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**NATIONAL COUNCIL ON FAMILY RELATIONS**
**PRESS RELEASE**
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## Study Debunks Stereotype about Welfare to Work Recipients

Public assistance recipients are committed to work, although policy makers and the general public may not recognize their commitment, according to research conducted at the LSU AgCenter.

In addition, Dr. Pam Monroe, a member of the faculty of the LSU AgCenter's School of Human Ecology, and Vicky Tiller, a research associate in the School, report region is a key factor in rural poverty, which is concentrated in the South.

The study of women receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families – formerly Aid to Families with Dependent Children – appears in the August issue of the Journal of Marriage and Family. The article is entitled, "*Commitment to Work among Welfare Reliant Women*."

"Welfare and welfare recipients have long been viewed with ambivalence by their fellow U.S. citizens," Monroe says. "Most often, they are stigmatized severely."

"We are trying to de-bunk myths and stereotypes about welfare recipients, to show these people as the diverse group that they are, and to expand the definition of work to include the activities in which many of the women are engaged," she adds.

Working in seven rural Louisiana parishes with high poverty and welfare program participation rates, the researchers interviewed welfare recipients who were participating in GED training or job training designed to help them get off welfare.

All the interviewees were women.

Through private interviews, the researchers learned about the women's work histories. They also asked about job availability, informal work, survival strategies and helping networks, most of which included kin and seldom included men.

"Welfare recipients have been viewed as a homogeneous group," Monroe says. "They aren't homogeneous. Welfare recipients vary widely in terms of characteristics like education, work history, mental and emotional stability, sexual exclusivity, family size and willingness to work."

Dr. Alexis Walker, professor of human development at Oregon State University and editor of the journal in which the article appears says that Monroe and Tiller's research indicates that "women on public assistance are much like other women in many ways." The researchers report these women expressed a strong desire and intention to work. In fact, they say, the women "professed some remarkably traditional, mainstream values regarding work and providing for their families." Walker adds, "The authors demonstrate that women on public assistance leave paid work for the same reasons other employees do: pregnancy or the birth of a child, the seasonal nature of the work, the closing of a factory, and so on. They care
about the same things other women care about: a job with reasonable hours and reasonable pay, access to high quality and affordable child care and transportation."

The Monroe and Tiller's research reveals that most of the women they interviewed are trying against all odds to improve their human capital. Many have been employed and want to work in the future, seeing employment as the key to a better life beyond the welfare system.

Monroe says many, maybe most, welfare recipients are actively engaged in what she calls self-provisioning activities.

"These are the many, varied methods and strategies the women use to provide for themselves, their children and their extended family, such as dependent elderly parents," she says.

"The women also are actively involved in the work of care – care of children especially, but care of family and community members," Monroe adds. "The paper argues that stereotypes of laziness and unwillingness to work should not be applied to such hard-working women and that if these women were middle-class, suburban women, we would readily admit that this is 'work.'"

Monroe and Tiller continue to follow the women in their study, having recently completed a third round of interviews with funding support from the Southern Rural

Development Center. Their latest work includes researchers at Clemson University in South Carolina who conducted a parallel study for comparison with the Louisiana study.

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# Commitment to Work Among Welfare-Reliant Women

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*The purpose of this article is to describe the work of welfare-reliant women and to reveal commitment to work in the experiences of 84 welfare-reliant, rural women interviewed for this study. Understanding the domains where welfare-reliant women exhibit commitment to work may help policy makers, trainers, and employers design and implement interventions that enhance chances of success for these women in the formal, paid workforce. Discussion focuses on the women's formal labor force participation in the past and desire for wage work in the future; barriers to labor force participation, both personal and in the rural job market; informal work and the work of care; support networks; survival strategies for making ends meet while receiving welfare; and the stigma of welfare receipt.*

*Keywords: family policy, welfare reform, women's work.*

There are many impediments, at societal and individual levels, to families moving from welfare reliance to full-time paid labor. Well-known barriers include lack of job skills, low educational attainment, single-parent households and heavy family responsibilities, severely limited employment opportunities in local communities (especially in the rural South), lack of reliable transportation, and lack of quality affordable child care (Brayfield & Hofferth, 1995 ; Browne, 1995; Hao, 1995 ; Harris, 1996 ; Nord & Beaulieu, 1997 ). Recent research suggests that it is not just these obstacles, but a pileup of severe, persistent problems that impede employment success for welfare-reliant women (Zedlewski, 1999 ). There is another impediment that rests just under the surface of public discourse among employers, trainers, politicians, and the general citizenry: the belief that some welfare reliant adults resist efforts to move them into the formal workforce. Some employers call this problem a lack of "willingness to work" or absence of a work ethic (Gilens, 1999 ; Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991 ; Monroe, Blalock, & Vlosky, 1999 ). Work ethic is described as responsibility, dependability, pride in a job, loyalty to an employer, and commitment to work, and the welfare reliant population is stereotyped as uniformly deficient in its work ethic (Kirschenman & Neckerman; Rose, 1995 ; Task Force, 1993 ).

Such thinking is flawed on many levels. There is solid evidence that the welfare-reliant population is heterogeneous in terms of many defining characteristics, including previous participation in the formal labor force and the circumstances that precipitated the need for public assistance (for reviews, see Jencks, 1992 ; Task Force, 1993 ; Taylor, Jackson, & Chatters, 1997 ). Furthermore, most people who participate in the welfare system do not rely on welfare for long periods of time, although participants appear to be stereotyped by the small core of individuals who are chronically dependent on public assistance (Friedlander & Burtless, 1995 ; Harris, 1996 ; Rank, 1994a, 1994b ; Rosenbaum & Popkin, 1991 ). Despite such empirical data, the American people and their public

officials show a broad willingness to stigmatize the poor, including the working poor and families reliant on public assistance, and to base policy reforms on such stereotypes (Gilens, 1999 ).

The purpose of this article is to describe the work of welfare-reliant women. We will attempt to uncover various ways (where they exist) in which marginalized women exhibit commitment to informal and formal work, for the purpose of helping policy makers, trainers, and employers design interventions that enhance chances of success for these women in the formal workforce. Finally, the foregoing issues will be examined in the context of the rural and remote rural Southern communities in which these families are being asked to achieve wage-based self-sufficiency (see Lobao, 1996 ). Although poverty and welfare reliance are disproportionately concentrated in both urban centers and in remote rural areas, poverty and welfare research to date has focused on urban areas (Jensen & Tienda, 1989 ; Task Force, 1993 ). Many of the early welfare reform "success stories" are to be found in urban, metropolitan, or small-city settings with fewer such stories found among rural poor citizens. Thus, a unique contribution of this study is its focus on poor, welfare-reliant families in rural and remote rural Southern communities.

We begin by framing this research in the literature on rural poverty, welfare reliance, and the meanings of work. Particular attention is given to the historical and cultural context of stigma for welfare-reliant adults and their families, for the rural poor, and for the rural minorities that are the focus of this study, as well as to how stigma shapes public discourse on these issues. We then allow the stories and voices of welfare-reliant women to reveal commitment to work where and how it exists in their world.

## Review of Literature Return to TOC

Although rural poverty has declined since the mid-1960s, rural poverty rates remain high, with rural poor citizens concentrated in the Deep South (Hoppe, 1993 ; Lichter & Eggebeen, 1992 ; Rural Policy Research Institute [RUPRI], 1999 ). This situation is largely due to the fact that rural areas and Southern rural communities have not fared well in the transition of the national economy from an industrial and manufacturing economy to a service- and information-based economy. Additionally, women fare worse in rural economies in the South, and African American women are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than their White counterparts (Iceland, 1997 ; Lichter, 1989 ; RUPRI). Juxtaposed to these realities is the fact that many recipients of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF; formerly Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC) already have experienced interruptions in their welfare benefits as mandated by states'

response to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 (PRWORA). Many Southern states have reached the critical point when TANF benefits will expire and, ready or not, welfare-reliant families will be removed from assistance programs.

### *Rural Poverty and Welfare Reform*

Although welfare is not a benign element in a person's life, the magnitude of the role of welfare in the events and circumstances of most people's lives appears to be small (Atkinson, Monroe, & Garand, 1995 ; Gottschalk, McLanahan, & Sandefur, 1994 ; Monroe & Garand, 1991 ). It is difficult to characterize whether welfare availability and reliance increases or decreases the likelihood of various personal and family outcomes. What is known is that in the United States, welfare has been a relatively small program, that it is one factor among many in various societal conditions (and a small factor at that), and that it has been handled in an indecisive way in this country in part because of ambivalent public attitudes toward the poor and toward the assistance offered to them.

Debate continues over whether persistent poverty is due to the structural impediments of a market-driven society or to generations of questionable personal choices and lack of personal restraint. Contemporary scholars suggest that this question no longer be treated as a dichotomy, especially for rural residents, where poverty is closely tied to historic structures of government, societies, or economies reflecting racism, sexism, and paternalism (Nord & Beaulieu, 1997 ; Task Force, 1993 ). Certainly, some poverty experienced by adults is self-inflicted. It may not be rational, however, for all people to invest in education and “hard work” in communities where there will not be any or many high-paying, high-skill jobs or where racism, sexism, and stigma work against them (Harris, 1996 ; Rank, 1994a, 1994b ; Rosenbaum & Popkin, 1991 ). Children born to rural poor parents and living in conditions of persistent poverty are likely to be poor as adults, in large part because of such structural impediments but also because of the reluctance of their parents to make conventional human capital investments in children (Becker, 1981 ; Rodgers, 1995 ; Task Force). For the poorest of the poor, racial minorities, the least well educated, and women—exactly the groups on which we report here—the payoff for their investments in human capital and their attempts to participate in the market economy can be frustratingly low.

### *The Stigma of Poverty and Welfare Reliance*

Stigma involves the use of powerfully discrediting and tainting social labels that radically change the way individuals view themselves and are viewed as a person (Goffman, 1963 ). An entire field of persons may be stigmatized in a nonreflexive way, some

for actually having violated societal norms or rules, but others for being members of a certain racial, ethnic, or regional group or for having traits and characteristics that are not highly valued (Birenbaum & Sagarin, 1976 ). One way to insure that poor persons would be uncomfortable in their roles as aid recipients was to attach a certain level of stigma to most forms of public assistance (Harris, 1996 ; Katz, 1989 ; Rank, 1994a ; Seccombe, James, & Walters, 1998 ). The cultural roots of stereotyping and stigmatizing relevant to the welfare-reliant population are outlined briefly below.

*Racial stigma.* White Americans once classified Blacks in terms that echoed Katz's (1989) notions of deserving and undeserving subgroups (see also Gilens, 1999 ). A “Negro” or “colored person” was a hardworking black man or woman who would do the least desirable physical labor without complaint toward the work, the hours, or the pay and who could be trusted to some degree by Whites (see Segrest, 1994 ). Such “deserving” Blacks were patronized by Whites as long as they kept their place. In contrast, some Blacks were classified as “niggers,” a label used to stereotype a man considered to be undeserving, lazy, ignorant, shiftless, one who could be counted on for little but trouble. The attitudes behind such labels helped lay a foundation for stigmatizing Blacks as *others,* different from Whites, even as their work ethic was recognized in this context to be heterogeneous.

*Class stigma.* Such classifying and stereotyping was not limited to Whites' attitudes toward Blacks. In some places, employers have relied on working-class Whites to help enforce the rules of conduct between Blacks and Whites (Roediger, 1994 ). In exchange for their cooperation, silence, and disunity, some poor Whites were allowed the barest taste of White privilege, just enough to allow them to think of themselves as different from and superior to Blacks (Segrest, 1994 ). Poor Whites also have been classified into more or less acceptable subgroups by other poor Whites and by more privileged Whites (Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991 ; Roediger). Working-class members of certain subgroups (e.g., persons of English or German descent) were allowed some privilege whereas other ethnic groups (e.g., Irish or Mexicans) were viewed as not-yet-White and allowed only limited White privilege (Roediger).

*Historical and contextual stigma.* People are embedded in their near environment and their local social and historical contexts. If these contexts are treated as homogenous, we may fail “to comprehend the meaning and significance of ethnicity, kinship, traditions, culture, and other factors that bind these communities together” (Task Force, 1993 , p. 197; see also Taylor et al., 1997 ; Trent, 1994 ). There are different types of group and individual

survival practices among rural residents, and there will be varying responses to poverty, structural impediments, and personal choices. In these complex social and economic contexts, individuals make choices about their lives that may appear to be less than rational. Full participation in the community—whether this is a racial, ethnic, or tribal group—may come at the expense of full participation in a capitalist marketplace. Some people in rural ethnic groups grasp this tradeoff quite clearly, and choose their community over the marketplace. This rich cultural capital may function as a marker that assists or impedes the progress of group members as they make their way into the formal workforce (Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991 ; Task Force).

*Welfare stigma.* Even welfare recipients tend to cope with the stigma of welfare by separating *self* from *other* through criticism of the motivations and commitment to work and family of other assistance recipients. In previous work, welfare-reliant women described other recipients as lazy, without ambition, willing to defraud the system, using welfare money for themselves rather than their children, and even willing to have more babies to receive more welfare money, all in contrast to themselves (e.g., Rank, 1994a ; Seccombe et al., 1998 ). This reaction will be explored in depth as we examine the comments of our respondents concerning their own and others' willingness to work.

## *Expanding the Definition of Work*

Beginning with a conventional marker for work, it must be noted that many rural poor citizens and rural welfare recipients are employed in the formal labor force (RUPRI, 1999 ). Nearly 65% of rural poor households have at least one person in formal employment (Deavers & Hoppe, 1992 ). For this study, work is not limited to formal employment but includes the many activities of informal work "that contribute to the material survival of individuals and their households," self-provisioning, and survival strategies (Task Force, 1993 , p. 12). Work is a dynamic concept with meaning in the context and place in which it occurs and should be examined with regard for race and ethnic group, class, and gender. Many women do informal work for which they receive little credit, most notably the care of children and family (Rose, 1995 ; Task Force). Poor rural women also may purchase certain goods cheaply and add value to the product through their own labor, a form of work that is difficult to quantify (Task Force).

In addition, women barter their time and energy resources with other women and households in exchange for needed services or goods. In fact, many households and communities depend on this informal work–exchange relationship entered into by women (Brayfield & Hofferth, 1995 ; Hao, 1995 ; Rosenbaum & Popkin, 1991 ; Stack, 1974 ; Task Force, 1993 ). Poor women cannot

ignore the reciprocity and commitment they owe to kin and neighbors because this network is one of the chief ways they "make ends meet" (compare to Edin & Lein, 1997 ; see also Stack). It is not an obvious choice, then, that women should reduce their available time and energy for such exchanges by entering the formal workforce to gain more of the resource of money, especially if the job is physically demanding and the pay is at or below poverty-level wages.

It appears that these women essentially come to the same conclusions as have most social scientists: Most of the formal work available to women in rural and remote rural communities will not pull families out of poverty now or even in the long run, and instead may deprive their children of other valuable resources. Oliker (1995) suggested that the tradeoff for welfare-reliant women who try to diminish their level of stigma and regain their "public virtue" through formal work would be an increase in the costs to their private, family obligations and within their resource exchange network. We will examine the comments of the women interviewed here for evidence of formal work, informal work, and other strategies to provide for the well-being of their families.

## Data Collection Return to TOC

This project was supported by the Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station and carried out with cooperation from the Louisiana Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service (LCES). The research protocol, an open-end qualitative interview, was piloted among women who met the same criteria as the potential participants; these interviews are not included in the analysis. Both researchers were White, middle-class professional women, about 10 years older than the average participant. We presented ourselves to participants in a low-key way, dressing and speaking in a comfortable, relaxed manner.

The seven sites for the interviews were chosen based on their representative rural and remote rural locations around the state. LCES parish agents and DSS regional program specialists assisted researchers in locating groups of women who would be eligible for participation in this study, introducing us to directors at training sites where welfare-reliant women were meeting their mandated participation in programs (e.g., training centers for General Equivalency Diplomas [GED] or job-training sites) designed to assist their exit from welfare. Each of the directors contacted agreed to open their classrooms to us.

At each interview site, the researchers introduced themselves to the potential participants in a large group setting; clarified for the women who we were and who we were not (i.e., we were not case

workers or state agents); explained the research project; and guaranteed confidentiality of their comments. The women were paid $10 for their participation and were told that this compensation had been cleared with DSS as income that did not have to be reported. The voluntary aspect of the project was emphasized, although it is acknowledged here that the offer of monetary compensation to poor women is compelling. After these introductory remarks, the researchers went to preestablished private meeting rooms and volunteers came one at a time for individual interviews. The site directors indicated that all or almost all of the eligible women at each site participated in the interviews. The interviews averaged about 25 minutes in length. The first author transcribed the audio-taped interviews with assistance from the other researcher.

Summary characteristics for the 84 women who participated in this study are presented in Table 1. The participants were typical of the average TANF recipient in Louisiana, based on state DSS data. African Americans are overrepresented in our respondents, probably because we targeted rural and remote rural regions for this study, although Louisiana does have a relatively high proportion of population that is Black (67% White, 31% Black) compared with the nation. The rural areas in which the respondents reside have experienced higher levels of unemployment, underemployment, and job shortages than the state or the nation at large. The state unemployment rate for the data collection period was 6.6%; unemployment in the parishes where data were collected, for the same period, ranged from 3.2% to 12.4% and averaged 7.1%; female unemployment rates for the same parishes and time period averaged 8.2%. Rural Louisiana also lacks support systems such as public transportation and quality child care (Keefer, Monroe, Atkinson, & Garrison, 1996 ). An average of 23% of families in the seven parishes of interest here had incomes below the poverty level compared with 19% of all Louisiana families with incomes below the poverty level for the same period.

## **Results** Return to TOC

### *The Work of Welfare-Reliant Women: Formal Labor Force Participation*

Our discussion of findings also begins with the conventional marker for commitment to work, with many of the women in this study reporting a work history that included formal employment. The women had worked at a wide variety of jobs, including seasonal agricultural and commodity work such as planting sugarcane, packing vegetables or honey, cracking crabs and fishing; fast food, restaurant and cafeteria work; janitorial,

housecleaning, and service work; babysitting and elder sitting; braiding hair or hairdressing; commercial driving; and security officer positions. Those who had formal work experience had seldom worked at one job for a long period of time but were more likely to have held several jobs. A 36-year-old woman indicated that she had held more than 10 jobs, engaging in a variety of work from child care to pulling wood at a plywood plant. She laughed and said, “This is the longest I've been on welfare, ever . . .I've been off and on the system, mostly between jobs . . .but it has never taken me this long [2½ years] to find a job.” Another woman, aged 35 and the mother of five children, said, “I got good jobs but had to let them go because of pregnancy or they went out of business.”

Job turnover is not necessarily due to problems with the women's performance but often to the seasonal or short-term nature of the work for which they are qualified or to child care problems: “I resigned from this job, because I was the only transportation officer,” said a 33-year-old mother of three children, “and they were calling me in the middle of the night, 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning. I got kids, and I had told them about it to get me some help, so I didn't have no choice but to resign.”

A few women had worked at jobs for a number of years. The best example of this was at an interview site in a small town that, until recently, had been the home of a large textile mill. The parent company had recently closed the factory, resulting in the loss of hundreds of jobs in a rural area that had few large employers for low-skilled workers. Many women had worked at the mill continuously, or in an on-again–off-again manner, but now were out of work completely. For example, one middle-aged woman described her employment history there by saying, “at 19 [I] began working at the mill, sewing, quit and went back, and quit and went back.”

A handful of women reported that the birth of a child had interrupted conventional preparations for formal employment. These women had participated in technical, vocational, or trade school training, college, or graduate school and dropped out when their children were infants. There were a few cases in which women had been in trade school or college and had been caught between old welfare regulations and the new PRWORA. The change in regulations forced them to drop out of school or come to a particular state-sponsored training program without allowing them to complete the program in which they had been enrolled. A 22-year-old mother of three children told us, “I will get cut off [welfare] 6 months before I finish [college]—that will be a strain on me. You're 6 months from that degree, but then I got to provide for my family.” In another case, one woman was a licensed cosmetologist but had not been able to afford to renew her license

for a number of years. A few hundred dollars—reasonable by most standards but a princely sum for a woman in poverty—stood between welfare reliance and the legal practice of her trade.

The women in this study who reported no formal work experience at all were more likely to be the younger women. Most had given birth to their first child while still in high school, had subsequently dropped out of school, and were just now returning to finish their secondary education or to seek job training. Recent research suggests that these young women will be particularly vulnerable in their transition from welfare reliance to paid workforce participation. They may make several starts out of the gate before they exit welfare for work and are able to avoid a return to welfare, although rural women generally seem less vulnerable to returns to welfare (Harris, 1996 ).

A few women mentioned their feeling that there were some jobs in the paid labor market that were beneath them, mainly because they were dead end or taught them no new skills. These jobs included the typical "public works"–type activities such as picking up litter alongside the roadways or in public places. A 42-year-old mother of six children who reported never having formal employment told the interviewer, "I was working for the town . . . sometimes it was too hot, it was during the summertime . . .the heat, at my age . . .I just couldn't put up with that." Another woman expressed her concern that, as long as welfare-reliant women were available to employers without pay, the women completing the programs would never be hired: "How could you get hired when they're just grabbing you for free during the program? That's how they look at it—the people that is doing the hiring. If they can get them for free, why hire me?" Although this may be a very rational attitude (Stephenson, 1997 ), there is evidence of a discrepancy between what young workers report as their limits versus the work they will actually perform, if necessary, to take care of themselves and their children (Petterson, 1997 ). It was far more common to encounter women who said they would do whatever it took to support their families, like the 19-year-old mother of two children who said, "I'm willing to do whatever it takes to keep a paycheck coming in for them, and for me, to get whatever they need. I don't want my children to be left out."

Nearly all of the women interviewed indicated their intentions and desire to enter the formal paid labor force in the very near future. Over and over, the women told us, "My plan is to get a job," just as they said their plans as a teenager had been to get a good job. Clearly, the women saw paid employment as their way off welfare and into a better life. Pursuit of a job was also a common piece of advice the women offered when asked to speak to "other women like yourself"on these issues. In describing how

these plans were derailed, one woman said, “I wanted to finish school. Then I wanted to find me a good paying job. I had in my head I wanted to be an engineer. After I got pregnant with my second little boy, it was like my hope just got lost.” This woman felt she was once again on track through participation in the training program in which she was enrolled.

There was anxiety mixed with this optimism about employment, however. The women were concerned about several factors that they perceived as barriers to their success in the workforce. There was the perennial, but valid, concern about transportation. One woman noted, “I live all the way in [name of community]. That's way out in the country and I don't have no transportation to come down to find a job.” Another woman said, “Transportation is hard. I'll just do what women do, somebody will always stop and pick you up. But I don't get in cars no more cause something bad happened to me.” Many women mentioned having to pay a relative or neighbor to drive them places.

They were also deeply concerned about child care (cf., for example, Brayfield & Hofferth, 1995 ; Hao, 1995 ; Rosenbaum & Popkin, 1991 ). The women indicated that, like most parents, they simply would not or could not leave their children “with just anybody.” “I didn't trust other people to take care of my children,” said one woman, and another noted, “I don't believe in anyone keeping my children—sister, brother, mother—regardless.” One 45-year-old mother of two children noted with irony, “They [the state] payin' for child care—they [the care providers] get paid more than we get for the whole month.” A 27-year-old mother of one son expressed the concerns of rural women quite clearly: “I thought they should've came out to this area here and seen how it was out here instead of just New Orleans and other places. Should have checked into day-care centers. Down here some people need transportation to work, some don't have a car. Besides, people can't work unless they have a reliable babysitter. If they would have provided busses or something. . . . They would've seen how this area is.”

In addition to the job market constraints previously mentioned, the women perceived that there was an element of luck or networking to getting a job, and they feared “not knowing the right people” would impede their employment opportunities. “You have to know people to get a job,” a woman told us. Another woman said firmly, “I believe it's not what you know, but who you know.”

Finally, several women reflected the concerns that some people simply lack the ability to be competitive in the marketplace. One 44-year-old woman who had never held a job said fretfully,

> I'm scared to death. I can't hold no job. I don't know what I'm gonna do. I don't know why I'm

> here—the state told me to come so I'm coming. I don't want nothing to interfere with my household. I been on this since I was 18.

A 35-year-old mother revealed her anxiety about entering the job market: “I didn't pass my GED. I was frustrated. This school should have been open all along for people to come and get a trade, get a job. I'd been out of school 17 years.” Another young mother said, “This is my third time coming back to try to get my GED and I still ain't learning nothing.” A 22-year-old mother of three children expressed concern over this aspect of welfare reform as well:

> Two years. It's a good thing and also a bad thing. . . . People who have been out of the workforce so long, don't know how to get back into it. Some ladies coming back to school, 40, 50 years old, try to get their GED, takes some people a long time to get their GED, cause school has changed drastically in the last 20 years. For them, it's hard, they have a lot to do in a 2-year period, a lot to work on.

### *Rural Job Market and Availability of Jobs*

A major concern for these women—and for policy makers, social scientists, and agency professionals—is the shortage of jobs available in many rural communities in the United States (Diller, 1998 ; Task Force, 1993 ). Many of the women interviewed report a similar anxiety about the lack of formal work available in their communities. They told us that there were no jobs or that no one was hiring. These comments, offered by various women, are typical of the many women who raised these concerns:

“There's no jobs. They can't find jobs for everybody all at one time.”

“Not everybody will get a job in that time period, not guaranteed.”

“Some mamas saying they can't find no job and can't find nobody to watch their child. I'm concerned about that too.”

“They say they have the jobs, but that's if you have the ability to do those jobs.”

“Just about have to have a college degree to be a ditch digger.”

“Take away the assistance and have no jobs—crime is gonna be everywhere.”

“Getting the job is not the problem, and not even transportation, the problem is this is a small community. Not enough jobs available, jobs are already filled.”

Some women said they had filled out applications, even gone on job interviews, but had received no callbacks. “I'm trying to find a job. Put in applications everywhere, but nobody called,” said one

woman. Another woman echoed this comment: “There are some jobs around, I put in my application but they didn't call me.”

A few women told us that there are plenty of jobs available if women will get up and go look for them. “There are jobs for people who try to get a job,” said one woman, whereas another commented, “All kinds of jobs out there, especially for women. If they say there isn't, they're just not looking, not checking their resources.” Another woman indicated that she would do any work, and volunteered, “I'm from the country, and I used to throw bales on a truck. [Some women] probably think it's a man's job.”

It is clear from the respondents' comments on formal work that these women had a strong desire and intention to work. In fact, they professed some remarkably traditional, mainstream values regarding work and providing for their families. They saw work as a legitimate way of providing for self and family, to improve their situation in life, and to have more and better things for themselves and their children. “I've passed my tests,” said one woman, “so the future should be all good. [I'm going to] provide for my children. I know I'm gonna make it.” “You can have fine things in life when you're working,” was the belief of one woman. “I never give up, every day when I look at my children it seems like they motivate me to try to do better. I'm a lot like my mother, I never give up” one young woman told us.

The women also talked about the importance of formal employment in terms of what it meant to be a role model for their children. “I grew up in an environment where my folks worked, set the example,” said one 33-year-old woman. A 20-year-old woman said, “[I want to] have my own, what I work for, that's what I want my kids accustomed to, getting it honestly.” A 19-year-old mother of twin toddlers revealed that “when I was little, my mama worked constantly, constantly, constantly, constantly, and I want to do my kids the same way. I don't want my kids to grow up with a mother having nothing.” Many women echoed the words of these mothers: “I have to set an example for her [daughter] so she won't make the same mistakes that I made, and my boys too.” And, “I want to show my children that quitting school and getting on welfare is not the right thing to do.”

Finally, many women made a very traditional connection between work and improvements in their self-esteem: “I want to better myself. I've always wanted to get my GED. And now that I'm doing it, my self-esteem has been lifted.” A 38-year-old mother of two children told us, “I have more self-esteem now than I ever had. I feel like my children see a stronger image now. I don't mind starting from the bottom and moving up.” A few women mentioned a renewal of their faith and religious practices: “I just had to make a change in my life, so that's what I did. . . . I love my

life now. Before I was in church, everything was just dark, I didn't know nothin', all I knew was men, men, men. So I made a total change in my life," said a woman whose daily life was a constant struggle but who captured the optimism expressed by so many of the women in this study concerning their futures in the labor force.

### *Informal Work*

It is important to consider a wide variety of self-provisioning activities in which welfare-reliant women may be engaged. Otherwise, their commitment to work may go undetected and unacknowledged. The respondents' stories revealed several patterns of informal work. First, it is clear that care of children is the first priority of many women and that they consider this to be their work. In many cases, they recognized that they had been faced with a choice between care and supervision of their children using public assistance as their primary income, or participation in paid employment. After some consideration, the women chose the work of caring for their children. A decision to care for children, even if through public assistance, may represent a cost to the women at one stage of life but may be rational for its long-term benefits for the woman and her children in later stages of life (Esterberg, Moen, & Dempster-McCain, 1994 ; Oliker, 1995 ).

Other forms of informal work, most likely paid in cash, include farm and field labor and working in seafood processing, sitting for children or elders, house cleaning, driving, and hairdressing. Edin and Lein (1997) addressed the pressures for urban women to engage in informal, cash activities to help make ends meet, and the rural women in our study fit this pattern as well. A 41-year-old mother of two children said of her occasional work, "At least you're getting a little bit of cash, and you're trying to do something for yourself and your family." Another woman said, "I always did find something, babysitting." An older woman commented, "I've been cleaning all my life. So that'll probably be the first step where I can find something to do 'til I can find something better." "I like doing housework; that's about the only thing I know how to do," said another.

### *Survival Strategies and Helping Networks*

Broadly defined, work includes self-provisioning, survival strategies, and participation in exchange networks. It is those activities to which we now turn. Some women participated in a helping network, made up mostly of kin, as a survival strategy. Nonetheless, there was a clear refrain heard over and over from these women that appears to set them apart from their urban counterparts: They believed that they had to depend on themselves and no one else to care for self and children. "You can't lean on no one else," said one woman, and another commented, "I realized I

would have to take responsibility for myself. . . . No one else was gonna do it for me.”

The women engaged in a variety of survival strategies. Some of the women engaged in multiple jobs for which they were paid cash. “I was determined to get jobs after jobs, no matter if it took two or three jobs,” said one woman. They reported that, in the past, formal work did not always get them out of poverty, even when they tried to hold multiple jobs. Other women spoke of selling off any consumable goods they possessed for cash: “If it meant selling things I had—I sold my TVs, furniture, stuff like that,” or juggling payment on their bills from one month to the next. Some women simply described their lives as a daily “struggle:” “I had to survive the best way I could for me and my kids,” said one woman, whereas another commented, “It's hard to raise children by yourself. No help or nothin'.” A 31-year-old mother of two children advised women to “struggle for what you want. Ain't nobody gonna hand it down. Everybody on welfare have not been born with a silver or gold spoon up in they mouth.” The women seemed always to be in a precarious situation, in that their own illness or the illness of a child could result in a day or a few days of missed work and subsequent termination from the job. These comments are indicative: “I was working at [fast food restaurant] then, but then she [respondent's daughter] got sick, was hospitalized, and I had to quit working.” And from another woman: “I worked at [fast food restaurant] but I didn't like the things the manager wanted us to do. He wasn't paying us enough money and he wouldn't let us work enough days” so that the money this woman earned was less than she received through TANF.

A few women reported that, to survive, they sent their children away to live with a relative or the children's father, after which the woman would turn to the most minimal existence such as homelessness, living on the streets, occasionally sleeping in motels, or sleeping in a car or bus. Some women hinted that they had engaged in illicit, illegal, or stigmatized activities such as shoplifting, selling stolen goods, drug-related crimes, selling food stamps, or exotic dancing. Of particular concern was the lack of well-developed survival skills among younger women, a deficit that may make their welfare exits more tenuous (Harris, 1996 ). One woman commented to us, “If they cut me off, I'll probably have to give custody to them [her children's fathers], cause I ain't gonna let my children starve.” This seems a precarious plan because, for the most part, these men have not been a regular source of material or emotional support to the children up to this point.

*Help from family.* Most of the women appeared to rely on a family network of support and help, particularly from their

mothers. “My mother tries to help me as much as she possibly can,” said a 22-year-old mother of two boys, “My mother is my backbone.” The assistance offered most often was the opportunity to live with another adult(s), usually the woman's mother, as a form of help with housing, providing general care and material support for the woman and her children, or both. Previous research has demonstrated that coresidence with kin is especially important for young mothers for these very reasons (Hao, 1995 ). The women also talked about receiving help from siblings, cousins, aunts, and “parens” (i.e., godparents). One woman offered, “My sister . . . pays my rent. She supports me all the way.” Another woman described a rather extensive network of help: “Me, my mama, my grandmama, the guy I'm talking to now, and his mama—they help us.” These helping networks clearly are part of the women's strategies for self-provisioning and stretching their meager resources. Less frequent was the decision to live with an unrelated adult(s) and the pooling of resources as a survival strategy. Speaking of other welfare-reliant women, a few study participants told us, “A lot of them have men living with them,” although almost no study participants reported to us any men living in their households.

*Support from fathers.* Men rarely figured into this helping network (cf. Brayfield & Hofferth, 1995 ). The women seldom mentioned their fathers, grandfathers, brothers, or uncles as sources of help. Most notable is the lack of assistance the women reported from the fathers of their children, as well as from the children's paternal relatives. The women clearly discounted the fathers of their children as reliable sources of support. A 25-year-old mother told us, “Either the father is going to take care of the child or he's not. You have to prepare in advance for your situation whether he's going to be there. If he doesn't take care of you while you're pregnant, he's not going to take care of you when the baby is born.” The following is typical of the comments we heard: “Never depend on a man, cause they'll disappoint you every time—not all men, but most men.” A 35-year-old mother of five children said, “If I had a good relationship with a man me and him would work and I wouldn't have to be on welfare. If I had a good job and a good man . . . but I never could get one decent enough to do that.”

Some women mentioned that the father of their child “was there for me at the hospital when the baby was born,” and that maybe he “came around” with some diapers or a few “outfits” for the child soon after the birth. A 36-year-old mother of eight children said that the father of her 3-year-old triplets helped financially

> when the babies were first born. He would buy diapers. His mama would buy them little clothes and stuff. He was paying child support—$70 a month. But then he would take his money and give

> it to his mama first, . . .for her kids. I knew right then, if he would rather give it to his mama than his own kids—that burned me.

Most women reported that these fathers then saw the child less and less until some point at which he had little contact with them at all, a situation they felt powerless to change. “When I call him for stuff he has an attitude so I don't even fool with him. Like, he'll be having smart little remarks, but you know, I ain't make the baby by myself. I don't fool with him,” one 18-year-old mother of a 3-year-old son said with disdain.

A few women indicated that fathers provided regular support; in some cases, support from the mother's boyfriend or from the father of one child was extended to all the mother's children whether or not the children were his biological offspring. “[My financial situation] got better,” said one woman, “cause I found me a boyfriend and he helped me take care of my kids.” A 20-year-old mother of four children born in 4 years expressed her dismay at finding herself pregnant, and the resolve she and her partner had regarding their children: “We didn't want the baby, but I wasn't going to get rid of it. He didn't want the baby either, but it was his and I wasn't gonna kill it. He wanted the best for me and he always cared about me and the children. I wanted my children to grow up with they daddy and they mama.”

In sum, nearly all of the women in this study had been disappointed by the fathers of their children, so they were adamant in their belief that these men could not be relied on at all. A few women mentioned that the fathers would use their own money, or the woman's money, for themselves: “The money I needed for my son, I mean he would go out and use it to put gas in his car or drinking—was more important than buying a pack of [diapers],” reported a 25-year-old mother of one young son. Another 26-year-old mother told us that her ex-husband “took my son's bicycle back to Wal-Mart at Christmas” and used the money to buy drugs. It appeared that one survival strategy was to disengage from these men and the drain they represented on the family's material and emotional resources.

### *The Stigma of Welfare*

Recent research literature alerted us to the possibility that even the welfare women we interviewed would stigmatize their peers reliant on welfare and would seek to separate themselves from others (e.g., Seccombe et al., 1998 ). This tendency to stigmatize emerged quite clearly in the interviews. First, the women told us that they did not feel good about themselves while they were reliant on welfare. “I just don't feel good about it, because I'm able to work,” said one woman. Another woman indicated, “I don't want my kids to say, ‘There's mama sitting on welfare.’ ” In the

words of another, “[I] want my kids to say, ‘mama did it,’ not ‘mama lazy, mama ain't did nothing.’ ”

Some women gave very negative reports about their experiences on welfare. They wanted to be off welfare as quickly as possible and remain off. Several women mentioned their misgivings over the personal, intrusive nature of the information requested by their case workers: “[There were] some other things they wanted I felt that they shouldn't know . . .they were going too personal, unnecessary questions. They're very aggravating and they're getting on my nerves,” reported a 26-year-old mother of two children. A 22-year-old mother of two children told us that with welfare the government “is taking over your life. It's like you're in a TV and they just clicking the channels.”

The women found it particularly burdensome that the TANF check was so small and that it came just once a month. The women were nearly universal in their use of an interesting piece of jargon: They spoke of getting their “one twenty three.” We soon recognized this as a reference to the amount ($123.00) that a woman with two dependents, or a woman receiving TANF for herself and one child, receives per month in welfare benefits in Louisiana. Many women complained anxiously about the insufficiency and inadequacy of this amount (cf. Edin & Lein, 1997 ). “One twenty three don't support a child. They say it's not meant to support a child, but it's the money they give you to support your child instead of child support,” said one woman.

It should be noted, however, that some women were not so negative about their experiences with “the system,” indicating that they were “thankful” that welfare support had been there when they needed it. A 31-year-old mother of three children said, “Even though it wasn't a lot, it helped me and my children. To me, they was reasonable enough.” Some women clearly saw reliance on welfare as a legitimate way to support their families, and socially equivalent to participation in the formal labor force. “I really didn't choose to be on, but you gotta do what you gotta do. I needed something to take care of me and my baby” said one woman. One of the married women in our study laughed and said, “I paid taxes through my husband long enough, so I guess I can take advantage of it.”

Nonetheless, many women indicated that their reasons for program participation were, at least, legitimate as compared with the behavior of others. They spoke in particular of having been abandoned by the fathers of their children or of having to leave him because he was abusive or using drugs and alcohol. One woman commented, “He was a good provider if you wanted to take the abuse.” Several women expressed concern about how the women who had “abused the system” had ruined it for the rest of them.

“They are destroying public assistance,” said one young woman, “they quit their jobs for no reason and go on public assistance . . . welfare just spoiled them.” They described these women as getting “lazier” while on welfare, unable to “hold [a job] because some of them not used to work, to doing anything,” and preferring to “sit at home and get a check [rather] than go out and earn.” An 18-year-old mother said, “For so many women not doing nothing, not trying to help themselves, they should cut off from them. But the ones that really need it [and here she included herself], I don't understand that [being cut off].”

A 34-year-old mother of three children revealed the competitive nature of the market she believes she faces: “I'll be getting a job and they'll [other women on welfare] be sittin’ home. I'm trying to get ahead of them. My kids will have things that their kids won't and it's their fault, cause they're sittin’ at home.” One woman revealed a popular stereotype when she said, “They have girls out there making babies. As long as they give them money, they gonna keep on doing what they doing.” Some women were reluctant to discuss their peers on welfare, however. The comments of one woman revealed these mixed feelings:

> I can see how people who go to work every day and make their own money. . . I can see how they might look down on people, but at the same time if you never been in their shoes you don't know what these people may be going through. There are some people who do abuse the system, but there are some people, like me, who take the money and do for their children. I could get a little job at a store but I couldn't put the food on the table for my children, then I'd be worried about medical bills.

## **Conclusions** Return to TOC

Throughout the century, it has been tempting to classify the poor as functionally and morally different from mainstream Americans (Gilens, 1999 ). The poor have been viewed through the lens of homogeneity, and differences of race, ethnicity, class, age, gender, ability, personal motivation and self-discipline, and community and place have been downplayed. The mirror of mainstream America was held up to the poor, and entire lives were perceived to be different from our own. If such people have one set of problems, goes the thinking, then surely they manifest other nonnormative behavior (see Jencks, 1992 ).

Distorted images of the poor help to justify society's actions toward them. Reactions to these images range from indifference to paternalism to hostility and play themselves out in public policy decisions. For example, reform attempts are directed almost

exclusively at individuals rather than social institutions (Task Force, 1993 ), or vice versa, without much offered in the political arena that deals with the strengths and weaknesses of each. Or, as with the PRWORA, we take a "sudden-death" approach to welfare program participation. Such flawed thinking makes for bad policy making. Our findings suggest that policymakers and public officials can start with the assumption that most welfare-reliant women are willing to participate in the formal labor force. Furthermore, this study suggests that these women do have a willingness to work, that they value the intrinsic meanings of work and want the opportunity to be a role model for their children.

Americans have demonstrated their willingness to provide assistance to poor families who exhibit this work ethic (Gilens, 1999 ). Policy makers can capitalize on welfare-reliant women's expressed willingness to work by continuing to provide meaningful work preparation programs and support services during the welfare-to-work transition period and beyond. The women in this study want to do more than survive; they want to succeed, and they want the lives of their children to improve. Ongoing training opportunities and coordinated, sustained programs for support services such as transportation, child care, food security, and health care will place these families on a firm foundation after their transition period.

Next, national policy must give attention to local and regional realities concerning the economy and employment opportunities. For many families in rural and remote rural Southern communities hardest hit by decades of poverty, income assistance and support programs may have to coexist with formal labor force participation for years to come. Many of the women in this study expressed the belief that they could survive without TANF, on their income from a low-skills job, *if* they did not lose their food stamps or *if* they did not lose their "Medicaid card." In many communities, it simply is not realistic to expect families to make a complete transition from reliance on government programs to total independence on personal, private resources.

Finally, if the American public dialogue on these issues can expand the meaning of work beyond mainstream, gendered definitions, images emerge from this study and others that allow for the possibility that poor and welfare-reliant people do work and are motivated to work by many of the same things that motivate middle-class Americans, notably responsibilities to provide for the material needs of their families and themselves. Gilens (1999) suggested that the media has played a major role in the creation and feeding of the stereotypes discussed earlier in this paper and that the media could play a major role in their reversal in the public debate with more even-handed presentation of poverty and

assistance issues. Most of the women we interviewed are trying against all odds to improve their human capital before their welfare benefits expire. They invest in the human capital of their children in places and at times where it may not even seem rational to do so. They have been employed and desire employment in the future; they see such employment as the key to a better life, a life beyond the welfare system. Until that day, they engage in informal labor, resource exchanges, and value-added activities to stretch their meager resources. They engage in just about any tactic or strategy—whatever it takes—to survive, keep their children together, fed, housed, and clothed. And they are involved in the daily care of their families, just like many other American mothers. If only they were not poor and living on welfare, we would call this work.

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Table 1. Description of Participants ($N$ =84)

| Variable | $N$ | % |
|---|---|---|
| Race | | |
| African American | 68 | 80 |
| White | 14 | 17 |
| Hispanic | 1 | 2 |
| Native American | 1 | 1 |
| Age (mean age = 29) | | |
| 18–21 years | 21 | 25 |
| 22–27 years | 21 | 25 |
| 28–35 years | 21 | 25 |
| 36–47 years | 21 | 25 |
| Marital status | | |
| Never married | 61 | 73 |
| Married | 2 | 2 |
| Separated | 7 | 8 |
| Divorced | 13 | 16 |
| Widowed | 1 | 1 |
| Education | | |
| Less than high school | 58 | 69 |
| Completed high school or GED | 23 | 27 |
| College or trade school | 3 | 4 |
| Number of children (mean = 2.5) | | |
| 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 1–2 | 45 | 54 |
| 3–4 | 33 | 39 |
| 5–8 | 6 | 6 |
| Receiving government benefits | | |
| AFDC/TANF | 80 | 95 |
| Food stamps | 75 | 89 |
| Medicaid | 79 | 94 |
| Housing supplement | 17 | 20 |
| Number of jobs ever held | | |
| Never employed | 16 | 19 |
| 1–2 jobs | 32 | 38 |
| 3–4 jobs | 22 | 26 |
| 5 jobs or more | 11 | 13 |
| Unreported | 3 | 4 |

Note: AFDC = Aid to Families With Dependent Children; GED = General Equivalency Diploma; TANF = Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.

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