

## **TOWARD WELFARE THAT WORKS**

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**ABSTRACT:** Welfare reform is high on the national agenda. This paper clarifies facts about the welfare system, provides behavioral analyses of welfare and working, and reviews current policy initiatives with potential for producing lasting solutions. The most frequent approach to the issue has been to cut benefits, and exhort those on welfare to obtain employment which may not be available, or for which they may not be prepared. However, the demand to look more closely before cutting already desperately limited resources for families and children is not simply the cry of the old-time liberal; it is also the conclusion of the careful empiricist. Analysis of the data suggest (1) that the most effective approaches will be those that are based primarily on offering adequate supports and incentives, and (2) indiscriminate cuts and sanction-based programs are often based in myth, and are likely to be ineffective and produce undesirable side effects.

In the 1960s the United States waged a "War on Poverty;" the country may now have embarked on a "War Against the Poor" ("The War," 1992). Like the "War on Drugs," the new politics of welfare assert, "Just say 'No!'" Recent speeches about "family values" emphasize a simplistic solution to complex issues: cutting welfare rolls will solve the problems of poor people, the problems of cities, and the problems of race. Lacking a data-based knowledge of the operative forces, policy makers facing political pressure may act without full recognition that poverty in America is a sociocultural problem maintained by a powerful system of interlocking contingencies (cf., Mattaini, 1993). The tragic results include the maintenance of a coercive system that unintentionally punishes the child for not being located in a social matrix that includes one or more parental figures with stable, adequate employment, a safe drug-free physical environment, and opportunities to act to obtain a reasonable level of satisfactions.

The need to look more closely before blindly cutting already desperately limited resources for children is not simply the cry of the old-time liberal; it is the urging of the careful empiricist as well. The National Association of Social Workers recently urged, "Reforms should be based on scientific evidence rather than myth" (Behavioral Welfare Initiatives, 1992). In fact, behavioral science can provide more guidance here than commonly supposed. A careful analysis of the behaviors at issue is more likely to produce effective solutions than are the most common, and frequently self-defeating, proposals.

### **AUTHORS' NOTES:**

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### **Welfare and Poverty**

When the media and politicians refer to "welfare," what is usually being discussed is the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, jointly funded by the states and the Federal government. AFDC began in the 1930s as a small program that would enable women in families with no father present to stay at home and care for their children, the culturally accepted norm at the time. The majority of the 13 million Americans who rely on AFDC are single mothers (usually divorced or never married) and their children. Single parent families face significant economic and social challenges. Children of unwed mothers (who constitute more than one in four children born in the United States) commonly are born and remain poor. Other available options for most of these families are often even less attractive than the current dehumanizing welfare system. The actions taken by welfare mothers are not irrational; they can be understood and even largely predicted given adequate knowledge about the existing web of contingencies within which AFDC households are enmeshed. The matching law, a well-established mathematical model, predicts that "choice" among behavioral alternatives is based on the relative balance of available reinforcement among them (Mattaini, 1991; McDowell, 1988). This model provides important guidance for welfare reform.

If most AFDC recipients are single mothers and their children, where are the fathers? One might conclude from the current debates that fathers have become irrelevant, particularly among the poor. This is a particularly important issue among minority populations. Sixty-three percent of African American births are to unwed mothers, who are often understandably reluctant to marry young men without stable employment and income. The dearth of opportunity for young black men is often viewed as a separate issue, but is closely tied to the welfare picture. In a nationwide New York Times/CBS poll conducted during the Los Angeles riots, respondents viewed the lack of jobs as the root of the troubles (Toner, 1992a). When offered a choice of strengthening police forces or investing in job training, 88% of whites and 90% of African Americans indicated that jobs and job training were a more effective way of preventing unrest. These results suggest that America is ready to hear that strategies based on aversive control are likely to fail, and that those based on opportunity and incentives are more likely to work. While an exclusive focus on jobs is overly simplistic, the detailed analysis that follows supports the basic paradigm.

### **Current Welfare Reform Initiatives**

Welfare reform is high on the national agenda. President Clinton has suggested limiting AFDC payments to two years (the reasons for selecting this specific interval are not obvious, and some central figures in the Administration have begun to question "artificial deadlines", DeParle, 1993a). Although the details of Administration proposals are not yet clear, the basic notion is that welfare should be seen as "a second chance," rather than "a way of life."

Welfare reform until now has been based primarily on cutting benefits and limiting eligibility. Benefits have recently been cut or frozen in most states, often

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arbitrarily, without an underlying rationale. Vermont, Florida, and Wisconsin have requested Federal waivers for changes based on President Clinton's two-year benefit limit, generally without putting in place the educational, child-care, and job readiness programs that have always been an integral part of Clinton's plan (DeParle, 1993b). This is precisely what traditional welfare advocates suggested would occur in welfare reform: Punitive and coercive parts of the program would be quickly enacted, but necessary opportunities, supports and incentives would not be put into place for reasons of cost (Cloward & Piven, 1992). The Clinton administration itself has increasingly recognized that simply continuing the current program is likely to be less costly than implementing the two-year limit in conjunction with the supporting programs that would be essential to effective change, which could cost an additional \$30 billion a year (DeParle, 1993a).

In the 1992 election, California voters rejected Proposition #165, which would have eliminated incremental benefit increases for welfare families, decreased benefits by 25% for those who remained on assistance for more than six months, required that single teen mothers live with their parents or guardians in order to receive benefits, and paid teen parents \$50 a month to stay in school. However, the legislature enacted significant cuts in benefits, including those for new residents to the state.

In July, 1992, the Federal Government approved New Jersey's proposal to drastically revise its welfare system, including a plan to deny increased benefits to mothers currently on welfare who have additional children. Supporters of the plan say it will reward work and encourage stable families. Certain work incentives and other provisions, such as the elimination of disincentives for marrying, are reasonable steps, congruent with basic behavioral principles. However, the denial of an additional \$64 a month to a mother who has an additional child will hurt all the children, and existing data from this country and abroad indicate this approach is likely to have little impact on birth rates (DeParle, 1992d).

A number of states have proposed or implemented other experimental plans. Maryland's plan cuts benefits 30% if a parent fails to pay rent, provide health care for children, or keep them in school. In Connecticut, the legislature approved a bill to cut from the welfare rolls drug abusers who are not in treatment (SB 2023, PA 92-16, May Special Session). Programs to support school attendance have been tried in several places, and are discussed in more detail below. There are potentially useful components in many of the programs that have been proposed or enacted; what has often been missing is an overall data-based rationale likely to lead to lasting success.

The analysis of welfare reform that follows will first clarify basic facts about poverty and welfare, then examine in detail the behavioral matrix within which welfare beneficiaries are embedded. Finally, the results of current policy initiatives and implications for further action emerging from the analysis will be explored.

### Facts about Welfare and Poverty

While welfare mythology is widespread, basic facts about poverty and welfare among families with children have been widely printed in the media, and are

readily available from a variety of other sources (e.g., Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Center for Law and Social Policy, & Children's Defense Fund, 1992; Information Please Almanac, 1993; National Commission on Children, 1991). Particularly critical information includes the following:

1. Twenty percent of American children are poor, an increase from 15% in 1960. One quarter of children under three are poor. About 15% of white children, 36% of Hispanic children, and 44% of African-American children are poor (National Commission on Children, 1991). Only about half of the poor children in this country receive public assistance. Any thoughtful discussion of welfare or broad family policy must consider the long-term implications of these truly sobering facts for these children and for the nation.

2. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the welfare program most in the news, constitutes 1% of the Federal and 3.4% of state budgets (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Center for Law and Social Policy, & Children's Defense Fund, 1992). The primary factor in breaking state budgets is not AFDC, but Medicaid assistance. In New York, for example, Medicaid payments grew by 36% from 1989 to 1991, with the increase attributed largely to long-term care of the elderly—generally not covered by Medicare—rather than payments for poor mothers and their children (Sack, 1992a). Even if it were desirable to cut benefits dramatically, we could not possibly balance the budget by cutting spending for poor children.

3. About 30% of women entering the welfare system for the first time stay for less than two years, and another quarter remain less than five (Eckholm, 1992). The surest route off of welfare is marriage. Current data suggest that it may be possible and desirable to develop policies that assist women, particularly very young mothers, to move even more quickly through the process (Davis & Abramovitz, 1992), but the facts indicate that for many families, welfare can be a step toward independence rather than a way of life.

4. Only 10% of all welfare families have more than three children. Over the past 20 years, the number of children in the average welfare family has shrunk from three to less than two (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Center for Law and Social Policy, & Children's Defense Fund, 1992). Clearly the notion that most welfare recipients "keep on having babies" so they will receive higher benefits is a myth. Some of the poorest families do have more children than they desire, however, and the number of children in a family does affect its standard of living and life options, so some effort should be directed to making the means to limit births readily available. Detailed behavior analyses could help to make these programs more effective.

5. Twenty-five percent of new recipients stay on welfare for more than 10 years; these long-term recipients constitute about 56% of the rolls at any given time (Eckholm, 1992). This is a particularly challenging group for policy makers, since many may lack basic repertoires for responding effectively to other options. The subsequent analysis will provide some tentative directions for programming to meet the needs of this population.

6. Welfare mothers are not doing well financially. The combined value of cash assistance and food stamps buys 27% less than it did in 1972 (Toner, 1992b).

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The monthly average income including cash and food stamps for a family of three on welfare is now \$623 (DeParle, 1992d). Cutting this level further will have damaging effects on children and the nation's future.

7. Welfare funds do not go primarily to African-American households in a few large inner cities. While the racial undertones of the welfare debate are often very near the surface, 39.7% of AFDC families are black, 38.1% white, 16.6% Hispanic, and 5.6% other (Toner, 1992b). Members of minority groups are at the highest risk for poverty, but welfare funding flows to all racial groups. Welfare cases are increasing everywhere; the largest percentage increases between 1989 and 1991 were in New Hampshire, Arizona, North Carolina, Kentucky, Florida, and Connecticut (DeParle, 1992b).

8. Getting a job is often not a solution to poverty; many of those who work remain poor. The poverty rate for working families in 1990 was 11.3%, up nearly one-third from 1979. About one-sixth of the poor work full-time, and 63% of poor families with children include at least one worker (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Center for Law and Social Policy, & Children's Defense Fund, 1992). Mothers on AFDC lose not only cash assistance, but Medicaid (especially important to poor families where the rate of medical problems is high), and other benefits as well if they take a full-time job, which is likely to be a minimum-wage position.

### Should Everyone Work?

Although many economists suggest that a healthy economy may require a certain level of unemployment (which, barring support for starvation, would necessitate some form of assistance), it is not clear that all of the options have been explored, and the notion of universal opportunity is deeply rooted in American values. Traditional societies generally were able to provide a meaningful role for everyone, and humans are probably biologically wired to be productive in some sense. In our own society, cultural practices have changed significantly over recent decades, with most mothers now working outside the home. Still, in middle class families, one parent often stays home for a period of time immediately after birth. Should we as a society provide for such a period for single mothers? Most welfare reform advocates agree we should, although there is debate about how long such an exemption should continue.

Not everyone can maintain a regular job. Difficult decisions are encountered regarding the determination of disability, or partial disability requiring sheltered employment, and the level of training necessary for employment. Given the limited resources currently allocated for supporting employment among welfare recipients, however, it will be some time before we need to struggle with these issues regarding welfare mothers. For example, the Family Support Act enacted by Congress in 1988 was a first effort at welfare reform. It created the program called JOBS—for Job Opportunities and Basic Skills—that requires each state to run an education, training or work program for parents on welfare, and provides up to a billion dollars a year in Federal matching funds to help pay for it. The law expands training opportunities for those on welfare but also imposes new obligations for them to participate.

A report released in 1992 presented the somewhat disappointing results of the first major study of the implementation of the Family Support Act. Summarizing the results of the program, *The New York Times* reported, "it is failing to convert welfare from a system that permits long-term dependency to one that stresses skills, jobs and financial independence" (DeParle, 1992a, A1). According to the *Times*, "When it is fully in place [1995], the law will require 20% of those eligible to join a work or training program. But about half of the women on welfare are exempt, either because their children are too young or they lack transportation and day care. So even at full speed, only about one welfare recipient in 10 will be included" (DeParle, 1992d, p. E3). Many states also have not fully participated in the Family Support Act due to the requirement of matching funds from the state.

One of the Act's major proponents, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) predicts that any real improvement will not be measurable until the year 2000. He recently stated, "Anybody who thinks you can change something so huge in less than a generation is not telling the truth" (Eckholm, 1992, p. 18).

It is also clear from available data (Eckholm, 1992) as well as a careful conceptual analysis of behavior, that comprehensive solutions will not, in the short run, save money. Changing the antecedents and consequences that are traced below will require significant resources, a fact increasingly recognized by the Clinton administration (DeParle, 1993a). The enormous costs of not acting, however, also should not be forgotten.

### **Applying Basic Behavioral Principles**

Certain basic behavioral principles can inform the debates. Most existing "experiments" (which often lack any credible evaluation component) rely on making life on welfare more unpleasant in one way or another. We know from decades of research, however, that strategies that rely primarily on aversives are unreliable for producing the specific alternatives we desire, and are likely to produce serious side-effects like aggression, depression, and countercontrol (Sidman, 1989). This is a hard empirical fact, not a matter of opinion. Punishment, threats and other aversives are not effective long-term behavior change techniques under most circumstances. If society's response to the poor is to make life more difficult, not only will children be hurt, but more violence, rioting, and urban unrest are to be expected. For example, the New Jersey plan appears to be based on the assumption that making poor children hungry will be an effective establishing operation for sending their mother out looking for a job in response to her children's pain. No one should expect her (or her children when they grow up) to thank society for this, especially if that job is nonexistent, or if the woman lacks the skills to get and keep it.

By contrast, we know from decades of research that incentive-based strategies reliably increase desired behaviors, without undesirable side effects. Working people work because it pays off (in many ways, on many levels). The incentives must be adequate, since the matching law tells us that rates of several possible behaviors depend on the relative pay-offs of each. Assuming the presence of necessary antecedents (particularly available jobs and necessary skills), both conceptual analysis

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and existing data indicate that most people will work instead of applying for assistance payments. The welfare system is highly aversive to most recipients.

One reviewer of this article suggested that, "Surely procedures based on the principles of negative reinforcement have some place in welfare reform." In negative reinforcement, a person acts to obtain relief from something unpleasant or aversive.<sup>1</sup> Negative reinforcement and other aversive processes are involved in welfare reform in several ways. For example, if genuine opportunities are available, persons on welfare will act to escape their current unpleasant situation. Failing to earn privileges is to some extent aversive, but in a relatively natural way. A central question in welfare reform is whether it is desirable to intentionally increase the aversiveness of the current situation in order to change behavior. We believe the data suggest this is generally not required, given the already barren and unfulfilling life situations of most persons on welfare, and is usually counterindicated due to the likely side-effects. There may be times, for example in specialized training programs, where fines or mild sanctions may have some utility, but in general, such procedures are likely to play a minor part in effective programs.

These are basic principles that must be taken into account if programs hope to be effective. The more detailed analysis of working behavior that follows demonstrates why, and suggests additional policy directions.

### Why Do People Do What They Do, and Not Do What They Don't?

Three decades of experimentation in this country and Europe have found that changes in benefit levels have little impact on decisions to work, marry, or bear children. In part this failure results from unrealistic expectations of large behavior changes on the part of recipients in response to small changes in benefits (DeParle, 1992d). At least as significant, however, is that the behavioral issues involved often have been conceptualized quite superficially, frequently suggesting that single factors can be identified that are the causes of problems. The very preliminary analysis that follows examines working behavior in terms of the matrix of antecedents (situations and events that precede action) and consequences (situations and events that follow behavior) within which this multidetermined issue is embedded. The results of the analysis, once enumerated, may seem like simple common sense, but the reality is that these factors have seldom been coherently addressed by policy initiatives in an integrated way.

"Working" is a complex aggregate of repertoires, involving job-seeking skills, effective interviewing, and behaviors required to maintain employment once found. Each of these response classes in turn involves multiple concurrent and chained behaviors. A preliminary conceptual analysis, however, provides a place to begin. The discussion that follows applies to working among the poor—not only among single welfare mothers—since the cost of welfare is only one of poverty's costs to society and the individuals involved.

Figure 1 identifies classes of antecedents and consequences likely to be associated with an adequate rate of working behaviors.

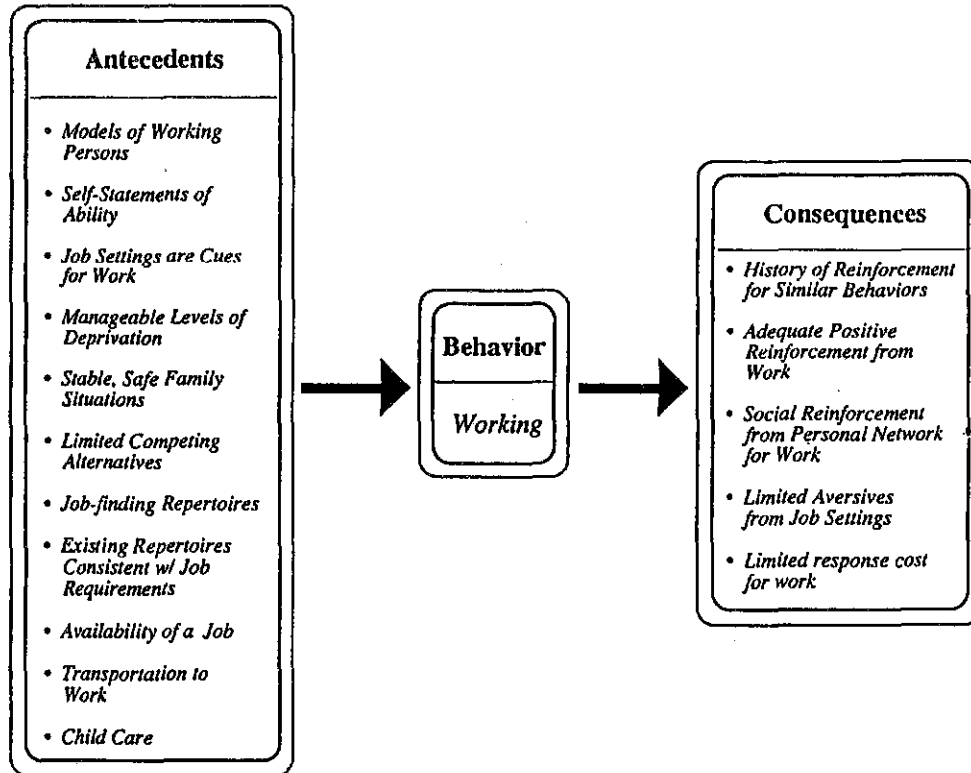


Figure 1. Antecedents and consequences that shape working behavior.

This graphic (based on Malott's [1992] contingency diagrams) is quite simplified, not only in viewing working as a simple behavior, but also in aggregating many technically distinct factors together as antecedents,<sup>2</sup> and in combining complex histories of tangible and social reinforcement and punishment as consequences. Still, it suggests a variety of strategies that may have significant potential in the policy arena.

Looking first at antecedents, the rate of working is likely to increase if the person has been exposed to significant models, much like herself, who find work satisfying. Since the poor and the middle-class, regardless of race, are increasingly separate, many young people in urban areas primarily see models of persons who do not work, or who are working in frustrating and sometimes demeaning positions with little pay-off, or are supporting themselves through illegal activities. Given their histories, many of these youth also have not learned rules that say in effect, "If I go to work I will do well and prosper." Job settings once entered do not evoke working behavior; since the individual has not learned that effort in such settings is likely to pay off. Some deprivation can be motivating, but the experimental literature confirms that too much interferes with action. Many of the persons with whom we are concerned have experienced severe deprivations, in some cases to the extent of causing organic damage. Each of these missing antecedents may need to be addressed in some way in effective policy formulation. Are there potentially serious dangers at home if the parent were to go to work, such as children placed at risk for



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substance use, violence or premature sexual activities? Are there other available alternatives (say, selling drugs) that have high, if short-term, payoffs for a person? If so, has the individual learned to govern current action based on long-term consequences of actions (an advanced form of rule-governance), or does she at least have available reliable external sources of such rules that she has come to trust?

A number of facilitating antecedents, tools that make working easier or even possible (Stuart, 1970), are also associated with working. These include environmental resources as well as existing personal repertoires. Very basically, is a job available for which the person has adequate skills? Transportation and adequate child-care are also important. Poor youth, of course, often do not have access to these basic resources, especially in inner cities. If an individual does have those resources, does she have the skills to access the position, to get the job, and to keep it? These include job-readiness skills (punctuality, communication, grooming) applicable to nearly all work, as well as specific job skills. Generalized abilities to learn quickly and efficiently are also important, and a history of parental or personal substance abuse can affect these abilities.

Behavior is ultimately shaped by its consequences, so the consequences of working behavior are crucial. Has the person had an opportunity to experience what working is like? Have previous, even marginal, efforts to work paid off? Does the job reinforce richly enough (tangibly and socially)? Do the family and peer group reinforce approximations to working? Does taking a job entail high response costs, for example, a loss of medical benefits perhaps leading to increased illness among one's children, or hours of travel on unreliable and sometimes dangerous public transportation systems at a high relative expense?

Neither the necessary antecedents nor the necessary consequences for working are present for many persons now in poverty, whether on welfare or not. So long as this is true, it is entirely predictable that they will not, and in very real sense cannot, work.

Table 1 summarizes policy and programmatic elements flowing from this analysis of the relevant contingencies, identifying potential antecedents and consequences that may shape and maintain working behavior. (This analysis should be regarded as preliminary; only empirical testing can identify specific contingencies and the relative strength of each.)

Table 1

*Elements of welfare reform suggested by the contingency analysis*

Component of the Contingency Analysis	Illustrative Element of Welfare Reform
<i>Antecedents</i>	
•Models of working persons	•Provide access to successful models (e.g., mentoring programs, internships, public service placements)

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- Self-statements of ability
- Job settings are cues for working behavior
- Manageable levels of deprivation
- Job-finding resources and repertoires
- Repertoires consistent with job requirements
- Availability of a job
- Transportation to work
- Stable home situation
- Limited competing alternatives
- Provide training in more effective self-talk coupled with success in progressively more challenging activities
- Include a focus on stimulus control in training programs (e.g., shape and reinforce working in work-like settings, and provide clear descriptions of contingencies)
- Provide consistent access to at least minimally adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care and social reinforcement (e.g., support groups, assistance with family functioning), and contingently available opportunities for higher levels of reinforcement
- Provide access to phones, resume-development, buddy programs and skills training (e.g., Job-Finding Clubs [Azrin, Flores & Kaplan, 1975])
- Provide education, life skills, job readiness and specific job training programs (both preventively and remedially). See especially Cohen & Filipczak (1971/1989) for applicable behavioral technology
- Availability of rewarding jobs ultimately requires economic restructuring and policy-level interventions. Interim measures include offering incentives to the public for identifying available positions (e.g., Jones & Azrin, 1973)
- Provide transportation assistance or subsidies
- Provide behavioral family consultation to assist family to manage internal and external problems; provide access to adequate child care, medical care and housing (including contingent access to better quality housing on an equal opportunity basis); develop and support community empowerment programs to minimize neighborhood aversives including violence
- Provide substance abuse treatment; address major neighborhood and community issues like drug abuse, youth social networks that

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support undesirable behavior, and illegal activities

- Adequate child care resources

- Provide day care assistance or subsidies

### *Consequences*

- History of reinforcement for similar behaviors

- Provide training programs utilizing incentive-based strategies including approaches that reinforce successive approximations to the level of performance ultimately required

- Adequate positive reinforcement from work

- Ensure that available positions provide adequate incentives, including tangible reinforcement, social reinforcement, and work that offers challenge and opportunities to come into contact with the outcome of the work

- Social reinforcement from personal network

- Develop programs that train existing networks to reinforce work rather than incompatible alternatives; develop new support networks that reinforce work (variations of the Community Reinforcement Approach [CRA], cf. Azrin, 1976 and related CRA references)

- Limited aversives from job settings

- Ensure that employment settings emphasize incentive-based strategies rather than aversives; provide on-site coaching for dealing with unavoidable aversives

- Reduce response cost of work

- Eliminate work disincentives including reductions in overall income, and ineligibility for health and other benefits once working (as is currently the case)

Programs that have been at least partially successful, discussed in the following section, have universally included at least some of these elements. One important caveat should be born in mind, however. Establishing effective contingencies is complex; for example, not every program that claims to have established a network of social reinforcement or an incentive structure actually does so. Some programs that describe themselves as "behavioral" have been established by persons with limited technical knowledge and skills. Such programs are unlikely to reach their potential, and tend to drift into the use of ultimately counterproductive aversive strategies. There is no substitute for enthusiastic staff that have mastered the arts and sciences of program design and behavior management.

**Welfare Reform: Current Initiatives and Empirically-based Proposals**

Several recent experiments consistent with this analysis have demonstrated encouraging results. An experiment developed by New York State to comply with JOBS is the Child Assistance Program (CAP) (Sack, 1992b). Randomly selected women in seven counties can opt for participation in the program. They must seek and turn over to the State a court order for child support. Then the women are guaranteed payment from the State, regardless of whether the State can recover the funds from fathers. The amount of the guarantee is less than the usual benefit, but the plan includes other significant incentive arrangements. If the participant works, she can retain more money—benefits plus earnings after taxes and work expenses—than under current rules. In its first test, women with two children in the experimental program had a total monthly income of \$1045, of which \$326 came from welfare and food stamp benefits, as contrasted with a total monthly income of \$765 for comparable families on AFDC, of which \$685 came from welfare payments and food stamps (Sack, 1992b). The differences were clearly at a level that would be regarded as personally and socially significant.

A California program, called Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN), began several years prior to the JOBS law. A study of the program published in April, 1992 by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation revealed that the single parents in six counties who entered the education and job training program earned 17% more than those in a control group who did not participate (DeParle, 1992c). In addition, participants received 5% less in welfare payments. The results were particularly encouraging in that the data suggest that gains are likely to be greater in subsequent years. This program emphasizes the job search process (especially in Riverside County), as well as basic education and training, and includes financial sanctions. Although the program does not describe itself in this way, program staff—who emphasize “enthusiasm”—clearly provide powerful models of new, hopeful self-talk and a high level of social reinforcement for positive steps. An issue that may set a ceiling on success for the program over the long term is its focus on moving participants quickly into jobs that are often entry-level, rather than on preparing them for more fulfilling positions.

America Works, based in New York City, is a private, for-profit agency paid by the State of New York. Current welfare recipients are recruited to its program by word of mouth (50%), media exposure (25%), and agency referrals and employment advertising (25%). Its success is based on the fact that single mothers are trained on the job and receive small salary checks and health benefits in addition to their welfare benefits. Any job-related behavioral issues for which people are usually penalized, such as tardiness, absenteeism, or interpersonal conflicts on the job, can be addressed before the participant gives up her welfare “safety net” (cash assistance and medical benefits that ordinarily end with the beginning of employment). The women report that their self-esteem is boosted by the salary check they have earned. The majority of participants are weaned from welfare benefits after four months (R. Greendlinger, personal communication, March, 1993). Programs that provide only job training, by contrast, can actually frustrate participants who learn that no position is available when the training is completed,

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and can become components of a revolving-door pattern in which clients sometimes complete several different training programs without ever achieving job placement.

These successes illustrate that work-related behaviors will change when crucial antecedents are present and adequate incentives are available. None of these programs relies primarily on coercion (the California program emphasizes sanctions to a greater extent than the others). Each drew most of its clientele (usually volunteers) from those with stronger existing repertoires, and programs that enroll persons lacking more fundamental skills will require higher levels of resources over longer periods of time. But the empirical evidence suggests that the basic behavioral principles needed to encourage change among this group will be the same.

Education achievement is a key to future independence. Experiments seeking to keep children and youth from families on welfare in school have also been tried. Wisconsin cuts benefits by up to \$200 per month per child if children do not regularly attend school ("Learnfare"). A multi-year evaluation, however, found that Learnfare did not improve attendance or graduation rates (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Center for Law and Social Policy, & Children's Defense Fund, 1992). Ohio has implemented a mixed sanction/bonus program for pregnant and parenting AFDC teens, in which those meeting requirements receive a \$62 bonus and those who do not lose that amount. The results have been interesting: the bonuses do appear to reduce dropout rates to a significant degree, a positive finding. On the other hand, most of those who would have been expected to drop out continue to do so, and as a result they and their children simply have fewer resources to meet basic needs (DeParle, 1993c). Sanction programs can reduce costs, but in so doing tend to increase poverty.

Experimentation is crucial, of course. But current programs, in general, are not well-grounded in what we know about human behavior. Paying children (or their parents by proxy) to stay in school might be of benefit if the payment plan were quick and carefully designed, but only those who have already learned to defer gratification are likely to act today to receive a small bonus, or avoid a small cut, thirty days or more away. Providing two or three dollars a day is also unlikely to be very effective.

Creative solutions based in our knowledge of human behavior, however, have potential. For example, one possibility is a "gambling" arrangement in which a student could receive a fixed amount each week, contingent on high rates of attendance, as well as a chance at a larger amount for each day when she attends all classes (see Mattaini, 1993, pp. 117-118, for an example).<sup>3</sup> Programs based on meaningful incentives have also been implemented on a school-wide basis. For example, through the efforts of the Renaissance Education Foundation, Toledo High School has formed a partnership with a local MacDonald's restaurant, rewarding attendance and achievement with popular food items, as well as drawings for larger prizes. Absenteeism declined from eight to three percent and educational achievement improved (Damico, 1992). Renaissance programs using different but related strategies are also in place in St. Louis; in this program incentives for teachers have also been developed (Damico, 1992). Of course, the extent to which the educational system itself is designed for success is another critical concern but is beyond the scope of this paper; examples of effective general and remedial

educational systems built on accurate assessment of learning needs and incentive systems are, however, found in the literature (e.g., Cohen & Filipczak, 1971/1989; Greer, 1991; Mayer, Butterworth, Nafpaktitis, & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1983).

Other potentially important policy initiatives that go well beyond the welfare system itself have been suggested by liberals and conservatives alike who have studied welfare dependency (Eckholm, 1992). The first is the universal availability of adequate health care, some approximation of which may be in place in the near future. This is important in several ways, given the present analysis. It reduces the response cost for the parent to leave the welfare system (thereby giving up Medicaid) and enter the employment market. Timely health care (including prenatal care) can prevent a range of health problems and organic disabilities that are themselves impediments to employment. In addition, health professionals and self-help networks based in health settings can provide education about birth control, as well as models and social reinforcement for the use of birth control, participation in training and employment programs and other constructive actions.

A second potentially important policy direction is income subsidies of one kind or another for the working poor, as contrasted with work disincentives commonly built into some current policies. Such subsidies are consistent with social judgments that some things, like adequate nutrition and safe housing, ought to be available noncontingently to all children. The inflation-eroded income tax exemption for dependents might be restored to a realistic number (perhaps \$6000 per child). Expansion of the earned-income tax credit—a “pay raise for the working poor” (Verhovek, 1993, p. A1, quoting David Ellwood, Assistant Secretary for Health and Human Services)—would be a useful step, and appears likely to be enacted by the time this paper is published. Child allowances (money provided universally for all children, an approach that has been used in a number of other countries) would help all poor children, regardless of their families’ work status, and would eliminate work disincentives in AFDC.

Other proposed legislation calls for stepped up efforts to identify fathers of illegitimate children and collect child support payments, allowing the IRS to garnish part of a parent’s income, and remit it to the custodial parent. Richman (1992) reports that, “Columbia University sociologist Irwin Garfinkel calculates that obligatory parental support could yield single parents with children over \$24 billion dollars a year—about four times as much as they currently receive” (p. 40). Garfinkel (actually a social worker trained in economics) suggests that this approach would communicate to children that their parents, not the state, are caring for them. Senator Moynihan also suggests that a first step in combating welfare dependency is to “[m]ake the daddies pay” (Klein, 1993, p. 33).

Enormous changes have occurred over the past three decades in patterns of unwed pregnancy and divorce that have resulted in the current child-support crisis. Americans generally agree (at least for strangers) that absent fathers should support their children, particularly when the alternative is that taxpayers do so. This is not a simple policy to implement, however. For example, concerted—and expensive—efforts by the State of Wisconsin have resulted in collections from only about 13% of missing welfare fathers. Many of the fathers are unknown, and many of the rest have proven difficult to locate. The threat of jail under very specific

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conditions seems to make some difference, but as with the other issues addressed here, careful conceptual and empirical analyses are likely to produce better results over the long term.

Changing "values"—which involve changing patterns of social reinforcement and self-talk—is likely to be crucial over the long term. In the meantime, building child support into the tax withholding system would in many cases facilitate payment (since it would require less behavior<sup>4</sup> on the part of the individual), and could be one component of an improved system. However, a father who is unemployed, incarcerated, or has another family to support with limited income may lack the basic means to support his children, and obligatory support laws will not resolve those problems. An individual who has the resources to pay support but lacks mutually reinforcing contact with his children is also less likely to pay voluntarily. This suggests the need for new patterns of visitation and custody (experimentation is needed here). These issues require additional detailed analysis, but even this very preliminary examination has clear implications for policymaking and program design.

In addition, another critical facilitating antecedent is the availability of quality day-care, needed by 23 million American families who currently have inadequate or no care (Reeves, 1992). We remain the only industrialized nation without a national day care policy.

Taking a long-term view, family life education in the schools could be expanded to include not only sex education, but also the responsibilities (and costs) associated with parenthood (basically teaching "the rules"). Children also need to learn about how much jobs pay (which often sounds like a great deal of money, until the costs of a family are factored in), what living expenses are, and the expense involved in raising a child. They also need to have opportunities to witness and experience the satisfactions that can be associated with making a genuine contribution, in jobs or otherwise. President Clinton plans to initiate some form of national service program; ultimately, we might design cultural practices encouraging all young people, perhaps beginning very early in their education, to engage in public service. Society is currently deeply fractured into "us" and "them" along several fault lines, and authentic experience with those different from ourselves, preferably with guidance to overcome initial differences, is essential if we are to begin to bridge these gaps. Only when we begin to think about what sort of welfare program we should establish for ourselves rather than for "them" (a somewhat Rawlsian notion), is sustained progress likely.

Why have such policy initiatives not been more broadly tried? Politicians and policy analysts are often not aware of the implications of current behavioral science findings, of course, but the issue goes deeper, since they find themselves embedded in their own webs of interlocking contingencies. Even if policy makers accept the basic argument made here, the multiple constituencies to which they are necessarily responsive are unlikely to immediately accept expensive programs that rely on incentives as opposed to sanctions (which are likely, over the short term, to entail fewer obvious costs to the taxpayer). Two basic strategies may have potential for dealing with this situation. One is to present these approaches as "hard science" as opposed to soft thinking, in an effort to change public perceptions of what is required to resolve a situation with which no one is happy. The second is to support

modest pilot projects based on these principles, to demonstrate their effectiveness over and over in a variety of settings. If sanction-based programs cannot be avoided, policy makers can insist on comparison studies using incentive systems as contrast conditions, and designs that permit disaggregating the separate effects of incentives and sanctions, and let the data begin to tell the story. It is then important that the data be presented in accessible ways, since data seldom speak entirely for themselves. Stakeholders who are significant parts of the contingency networks of those in decision-making positions (media representatives, consultants, and especially constituents) can adopt similar strategies, emphasizing the empirical basis and demonstrable effectiveness of incentive-based strategies.

### Conclusion

American society can not afford further delay in addressing these issues if we value social stability, competitiveness on the world market, and a minimally acceptable quality of life for millions of poor women and children. The nation pays a large current and will pay an almost incalculable future price for excluding millions of citizens from basic incentive structures, satisfactions and contributions to society. Many of our children are growing up without resources to meet their basic needs, with the terrible potential for becoming a permanent underclass. Our mothers and sisters and daughters also pay a high price for exclusion. A recent report by the American Psychological Association (McGrath, Puryear Keita, Strickland, & Russo, 1990) confirmed that the rate of depression among women is twice that of men, and the higher incidence is mainly related to being female in the contemporary world, not to the long held notions of women being more inclined to admit to emotional distress or their greater willingness to use mental health services. Among factors that placed women at higher risk for depression are physical and sexual abuse, entrenched biases in wages and opportunities, and poverty.

A number of positive initiatives are underway. President Clinton's support for the recently passed Family and Medical Leave Act, twice vetoed by former President Bush, and significant movement toward guaranteed health care and help for the working poor are important steps, but should not blind us to the severity and depth of the problem of poverty in this country, or the need to carefully examine the contingency structures built into the new initiatives as they evolve.

An oft-quoted African proverb states, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." Ours is a large village that has to an alarming extent forgotten many of our children. Governmental policies can, and should, provide some of the essential resources required to raise our children. In addition, however, we will need to enlist private, public, religious, corporate and individual community efforts to strengthen communities and build families, thereby supporting children. The present analysis suggests a wide range of potentially powerful steps toward this end.



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## NOTES

1. This is a loose definition. More precisely, under similar circumstances, the person tends to repeat behaviors that have been reinforced in the past by escape from or avoidance of an aversive event or situation.
2. These include *discriminative stimuli*, *rules*, *establishing operations*, and *facilitating stimuli*.
3. This is, technically, a somewhat complex concurrent schedule.
4. Technically, it reduces the response cost of paying child support.