Empowerment through Involvement: Iowa's Experience with Welfare Reform.

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Abstract
This is a challenging and an important time for low-income families. The United States is mired in a recession while Congress faces the reauthorization of assistance and support programs involving low-income families. To date, policy discussions have been fueled by analyses of individual aspects of the changes set forth by PRWORA and other legislation. This article synthesizes research findings from a single state, Iowa, and suggests that although low-income families in Iowa continue to struggle, the state has had success in helping families move toward self-sufficiency. The success came from programs that emphasize flexibility with support and participant involvement.

Disciplines
Civic and Community Engagement | Community-Based Learning | Demography, Population, and Ecology | Political Economy | Public Economics

Comments
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Low-income families need adequate and flexible support in programs and a greater voice in policy and programs.
strengths of both the welfare system and the families that interact with it.

Iowa is an appropriate state for this synthesis for two reasons. First, Iowa is marking 10 years operating a public assistance program remarkably similar to the TANF programs that have been in existence in most other states for about half that time. In 1993, Iowa moved to the welfare reform frontier when it received federal approval to abolish its Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program and replace it with the Iowa Family Investment Program (FIP). FIP offered training and educational opportunities, allowed more earnings to be kept and saved by recipients (as compared to the former AFDC program), and provided numerous support services and subsidies (Iowa Department of Human Services, 1996). FIP also placed a time limit on receipt of benefits. In general, changes to FIP related to the creation of TANF were relatively minor compared to the changes made when FIP was implemented.

Second, Iowa has a history of providing a high quality-of-life for its families and children. Iowa was ranked among the top ten states for children throughout the 1990s; in 1996 it ranked first (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1999). Furthermore, Iowa received a TANF High Performance Bonus for its job entry efforts for program participants in Fiscal Year 2000 (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2002b). Although low-income families continue to struggle in Iowa, policy changes designed to assist these families have had some success. For many, however, the issues have not changed, they have become more complex, with added challenges in caregiving, transportation, and health care as the family increasingly interfaces with the workforce. The goal of this article is to identify what works in Iowa and to offer recommendations.

This article is guided by the Five I's Policy Analysis Organizing Tool developed by Braun and Bauer (2001). Braun and Bauer present questions for exploration in five areas of policy analysis: information, issues, impacts, implications, and imperatives.

A scenario of one Iowa family is presented, followed by an examination of Iowa-specific research findings and two local programs. The conclusion reviews impacts and implications for low-income families that center on their involvement in the policy process.

A Family in Need: Alice and Tom's Story

Alice (age 34) and Tom (age 38) are parents of two children, Trevor (age 5), and Elizabeth (age 10 months). They live in a rural area 5 miles from a small Iowa town. Living in the country makes finding transportation and childcare more difficult, but it is the only place where they could find affordable housing. Tom often is unemployed due to chronic back pain. Alice works at a local agency as a receptionist. She earns $7.40 an hour, but has no medical or dental benefits. As a result, she has not always been able to purchase Tom's pain medication or the medicine prescribed to treat her hypertension and diabetes. At other times, Alice reduces dosages to make the medicines last longer.

Alice and Tom's neighbor cares for Trevor and Elizabeth while they are working. On days when Tom is not working and is not in tremendous back pain, he watches the kids. Alice and Tom are able to pay their childcare bill, except when emergencies arise like doctor bills or car repairs. During the last few months, however, they have had more emergencies, and were evicted last week for not paying their rent on time. In addition, their neighbor says that she will no longer care for the children if they are unable to pay her. Upon eviction, Alice, Tom, and the children move into an apartment in town. They invite Alice's friend, Gail, to live with them if she will watch Trevor and Elizabeth. Gail does not work and needs a place to stay. Trevor has symptoms of asthma as a result of Gail's smoking.

Even though Alice and Tom feel uncomfortable using public assistance, they believe they have no choice. They participate in the Food Stamp Program, the Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and FIP. FIP benefits provide income for expenses such as gas, rent, and childcare. The Earned Income Tax Credit also stretches their limited earnings (Cauthen, 2002). Food stamps, WIC, and the one food pantry in town help Alice and Tom.
put food on the table. Alice worries constantly about what they will do when Trevor turns 6 years old and is no longer eligible for WIC, or what will happen when they expend their time-limited eligibility for FIP benefits.

RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM IOWA

The issues Alice and Tom face are not unlike those faced by many low-income families throughout the United States. The shift in welfare policy from focusing on income security to focusing on work and self-sufficiency has affected the ability of some families to meet their daily living needs. Even in Iowa, low-income families have struggled since the passage of PRWORA (Fraker et al., 2002).

Studies of families exiting welfare in Iowa suggest various points of vulnerability. More than half of the families leaving welfare in 1999 had incomes around the poverty line two years later (Kauff, Fowler, Fraker, & Milliner-Waddell, 2002). Among a random sample of households who received Food Stamps in 1997, in 1999 two-thirds of them had an income below poverty, more than half were food insecure, and more than one-quarter were experiencing hunger (Jensen, Garasky, Wessman, & Nusser, 2001). Food insecurity for Iowa WIC participants was greater in 2000 than in 1997 (Iowa Department of Public Health, 2001). In rural areas, the restructuring of local economies from high-wage to low-wage industries and to service sector employment disproportionately hurt poor families and families headed by women (Litt, Gaddis, Fletcher, & Winter, 2000).

Obstacles to self-sufficiency

Health, childcare, and transportation problems permeate this population. Jensen et al. (2001) reported that one-fifth of their respondents considered themselves to be disabled, and one-third considered themselves to be in poor health. Working families with limited incomes find it difficult to locate affordable childcare. Some parents choose not to work, jeopardizing their FIP benefits for childcare (Greder, 2002).

Former TANF participants report that access to transportation is not a major barrier to entering the workforce, but the cost of vehicle maintenance can be a challenge for those who work or hope to work (Kauff, Fowler, Fraker, & Milliner-Waddell, 2001). Rural transportation issues include: (a) barriers to owning and operating a personal vehicle, (b) owning vehicles described as old and invariably unreliable, and (c) the rarity of any form of public transportation except local school buses (Fletcher, Flora, Gaddis, Winter, & Litt, 2002). Fletcher et al. concluded that if the only available employment opportunities require long, difficult commutes, then shifting from welfare to work will be problematic.

Survival strategies

Survival strategies for families center on meeting their nutritional, housing, and basic needs. Low-income families in Iowa meet their food and nutritional needs by (a) relying on others, (b) adjusting resources, (c) reducing food consumption, (d) making trade-offs, and (e) acquiring nutrition and shopping knowledge and skills (Greder & Brotherson, 2002). Clearly, some of these strategies are positive and enhance the quality of life for families, whereas others do not. For example, some families trade-off food for housing; as food stamp benefits decrease with increased earnings, the additional income is used to pay the rent or utilities. A common housing strategy of rural Iowa welfare recipients is an informal arrangement made with families and friends that tends to be temporary, or at least is thought of as such (Cook, Crull, Fletcher, Hinnant-Bernard, & Peterson, 2002). These authors concluded that families make their housing needs fit within the considerable constraints of their budget and the available housing.

Another important coping strategy for households of limited resources is participating in multiple assistance programs (Keng, Garasky, & Jensen, 2001). Families who were able to leave
welfare often found food stamp benefits were important to a successful transition, allowing them to discontinue cash assistance. Use of community resources such as emergency shelters, county relief benefits, or privately provided food assistance also was common (Jensen et al., 2001).

Survival often depends on flexible policy and implementation guidelines. In addition, a family needs sufficient resources to meet basic needs, community participation skills, and financial skills to manage their resources. In the long term, educational support can help families identify strategies, network, and contribute to meeting their communities' needs. While statistics provide focus on many key issues, statistics are enriched with qualitative approaches, such as a case study, to help us understand how, when, and where policy affects families. Qualitative data can suggest policy and implementation considerations that would not be apparent otherwise.

PROGRAMS THAT WORK IN IOWA
These survival strategies demonstrate that low-income families in Iowa understand what is needed to become economically self-sufficient. As a result, the authors believe that initiatives to help these families will have a higher likelihood of succeeding if the families have input.

The following describes two programs in Iowa that are helping low-income families move toward self-sufficiency by getting them involved.

ROWEL Poverty Simulation
The ROWEL Poverty Simulation is a copyrighted learning tool created by the Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL) Education Association of Missouri (Shirer, Klemme, & Broshar, 1998). The simulation is designed to increase public awareness about issues related to poverty, and to empower limited resource individuals—through sharing their perspectives and experiences—in the simulations and the follow-up discussions. The simulation makes participants more sensitive to the plight of families living in poverty and provides limited-resource families an opportunity to open dialogues with persons in positions to affect policy and implement changes. Shirer et al. reported that 50% of the respondents to a follow-up survey indicated that they later had met with others to discuss ways to change programs.

Simulation participants assume the roles of families living in poverty and trying to survive from month to month. Many simulation "staffers" who represent community resources such as banks, the employment office, grocery stores, and pawnbrokers have lived in poverty. After the 1-hour exercise, participants and staffers discuss their experiences in small groups and share conclusions with the large group.

More than 4,000 Iowa State University Extension staff and their community partners have participated in the ROWEL simulations since 1995 (Shirer et al., 1998). The success of the program is due in a large part to recruiting volunteer staffers who either have faced or are currently facing poverty. Persons who have "been there" lend credibility to the experience and serve as knowledgeable educators on the realities of poverty.

Beyond Welfare
Beyond Welfare (BW) seeks to instill participants with a sense of advocacy and build a constituency for systemic change (Miller, 1998). Families in poverty are invited to participate and are equipped to become leaders in the program and in the community by learning how to communicate and advocate for themselves. A majority of the BW Board of Directors has been or currently is marginalized by poverty. At the same time, BW also facilitates relationships that assist and support families. Community members are recruited and trained as "Family Partners" for intentional friendships with BW participants. These partnerships are based on common interests, yet focus around the safety, stability, self-sufficiency, and well-being of the BW participant family. These relationships provide the beginnings of an effective social support network. They help to reduce isolation, erode stigma, and replace feelings of victimization while simultaneously helping participants learn new ways of coping with daily problems and setbacks from those who have been able to do so with a modicum of success. At the same time, Family Partners learn firsthand the strengths and challenges of people on welfare and the working poor.
IMPLICATIONS

How can we develop policies that help low-income families not only survive, but also thrive and work toward a higher quality of life? The common theme of these programs is the importance of including participating families in programmatic decisions. As we think about giving a greater voice to low-income families, we also can learn from activities in other areas. For example, the disability field has several national and statewide efforts that support parents and individuals with disabilities, helping them become stronger advocates for policy change. In 1987, the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities created Partners in Policymaking. Partners is an innovative, competency-based leadership training program for adults with developmental disabilities and parents of children with disabilities. The purpose is twofold: to teach best practices in disability, and to teach the competencies of influencing and communicating. Since 1987, Partners programs have been implemented in 46 states. More than 8,000 Partners graduates are part of a growing national network of community leaders serving on policy-making committees, commissions, and boards at local, state, and national levels (Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2002).

The experiences of the ROWEL Poverty Simulation, Beyond Welfare, Partners in Policymaking, and other programs that support self-advocacy efforts demonstrate that low-income families can be empowered to improve their quality of life. Families in poverty and on public assistance can provide us with new ways of understanding how our policies affect their lives and what policies should be changed. First, it must be accepted that these families are capable of giving valuable and important policy information. Then, with this presumption of competence and with support, these families can be empowered to be persistent and successful self-advocates in their quest for a better way of life.

REWRITING ALICE AND TOM'S STORY

If Alice and Tom’s story were rewritten with what we know about sustainable supports to families, it might sound like this. First, Alice and Tom have a service coordinator to help identify specific needs, facilitate skill building, and identify access, and expand their social support network to help address housing, transportation, health care, and childcare issues. Affordable housing is available and safe. They would be food secure. Food Stamp and WIC benefits meet nutritional needs. The Community Wheels for Families Program provides reliable transportation options. Alice takes prescribed medicine, the children visit the doctor, and the family has medical coverage. A small increase in their household income does not change Food Stamp benefits. Quality, affordable, and accessible childcare is identified through the local Early Childhood Resource Center. The local Family Resource Center offers help with emergencies and a place where Alice and Tom talk with other parents about strategies for improving their situation. Lastly, Alice and Tom are asked by a community council member to share their story with local legislators as they shape policies and programs for low-income families. Alice and Tom share that their family is becoming more self-sufficient with community support.
REFERENCES


