



## **The Impact of Welfare Reform On Infants & Toddlers, Their Families, & Their Communities: Families Entering the Work Force**

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 represents a fundamental change in our country's approach to supporting families in economic need. Since the enactment of PRWORA, researchers have been studying the experiences of families as they attempt to transition from government assistance to various levels of increased self-sufficiency. Of particular interest is how families with young children are faring in response to welfare reform. While many families with young children are experiencing success as they enter the work force, others are having more difficulty. Research findings indicate that the likelihood of making a successful transition is affected by the supports available to families and the barriers families face. Understanding the role of these supports and barriers is of critical importance to policymakers as re-authorization nears.

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### **The Qualitative Study**

An understanding of the impact of new policies cannot be achieved without an assessment of how the policies are interpreted and acted upon by those who have direct contact with the people they are intended to affect. This study is a qualitative inquiry investigating how perspectives of welfare reform implementation may change or evolve from (a) state level policy makers, (b) county or local administrators responsible for implementing the policies, (c) social service workers directly involved with welfare recipients, (d) Head Start/Early Head Start program staff interacting with

both the social service workers and the families they serve, and e) families currently or previously on cash assistance. For each of these groups, investigators have conducted focus groups or key informant interviews. Over 600 interviews were conducted over a two-year period between 1998 – 2000 in rural and urban communities in nine states that are a part of the Early Head Start Research Consortium (AR, CA, CO, IA, KS, MI, MO, NY PA).

For more information on EHS/HS see:

<http://www2.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/hsb/>

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### **Families with Young Children Impacted by Welfare Reform: Who Are They and How Are They Doing?**

Some families in the study have successfully made the transition to full-time work. Our interviews indicate that many parents are pleased with their progress and are excited and happy to be working. Their children also seem to be doing well.

*"I am now employed full-time with benefits. I have a job that I enjoy doing. Jenny, my 3 year old, is now in Head Start. She is in an all-day Head Start program.. and things are a lot less stressful for me now. Thank you, Head Start!"* (Mother, urban community)

Other families are struggling to enter or remain in the work force. These families often have a lot of instability in their lives and face multiple challenges.

*"She [mother in EHS program] talks to me...about the stress in her life...how she doesn't know if she can [continue working].... She has no transportation. The kids want her attention...one son is acting out, they are threatening to send him out of school. She knows that what he needs is...her positive attention....She is walking through areas where people have gotten murdered two times in the past two months... And she is walking home in the dark, after work, with her small kids."* (EHS Program Staff, urban community)

policy brief

## **Factors Affecting the Ability of Families to Make a Successful Transition into the Work Force Include the Following:**

### **Families who Successfully Made the Transition to Full-time Employment had Multiple Supports, such as:**

- Stable child care the parents trusted
- Support from Early Head Start or Head Start staff who helped parents set goals, prioritize their needs, access resources, and stay connected to their children
- Supportive and knowledgeable county caseworkers who linked parents to job training and jobs, and other resources
- Employers who provided mentoring, allowed parents some flexibility in their hours, and/or offered benefits such as health insurance
- Support from faith-based organizations, substance abuse treatment programs, and other community groups
- Stable housing arrangements
- Supportive family and/or friends

### **Families Who Struggled to Enter or Remain in the Work Force Faced Challenges, such as:**

- Little or no prior work experience
- Low levels of education, including a lack of literacy skills or undiagnosed learning disabilities
- Difficulties with child care arrangements
- Unreliable or inadequate transportation or revoked driver's licenses
- Several young children
- Mental health issues among hardest to serve families
- Substance abuse problems
- Previous prison records
- Domestic violence issues
- Lack of stable housing
- Unsafe neighborhoods
- Negative community attitudes about hiring welfare recipients

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### **Summary**

A successful transition into employment for families with young children typically involves a gradual, step-by-step process as parents set and achieve goals, including such things as:

- obtaining a GED
- receiving job training
- obtaining high quality child care
- finding employment with an employer that supports working families
- parents and children who have the support of EHS and other stable social services fare better during the transition from welfare to work.

EHS home visitor from an urban area describing one family's success: *"She is one of the parents that attended the Future's Program, and actually graduated from the Urban League with skills to take her into the job force.... She's now working for City Hall...full time, so she gets benefits; she has a good job attendance record, and is just doing really well because of that program. I think that made a big difference. Also, the Early Head Start program, with the emphasis on strengths and needs development that we have, made a great impact on her as well. We assisted her through her goal setting and helped her accomplish her goals."*

### **Policy Recommendations**

- Provide incentives to states to offer on-going supports to families as they transition into the work force to help them balance work and parenting.
- Provide incentives to states and communities to encourage stability and a gradual transition in order to enhance positive family and child outcomes.
- Insure that job retention services and training are available to working parents to help them advance in their jobs and improve their earnings.
- Provide incentives to states to help working families maintain the services for which they are eligible (e.g., food stamps, Medicaid, child care subsidies, subsidized housing).
- Fund TANF at existing levels plus inflation and continue to allow states flexibility in the use of these funds to support child care and other family supports.

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The Center for Family Policy & Research is housed in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The Center's mission is to create and disseminate research-based analyses to promote the well-being of families through informed public policy and programs. Visit us on the web at <http://MUCenter.missouri.edu>

