The Short-Term Impacts of Welfare Reform in Persistently Poor Rural Areas

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Current welfare reform policy is based on the premise that persons who receive welfare are avoiding work and that requiring them to work will end “welfare dependency.” This policy further assumes that employment opportunities are sufficient to absorb welfare participants into local labor markets. Thus, unemployment is equated with labor market inexperience and willful failure to take advantage of available employment opportunities.

This chapter reports findings on the short-term impacts of welfare reform in persistently poor rural areas of central Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and Indian reservations in South Dakota. These regions, often referred to as “pockets of rural poverty,” have had substantial labor demand deficiencies for several decades. The persistence of poverty in these areas contradicts the assumption that sufficient employment opportunities are available to absorb all decanted welfare participants. These “pockets of poverty” are
also characterized by an active and extensive informal economy, which undermines the notion that unemployment can be equated with economic inactivity.

The implementation of welfare reform policy based on faulty assumptions about the economies of these persistently poor areas raises questions concerning the likelihood of achieving the expressed policy goals. In the face of insufficient labor demand in the formal economy, welfare participants will be severely challenged to secure adequate employment to replace cash welfare assistance. Moreover, applying Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) eligibility criteria and time limits, which are based on participation in the formal economy, could result in many participants leaving TANF. These “leavers” may become more dependent on other programs or family networks of support to meet their basic needs, and their ability to continue participating in the informal economy may be threatened. Thus, official statistics that show declines in TANF participation and unemployment rates may mask the reality of continued or exacerbated social and human welfare deficiencies among low-income families in these pockets of rural poverty. We therefore examine data on employment outcomes, labor force participation and unemployment, changes in rates of participation in public assistance programs, and changes in levels of dependence of unofficial sources of financial support, particularly food banks, to assess this probability.

Our findings indicate that the implementation of welfare reform in these persistently poor rural counties has resulted in rapid caseload decline and an increase in the day-to-day hardship faced by poor residents. This is, in large part, owing to the fact that welfare reform has proceeded in a “backwards manner” in these places. The refrain of community leaders, TANF participants, and program administrators across all counties was, there aren’t any jobs. The data suggest that many former welfare participants are making ends meet by working in informal labor markets and the downgraded service sector, at or near minimum wage. They are also drawing more heavily on the already stretched resources of extended family, friends, and local food pantries to replace the loss of public assistance. Most families that have left TANF probably remain well below the poverty threshold.
BACKGROUND: RURAL LABOR MARKETS
AND WELFARE REFORM

The reforms initiated by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) encourage states to implement programs emphasizing immediate labor force participation. A review of the literature on rural labor markets highlights the importance of understanding how welfare systems operate in particular labor market contexts and presents a number of concerns regarding the ability of rural labor markets to absorb large numbers of former welfare participants. The first issue is the importance of accounting for the “opportunity structures” that exist in rural areas and how they differ from metro labor markets. A second issue is the crucial role that households play as a unit of analysis in understanding the labor market strategies of rural women. The central roles that the informal economy and “informalization” play are also key to understanding how rural labor markets operate. Finally, the operation of rural labor markets is subject to inefficiencies and a lack of meritocracy stemming from entrenched local power structures and historical underinvestment in workforce development programs. This chapter provides an initial look at the disjuncture between TANF policy and rural conditions to substantiate the importance of labor market differences between rural and urban contexts.

Theories of Rural Labor Markets

The literature on rural labor market outcomes acknowledges the importance of human capital but emphasizes that local opportunity structures cannot be overlooked when studying rural labor markets. Tickamyer (1992) argued that place is a significant structural factor in labor market outcomes and critiques standard labor market theory for conceptualizing labor markets as if they operated outside the constraints of time and space. She advocated studying “local labor market areas” to account for specific opportunity structures (Tickamyer 1992, p. 43). Tickamyer and Bokemeier (1993, p. 57) assumed that rural labor markets differ from urban markets to the extent that “inequality of experience is systematically affected.” Lobao (1993, p. 23) also
stressed the importance of spatial analysis, noting that studies of local labor markets have shown that “the organization of economic production has developed unevenly over space and time resulting in different contexts of opportunity” and variations by place in “types of industries, firms and jobs.”

The literature also cites the need for “multi-level models” that use households as a unit of analysis. Tickamyer and Bokemeier (1993, p. 52) cited the household as “the social structure” in which economic decisions, including labor allocation, migration, and consumption, are negotiated. Housing arrangements and kin networks in poor rural areas constitute an opportunity structure that influences the labor-market participation and mobility of household members (Halperin 1990, pp. 98–99; Tickamyer and Bokemeier 1993, p. 57). Household analysis is crucial in understanding how poor rural households employ strategies that pool the resources of family and nonfamily members to make ends meet. Household analysis also enhances our understanding of how gender relates to poverty, inequality, and the different experience of women workers (Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia 1989, p. 248; Nelson 1999, p. 20; Thornton and Williams 1992, p. 106; Tickamyer and Bokemeier 1993, p. 51).

Informal activities and “informalized” work are two related theoretical issues also raised in the literature. Castells and Portes (1989, p. 26) maintained that both the informal economy and processes of informalization are expanding under globalization. They argued that informal economies must not be reduced to the “survival strategies of marginalized groups,” but rather be conceptualized as integral parts of national economies that develop under the “auspices of state tolerance.” The informal economy is a specific form of relationships of production that cuts across the entire social structure and is articulated with formal activities. The defining feature of informal labor markets is that they are “unregulated by the institutions of society in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated” (Castells and Portes 1989, p. 12).

The informalization of work is an equally salient issue. “Informalization” denotes the undoing of the employment relationship established between labor and capital under Fordism. The Fordist production paradigm was characterized by Keynesian demand-side management of the domestic economy. Fordism transformed workers
into consumers, spurring the upward spiral of investment, production, and consumption that produced historically unprecedented growth from World War II through the early 1970s (see Legborne and Lipietz 1992). Jessop (1994), among others, argued that we have entered a new era of economic accumulation and social regulation that is post-Fordist. The post-Fordist employment relationship in the United States is marked by the flexibility of the employment relationship and the decline of labor unions and collective bargaining processes. The result is a downgrading of work for many without formal higher education or training (Legborne and Lipietz 1992; Streeck 1997). Lifelong, semiskilled employment secured through unions and the internal labor markets of firms has been replaced for many by a series of temporary jobs offering less pay, fewer benefits, and fewer protections from the vagaries of the market (Castells and Portes 1989; Gringeri 1994; Nelson 1999, pp. 18–20; Peck 1996). The processes of informalization and the downgrading of work were inherent in the movement of manufacturing to rural areas in the 1960s and 1970s and defines the new rural low-wage service sector (see Gringeri 1994; Nelson and Smith 1999).

Finally, the operation of rural labor markets is often distorted by market imperfections. These include the ability of local political elites to manipulate the distribution of jobs and public benefits; a lack of diversified employment; discriminatory values regarding the role of women; spatial isolation; and inefficiencies in institutional mechanisms both for disseminating job-related information and for administering human resource development programs. All contribute to a lack of meritocracy and low returns on human capital investments (Duncan 1992, 1999; Gringeri 1994; Hofferth and Iceland 1998; Lichter and Costanzo 1987).

**Findings on Rural Employment and Welfare Dynamics**

Empirical studies of rural labor markets, rural poverty, and rural welfare establish four significant characteristics of rural employment opportunity structures and welfare dynamics. The first is that rural labor markets are becoming more dependent on informalized and downgraded service-sector work. There is substantial evidence in the literature that rural labor markets have undergone major structural change as their industrial bases have been transformed from agricultural, extrac-
tive, and manufacturing to services (Duncan and Sweet 1992, p. xxii; Miller and Bluestone 1988; Nelson 1999, pp. 22–23; Summers et al. 1976). Seventy-five percent of overall employment growth in non-metro areas during the 1970s was in the service sector, while only 17 percent was in manufacturing (Gringeri 1994, p. 35). Moreover, the service-sector employment that emerged in rural areas was more labor oriented than in metro areas (Gorham 1992, p. 24; Miller and Bluestone 1988). Government employment accounts for a substantial proportion of total earnings in rural areas, where local school systems and government are often the largest employers (Pickering 2000, p. 153; Tickamyer 1992, p. 42). This is acutely so in the persistently poor rural pockets of poverty, which are the focus of this chapter.

The second characteristic of rural employment is that the restructured rural economy is marked by “employment hardship” in the form of low wages, low hours, and lack of benefits such as sick leave and health insurance (Findeis and Jensen 1998; Gorham 1992; Lichter 1989). Employment hardship creates working poverty. Research using households as a unit of analysis shows that the rural poor are largely working poor, given that the largest share of income in poor rural households—even among those with the most restricted labor market opportunities—comes from wages of household members (Bloomquist, Jensen, and Teixeira 1988). Deavers and Hoppe (1992) found that nearly 20 percent of poor rural householders worked full-time, year-round, and Bryant et al. (1985) found that 33 percent of rural workers held more than one job. The persistently poor rural areas examined in this chapter also are home to many “discouraged workers,” those able-bodied persons who are not counted among the unemployed because they have given up trying to find an official job (Summers, Horton, and Gringeri 1995).

The third characteristic is that poor rural households combine the activities of household members in a “household survival strategy” composed of official earnings, unofficial activities, in-kind assistance from kin, and welfare (Fitchen 1981; Nelson and Smith 1999; Pickering 2000, p. 159; Rank and Hirsch 1988; Shapiro 1988). As noted above, the most significant component of household income among the rural poor comes from official earnings. Income from unofficial activities is also crucial, however, and not unrelated to a household’s official labor market status. Nelson and Smith (1999) found that the type of official work done by the head of the household affects the ability of the
household to sustain a multi-earner strategy and engage in unofficial activities.

Reciprocal support among kin and friends is also crucial to sustaining poor rural households (see Fitchen 1981; Halperin 1990; Ruiz 1987; Ruiz and Tiano 1987). Adams and Duncan (1992, p. 83) used data from the 1980 Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) to analyze the extent to which persons could rely on their networks for emergency assistance. Three-fifths of the long-term rural poor stated that they had friends or relatives who could provide several hundred dollars more than they had available or could borrow from an institution. An even greater percentage said they had contacts who could be counted on to help out during an emergency. Housing is perhaps the most important form of network support, as families often double-up with parents or in-laws in times of crisis (see Fitchen 1981; Nelson and Smith 1999).

Welfare also plays an important part in the household survival strategies in rural areas among families with children. The rural poor typically go on and off cash assistance as a last resort in situations of unemployment or absence of a male earner (Adams and Duncan 1992; Fitchen 1981, p. 72). In contrast to metro areas, studies by Fitzgerald (1995) and O’Neill, Bassi, and Wolf (1987) found that rural welfare participants have shorter welfare spells, while Rank and Hirschl (1988) found that rates of program participation among welfare recipients are lower in rural areas. Finally, Meyer and Cancian (1998) found that those leaving welfare among rural recipients have lower earnings than their metro counterparts. A study by Adams and Duncan (1992) that focused on the long-term, nonmetro poor found that, between 1976 and 1985, the vast majority used some form of public assistance.

Finally, in addition to structural transformation, employment hardship, and household survival strategies, rural economies are characterized by a deliberate underinvestment in programs to upgrade the workforce. In contrast to metro areas, few efforts have been made to improve the human capital of the rural workforce or to move rural welfare participants into employment. Because agribusiness and other extractive industries historically required mainly unskilled labor, rural employers had little interest in human resource development, and the programs that existed functioned ultimately to meet the seasonal labor needs of producers (Marshall 1974, pp. 30, 89–90; Pickering 2000, pp. 154–55; Saenz and Ballejos 1993, p. 116). Instead, those interested in
skilled labor have migrated to urban centers, creating a gradual decline in the rural population.

Demonstration projects by the Women’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor (1985) found few training and employment opportunities available to women in rural areas and pointed to a lack of qualified personnel to run programs, inadequate space, lack of transportation, and lack of child care services as key barriers to rural women’s employment. Gringeri (1994, p. 31) noted that the Manpower Development and Training Act has spent $47 per capita in metro areas compared with $18 in rural areas. Although welfare-to-work programs have existed since the early 1970s, they were not extensively implemented in metro areas until the establishment of the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program in 1988 and were only marginally implemented in the rural areas included in this study.

These theoretical and empirical studies of labor market issues illustrate that a national welfare reform policy based on assumptions of a robust labor market will face considerable challenges when imposed in rural areas.

METHOD

In examining the short-term impact of welfare reform in persistently poor rural areas, we used data from national data archives such as the U.S. Census of Population and Housing, state and local government administrative records, records of nongovernmental organizations, and interviews with community leaders and welfare participants. To make the research project feasible within the limits of budget and time, we selected a sample of persistently poor rural counties for study. Four states were selected to represent the four major pockets of rural poverty: Kentucky (Central Appalachia), Mississippi (Lower Mississippi River Delta), Texas (Lower Rio Grande Valley), and South Dakota (Indian reservations). Because welfare reform is state-specific in its implementation, it was necessary to select states to represent regions rather than use a random sample of counties in each region. Second, within each of the four states, we selected a cluster of contiguous counties, all of which were persistently poor. South Dakota is an exception to this selection rule. For that state, we selected all rural counties con-
taining an Indian reservation, even though some counties are not contiguous. These clusters of counties are assumed to represent the four pockets of rural poverty. (See the appendix for the counties contained in each of the four clusters.)

In addition to the clusters of counties, we selected two counties in each state for more intensive case study. We conducted interviews with community leaders and welfare participants to add depth and nuance to the data available from secondary sources. Within each state, the two counties with the highest poverty rate in 1990 were chosen as case study sites. The case study counties are McCreary and Owsley (Kentucky), Holmes and Sunflower (Mississippi), Shannon and Todd (South Dakota), and Maverick and Starr (Texas).

We used administrative and archival data to construct a database for each cluster for the period 1990–1999, including the case-study counties. This data design allows a short-term assessment of conditions in the counties before and after welfare reform. Interview data for the case studies were collected over a period of several months using face-to-face interviews. We conducted interviews with roughly 15 community leaders in each county between March 1999 and May 1999.

Interviews with welfare participants were conducted by county residents. All of the interviewers had experience working with welfare participants. However, none of the interviewers was employed by a state or county welfare agency at the time of the interviews. Some of the interviewers were former welfare participants. All the interviewers were given instructions, which included the objectives of the research project, the principles of interviewing, and a structured interview guide. Ten current or former recipients were interviewed in seven of the eight counties, yielding a total of 70 participant interviews. Interviews were not conducted in Starr County, Texas, because we could not locate an appropriate interviewer. The interviews with community leaders and welfare participants were tape-recorded and used as referents by the authors.

**FINDINGS: CASELOAD DECLINE**

The implementation of welfare reform in these counties encouraged many participants to leave the cash assistance rolls quickly. Case-
Load data clearly indicate that participation in the AFDC/TANF “Basic” program peaked in the early to mid 1990s and had begun to decline in all four clusters by 1996. In 1996, the year immediately preceding the implementation of TANF, the Kentucky cluster had 18,540 TANF cases. By October 1999, only 11,524 remained, a 38 percent decline (Figure 13.1). In the Mississippi cluster, the caseload fell from 12,996 in 1996 to 4,842 in October 1999, a 63 percent decline. In the South Dakota cluster, the caseload dropped 42 percent, from 2,248 to 1,299. In Texas, it fell from 4,603 to 2,805, a 39 percent decline. Percentage declines among Unemployed Parent Program (UPP) cases in Kentucky and Texas were even sharper.

According to respondents, there are five main reasons behind the rapid caseload decline. The first is that the counties are located in low-benefit states, in which cash welfare assistance functions as a supplemental source of income. Second, many participants had other forms of support, including participation in the informal economy and reciprocal networks of support among friends and kin. Third, because official labor markets provide few opportunities and the TANF program requires formal work participation, there is little positive incentive to participate in welfare-to-work programs. Fourth, the reforms increased the bureaucratization of welfare. Given the lack of employment opportunities, programs often are perceived by participants as ineffective, a “hassle,” punitive, and “a waste of time.” Finally, implementation

Figure 13.1 Change in TANF Caseloads, 1996 to October 1999
failed to provide the support services necessary to allow participation. Each of these reasons will be explained in more detail below.

**Low Benefits**

Mississippi and Texas are among the states offering the lowest cash assistance benefits in the country. Prior to welfare reform, Mississippi offered a maximum benefit of $120 per month for a family of three. Under the reforms, the state raised the benefit to about $180 a month, approximately equivalent to that of Texas. The average grant for a family of three in Kentucky is $220 per month, while South Dakota offers $294. Given that the most generous of these states offers the average participant household a little over $70 a week, it is not surprising that many participants found the new work participation requirements of TANF “not worth the hassle.”

**Other Sources of Support**

Local TANF administrators explain the large caseload declines as a result of many recipients having other means of subsistence on which to draw. They are well aware that their service populations do not survive on public assistance alone and that income is garnered through other sources, including work (see Edin and Lein 1997). One Texas administrator estimated that at least 60 percent of his county’s pre-reform caseload had been working informally while receiving welfare. According to administrators, when time-consuming work requirements were implemented under TANF, many chose to forfeit cash assistance in order to maintain unofficial activities. In areas where official work is available, others found it less of a hassle to seek work on their own. Although no data are available on those who dropped out of TANF, administrators and community leaders in counties experiencing job growth reported that these people are “doing the jobs that other people wouldn’t take,” including work in fast food establishments, hotel domestic services, and home health care.

These statements are supported by data from the Texas Workforce Commission for Maverick County, Texas, which record the employment status of those who obtained work through TANF. These data show that 125 TANF participants were placed in nonsubsidized em-
ployment between October 1998 and November 1999. Of those placed, 79 (63 percent) were still employed in November 1999. Among those still employed, 32 percent were working as nurses’ aides or home health care assistants, 19 percent were working in fast food, 10 percent were in canning, 8 percent in pottery-making, and 8 percent were working in retail. Other jobs, constituting fewer than 5 percent of those still working, were housekeeper, custodian, clerk, laborer, caregiver, security guard, electrical helper, and truck driver. No data were available on the 37 percent who failed to maintain employment or the hundreds of leavers who did not obtain employment through the program. Excluding the wages of the two participants who found jobs as a truck driver and an electrical helper, the average starting wage was $5.34 per hour.

In areas where such jobs are unavailable, persons have reportedly become more economically dependent on informal work and assistance from family and friends. Informal employment is another important source of household income. The informal labor markets in these areas are described as “huge,” and activities vary by region. In Kentucky, forestry work and seasonal tobacco cultivation and harvesting are widespread. In Texas, seasonal picking, gardening, day labor, construction, the drug trade, and trading in used goods across the border were common informal economic activities. In South Dakota, women make traditional clothing and beadwork, which they exchange for cash or in-kind services. It is estimated that 83 percent of the households in Pine Ridge engage in micro-enterprise and that 75 percent of households in Pine Ridge rely on some form of hunting, fishing, or gathering (Sherman 1988, p. 5).

Current and former TANF participants reported very high levels of reliance on their families for housing, food, essential baby items, including diapers and clothing, transportation, and child care. This shift of support from the government to extended families increases the vulnerability of working poor households when their limited resources are stretched to cover the needs of former TANF participants.

**Labor Market Deficiency**

The number and types of jobs available in the counties provide little incentive for those looking for work, or employers in need of labor
to participate in TANF welfare-to-work programs. In many of these counties, there are simply very few jobs to be had. In others, there is job growth, but labor markets are split between low-level service jobs and jobs with local school systems and government, which generally require higher education.

Earnings data from the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Regional Economic Information System from 1977–1996 show strong growth in the government and service sectors (U.S. Department of Commerce 1997). Data on the Kentucky cluster show that the proportion of earnings from mining fell from 40 percent of total non-farm earnings to 15 percent, while earnings from services more than doubled, from 11 percent to 23 percent (Figure 13.2). The share of earnings from government also grew from 10 percent to 18 percent. In the Mississippi cluster, the proportion of total nonfarm earnings from service grew from 17 percent to 30 percent, while the government share remained steady at 19 percent. The South Dakota cluster exhibited the least change; the share of government jobs remained at about 39 percent of total earnings and services grew from 29 percent to 34 percent. Finally, the Texas cluster also saw growth in the share of earnings from services, rising from 14 percent to 19 percent, while government earnings jumped 12 percentage points, from 27 percent to 39 percent. Mississippi is the

Figure 13.2  Earnings from Service Sector, 1977–96

![Figure 13.2 Earnings from Service Sector, 1977–96](chart.png)
only cluster in which a substantial proportion of total nonfarm earnings were gained from manufacturing, roughly 20 percent.

Data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the U. S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics show that women in these counties are not faring well despite the economic growth. Rates of women’s official labor force participation in these areas are substantially below national and state averages. Estimated women’s labor force participation in the Kentucky cluster remained constant from 1990–1999 at only 46 percent (Figure 13.3). 3 Estimated unemployment rates among women declined over the same period from 8 percent to 5.8 percent. The South Dakota cluster saw little change in women’s labor force participation, inching up from 51.6 percent in 1990 to 52.3 percent in 1999, while women’s unemployment rate fell from 10.2 percent to 7.9 percent. In Texas, women’s labor force participation declined steadily from 56.7 percent in 1990 to 50.4 percent in 1999, as unemployment among women fell from 23.9 percent to 17.4 percent. Mississippi exhibited the highest rate of women’s labor force participation among the clusters. Between 1990 and 1999, the rate declined, however, from 63.4 percent to 61.1 percent, while the estimated women’s unemployment rate dropped slightly from 11.9 percent to 10.3 percent.

The relatively low unemployment rates in Kentucky and South Dakota are, according to local residents, underestimated due to the

![Figure 13.3 Women’s Labor Force Participation, 1990–99](image-url)
presence of a large number of “discouraged workers” who are in need of work but have given up looking for employment in the official labor force. For example, the Bureau of Indian Affairs calculated the overall unemployment rate on the Pine Ridge Reservation to be 73 percent, in contrast to the state’s figure of less than 8 percent. The difference is largely due to different definitions of who is in the labor force.

These data indicate that there are few opportunities for women to participate in the official labor markets in these areas. Moreover, the data presented above on the employment and wages of TANF participants in Maverick County provide direct evidence that few jobs are available that may be expected to lead to economic self-sufficiency. According to community leaders in all of our sample counties, when jobs do appear, competition is fierce and selection between qualified candidates often comes down to politics. This is particularly so as regards good jobs in the public sector. Alternatively, good positions are often filled by “outsiders” with more formal qualifications than local residents.

**Increased Bureaucracy**

PRWORA made it more difficult to apply for welfare assistance and placed tighter restrictions on eligibility, particularly for new immigrants and Legal Permanent Residents. Increased bureaucratization has contributed to the substantial declines in both the TANF and food stamp caseloads. These declines have been accompanied by a substantial increase in the use of nongovernment assistance, specifically, food banks.

The TANF programs implemented in these areas are based on the “work first” philosophy, that is, they emphasize “immediate labor market participation” in “whatever job is available.” The primary, and in some counties singular, component of the welfare-to-work programs initiated in these areas is a six-week job search, at the end of which most participants are to have found a job. Because so few jobs are available, local administrators have resorted to placing large numbers of participants in voluntary community service positions so that they may remain eligible for benefits and administrators may meet federally mandated participation rates. The majority of these placements are with local school systems, county administrative offices, and county
hospitals. Fewer numbers have been placed with private companies and local non-government organizations.

Mandatory six-week job-search programs were established in all but one county, Starr County, Texas. Participants who dropped out of TANF described these programs as a “hassle,” a “waste of time,” and an experience from which they “did not learn anything.” One high school-age participant quit both school and TANF because she became confused and frustrated with the participation requirements that conflicted with school. In response to the question, “Did welfare help you?” she replied: “Well, not really. It was helping me buy things for my baby but I had to stop going to school because it conflicted with orientation [the six-week job search program]. Orientation was a waste of time . . . not training, just signing a lot of papers.”

Participants and employers alike complained of bureaucratic irrationality. Participants report frustration and disappointment with volunteer work assignments in which it is clear that the organizations they are placed in do not have the resources to hire them as permanent employees. Some complained that too many participants are often assigned to the same site, resulting in a lack of work and training for all. Others expressed resentment about being forced to work for subminimum wages alongside regular employees paid higher wages for doing the same work. Reliance on such voluntary placements in which participants feel that they are merely “wasting time” has also contributed to caseload decline.

Some employers with whom TANF participants have been placed also criticized the process. They complained that lack of support services, particularly, child care and transportation, resulted in unreliability among some participants. Some employers were sympathetic to the difficulties faced by participants and were hesitant to report absences, even though they are mandated to do so, because they did not believe they should be sanctioned.

Local TANF administrators complained of a “lack of concern” among the private sector with the potential long-term negative effects of welfare reform. A complicated application process and demand for unskilled labor were cited as reasons why private employers have shown little interest in participating in TANF wage subsidy programs. These programs use TANF and food stamp benefits to subsidize the
wages of participants as they are trained in the job-specific skills needed by specific employers. Rather than pay the small price associated with these programs, employers were reported to be “waiting in line” to accept TANF participants as free “unpaid volunteer labor.” Some administrators expressed concern that employers may seek to exploit TANF work requirements and participants by using the program as a source of free labor.

**Effect of increased bureaucracy on Medicaid eligibility**

Participants also complained that services are cut off too quickly after obtaining employment. The premature cut-off of services was seen as especially problematic in the case of health care for children. The children of TANF recipients who find employment may remain eligible for Medicaid for up to one year. Unfortunately, many of the jobs secured by TANF recipients provide no health insurance coverage for children of workers, and often not the workers themselves. When Medicaid eligibility has been exhausted, the family is faced with a choice of either forgoing health insurance and depending on emergency room care or quitting the job and returning to TANF. According to caseworkers, many participants choose the latter alternative.

Data on the Medicaid program from Kentucky, South Dakota, and Texas do not exhibit the same drastic decline as TANF and Food Stamp program participation. In fact, it appears that the extension of coverage for one year after leaving TANF in combination with state outreach efforts to enroll working poor families in “low income” Medicaid programs has substantially buffered declines in Medicaid.

Administrative data from Kentucky show that the percentage of children eligible for Medicaid declined only slightly between 1996 and 1998 (the last year for which Medicaid data are available), from 39 percent to 37.8 percent. Although the number of children eligible through TANF dropped sharply, the decline was largely offset by strong growth in the numbers of children eligible through Kentucky’s Medical Assistance Case (MAC) program. Adults also experienced a decline in Medicaid eligibility of about 2 percentage points over the same period, from 7.8 percent to 5.7 percent.

South Dakota changed its method of reporting Medicaid data over
the course of our study; thus, two measures are presented. From 1990–1998, data on Medicaid eligibility were reported for TANF eligibles and for Low Income Women and Children (LIWC). Comparisons show that the percentage of women (ages 18–64) and children eligible for Medicaid through TANF declined from 29.2 percent in 1992 to 24.9 percent in 1998. As in the Kentucky cluster, this decline was offset by an increase in the percentage of women and children eligible for Medicaid through the LIWC program, which rose from 4 percent in 1992 to 10.2 percent in 1998. There was, therefore, a net increase in Medicaid eligibility among women and children of about 2 percent between 1992 and 1998. The distinction between TANF and LIWC was replaced in 1999 with “child” versus “adult” eligibles. These data show an increase in child Medicaid eligibles, from 48.2 percent of children in 1997 to 54.3 percent in October 1999. The percentage of all adults (ages 18–64) eligible for Medicaid also increased during the period, from 18 percent to 22.9 percent.

Texas data on Medicaid eligibles is reported by “families and children” and “aged and disabled.” The Medicaid eligibility rate for families and children (women ages 18–64 plus children) reached 30.3 percent in 1996 before falling to 26.1 percent in October 1999.

As of March 2000, the Mississippi Division of Medicaid had yet to release its 1998 annual report. A state Medicaid administrator stated that data problems would likely result in the joint publication of the 1998 and 1999 reports sometime in late 2000. Lack of post-1997 data precludes any inference regarding the effect of welfare reform on Medicaid eligibility in the Mississippi cluster.

Although the Kentucky and South Dakota data indicate that declines in TANF Medicaid eligibility have been largely offset by increases in the numbers eligible for expanded state low-income programs, particularly those serving children, it should be noted that transitional Medicaid assistance is available for only one year. Thus, over time, eligibility rates may be expected to decline. Medicaid eligibility is also not a direct indicator of use of or access to medical care. The increased bureaucratisation of social service eligibility determination under TANF may make it more difficult for persons who are eligible for Medicaid to actually make use of the program. Moreover, the problem of health care in these areas is further compounded by a lack of health care providers.
Effect of bureaucracy on food stamps

Although the bureaucratization accompanying TANF has not had a negative impact on Medicaid eligibility in the short-term, data on Food Stamp program participation indicate a major negative effect. With the exception of Texas, where the substantial decline in participation is directly related to changes in the eligibility status of the large population of legal permanent residents (LPRs), declines in food stamp participation are noteworthy because eligibility for food stamps is not linked to TANF eligibility.

Data on food stamp participation are presented as total numbers of recipients and as a food stamp participation rate, which reflects the percentage of estimated persons in poverty receiving food stamps. The data indicate that the number of food stamp recipients in the Kentucky cluster fell 13 percent between 1996 and October 1999, while the food stamp participation rate among persons in poverty fell from 77.6 percent to 66.9 percent (Figure 13.4). In the Mississippi cluster, the number of food stamp recipients declined 35 percent, while the food stamp participation rate among the poor fell nearly 28 percentage points, from 87.8 percent to 60 percent. In South Dakota, the number of recipients declined by only 4.8 percent, while the participation rate fell from 80.1 percent to 74.4 percent. In Texas, the number of recipients fell 34 percent and the participation rate declined from 104.2 percent to 65.7 percent.

It is telling that the percentage decline in the number of persons receiving food stamps was roughly equal in the Mississippi and Texas clusters. A significant proportion of the decline in the Texas caseload is undoubtedly explained by the loss of benefits among the large population of LPRs. There is no comparable explanation for the Mississippi decline.

Increasing food insecurity

Data on the pounds of food distributed by food banks in these counties indicate that reforms may be substantially increasing food insecurity. The data show that as food stamp rolls have declined, food bank distributions have risen sharply, suggesting that families that lost government food assistance have migrated to private charities for support.
Annual figures on pounds of food distributed show that God’s Pantry Food Bank in Lexington, Kentucky, distributed 119,917 pounds of food in McCreary County in 1997. This figure grew to 299,604 pounds in 1998, and stood at 230,769 in 1999 (Figure 13.5). The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) commodities composed 75 percent to 80 percent of the food distributed. Food bank distribution also increased in the tri-county area of Owsley, Breathitt, and Jackson counties, from 174,568 pounds in 1997 to 221,258 pounds in 1998 and 208,201 pounds in 1999.

In Holmes County, Mississippi, the Mississippi Food Network of Jackson distributed 93,829 pounds of food in 1997, 96,017 pounds in 1998, and 110,589 pounds in 1999 (Figure 13.5). In Sunflower County, distribution grew from 97,549 pounds in 1997 to 104,479 pounds in 1998 before falling to 93,382 pounds in 1999. According to the director, about half of the poundage distributed was USDA commodities (Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program).

The data from The Second Harvest Food Bank of South Dakota for 1995–1999 show tremendous growth in pounds of food distributed in the two case study counties. In 1995, Shannon County (the Pine Ridge
Figure 13.5 Food Bank Use in Selected Areas (lb.)

McCreary Cty., Ky.

1997: 119,917
1998: 299,604
1999: 230,769

Maverick Cty., Tex.

1997: 47,448
1998: 203,529
1999: 237,740

Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, S. Dak.

1997: 16,806
1998: 192,632
1999: 425,027

Holmes Cty., Miss.

1997: 93,825
1998: 96,017
1999: 110,589
Indian Reservation) received 21,502 pounds of food. Ten times that amount, or 200,930 pounds, was distributed in 1996 before dropping back down to 16,806 pounds in 1997. In 1998, the poundage jumped back up to 192,632 pounds, and more than doubled in 1999, reaching 425,027 pounds (Figure 13.5). Todd County, South Dakota (which contains the bulk of the Rosebud reservation) saw food bank distributions grow from 46,991 pounds in 1995 to 198,744 pounds in 1996. In 1999, the food bank distributed 377,490 pounds of food.

The Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations also receive food assistance through the Food Distribution on Indian Reservations Program. The amount of food distributed under this program greatly overshadows that provided by the food bank. On the Pine Ridge reservation, the quantity grew from over four million pounds in 1996 to over five million pounds in 1999. Distribution remained fairly constant on Rosebud from 1994–1999 at just over two million pounds per year. However, the caseload of the tribe-operated emergency food assistance increased from 250 cases before TANF to more than 700 cases in 1999.

Food bank distribution in Maverick County, Texas, was 47,448 pounds in 1997. In 1998, it climbed to 203,529 pounds and reached 237,740 pounds in 1999 (Figure 13.5). Starr County, Texas, experienced steady growth in food distributed, from 341,795 pounds in 1996 to 1,780,092 pounds in 1999.

Food bank administrators emphasized that the data do not accurately reflect need, which always far outstrips supply. Local food pantry operators reported serving a higher proportion of families with children than prior to the reforms and complained that they are not equipped to replace government as the primary source of food assistance.

**Changing casework and changing regulations**

The declines in the number of persons receiving TANF and food stamps also appears to be associated with changes in the culture of the welfare office. The welfare office is no longer merely a place where one applies for public assistance; rather, it is also a job center. Caseworkers report that they are instructed to treat participants as job seekers rather than persons entitled to government assistance. Their new role is to encourage self-sufficiency and divert applicants from applying for TANF assistance “if at all possible.” Caseworker emphasis on
diversion, as well as general confusion among the poor regarding the changes under PRWORA, has likely contributed to declines in food stamp participation.

Participants’ accounts of interactions with caseworkers varied. Some caseworkers were described as “domineering.” One participant stated that under the new system, caseworkers “ask you too many things to apply for TANF. They act as if the money is theirs.” Another stated that the local social services workers “practically want to know the color of your underwear each day.” Experience clearly varied, however. Other participants described caseworkers as “very helpful.”

Finally, interviews with participants indicate a general lack of information and confusion about TANF regulations, programs, and benefits. Many of the state TANF plans offer new programs designed to meet the specific needs of particular individuals, such as diversion programs offering lump-sum payments of approximately $1,000 to individuals deemed highly responsible in lieu of a year’s worth of monthly checks. Participants and, in some cases, administrators were completely unaware of such programs. In addition, directors of community-based organizations in several counties reported that recipients who lost eligibility for TANF mistakenly believed they also lost eligibility for other programs, including food stamps, WIC, and utilities programs such as the Low Income Heating Assistance Program. There was widespread concern among leaders of helping organizations that fear associated with the punitive nature of the new welfare system had resulted in some needy residents not seeking services for which they remained eligible.

**Inadequate Work Support Services**

Working frequently requires basic services and resources including transportation, child or elder care, and the appropriate clothing, tools, and so forth. We found such services to be grossly lacking in the eight case-study counties. There are a variety of reasons for this, including labor market dynamics and the historical underinvestment in job assistance programs; a lack of basic infrastructure, including paved roads and buses; insufficient child and elder care facilities; and the persistence of a division of labor in which women are expected to stay home and take care of other family members.
Lack of services has contributed to caseload declines in two ways. First, it has made it practically impossible for those lacking informal supports, such as friends with vehicles or parents who can provide child care, to participate in TANF. Although participants who cannot obtain publicly provided child care may be exempted from work requirements under PRWORA, few are aware of this exemption and have simply dropped out. Second, because neither skills-training nor education are provided, those with some resources chose to seek work on their own.

TANF participants and community leaders expressed great disappointment with the lack of services accompanying the reform. Many held high expectations stemming from the promises of the rhetoric of welfare reform. One director of a community-based organization expressed her disdain with the new “punitive” approach, stating, “Yes, there is a lot of abuse. But we must focus on meeting the needs of the children. The services are not being provided. We thought that was what welfare reform was going to be.” At the time of the interviews, the lack of services and real opportunities for training and work had left participants and community leaders alike disillusioned with the reforms and concerned about the long-term impact.

The problems of child care, elder care, and transportation in these areas cannot be overstated. Although some counties have contracted with transportation providers, these services are largely reserved for emergencies and are fully inadequate to address the daily problems that many participants face, especially those living in remote neighborhoods that may be 20–40 miles from the welfare office or the nearest place of employment. Participants without vehicles are encouraged to find rides with family and friends and apply for reimbursement from the TANF office at a later date. One social worker described this policy as insensitive to the reality of life on welfare, where recipients often do not have cash on hand to pay for transportation, gas, and car repairs. She reported the case of one participant whose car broke down in the middle of her six-week mandatory job search. As a result, she never completed the training, was sanctioned for nonparticipation, and was never reimbursed for the money she had spent on gas and lunch traveling 20 miles daily from her home to the training center for three weeks. Moreover, the caseworker described the reimbursement form as so complicated that even she had trouble filling it out.

Interviews with participants indicate that finding reliable child care
is a major barrier to employment and that most rely primarily on family and friends. Although such supports are strong, they are not always reliable. One woman reported losing a job because her child was ill and she could not find anyone to take care of him while she went to work. She was fired and told by her employer that he needed someone without children. Official providers of child care are scarce, and the systems connecting them to welfare participants are patchwork.

Postemployment services to help participants obtain better jobs were all but nonexistent in these areas as of spring 1999. Work First programs were implemented in all but one of our case study counties (Starr County, Texas). In theory, Work First is shorthand for a policy orientation geared toward immediate labor force attachment combined with subsequent education and training if desired by the participant. Thus, participants are placed in whatever job is available “if at all possible.” In the words of one local administrator, if at all possible means “if work is available and the recipient has a ninth-grade education.” The reality as of October 1999 in the counties studied here was that, while Work First has been vigorously implemented, the postemployment education and training services that were to accompany it did not exist.

Administrative Strategies

Although states and localities exercised substantial discretion in administering welfare under Aid to Families with Dependent Children, PRWORA (and the Work Force Investment Act of 1998) devolved even more responsibility to the local level. Under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), authority over all regional workforce development programs, including welfare-to-work, is vested in New Area Workforce Boards (NAWBs). These boards are responsible for the design and oversight of all job-training programs, including TANF welfare-to-work programs (National Governors’ Association 1998).

During the period of data collection, the NAWBs in the areas studied had either just been formed or were in the process of being created. Responsibility for TANF is only one among many tasks these boards are charged with carrying out. According to an executive of one of the Texas boards, their first and foremost concern is to “create jobs,” and this goal is pursued “by serving the needs of business.”
The economic problems plaguing these areas are described as affecting everyone, “not just welfare recipients.” Serving the needs of welfare participants in transition to work is clearly secondary to the overarching goal of regional economic development and job growth. To the welfare program administrators, developing the services necessary to allow participants to take part in work activities of any kind is clearly subordinate to creating opportunities for work. Regarding transportation, one administrator stated, “If they get a job, we’ll get them there.” Yet the evidence indicates that this work support is seldom available.

Economic growth is therefore the primary concern of the bodies responsible for implementing TANF. The NAWBs spend much effort working with local development corporations to attract new employers to their regions and garner economic development grants from state and federal sources. Most of the counties in this study are in regions granted Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community (EZ/EC) status under the USDA’s EZ/EC program. The funds made available under these programs have been focused on increasing economic development and meeting general community needs, such as paving the streets of the “colonias” (unincorporated neighborhoods) in the Texas counties. As of 1999, these initiatives had produced variable results depending on whether an area was designated EZ or EC and the year in which the respective status was granted. In most areas, goals had merely been identified, while in a few others, a number of new businesses had started up as a result of the EZ initiative.

Other problems faced by local administrators related to the implementation of welfare-to-work programs in these counties is a lack of funds to participate in federal match grant programs, such as the competitive U.S. Department of Labor welfare-to-work grants. Even though such programs may be desirable and potentially beneficial, they cannot be implemented in communities that lack the financial resources to meet the federally required match.

Economic development is a long-term goal. In the short-term, administrators have sought to cope with the dilemma of implementing welfare-to-work programs in areas where there is no work by encouraging participants to move to other regions where demand for low-skilled labor is higher. Administrators acknowledge that this approach
has been unsuccessful in the past, due in large part to welfare participants’ reluctance to move to urban locations and forfeit their kin support systems and other ties. There is no evidence to suggest that encouraging such migration has been more successful in recent years. Nonetheless, a number of counties have held job fairs to try to connect regional employers with local residents in need of work. Administrators report that some residents commute 150 miles or more each day to work in order to remain in the area. Obviously, exercising this option requires a reliable vehicle.

Because the labor markets offer few positive incentives to find official work, administrators have turned to increased surveillance and sanctioning to meet their federally mandated participation rates. One administrator looked forward to the implementation of the Food Stamps Employment and Training Program in his region because it would allow him to sanction the food stamp grants of persons who refused to participate in TANF work activities. He referred the Food Stamps Employment and Training Program as providing the “hammer” needed to force program participation. Another metaphor used in describing sanctions was a “tightening of the noose” around clients.

Data from Texas and Kentucky show a substantial increase in sanctions between 1997 and 1998 in McCreary County, Kentucky, and Maverick County, Texas. The number of cases under sanction in McCreary County grew from 67 in September of 1997 to 103 in September of 1998 (Kentucky Youth Advocates 1999). Data provided by the Texas Workforce Commission show that in Maverick County, the average number of cases under sanction grew from 38 in 1997 to 94 in 1998. At the same time, the number of cases sanctioned in Owsley County, Kentucky, fell from 12 to 3. Sanctions are not applied in Starr County, Texas, because it is a “minimum service” county and participation in TANF work activities is voluntary. Data on sanctions from Mississippi and South Dakota were unavailable. Although administrators in South Dakota expressed the desire to avoid imposing sanctions, TANF participants spoke of the hardships caused when sanctions were applied for missing an appointment, class, or community service hours because of transportation problems, lack of child care, family illness, or personal crisis. Administrators report that their use of home visits has increased as well.
Program administrators and community leaders alike in the study counties are concerned with the potential negative long-term impact of welfare reform in the absence of job growth. State time limits have been suspended in most of these counties because of high unemployment rates; thus, no families have exhausted their time-limited eligibility for assistance. Leaders are concerned, however, with the approaching federal five-year lifetime limit on assistance, which they believe will not be waived. They are particularly worried about the ability of the counties to absorb the health care costs of those who lose Medicaid when lifetime limits on assistance take effect. Some also expressed concern that those left with no other alternative will turn to illegal activities, particularly the drug trade.

One hypothesis concerning the impact of welfare reform was that persons losing cash assistance in areas where employment was unavailable would migrate to other programs. Our findings indicate that, rather than migrating to other government programs such as food stamps, WIC, or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Disability, people have turned to their families and to food banks. Regarding health insurance, the data indicate migration from one category of eligibility, that is, “TANF eligible,” to another, “low income eligible.” This change suggests that the jobs most TANF participants are obtaining do not provide affordable private health insurance and lends weight to local leaders’ fears concerning the long-term ramifications.

Our interview data indicate that the overall short-term impact of welfare reform in these areas has been to create “more hardship for people with nothing.” Nonetheless, it has also produced some positive results. These include increased emphasis on education, the attainment of job skills, student retention, and interagency planning and coordination. There also appears to be improved self-esteem among those who have found jobs and increased motivation to obtain education. At the same time, interagency coordination as of March 1999 was more rhetorical than real. Moreover, directors of local charitable agencies and nongovernmental organizations complained that their organizations are an inadequate substitute for government assistance, and that they are facing difficulties in meeting increased demand. One director
expressed the concern that helping organizations may “begin to see more people in really desperate straits.”

In addition, the emphasis on immediate employment has resulted in the gradual exclusion of General Equivalency Diploma (GEDs), training, and college courses as substitutes for the hours of work activity required by TANF. Although aspirations of education have risen among those who have found work, others have been disappointed by the lack of services available under TANF.

We chose to monitor the impact of welfare reform in the poorest rural counties under the assumption that if serious negative impacts were to follow from PRWORA, they would surely appear in these counties. The data indicate that although there have been substantial problems associated with the short-term implementation of welfare reform, widespread, drastic, negative effects have not occurred. Extensive participation in informal labor markets, strong networks of family support, relatively low costs of living in some areas, as well as the suspension of time limits in most counties, have buffered the potentially severe impacts that were predicted by some reform critics.

The overall effect of welfare reform in the rural areas studied has been the disruption of the survival strategies of households by removing an important source of income and failing to replace it with the promised alternative of a job and the support services needed to maintain it. TANF caseloads have fallen rapidly because the low payments offered in these states are not worth the hassle of meeting new program requirements, participants have other sources of support, and because the new welfare bureaucracy encourages diversion and has failed to deliver necessary supports. The caseload decline has resulted in increased reliance on nongovernment and non-market sources of support. These supports, primarily family networks and food pantries, are unlikely to be effective replacements for government assistance in the long-term.

Limited data collection efforts by the states and the unwillingness of state administrators to share employment data (particularly Mississippi and South Dakota) leave us little direct quantitative evidence of the employment status of TANF participants. The interview data indicate that it is likely that many of those who left welfare in these areas have found work in either formal or informal labor markets. Although some are undoubtedly better off, it is likely that many, even among
families in which the head obtained formal employment, are worse off due to the type of work, loss of benefits, and lack of supports.

Notes

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1. We follow Cook and Meiser (1994) in defining “persistently poor” counties as those exhibiting poverty rates of 20 percent or more for the last four decennial censuses.

2. The Unemployed Parent Program is a cash assistance program under the AFDC/TANF umbrella that supports two-parent families in which one of the parents is unemployed.

3. Data from the Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and the Census Bureau were used to estimate women’s labor force participation and unemployment for the clusters from 1990 through 1999. The women’s labor force participation rate was obtained by dividing the estimated number of women in the labor force by census estimates of the population of working age women age 16–64 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999). The estimated number of women in the labor force was computed by applying the percentage of the total labor force comprised of women from the 1990 Census (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990) to BLS estimates of overall labor force participation from 1991–1999 (U.S. Department of Labor 1999). Similarly, estimated women’s unemployment rates for the clusters were obtained by applying the ratio of unemployed women to total unemployed from the 1990 Census to BLS estimates of unemployment from 1991 to 1999 and dividing this figure by estimated women’s labor force participation rates.

4. The Food Stamp program participation rate for 1995 was obtained by dividing the average monthly number of food stamp recipients by the estimated number of persons below poverty using 1995 census estimates (http://www.census.gov/population/www/estimates/popest.html). Income adjustments used in TANF are not accounted for in the census income data used to estimate poverty. Thus, poverty rates are only rough proxies for those eligible for food stamps. The denominator for the 1996–1999 rates was estimated by applying the ratio of persons below poverty to population in 1995 to census estimates of population for 1996–1999. Eligibility for food stamps requires income below 130 percent of the federal poverty line. Thus the denominator in our food stamp rate (persons at or below 100 percent of poverty) underestimates the number of persons potentially eligible for food stamps and therefore produces an inflated participation rate. This explains why the Texas rate was over 100 percent in 1996.
## APPENDIX

### CLUSTER COUNTIES

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<th>Appalachia, Kentucky</th>
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Part 4

Food Assistance and Hunger: The Rural Dimension