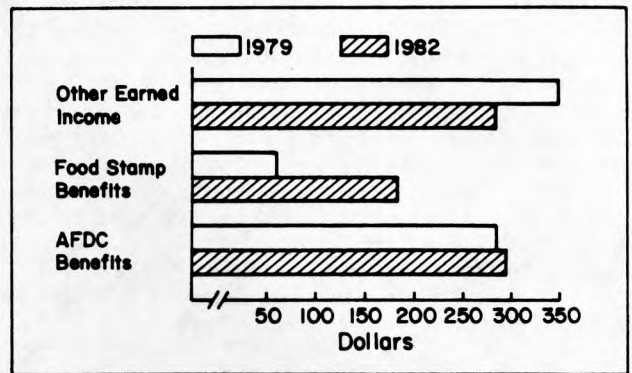


FIGURE 3

MEDIAN MONTHLY INCOME AND BENEFITS
OF OREGON AFDC RECIPIENTS:
1979 and 1982

All of the above findings are based on percentages which were not adjusted to exclude those who did not respond or were uncertain. Adjusted percentages would have made the changes even more striking.

"Welfare is a ditch. I'm in it and I spend my life trying to climb out; its unbelievable futility. Believe me, it's no privilege."

- 32 year old mother of two

Study Refutes Welfare Stereotypes

There are many popular misconceptions about people on welfare. This study challenges these myths with empirical findings, confirming the results of earlier studies. Four misconceptions contradicted by the findings of this study are as follows:

MYTH: She Doesn't Want to Work

One of the most commonly held myths about people receiving public aid is that they collect welfare because they are too lazy to work. Yet the findings of this study show that recipients in Oregon have a history of working and would much prefer employment to the collection of public assistance.

Ninety-five percent of these women held jobs in the past. During the last five years, they were employed 2.5 times, on the average. Currently, 63 percent of recipients want to work, 57 percent are prepared to work, and 51 percent are actually looking for employment. More than 70 percent of these mothers, however, indicate that there are obstacles which restrict their ability to work outside the home. These include lack of jobs, insufficient training or experience, child care, and transportation difficulties.

Nearly two-thirds of these women believe that their place is at home with their young children. It is at considerable personal expense, then, that many consider the possibilities of employment.

Fifty-four percent of the recipients usually work in service or clerical jobs. Typically, wages are low for holders of these jobs. The median monthly employment income of respondents who worked was \$300.00. Further, the decision to work generally means a reduction in the AFDC benefit. When these factors are considered along with expenses associated with employment (such as child care, transportation, and clothing), little economic incentive remains for these women to work. However, two-thirds continue to want to work.

MYTH: Welfare Breeds Welfare

Data from this study refute the belief that welfare utilization is a long-term, intergenerational habit. The average respondent had collected benefits for 21 months. Only half of these women had been on welfare before. More than 75 percent were reared in non-welfare families. Of those who came from families which received welfare, the average length of time on welfare for the family was less than six years.

In addition to demonstrating that recipients do not come from families chronically dependent on

public aid, the study also reveals that these women do not intend to remain on welfare for extended periods of time. Slightly over one-third of respondents expected to be on welfare less than 14 months. Among those who could not estimate how long they would receive AFDC, many expected to collect welfare only until they could find employment. It seems, then, that economic conditions, rather than intergenerational dependency, "breed welfare."

MYTH: She Rides the Gravy Train

A third myth is that recipients enjoy generous benefit at the expense of taxpayers. This study does not support the gravy train myth.

The median monthly AFDC benefit of respondents was only \$286.41. In addition, the typical woman in the study received \$182.17 in food stamps monthly. Only 18.6 percent received housing

subsidies, averaging \$200.00 per month. On the average, these low levels of income supported 2.9 persons. When the costs of rent, food, utilities, clothing, and other necessities are considered, it becomes clear that the benefits received scarcely meet basic economic needs. AFDC recipients, rather than riding the gravy train, are impoverished. Total benefit levels rarely move these recipients above the threshold of absolute poverty.

MYTH: She Finds Life is Easy on Welfare

The myth that life is easy on welfare is based in part on the preceding myths. According to the "easy life" myth, the typical welfare recipient does not want to work and likely comes from a family of welfare recipients. She and her children receive generous benefits and many services at the expense of the taxpayer. She is quite content to be a welfare recipient, relieved of the need to work and to provide for herself and her family. She lives, according to this stereotype, the "easy life," with few responsibilities and cares. In some cases she even sports a few luxuries, perhaps including a color television set and an expensive automobile.

It is also sometimes alleged that recipients receive many social services in addition to their "generous" benefits. In fact, only 30 percent of respondents had ever used public social services, and only 15 percent were using them at the time of the survey. This decline from an already low level of social service utilization is occurring at a time when the needs of recipients are more pronounced because of the financial cutbacks they are experiencing. In general, recipients know little about available social service programs. Most of these women were aware of no social service for which they might be eligible.

All of the findings of this study show that life for the AFDC recipient in Oregon is not easy. AFDC recipients not only have low incomes but also few possessions. Only 41 percent own or are buying motor vehicles. The median value of these vehicles is \$497. Only five percent own or are buying a home. These homes have a median value of \$30,500.

In addition to the isolation and poverty which these women experience, many suffer from the effects of stigma. Nearly half feel that they are viewed negatively because they are welfare recipients, that their neighbors look down on them because they are dependent on public assistance. Further, more than half report experiences of personal insults and service denials or delays because of their welfare status.

Nearly two-thirds of these women also find themselves caught between contradictory motivations to work and to remain at home with their children. The tension inherent in these conflicting values places these women in greater social and emotional jeopardy than other women, since they have fewer personal options because of their economic poverty.

"People seem to feel that I am not a responsible adult because I am on welfare."

- 23 year old recipient

"When you apply for welfare, first you swallow your pride, then you put your dignity and self respect in your pocket."

- mother of two

"I would love to work. Hopefully my children will never face the difficulty of welfare when they are older."

- mother of three

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