

# research snapshot

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## Welfare-to-Work Programs Hold a Contradicting Effect on Parents and Their Families' Wellbeing

### What is this research about?

In 1995, the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) was replaced by the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). Thus, the rights of a citizen to receive federal funding were reduced. Social assistance policy also shifted from a federal regulation to the provinces. Since then, neoliberal reforms that emerged have implemented welfare-to-work programs, reduced benefits, and limited the number of eligible applicants. The demand of welfare recipients' work has had multiple and contradicting effects, especially on parents.

### What did the researcher do?

The researcher explored the coping strategies of parents on social assistance. She wanted to review the ways in which parents dealt with the expectations of welfare, gaining employment and caring for their families. The researcher used a feminist political economy approach. She considered the ways that social assistance reforms are gendered and familial. That is, welfare-to-work policy assumes that "workers" are gender-neutral, with the ability to meet their caregiving needs privately through family and friends.

The data used compared the experiences of parents on social assistance in the transition of policy reforms between 1993 and 2004. Parents were approached at a major food bank in British Columbia, Alberta, and

### What you need to know:

Social assistance reforms have tried to combat unemployment and poverty by tying welfare benefits to labour. However, welfare-to-work programs offer little gain for parents who have to balance between work and caregiving demands.

Saskatchewan. Semi-structured interviews were held with 46 parents (41 mothers and 5 fathers), where they were asked about:

- Their understanding on changes to social assistance;
- Their thoughts on welfare policy's emphasis on being employed;
- Their balance between caring for their families and welfare-to-work programs.

### What did the researcher find?

Parents on social assistance dealt with welfare policy and its gendered and familial actions in four ways.

1. Learning the system: Parents searched for hidden government or community resources after mastering the details of social assistance policy. In other cases, parents also fought the system and its unfair expectations. Overall, they were persuaded by the reality that their existing benefits did not provide enough support.

2. **Playing the system:** Parents manipulated social assistance policy in order to improve their balance between caregiving and welfare-to-work demands. This included reports of false job searches, and neglecting to report money received from family or friends that would result in deducted benefits.
3. **Relying on social support:** Parents coped with their caregiving and work demands by relying on a network of friends, family, peers or neighbours for help. This included forms of physical or emotional support, like food or childcare. The researcher found these networks to be diverse and non-conventional for families. Parents also shared mixed satisfaction with these networks.
4. **Pawning:** Parents exchanged goods for money to gain short term relief to meet their caregiving needs. However, it was often a strategy that did more harm to families. It further limited opportunities for entertainment with the family (by selling items like a stereo or DVD player), and worsened parents' long term debt.

### How can you use this research?

This research may be useful for case workers, policy makers and other researchers in the field of social science. Case workers in welfare-to-work programs may consider the varied experiences that parents encounter in coping with social assistance and family demands. They may also evaluate the impact of service on parents, especially with the research's reference to overloaded case workers.

Policymakers may consider the vast effects that welfare reforms have brought for families. This may inform any changes related to diversifying and accommodating social assistance to the distinct needs of parents.

Social science researchers may find this study useful in building a platform of research to inform further policy reforms. This includes research that

demonstrates: the contradiction between the intention of policy and its actual impact, the value of both work and caregiving by parents, and the need for more benefits.

### About the Researcher

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### Keywords

Parents, Social assistance policy, Coping strategies, Caregiving, Welfare-to-work programs

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