

Success Stories: Welfare Reform, Policy Discourse, and the Politics of Research

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ABSTRACT: Welfare reform is now widely hailed as a success. In this article, the authors analyze this public verdict as a political construction. During the 1980s and 1990s, welfare discourse shifted to emphasize concerns over program dependency. This shift not only promoted policy retrenchment, it also defined the terms on which retrenchment would be judged. Specifically, it established caseload levels and studies of program "leavers" as a common frame of reference for judging welfare reform. This article presents evidence that a majority of media stories on welfare reform from 1998 to 2000 offered positive assessments. The authors then show that perceptions of reform as a policy success depend chiefly on the diversion of attention away from standards of evaluation and interpretations of evidence that might suggest failure. They conclude by discussing how the construction of policy success is likely to affect upcoming debates over the renewal of welfare reform.

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We live in a forest of symbols on the edge of a jungle of fact.

—Joseph Gusfield (1981, 51)

Our understanding of real situations is always mediated by ideas; those ideas in turn are created, changed, and fought over in politics.

—Deborah Stone (1997, 282)

Welfare reform is a success! Or so one might think based on a majority of evaluations coming from leading public officials and media sources. After four years under the new policy regime, initial anxieties have given way to a rough consensus that welfare reform, up to this point, has succeeded. As the architects of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) had hoped, the welfare rolls have dropped precipitously from 12.24 million recipients in August 1996 to 6.28 million recipients in June 2000, a decline of 53 percent (Administration for Children and Families 2001). In addition, a number of studies have suggested that many people leaving welfare are faring well (Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation [ASPE] 2000). To many observers, these facts suggest that the success of welfare reform is self-evident, indisputable among reasonable people.

Our goal in this article is to question the prevailing consensus on welfare reform by showing how TANF's status as a policy success may be viewed as a political construction (M. Edelman 1988). Evaluations of public policy inevitably require political choices regarding which facts will be valued as indicators of success and which interpretations of facts will serve as a basis for judgment (Stone

1997; Cobb and Ross 1997). Welfare reform is now widely viewed as a success not because of the facts uncovered by researchers (which paint a murky picture) but because of a political climate that privileges some facts and interpretations over others.

Judgments of policy success and failure are built on the backs of what Joseph Gusfield (1981) once called "public facts"—statements "about an aggregate of events which we do not and cannot experience personally" (51). Although any one of us may have personal experience with poverty or welfare, it is impossible to draw from such experience a conclusion about whether welfare reform in general is working or whether poor people in general are faring well. To arrive at such judgments, we must rely heavily on what media stories, public officials, and experts report about general states of affairs. Such reports serve to establish the success or failure of government policy as an authentic fact for the public.

The popular belief that welfare reform has succeeded can be traced chiefly to positive interpretations of two public facts: declining caseloads and outcomes for program "leavers." In what follows, we explore the politics that surround these two facts. We argue that the meanings of caseload decline and leaver outcomes remain far from clear, and we ask how alternative criteria might point to less sanguine evaluations of reform.

WELFARE REFORM AS A SUCCESS STORY

That the new welfare policies have succeeded where earlier, more liberal

efforts failed is now taken by many to be an irrefutable fact. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Michael Kelly (2000) stated, "In all arguments of policy and politics, there comes sooner or later the inevitable moment when it becomes simply undeniable that one side of the argument is true, or mostly so, and the other is false, or mostly so." "The inevitable moment," Kelly wrote, "arrived for liberals on . . . welfare reform" (A31). As early as the summer of 1997, President Clinton was ready to conclude, "The debate is over. We now know that welfare reform works" (Miller 1998, 28). Three years later, the debate really did seem to be over. The 2000 presidential campaign included almost no significant disagreement over issues of poverty and welfare, as the Democratic and Republican nominees both touted the achievements of reform and pledged to build on its successes.

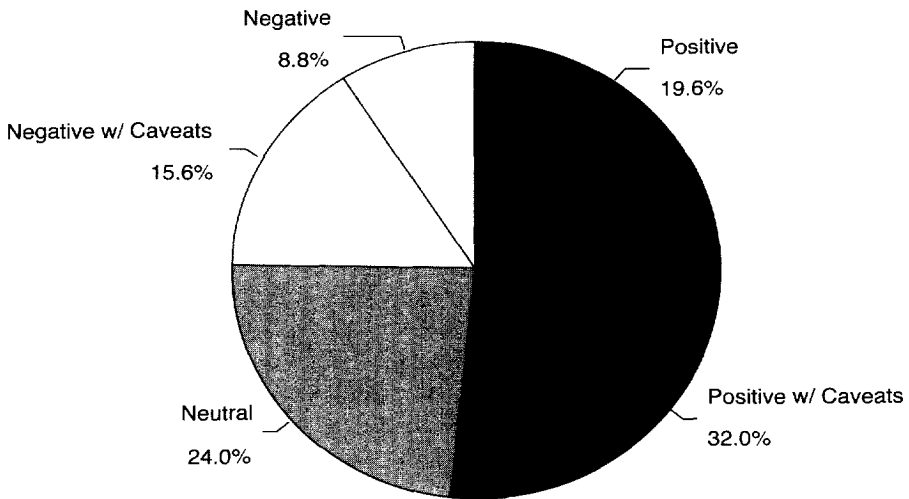
Media stories on welfare reform have been more measured in their tone but have largely bolstered the image of success. Because welfare reform has produced so many new policies and outcomes in such a diversity of places, it has been a difficult story for the news media to cover. Some journalists have made great efforts to meet these challenges. Jason DeParle's (1999) yearlong series in the *New York Times*, for example, was an admirable piece of journalism. In the main, however, media stories have tended to forgo investigative journalism and critical inquiry in favor of presentations that rely heavily on statistics and interpretations proffered by government. Such stories are typically written in a

traditional journalistic idiom that emphasizes balance, impartiality, and presentation (rather than critical interrogation) of facts; however, in a majority of cases, these stories portray new TANF policies as a success.

Between January 1998 and September 2000, the top 50 newspapers in the United States ran 250 stories on welfare reform and caseload decline.¹ Examining these stories, we found that only 28.4 percent offered an unmitigated positive or negative view of reform; most assessments came with some counterpoints. Over half the articles in our sample were either wholly positive (19.6 percent) or generally positive with caveats (32 percent). By contrast, only about a quarter were wholly negative (8.8 percent) or generally negative with caveats (15.6 percent). Twenty-four percent gave equal weight to the pros and cons of reform.² The modal story on welfare reform raised concerns about families leaving the TANF program and about what might happen if the economy sours; with these caveats in place, it went on to suggest that welfare reform so far has had remarkably positive results (see Figure 1).

Media stories on welfare reform have tended to be framed in terms that establish and dramatize the success of new TANF policies. By this claim, we do not mean that journalists have disseminated incorrect facts, exhibited overt bias, or colluded with those who have a stake in welfare reform's success. Rather, our argument is that media coverage has been shaped by policy makers' concerns with the problem of depen-

FIGURE 1
 MEDIA COVERAGE OF WELFARE REFORM, 1998-2000



NOTE: Based on an analysis of welfare reform stories that ran in the top 50 newspapers in the United States between 1 January 1998 and 1 September 2000. Number of stories = 250.

dence and, hence, has focused on a set of facts and interpretations that support a verdict of policy success. The roots of this focus, we argue, lie in an antiwelfare discourse that not only produced policy retrenchment in the 1990s but also defined the terms on which this retrenchment would be judged. As we describe below, the current framing of welfare evaluation in terms of caseload levels and leaver outcomes is far from natural or neutral. The "inevitable moment" described by Michael Kelly was not inevitable; it was and is an outcome of political battles fought on the contested terrain of public discourse.

CONSTRUCTING THE STANDARDS OF POLICY SUCCESS

Constructivist political analyses suggest that any object or event, however real, can take on diverse meanings, and it is these meanings rather than brute facts alone that form the basis of political thought and action (Schram 1995). Political information is inherently ambiguous; the public that receives this information is typically ambivalent. Thus, when citizens evaluate a complex political object such as welfare policy, they are likely to hold a variety of conflicting, potentially rele-

vant considerations. A major way in which political actors shape public responses is by advancing issue frames that highlight some of these considerations while obscuring others. When consensus emerges on an issue such as welfare reform, it suggests that some political group has succeeded in constructing what Dennis Chong (1995) called "a common frame of reference"—a frame pervasive and powerful enough to focus diverse publics on a shared set of considerations.

The TANF program is now perceived as a success in large part because caseloads and leavers have become a shared frame of reference for evaluating reform. Some well-known characteristics of mass media arguably have contributed to the construction of this common frame. Social networks, organizational routines, and shared work pressures invite a kind of pack journalism in which reporters focus on the same top stories (Fishman 1980). Norms of objectivity encourage reporters to build these stories out of information provided by a small stock of "credible" government officials and experts (Sigal 1973, 119-30). Narrative conventions push reporters to dramatize and then normalize these stories in similar ways. Concentrated ownership and the use of wire stories increase the likelihood that a small number of reports will run repeatedly in different media outlets.

Perhaps most important, the diversity of frames presented by mass media on a given policy issue usually depends on the extent to which public officials generate com-

peting flows of information (Zaller 1992; Hallin 1984). In recent years, leaders of both major political parties have been committed to new welfare policies, and activists have generally failed to disrupt this harmony with pressures from below. In such a bipartisan context, elite consensus usually gives rise to large numbers of media stories that paint a relatively consistent portrait of reality.

The implicit frame of reference for most recent reporting on welfare reform can be traced to a discourse of dependency that grew influential in the 1980s and 1990s. Dependency discourse identifies reliance on public assistance as an important social problem and defines transitions from welfare to low-wage work as steps, however perilous, toward self-sufficiency. Within this paradigm, champions of welfare reform point to roll decline as clear evidence of policy success, while critics use evidence from leaver studies to suggest that former recipients are not actually achieving self-sufficiency. Only marginal voices seem to raise the possibility that the TANF program might be better evaluated by other criteria. To explain how welfare reform got labeled a policy success, one must investigate how this discourse came to prevail and how it obscures evaluative criteria that might cast reform in a different light.

Beginning in the 1970s, conservatives waged a disparate but effective campaign to change the terms of debate on welfare. Moral conservatives entered the fray as part of a broader countermovement against changes in gender and race relations,

consumption patterns, and sexual and familial norms that they saw as evidence of moral decline (Ehrenreich 1987). Business interests had more material goals: by pushing the poor out of welfare and into low-wage work, employers hoped to lighten their tax burden and, more important, prevent tight labor markets from enhancing the bargaining position of labor or pushing wages upward (see Frances Fox Piven's article in this volume).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, foundations with funds supplied by corporate interests and moral conservatives promoted a string of influential critics whose books charged that welfare encouraged perverse behavioral choices, flouted the obligations of citizenship, and undermined the voluntarism of civil society (Stefancic, Delgado, and Tushnet 1996). Soon, such critics were joined by government officials who saw political capital to be made in attacking federal welfare programs and shifting control over welfare resources down to the state level. Liberal and left advocates, suddenly forced to defend an unpopular program that they perceived as inadequate, failed to establish a positive alternative to dependence and devolution as grounds for debating the future shape of welfare policy.

The achievements of the political campaign against welfare are easy to miss if one accepts the one-sided myth that Americans are selfish individualists who oppose government assistance on principle. Most Americans do place a high value on personal responsibility and the work ethic, but these commitments are

balanced by a belief that government has an obligation to help those in need (Feldman and Zaller 1992). Seventy to 90 percent of Americans say they support government assistance targeted at the poor and believe the government has a responsibility to guarantee every citizen food to eat and a place to sleep (Gilens 1999, 37).

The campaign against welfare did not persuade the public that aid to the poor was undesirable; it simply reframed welfare in terms that highlighted alternative considerations. Dependence and personal responsibility were central to the new frame, but there were other elements as well. Critics evoked antistatist and antielitist sentiments in the public by attacking welfare as a self-serving creation of liberals in government and the "intelligentsia" (Ehrenreich 1987, 165-73). Welfare, in this frame, was not a hard-won protection for poor workers and their families; it was a policy imposed against workers' values as well as their bank accounts. Second, welfare also got reframed in racial terms by coded political rhetoric and distortions in media coverage (Gilens 1999). In media stories and in the public mind, black people (especially black single mothers) became the most damnable and most frequent welfare recipients. As a result, racial resentments and old stereotypes of black laziness became fuel for hostility toward welfare.

All these frames contributed to the demise of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, but the effort to reframe welfare debates in terms of the issue of dependency arguably played the

most crucial role in shaping later evaluations of welfare reform. Here, it is important to recall that in an earlier era liberals had framed "troubling" behaviors among the poor as products of poverty and used images of social disorganization as evidence for the necessity of extending aid (Scott 1997). The crucial move made by conservatives was to reframe these same behaviors as products of permissive social programs that failed to limit program usage, require work, and demand functional behavior. Long-term dependency became a key word in welfare debates, usually treated as part of a broader syndrome of underclass pathologies that included drug use, violence, crime, teen pregnancy, single motherhood, and even poverty itself. Gradually, permissiveness and dependency displaced poverty and structural barriers to advancement as the central problems drawing attention from those who designed welfare policy.

The discursive turn to dependency had important political consequences. First, welfare dependency and its effects on the poor set the agenda for poverty research in the 1980s and 1990s (Schram 1995). To distinguish myths from realities, researchers expended great effort in identifying the typical duration of participation spells and the individual-level correlates of long-term program usage (e.g., Bane and Ellwood 1994). Structural questions received less attention as defenders responded to critics in a debate that focused on work effort, program usage, and poor people's behaviors. Second, as dependency came to be seen as a cause of intergenerational

poverty, it became a kind of synecdoche—a single part used to represent the whole tangle of problems associated with the poor. To fight dependency was, in essence, to fight a kind of substance abuse that led to unrestrained sexuality, drug problems, violent crime, civic irresponsibility, and even poverty itself.

As a synecdoche for diverse social ills, dependency became the basis for a powerful crisis narrative in the 1980s and 1990s. Critics spoke of a "crisis of dependency," often in conjunction with fellow travelers such as the "teen pregnancy crisis" and the "underclass crisis" (Luker 1996). As M. Edelman (1977, chap. 3) explained, such crisis language evokes perceptions of threat, conveys the need for immediate and extraordinary action, and suggests that "now is not the time" to air dissent or seek deliberation.³ Claims about the prevalence of long-term program usage were often overblown, and images of wholesale social disintegration depended on highly selective readings of poor people's attitudes and behaviors (Rank 1994). But by applying the label of crisis, critics turned ambiguous trends among the poor (many of which also existed in the rest of society) into a fearsome threat to the values of middle America.

Just as the so-called drug crisis seemed to require a tough, incarceration-minded war on drugs, the crisis of dependency called for nothing short of an assault on permissiveness. In this environment, poverty advocates who tried to direct attention toward issues other than dependency were seen as fiddling while Rome burned. Long-term

program usage was a major social problem requiring a bold solution; it called for extraordinary measures, not tepid liberal palliatives. The only suitable response was to attack dependency at its root by imposing a new regime of welfare rules designed to dissuade and limit program usage, enforce work, and curb unwanted behaviors. In 1996, that is exactly what welfare reform did.

The key point for our purposes is that when advocates established dependency as a synecdoche for underclass pathology and as the central target for reform, they simultaneously highlighted caseload decline and employment among leavers as preeminent standards for judging the success of reform. One point to note about these standards is that they are not very demanding. Compared to improving material conditions in poor communities, it is relatively easy to pare the welfare rolls and push the poor into low-wage work. When these outcomes are treated as *ipso facto* evidence of policy success, they make it easier for the architects of TANF to deflect criticism for current hardships, gain standing to make future policy decisions, and claim credit in front of their constituencies.

The second point to note about these standards is that they direct attention away from criteria that might suggest policy failure. One such criterion, of course, is poverty reduction. Antipoverty effectiveness served as a primary measure of success for public assistance programs through most of the twentieth century (Danziger and Weinberg 1994). Yet the TANF program does not offer

benefits sufficient to lift recipients out of poverty, and (despite a strong economy) the majority of families who have moved off the TANF rolls have remained in poverty (ASPE 2000). Consideration of another traditional economic goal, reduction of inequality, only makes matters worse. Welfare reform has coincided with massive growth in income and wealth disparities; it has done little to slow the expansion of inequality and may have actually accelerated the trend (Collins, Leondar-Wright, Sklar 1999). Has welfare reform created job opportunities for the poor? Has it promoted wages that allow low-wage workers to escape poverty? In all these areas, the economic story remains the same: we have little evidence that reform has produced achievements that warrant the label of success.

Introduction of less market-centered criteria creates even more uncertainty about the success of reform. For at least a century, liberals have hoped that welfare programs might ease the social marginality of the poor and, thereby, enhance the solidarity of the national community. Participatory welfare programs have also been viewed as opportunities to build political efficacy, engagement, and leadership in poor communities (Soss 2000). With TANF recipients now being hassled, fingerprinted, forced to work in public settings wearing distinguishing clothing, and otherwise made into objects of public scorn, it is difficult to see how welfare reform has been successful in relation to these criteria (Schram 2000, 73-84). Alternatively, consider the long-standing goal of providing aid

in a manner that is equitable across categories of race and gender. Welfare reform has applied a profusion of new rules to poor women that are not applied to men in any sector of the welfare state (see Gwendolyn Mink's article in this volume); the toughest TANF rules have been disproportionately implemented in states where people of color make up higher proportions of the caseloads (Soss et al. 2001). A more inclusive society, a deeper democracy, a more just and humane system of provision—we have little evidence that reform is meeting any of these standards of success.

A narrow focus on caseload reduction and leaver outcomes obscures not only liberal measures of welfare success but also traditional conservative tests. Before 1996, conservatives routinely cited waste, fraud, and incompetence in the administration of welfare funds as evidence of policy failure. Such a standard of evaluation has rarely been applied to welfare reform despite well-documented cases in which clients have been unable to gain access to remaining entitlements (Dion and Pavetti 2000; Bell and Strege-Flora 2000) and corporate welfare providers have used public funds for profit-enhancing purposes (Schultze 2000; Hilzenrath 2000). Likewise, the old permissive welfare was deemed a failure because it did little to end social problems in poor communities, but there are good reasons to believe that such problems have not waned under the new welfare (DeParle 1999). Proponents touted TANF as a form of moral tutoring, a way to instill responsibility and other

desirable values in the poor; however, client studies under TANF report that “paternalist reform seems to be a lesson about power, not responsibility” (Wilson, Stoker, and McGrath 1999, 485).

This list of alternative criteria could go on indefinitely, but our point by now should be clear. The success of welfare reform has seemed indisputable primarily because of how the TANF program's achievements have been evaluated. What must be underscored is that the public does not necessarily view alternative criteria as less important than caseload reduction. Rather, these criteria have been obscured by a discourse that focuses attention narrowly on the contrast of dependency and self-sufficiency.

FROM POSSIBLE
INTERPRETATIONS TO
AUTHENTIC FACTS

Thus far, we have made two arguments about the current focus on caseloads and leaver studies. First, it is chiefly a political outcome: a victory for those who sought to frame the goals of welfare policy in terms of dependency and a loss for those who valued other objectives. Second, it renders welfare reform a success by obscuring evaluative criteria that would otherwise complicate or perhaps reverse public assessment. In this section, we make a third point. Even if one ignores other criteria, the belief that caseload decline and leaver studies demonstrate the success of welfare reform depends on a particular framing of the evidence. Roll decline and leaver outcomes are facts and fictions (Gusfield 1981).

The facts are that caseloads have dropped, leavers have experienced outcomes, and researchers have produced measures of each. The fictions are that such measures offer an unambiguous rendering of reality and that they do so in a way that establishes the truth of welfare reform's success.

Consider the fact of caseload decline. As Wendell Primus, former deputy assistant secretary of Health and Human Services, observed in August 1999, "The conventional wisdom here in Washington is that welfare reform is an unqualified success because caseload reductions have been so dramatic" (Associated Press 1999, C10). Welfare rolls have declined by about 53 percent since 1996 (Administration for Children and Families 2001). With concern over dependency as a backdrop, observers have tended to interpret this figure as evidence that TANF policies are motivating and assisting program users to leave the rolls. Such an interpretation, however, can be maintained only by isolating one possible meaning of roll decline and minimizing the play of alternative readings (M. Edelman 1997).

Mainstream media stories typically recite a list of important but limited questions regarding the meaning of caseload decline. Most point out that a significant portion of the 53 percent drop can be attributed to an unusually strong economy (Wallace and Blank 1999). A small number do even better, noting the impact of policies that augment the earnings of low-wage workers, such as the earned income tax credit (EITC). Most stories highlight the

need to evaluate roll decline by studying leavers, and many suggest that caseloads could rise again if the economy takes a dive. What these reports rarely do, however, is question the underlying premise that the TANF program's contribution to lower caseloads has consisted primarily of encouraging and helping dependent recipients to leave welfare for work.

Such an interpretation may seem self-evident, but a closer look at the evidence reveals that it is based on faulty assumptions about the sources of continuity and change in welfare caseloads. Before the 1996 reforms, large numbers of recipients left the welfare rolls each year; continuity was maintained because these recipients were replaced with new cohorts (Bane and Ellwood 1994). Of the people who entered the old AFDC program each year, 56 percent left within a year (averaging 5.3 months), and only 18 percent stayed on continuously for more than five years (Pavetti 1993). Even among long-term clients who accumulated in the annual caseload, significant numbers would leave each year to enter jobs or relationships or because children became too old to qualify for benefits. Caseload levels were maintained through a process of cohort replacement: new and former recipients would enter AFDC, taking the places of those who left.

Thus, over the five years since 1996, we would have expected a large number of program exits even if the "permissive" AFDC program had remained in place. Given the imposition of tough new TANF rules, roll decline since 1996 undoubtedly

reflects some increase in program exits, but a significant portion of the decline may also be traced to a decline in the number of replacements entering the rolls. Our ability to distinguish between these processes is hampered by the fact that, under TANF, states have not had to report exit and entry figures.⁴ Several observations, however, suggest that a significant portion of TANF's impact on caseloads can be linked to a decline in new cases rather than movement of long-term recipients into work.

First, although we do not have good TANF data, we do know that roll decline under AFDC between 1994 and 1997 was based more on a drop in new and recent cases than on a decline among long-term recipients (Falk 2000). The nationwide roll decline of 28 percent from 1994 to 1997 cannot be accounted for by the 2.5 percent increase in the number of long-term recipients during this period; it is far more plausibly tied to the 37 percent decline in new cases (Falk 2000).⁵ Second, under TANF, a majority of states have added new diversion policies that deflect claimants toward job searches or private assistance rather than adding them to the rolls (Maloy et al. 1998). Third, although evidence is sparse, many observers suggest that the cultural and administrative climates that have accompanied welfare reform have functioned to deter eligible families from claiming benefits (Bell and Strege-Flora 2000). Fourth, recent data on the remaining TANF caseload suggest that long-term recipients with barriers to work make up a disproportionate number of clients

who are not exiting TANF (Loprest and Zedlewski 1999).

Despite these facts, public discourse on caseload decline focuses primarily on leavers, paying little attention to those who do not or cannot gain entry to public aid. Of the 250 media stories we analyzed (see notes 1 and 2), only 7 mentioned diversion as a possible source of roll decline; 114 discussed people leaving welfare in conjunction with roll decline. The fact that prevailing interpretations of roll decline emphasize leavers and exit rates rather than diversion and entry rates has major political implications. Moving long-term recipients out of welfare and into jobs that raise them out of poverty would be widely hailed by the public as a major policy achievement (Gilens 1999). By contrast, we suspect that paring the rolls by shutting the gates on needy families would be viewed by many as a small and ignoble feat.

Beyond the issue of take-up rates, there is an additional reason to question the use of caseload statistics as symbols of policy success. If roll decline primarily resulted from TANF policies' helping recipients to move toward self-sufficiency, one would expect to find the largest declines in states that have the strongest work promotion, training, and opportunity-producing policies. This is simply not the case. The welfare rolls have dropped the most in states that impose immediate, full-family sanctions—that is, states that punish a client's first failure to comply with a program rule by eliminating aid for an entire family (Rector and Youssef 1999). From 1997

through 1999, an estimated 540,000 families lost their entire TANF check due to a full-family sanction (Goldberg and Schott 2000), yet only 24 of our sample of 250 media stories raised questions about the impact of sanctions policy.

Our purpose here is not to suggest that caseload decline should be interpreted solely as bad news. Rather, it is to recover the lost frames of reference that could and should make observers uncertain about what roll decline really means. Some of the decline can be traced to a strong economy, some is due to wage supplements such as the EITC, a portion can be traced to diversion and deterrence of income-eligible families, and some percentage can be attributed to sanctions that simply cut families off the rolls. How much of the remaining portion really reflects successful movement of clients from long-term dependence to self-sufficiency? Our best answer is that no one really knows, and too few people are asking. Instead, caseload decline is assumed to be about people trading in welfare checks for paychecks and, hence, is evaluated primarily in terms of leaver outcomes.

Since TANF was implemented in 1997, a welter of studies have attempted to track families who have left the TANF rolls (for example, ASPE 2000; U.S. General Accounting Office 1999; Loprest 1999). The mass media has given heavy coverage to these studies and has treated them as key arbiters of claims that welfare reform is succeeding. Leaver studies provide important information on a particular set of outcomes for poor

families. But like reports on caseload decline, these studies supply ambiguous evidence that must be framed in particular ways to support claims of policy success.

The key leaver outcomes cited as evidence that welfare reform is working are that 50 to 60 percent of former recipients have employment one quarter after exiting the program, that such former recipients generally experience a modest increase in income, and that they tend to make wages equivalent to those of low-income women (ASPE 2000; Loprest 1999). Do these statistics suggest success? It depends on what one uses as a baseline for judgment. That 40 to 50 percent of first-quarter leavers are trying to survive without a job and without cash assistance hardly seems like good news—especially since this percentage rises over later quarters, and eventually, almost a third of leavers have to return to TANF (Loprest 1999). The evidence of success becomes even less convincing if one uses outcomes under the old “permissive” welfare as a baseline for comparison: about 46 percent of AFDC recipients left the welfare rolls because of employment earnings (Pavetti 1993). This is a lower percentage than one finds under TANF, but given that unemployment rates have been at historic lows and that TANF workers have been promoting employment of almost any sort, the shift hardly suggests a stunning policy achievement.

Turning to the evidence on income increases, one finds the same story. The baseline most frequently used to frame leaver incomes is previous

income as a TANF recipient. By this standard, leaver earnings are almost guaranteed to suggest success. To encourage work, welfare benefits have always been set well below the lowest wages in the labor market (Piven and Cloward 1993). Moreover, the real value of welfare benefits has declined by about half since 1970 and is currently too low to cover basic family necessities, let alone lift families out of poverty. Thus, TANF income provides a very low bar for gauging leaver success.

A comparison of leaver earnings to those of low-income women poses an equally lax test. In 1998, the poverty threshold for an adult and two children was \$1095 per month; the median earnings for TANF leavers in a study of 11 states ranged from only \$665 to \$1083 per month (ASPE 2000). In fact, leavers have incomes so low that 49 percent report that often or sometimes food does not last until the end of the month and that they do not have money to buy more; 39 percent report a time in the last year when they were unable to pay rent, mortgage, or utility bills (Loprest 1999). Whether leaver earnings indicate positive program outcomes depends, critically, on how much hardship one sees as acceptable for disadvantaged families to endure.

Finally, the claim that welfare reform is a success rests, to a significant degree, on the idea that leavers are now being provided a stronger system of support to smooth the transition to self-sufficiency. As in other areas, there is a grain of truth here. Public assistance prior to 1996

provided clients with limited resources to facilitate a lasting transition into work and out of poverty.⁶ TANF policies have arguably expanded these resources. But while many forms of transitional assistance are now on the books, survey-based leaver studies show that large numbers of former recipients are not actually receiving benefits. Despite widespread need, 53 percent of children in leaver families are not receiving Medicaid assistance, 66 percent of adult leavers do not receive Medicaid coverage, and 69 percent of leaver families do not receive food stamps (Loprest 1999). Among those making the initial transition to work (in the first three months), 81 percent do not receive child care assistance, 89 percent do not receive any help with expenses, and 85 percent do not receive help finding or training for a job (Loprest 1999).

None of these figures should be taken as unambiguous evidence that welfare reform, as a whole, is a failure. There is some nontrivial number of former welfare recipients who have been well served by new TANF policies—who have been encouraged and assisted to find jobs that lift them out of poverty and who are now doing well enough not to need transitional or ongoing assistance. The problem is that recent leaver statistics have been framed to misleadingly suggest that such experiences (1) rarely occurred under the old AFDC program, (2) characterize a majority of TANF leaver outcomes, and (3) account for the bulk of case-load decline.

CONCLUSION

It is official: the reform of the welfare system is a great triumph of social policy.

—Michael Kelly (1999, A21)

Although one can find significant dissenting voices in the government, the press, and advocacy organizations, welfare reform is now widely viewed as a policy success. The backdrop for this assessment is a causal story suggesting that permissive welfare policies from the 1960s to the 1990s produced a crisis of long-term dependency that, in turn, bred behavioral pathologies and intergenerational poverty. Over a 25-year period, promotion of this story turned the size of welfare caseloads into a key indicator of policy performance and established transitions off the rolls as a central policy goal. Accordingly, in the current era of welfare reform, caseloads and leaver outcomes have become the most salient measures of policy success—even for many who doubt that cash assistance was ever the root cause of poor people's problems. The secret of success for welfare reform has been a frame of reference that suggests positive interpretations of roll decline and leaver outcomes while simultaneously obscuring alternative criteria that might produce more critical assessments.

The discursive processes that we have highlighted in this article merit close attention because judgments of policy success and failure are more than just political outcomes; they are also political forces. Beliefs about which policies are known failures and which have been shown to

succeed set the parameters for reasonable debate over the shape of future legislation. Reputations for developing successful ideas confer authority, giving some advocates greater access and influence in the legislative process. Public officials who are able to claim credit for policy success hold a political resource that bestows advantages in both electoral and legislative contests. For all these reasons, politically constructed beliefs about the successes and failures of welfare policy can be expected to play a key role in determining the fate of TANF reauthorization in the 107th Congress. Such beliefs, and the political actions that sustain them, constitute major influences on the shape of social provision in America.

Notes

1. We used a two-step process to identify relevant stories. First, we searched Lexis-Nexis to find all stories with at least one sentence that included both "welfare" and "reform" and at least one sentence that included one of four combinations: "roll" and "decline," "roll" and "drop," "caseload" and "decline," and "caseload" and "drop." This procedure yielded a preliminary sample of 358 stories. Second, to limit our analysis to relevant media portrayals, we identified and removed all letters to the editors and news stories that were either irrelevant or made only passing reference to welfare. This procedure resulted in a loss of 108 cases, producing a final sample of 250 relevant stories.

2. The sample of 250 stories and prototypical articles representing each of the five coding categories are available from the authors on request. Coding reliability was evaluated by having two individuals independently code a random subsample of 50 stories. Applying the five categories described in the text, the two coders agreed on 82 percent of the cases in this subsample, a rate of agreement that meets conventional standards for

interrater reliability (see Rubin and Babbie 2000, 192-93).

3. In the 1960s, liberals used such crisis language in tandem with the militaristic metaphor of a war on poverty—a construction that cued anxieties about the costs of inaction while also suggesting the state's capacity to use its arsenal of weapons to achieve victory (Stone 1997).

4. Congressional action in 2000 restored some efforts to collect data on welfare entry and exit. It will be some time, however, before enough data will be available to support trend analyses of caseload dynamics under TANF.

5. Long-term recipients were defined in this analysis as those receiving welfare for 60 or more months; new recipients were defined as those who had been on the rolls for 3 months or less.

6. During the last decade of the AFDC program, the nominal transition benefits for exiting families included ongoing access to food stamps for those who qualified, one year of Medicaid coverage for those who qualified, and one year of child care for those leaving AFDC for a job.

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