Why Welfare Reform Cannot Lower the American Poverty Rate

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In 1996 President Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Clinton famously proclaimed that the act would “end welfare as we know it.” A decade and a half later it is clear that welfare today is very different than the policies it superseded. The new act replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which is basically a supported work program. TANF changed the goals and design of welfare by focusing on employment and independence of the able-bodied adult poor and by increasing the discretion of states in achieving these objectives. The able-bodied adult poor are required to find employment in return for transitional help with services such as child care, health insurance, transportation, and short-term job loans (Weaver, 2000). States are required and/or allowed to:

1. Design policies that reflect their employment environment, experiment with innovative programs to help the poor, tailor their programs across the state to deal with different levels and types of unemployment and poverty.
2. Set shorter time limits for employment for the able-bodied poor than the federally mandated twenty-four months.
3. Cap TANF benefits to families by denying increased assistance to mothers who have an additional child while receiving TANF.
4. Use strong sanctions to punish applicants and recipients who are found in noncompliance with rules, including denying benefits to both adults and children in the family.
5. Employ a range of policies including DNA testing, income garnishment, license forfeiture, and fines to hold both parents responsible for the financial support of their children.
6. Deny benefits to almost all legal immigrants (Rodgers, 1996, 107-130).

The basic design and goals of TANF are a good fit with American public philosophy and continue to enjoy a high level of public support (NPR Online, 2012).

AFDC primarily provided cash benefits (generally very modest amounts) to unemployed mothers and their children, sometimes for very long periods. By contrast TANF’s strong employment requirements have pushed most adult applicants and recipients either off the rolls or into the job market, greatly reducing caseloads in almost all the states, dramatically in most. In 1996 the TANF caseload was 12.6 million. By 2010 it was 4.2 million (AFC, 2012A; Ziliak et al. 2000). Unlike AFDC, only about a third of TANF expenditures consist of cash distributions. Some two-thirds of TANF spending funds support services for children and the employed. Since TANF went into effect when the economy was healthy and unemployment low, applicants and recipients generally found it possible to find employment. For a decade TANF seemed to be moving the poor in a positive direction. Poverty rates and cash welfare receipt declined, while single mothers significantly increased their employment and household income (CRS, 2008). Basic designs of TANF like mandatory work requirements increased rates of employment, and reduced welfare use. Family caps, sanctions and time limits reduced welfare use and increased employment. States providing the most generous child care support achieved the highest rates of maternal employment (CRS, 2008). Identification of absent parents greatly improved as did child support collections (AFC, 2012B; TANF, 2004).

While the early changes under TANF showed a degree of promise, the recession of 2007 and 2008 exposed some of TANF’s most serious flaws. As unemployment rose, the gains made by single mothers began to fade (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). Despite unemployment rates not suffered since the Great Depression, in real dollars both federal and state funding for TANF declined (Schott and Pavetti, 2011). The 1996 federal block grant to the states for TANF of $18 billion has not varied, in good times or bad. Most states have also reacted to financial distress by decreasing their support for TANF and other state assistance programs. The result is that in almost all the states TANF benefits in inflation-adjusted dollars have declined since 1996 by 20 percent or more (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). In the depths of the post-2007 recession the percentage of the poor receiving cash assistance under TANF continued to decline. In 1979 AFDC provided cash assistance to 82 of every 100 poor families. In 2009 only 27 of every 100 poor families received TANF assistance (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012). Children in deep poverty are significantly less likely to receive assistance under TANF than under AFDC (Trisi and Pavetti, 2012).

TANF, in summary, is basically designed to force able-bodied poor adults to move into the employment market where they can swim or sink. When the market tanked and employment opportunities greatly worsened, neither the philosophy nor program changed. The result was a decline in poverty rates for several years after TANF was launched, but by 2000 rates started to increase and then increased significantly starting in late 2007. By 2011 American poverty rates were at the same levels as they were in the mid-1960s (Bureau of the Census, 2012). In 2011 thirty-four states, including all the most populous states, suffered a higher rate of poverty than in 1996 (Bureau of the Census, 2011).

The bottom line is that while the welfare system has changed, poverty rates have persisted. TANF as a system for fighting poverty is clearly flawed. The most obvious structural failing is that it is dependent upon a healthy economy with low rates of unemployment and growing wages. It has proven to be unresponsive to the normal peaks and valleys of the economy. There are many other flaws including vastly different resources among the states to deal with their poor (Rodgers, 2005; Rodgers and Tedin, 2006B), and state poverty policies that vary from vigorous, supportive and innovative to discriminatory, half-hearted, lethargic, punitive and incompetent (Brown, 1995; Rodgers, Payne and Chervachidze, 2006C; Rodgers, Beamer and Payne, 2008; Soss, Fording and Schram, 2008). Some states, in other words, have taken seriously the opportunity to boldly redesign policies in an attempt to lower poverty while others have seized the opportunity to cut costs and support for their poor. Regardless of the intent, competence or good intentions of state officials, poverty has either increased or remained at post-reform levels in almost all the states. Wisconsin’s TANF plan has been widely touted as the most innovative and sophisticated in the nation (Mead, 2004). Yet, in 2010 the rate of poverty in Wisconsin was higher than in 1996 (Bureau of the Census, 2011).

In *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberalism, Paternalism, and the Persistent Power of Race (2011),*Soss, Fording, and Schram document flaws well beyond those discussed above. To do so they develop a sophisticated theoretical focus to dissect TANF’s transformation of American welfare policy into a mode of poverty governance that is designed less to end poverty than to secure the cooperation, compliance, and labor contributions of that portion of society that has become politically and socioeconomically marginalized. The key message that resonates in Soss et al.’s work is that American welfare policies have been institutionalized as regimes for disciplining the poor in line with a Racial Classification (RC) and a Social Control (SC) model. The Racial Classification Model (RCM) predicts a documented tendency for state officials to adopt less supportive policies and more disciplinary measures in the delivery of welfare services when African-Americans constitute a larger proportion of program beneficiaries. Soss et al. detail a system of welfare administration in which the race of applicants can structure “the political and economic relations that define its aims, institutions, and operational context” (2011, 14). They find that states and/or counties with larger black populations tend to utilize more punitive measures, such as harsh sanctions, rigorous work requirements, and shorter time limits for benefits. Additionally, these racialized welfare policies are backed by both exacting incarceration and punishment policies which are used to control low-income populations, particularly minority men. As Bruce Western documents in *Punishment and Inequality in America*, changes in the penal system caused state supervision to intensify both inside and outside of the prisons, as mass incarceration began to rise and wreak havoc on impacted families – especially those families hailing from poorer black communities. Thus, along with a much more disciplinary welfare system, these new tenets of the penal code, have become racially focused and mutated into what Soss et al. refer to as the “double regulation of the poor” (2011, 6).

Managing the poor is achieved through a Social Control Model (SCM) which delivers poverty governance through a network of actors charged with bringing discipline to the lives of the poor through quasi-market rationality. The two main theories governing this approach are *paternalism*,embodying themodification of the behavior of the poor by controlling and re-educating them by contract for services enforced by strict sanctions; and *neoliberalism*,which involves the organization of the delivery of welfare services along the line of free market rationality.

Soss et al.’s analysis of the political and structural forces behind the evolution of the welfare system raises many highly salient points regarding poverty, income, class and race in America – topics that have been explored in recent years by several prominent researchers in the field of social and economic policy (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Bartels, 2008; Hacker, 2006; Western 2006; Wilson 2009). Drawing upon Hacker and Pierson’s work in *Winner-Take-All Politics* on the role of neoconservatism in creating a work force characterized by deep wage disparities, disappearing job security, and loss of pension and health care benefits, Soss et al. provide savvy insights into how the neoliberal and paternalist political movements, which combined pro-business ideals with social conservatism, relentlessly altered the American political landscape beginning in the 1980’s. This political evolution eventually culminated in the creation and implementation of welfare policies that are generally punitive toward program participants while simultaneously promoting and legitimizing negative images of the poor. The regimented-paternalist approach of poverty policy the authors argue was developed in no small part because the poor were stereotyped as an underclass--incapable of disciplining themselves, correcting self-defeating behavior or seizing opportunities.

In summary the authors argue that the racially biased, paternalistic and neoliberal design of TANF and the penal code has produced a system within which:

1. The terms on which people are made to work relegate them to the lowest rungs of the capitalist ladder;
2. Citizenship is reduced to market roles and worsens the political marginalization of the poor;
3. Racial bias is both generated and tolerated;
4. Failure to reduce poverty is seen not as a flaw of policy or the economy, but a reflection of the personal deficiencies of the poor;
5. Harsh penal codes and drug policies combine with TANF to relegate, institutionalize and marginalize the poor.

Soss et al. are at their best in documenting how state discretion over the design and implementation of TANF has allowed many states, particularly those with a history of racism, to design privatized welfare systems that use market models to process and manage the poor as useful or failed market commodities. From both the perspective of welfare clients and the poorly paid administrative staff held to strict case performance standards and models, TANF has been turned into a mechanical, impersonal bureaucracy focused on moving the poor into marginalized employment or dismissing them from the rolls. Both the welfare staff and its clientele have become the victims of a system singularly focused on forcing the poor to meet behavioral standards in the shortest time possible for the least costs or suffer termination either from the rolls or their jobs.

Soss et al.’s argue for the replacement of TANF with policies designed not just to lower poverty, but to empower and engage the low-income population as fully functioning citizens. An enlightened policy, they argue, would be based on a broader definition of poverty than simply income. Drawing on the work of Sen (1999), Soss et al. define poverty as not just as a problem of low income, but more importantly as a lack of empowerment and choices. Poverty is “a condition of marginality and deprivation in which people are denied the capabilities they need to lead the kinds of lives they have reason to value and to participate effectively in the defining relations and institutions of their community (p. 302).” Defined this way, a more positive welfare system would have three characteristics: 1) “it would serve democracy by enhancing people’s abilities to participate in decisions that shape their lives, check arbitrary uses of authority, and reconfigure the terms of their relations to one another;” 2) “it would serve social justice by expanding capabilities for self-development and self-determination: capacities to participate in defining the direction and conditions of one’s actions,” and 3) “it would value the ethic and practice of care—acknowledging the necessity and societal contributions of care work, enhancing people’s abilities to give and receive care, and ensuring that they can do so without being marginalized in social, economic, or political relations (p. 302).”

Policy Solutions

Given this refined and enlightened definition of poverty, the policy solutions Soss et al. recommend are clearly too modest. While none of their recommendations are detailed, they prescribe a welfare system that moves away from strict disciplinary measures, encourages casework relationships that are based on more humane principles of assistance and protection, reduces the emphasis on work-first, increases the emphasis on education and skill development of adults, improves job opportunities and pay, increases support services for working mothers, emphasizes quick federal action when unemployment rises, and significantly enlightened drug and incarceration policies.

These are reasonable general prescriptions, but given the current divisions in Congress, Republican support for TANF and the public’s approval of the basic design of TANF (NPR, 2012), there is little chance in the immediate future that TANF will be jettisoned for a totally different set of policies. However, as we will argue below, even a better designed set of welfare policies would fall short of the changes required to significantly reduce American poverty. Enlightened welfare policies can help the poor, but American welfare programs will always be conservative and therefore unlikely to have a major impact on the poverty rate. The flaw in our restrained approach to poverty is that our major programs are focused overwhelmingly on impoverished, poorly-educated, unskilled, and frequently, dispirited and alienated adults. There is far too little emphasis on preventing people from reaching adulthood with these liabilities. The poor are best understood as not one group but two. The first group is those that are poor today while the second is those that will be the next generation of poor. Of course, there is an overlap. Poor and low-income children will make up the majority of the next generation of adult poor, and those who end up in prison. They are the pipeline that perpetuates American poverty. Any serious set of programs to reduce the American poverty and incarceration populations has to focus on reducing the generation of youth who are on the fast track to poverty and crime. This means thinking through policies that greatly reduce the next generation of people who are economically, educationally, and perhaps, emotionally vulnerable and may not be able to thrive in or contribute to a healthy, productive, global society.

If we accept this argument it leads to one conclusion. To significantly reduce the poverty population requires greatly improving the quality of youth education and youth opportunity (see Putnam, 2012; Brooks, 2012). Americans rather implicitly understand the importance of quality education, but a large and well-known literature documents the continuing failure of our educational systems. The failures and deficiencies are particularly acute for low-income children, regardless of race or ethnicity (Klein, 2011; Institute of Educational Statistics 2012). It is difficult to imagine how “people’s abilities to participate in the decisions that shape their lives”, or how their “capabilities for self-development and self-determination” could be impacted by any welfare system if its clientele base continues to consist primarily of poorly-educated-impoverished adults who often suffer from a sense of defeat. Not only is it unlikely that welfare programs can overcome a lifetime of educational, cultural and societal neglect, it is also clear that any skills a welfare system can teach poor-uneducated adults will generally leave them qualified for only low-pay, often dead-end, jobs. If our anti-poverty policies are focused on short-term remediation for uneducated adults, at best the poor are transitioned from the dependent poor into a class of permanent working poor.

While our educational systems are often failing, there is growing evidence that the education of American children and young teens can be greatly improved. We consistently underestimate the difficulty of educating children from low-income families, particularly those traumatized by poverty. Still, there is plenty of evidence that it can be done, but it is a mistake to think it is easy. One of the central findings of policy evaluation is that it takes major and timely interventions to change people’s skills, educational attainment or behavior (Nathan, 2000). Every policy analyst knows a rather cynical observation: if you support a policy, never support its evaluation (Nathan, p. 30). That is often true, of course, because many policies are flawed by design, timing and/or intensity. Job training programs for teens and adults, for example, have generally proven to have little or no benefit (Murray, 1984, 222-228; Nathan, 2000; Heckman and Krueger, 2003). The basic conclusion of job training experiments is that the help was too little too late. But even well-timed major interventions can fail if they are not properly designed. Many efforts to improve the education of low-income students, including many that are well-funded and designed by caring and skilled people, end in failure (Tough, 2009). In its earliest stages, the acclaimed Harlem School Zone experiment produced extremely disappointing results (Tough, 2009). The reason was that the experiment was caring and idealist, but absent some of the fundamental insights and principles that the best research has found to be critical to success.

Among the serious problems the Harlem School Zone initially was unprepared for involved students that were undisciplined, depressed, and intellectually paralyzed by a lack of confidence. Pamela Cantor, a psychiatrist, has found that children dealing with the stress and trauma of low-income and poverty often react by being “sad, distracted, aggressive, and tuned out.” Schools, she concluded, have to be designed to “address the issues poverty poses …in the classroom (2012; Nocera, 2012).” The research of James Heckman, and his research associates, has provided the foundation for many of the most successful efforts to create quality educational programs for poor and low-income children (Heckman 2112; Heckman and Masterov, 2007; Cunha and Heckman, 2007; Heckman and Krueger, 2003; Knudsen et al., 2006; Lynch, 2004). Heckman and Masterov (2007) argue that educational design should be driven by five major findings: 1) The value of skill. The more skills people acquire, the more successful they are; 2) Children demonstrate significant skill gaps as they age, and these gaps develop very early. At age one, there are few gaps regardless of the race, ethnicity or education of children’s parents. Without intervention, by age two and three there are major gaps. 3) Non-cognitive skills are as important as cognitive skills. To be successful in school, employment or life, people need both cognitive and non-cognitive skills such as self-confidence, persistence, self-regulation, and the ability to plan for the future and delay gratification. 4) Both cognitive and non-cognitive skills should be taught early. Early interventions produce positive results while programs to help older teens and young adults generally produce less positive even failing results (Heckman and Krueger, 2003). 5) Skills learned early in life make it easier to acquire more skills. The reverse is also true. The later the intervention, the harder it is for people to make gains. In a recent paper Heckman and Masterov (2007, 12) pointed out that the evidence shows that: “Skill begets skill; learning begets learning. Early disadvantage, if left untreated, leads to academic and social difficulties in later years. Advantages accumulate; so do disadvantages.”

Based on both experience and research the most effective education programs for low-income children have certain characteristics:

1. Children are enrolled at a very young age; preferably by age 3.
2. Parents are cooperative and participatory.
3. The school creates a safety net for both children and parents.
4. The school environment is orderly and demanding.
5. Character building is a major focus. Students are taught the importance of manners, self-discipline, patience, persistence and hard work. KIPP’s (Knowledge is Power) well-known motto is “work hard, play nice.”
6. Academic success in a discipline graduates students into more advanced courses in the discipline.

The research of Heckman and other scholars along with the generally poor outcome of programs focused on adults raises serious questions about the viability of making this group the focus of poverty reduction policies. This is not an argument for neglecting poor adults. It is an argument for a long-term policy of reducing the number of vulnerable adults. Effective anti-poverty policy needs to be focused on pre-adults and a new body of research suggests that focusing more attention on non-cognitive skills can produce some very impressive results even among teens (Tough, 2012). A program currently in place in twenty-three Chicago high schools focuses on teaching traits such as persistence, resourcefulness, professionalism, ambition, integrity, and resilience (Tough, 154-62). While the program is in its earliest stages, it is producing results (measured in terms of succeeding in college) that are impressive enough to encourage Houston and several other cities to set up similar programs (Tough, 194). This program may offer another avenue to produce citizens who never have any reason to have contact with the welfare system, who never turn to crime, who never abandon their responsibilities as parents, who never develop self-defeating habits that cloud and even destroy their future.

The leads us to our second major concern with current policy prescriptions for reducing the poverty rate. Most proposals for improving the welfare system are based on the theory that the American poor are the product of neglect, an economy rigged in favor of the privileged and often overt discrimination. What these proposals fail to consider is the impact of these disadvantages on the poor. Liberal scholars have long acknowledged that an environment of poverty takes a heavy toll on the poor. In his seminal work The Other America (1962) Michael Harrington observed that poverty is more than just a lack of funds or supportive services: “Poverty should be defined psychologically in terms of those whose place in the society is such that they are internal exiles who, almost inevitably, develop attitudes of defeat and pessimism and who are therefore excluded from taking advantage of new opportunities.” In addressing these problems, liberal scholars are not blaming the poor. They are addressing the ravages of neglect and discrimination on people throughout their lives. Some conservative scholars, of course, blame poverty entirely, or almost entirely, on culture, intelligence and behavior (Herrinstein and Murray 1994; Mead 1986 and 1992, Murray 1984 and 2012), but we cannot think of any scholars on the left who believe that behavior, culture or structure alone explains American poverty. Wilson (2009), West (1993), Tobin (1994), Patterson (2000), Majors and Billson (1992) and others argue that structure is the major antecedent of poverty, but that the neglect (educational and otherwise) and trauma of poverty and adaptations to it often produce self-defeating cultures and behaviors that challenge efforts to help the poor.

Arguably the most sophisticated analysis of the relationship between structure and culture is William Julius Wilson’s, More Than Just Race (2009). As Wilson carefully explains, in examining the link between poverty and race it is important to understand how the culture of many poor blacks has evolved to create damaging and even debilitating attitudes and behavior patterns for youth and adults. Wilson notes that high concentrations of poverty breed and sustain deviant cultural adaptations, while living in these impoverished or racially segregated neighborhoods exposes both youth and adults to self-defeating cultural adaptations. These adaptations can limit social mobility because they impact meaning and decision making for members of that society. Wilson explores how some of these adaptations (rejection of education, the “cool pose” culture, codes of the streets and shady dealings) can immerse members not only in the trenches of poverty, but in a life of crime. Importantly, Wilson argues that acknowledging the relationship between poverty and culture is not a form of victim-blaming nor does it ignore the primary role of structural factors in creating poverty. Rather, it is a call for an attack on the root causes of American poverty—poor educational systems, defeated environments and a lack of economic opportunity.

Wilson, and other major scholars of American poverty including Patterson (2000) and West (1993), confront thorny issues anyone serious about reducing American poverty cannot ignore. Unmistakably culture plays a powerful part in how many low-income and poor people adapt behavior and attitude patterns that make it very difficult to break the cycle of poverty. Low-income and poor adults understand this vicious cycle. In a recent set of polls conducted for the Kennedy School at Harvard (NPR, 2012), respondents with incomes below 100% of the poverty line included a shortage of jobs (62%), medical bills (71%), drug abuse (74%), too many single parents (64%), lack of motivation (55%), and a decline in moral values (57%) as major causes of poverty. As complicated, sensitive and complex as many of the causes of poverty are, an effective welfare system has to be designed to effectively and humanely overcome them. Well-designed early education systems could greatly reduce the chances that major cultural and behavioral problems could ever become barriers to success or excuses for punitive, racist welfare policies.

An enlightened and effective set of anti-poverty policies can only be designed if they address the major causes of poverty. In the final analysis anti-poverty policy has to reduce the number of Americans who are so poorly educated and handicapped by neglect and cultural adaptations that they cannot or will not succeed in American society. Real success in lowering the poverty rate means reducing the number of Americans who ever have any reason to have contact with the welfare system. That means starting early in the lives of all young Americans to make certain that they have the foundational education, values and non-cognitive skills to compete in a modern society. Focusing on prevention rather than remediation is a huge challenge, but it does not seem likely that poverty rates can be reduced in any major way without facing it. The major causes of poverty lay in the neglect of America’s human capital and the increasing unfairness of the economy (Atkinson, Piketty, and Saez, 2011; Bartels 2008; Hacker, 2008; Pierson and Skocpol, 2007; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006). Reducing poverty depends on maximizing the education, skills and potential of all Americans and in creating a fair, equitable economy based on an enlightened social contract.

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